



# Kerwan

International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies

Not Far Afield: Asian Perspectives on Sexuality,  
Testimony and Print Culture.  
A Coffee Break Project

editors:

*Daniele Cuneo, Elisa Freschi and Camillo A. Formigatti*

Miscellanea

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## Table of Contents

### Not Far Afield: Asian Perspectives on Sexuality, Testimony and Print Culture. A Coffee Break Project

editors: *Daniele Cuneo, Elisa Freschi and Camillo A. Formigatti*

There is no “East”: Deconstructing the Idea of Asia and Rethinking the Disciplines Working on it	9
<i>Elisa Freschi</i>	

#### Part 1:

#### Sociocultural Constructions of Sexuality in South Asia

editor: *Daniele Cuneo*

Sociocultural Constructions of Sexuality in South Asia	17
<i>Daniele Cuneo</i>	
Sexuality as a promotion of Power: How the Chief Wife becomes a Means of Persuasion in the Vedic Rhetoric on Kingship	23
<i>Marianna Ferrara</i>	
Are Women Entitled to Become Ascetics? An Historical and Ethnographic Glimpse on Female Asceticism in Hindu Religions	51
<i>Daniela Bevilacqua</i>	
“How many know how to (make) love?” – Semantic Understanding of Bengali Bāul Songs and Politics of Power in the Lineage of Bhaba Pagla	81
<i>Carola Erika Lorea</i>	
Item Girls and Objects of Dreams: Why Indian Censors Agree to Bold Scenes in Bollywood Films	117
<i>Tatiana Szurlej</i>	

Part 2:

There in only 'Philosophy': The case of Testimony

editor: *Elisa Freschi*

There in only 'Philosophy': The case of Testimony <i>Elisa Freschi</i>	141
Reliability of a Speaker and Recognition of a Listener: Bocheński and Nyāya on the Relation of Authority <i>Agnieszka Rostalska</i>	155
Bhaṭṭa Jayanta: Comprehension, Knowledge, and the Reduction of Testimony to Inference <i>Alessandro Graheli</i>	175
Bhartṛhari and Verbal Testimony: A 'Hyper-antireductionist' Approach? <i>Marco Ferrante</i>	227
Śrīharṣa Miśra's Critique of Trustworthiness <i>Sudipta Munsī</i>	247
Thoughts on the Early Indian Yogācāra Understanding of Testimony <i>Roy Tzohar</i>	261
Testimony and the Epistemic Problem of Society in <i>al-Risālat al-Kāmiliyya fī al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya</i> <i>Marco Lauri</i>	279

Part 3:

Change of Paradigms and Mechanical (Re)discoveries:

Manuscript and Print Cultures across Asia

editor: *Camillo A. Formigatti*

Change of Paradigms and Mechanical (Re)discoveries: Manuscript and Print Cultures across Asia <i>Camillo A. Formigatti</i>	305
Making Order in the Vaults of Memory: Tamil Satellite Stanzas on the Transmission of Texts <i>Eva Wilden</i>	317
Hoisted by their Own Petard: The Emergence of Sri Lankan Buddhist Printing and Counter-Christian Activities <i>Ann-Kathrin Bretfeld-Wolf</i>	339

Notes on Printing Press and Pali Literature in Burma 357  
*Aleix Ruiz-Falqués*

On a Particular Aspect of the Identification of Tibetan Xylographs: Preliminary Remarks on the  
Importance of Craftsmen 373  
*Michela Clemente*

### Miscellanea

Spazi e luoghi urbani nella narrativa swahili: Il caso di Dar es Salaam 399  
*Graziella Acquaviva*

Astrologie alchemiche: Ermetismi in transizione e culture occidentali 415  
*Ezio Albrile*



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and

*Camillo A. Formigatti*





## There is no “East”:

### Deconstructing the idea of Asia and rethinking the disciplines working on it

*Elisa Freschi*

This introduction summarises the steps which led the scholars grouped in the Coffee Break group to undertake the project and then accompanied them from the awareness of the need to deconstruct the idea of geographic boundaries and, consequently, of area studies such as “Indology” or “South Asian studies”, to the need to deconstruct disciplines such as “Philology” or “Literature” themselves, since they are also historically and culturally loaded and risk to tell one more about their subjects than about their alleged objects of study. This *pars destruens* is followed by a *pars construens* suggesting as an alternative a situated epistemology which refutes to essentialise the “Other” and, on a more practical level, by the constant implementation of team work.

#### 1. Prehistory of the debate: the previous CBCs

The Coffee Break project started in 2009 around a group of young researchers who were not (or no longer) feeling comfortable in their Areal Studies departments. They did not think they had so much to share with people working on the same area of the world, but on completely different topics, while being at the same time separated from colleagues working on similar phenomena only because these took place in a different area. Thus, they organised thematic panels focusing on themes (e.g., on Manuscript Studies, with contributions about Greek, Arabic, Tibetan, Indian and Japanese manuscripts) instead of areas (e.g., on South Asia, with contributions on Harappan archeology, anthropology of the Andaman people, Bollywood and Persian poetry at the Mughal court).<sup>1</sup>

With time, however, they had to acknowledge that the chief argument against areal studies — namely that geographic boundaries are far too often a recent and arbitrary construction, which has little to say about what happens within them — also applies to disciplines. These are also arbitrary and historically determined constructions, too often dependent on a Eurocentric perspective on what is worth of study (think for instance of the reappearance of Virtue Ethics as a legitimate field of Philosophy after a long eclipse).

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on the initial motivations, see E. Freschi’s introduction in the Proceedings of CBC 1 (Freschi 2011). The programs of the past editions of the CBC can be read online at the website <http://asiatica.wikispaces.com>

Moreover, the same rethinking process can be applied again and again. For instance, in the fourth edition of the CBC Giovanni Ciotti has shown how even emic disciplines (such as the Sanskrit disciplines linked with Grammar, Phonetics and Semantics) are often not much more than a post operam construction, superimposed on a much more fluid reality where scholars study complex phenomena using different tools. Similarly, during the final round table of the same conference several contributors (Barbara Benedetti, Susan Hawthorne, and Andrew Ollett among others) have raised the issue that Eurocentrism is not the only way of dominating the Other and that no progress is made if one abandons the one in favour of the other (e.g., by completely embracing the perspective of the dominant class/gender/ethnic group,<sup>2</sup> or by implicitly postulating the supremacy of one theory, or of our contemporary judgement as if it were the definitive one).<sup>3</sup>

This all implies that one can no longer assume that her perspective, methodology and sources are the “natural” and “right” ones. Similarly, if one were to contend that she has no perspective or methodology whatsoever, it would be easy to reply that she is just automatically conforming to the dominant one (as explained in Mary Fulbrook's *Historical Theory*, chapter 3, which has been the topic of a round table led by Mark Schneider during the CBC 2).

Does this imply that there is no room left for any intellectual enterprise which aims at acquiring and sharing knowledge which is not only useful for a certain group, but also generally valuable? Should we end up embracing relativism as the only possibility? Should we consequently abandon any attempt at universalising our studies and only focus on our own autobiography?

## 2. Pars construens

The final round table of the CBC 4 started from these considerations and attempted to define the Coffee Break Project's approach to this conundrum and to its possible solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Bianchi suggested the parallel risk of Japanocentrism in Japan, which excludes the study of Japanese literature (under the name of “National literature”) from the general field of Literature theory.

<sup>3</sup> A fascinating, and perhaps uncommon example has been evoked by Artemij Keidan, who mentioned the case of Paulus Potter. Potter is now a less known painter, but his painting *De Stier* used to be the main reason whence people visited the Gemeentemuseum, the museum in The Hague where paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Rubens and Van Dyck are conserved (cf. the praise of *De Stier* by George James Welbore Agar Ellis, the author of the 1822 *Catalogue of the Principal Pictures in Flanders and Holland*). Still, when confronted with this information, one tends to smile at the taste of our forerunners, as if our judgement about Vermeer, etc., were the definitive judgement, the one which will never be overcome.

On the one hand, we join a debate that has already been discussed for several decades.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the alarming fact that, e.g., colleagues working on European materials still do not feel the need to address Asian sources makes us aware of the fact that the issue still needs to be tackled in practice in each of our studies. Likewise, many male scholars still do not feel the need to read feminist critiques even when they are in the same field. This phenomenon is what another participant to the 2013 CBC, Susan Hawthorne, calls “dominant culture stupidity” (Hawthorne 2002), in the sense that dominant cultures run the risk to take advantage of their dominant position to become lazy and avoid engaging with alternative perspectives, thus ending up with depriving themselves of vital stimuli. In order to avoid this risk, members of the dominant group, as are European scholars, need to be intentional in exposing themselves to other approaches.

On the other hand, disciplines do have several practical and technical advantages (as an example, one might think of the analysis of paper and ink discussed by Michela Clemente in one of the panels of the CBC 4) and it would be hard to deny this role and to start from scratch every time.

Thus, if we still want to make communicable knowledge, we need to:

- Refuse to essentialise the Other: there is no “East” which is an altogether different “Other”. If we think this exists, it is only because we have constructed it.<sup>5</sup>
- Collocate ourselves:<sup>6</sup> renounce the idea of a neutral ground from which we, omniscient gods, can judge about the others, and instead be explicit about our methodological standpoints. This (never-ending) process will have the double advantage of making ourselves and our readers more aware of our possible biases and of possible antidotes. The choice of the word “process” is meant to show that we are aware of the fact that such a task cannot be completely fulfilled. But this objection should not lead one to think that, then, there is no point in even undertaking it. A linguist should make clear that her sources are, e.g., only contemporary Western Germanic languages, although she may not be aware of the fact that her preferences for Flemish beer has also subtly biased her in her choices.

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<sup>4</sup> One is immediately led to think of Foucault's and Bruno Latour's analyses and, in the specific case of South Asia, one cannot avoid thinking of the polemics against Orientalism initiated by Edward Said and developed in the case of India by Inden, and of the whole new branch of subaltern studies.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting example from a scholar who cannot be blamed of being a post-modernist relativist is Toru Oga's remark, during the CBC 4, that “Asia”, seen from Japan, indicates the states of the ASEAN community only, or, at most, it includes South Asia.

<sup>6</sup> The hint at the feminist idea of positionality has been made explicit by Paola Cagna during the round table at the end of the first panel of the CBC 4.

- Be ready to question our approach, including the discipline it is situated in. In order to achieve this purpose, the encounter with an Other is of chief importance, be it historically, culturally or only geographically remote.

Why should we engage in this painstaking process, instead of just focusing on our pet topics? Why, e.g., adding a long methodological introduction to a technical study on metrics? Because no subject is a given datum, a “natural kind” and it is, thus, our epistemological duty to overcome our laziness.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, if we start seeking for comparanda we will have the additional bonus of finding new resources, either in the sense of answers to the questions we had, or in the sense of new tools to deal with them (e.g., a vocabulary which is more apt to describe a certain phenomenon).<sup>8</sup>

Last, a good antidote to the laziness which makes one remain in the comfortable status quo of Eurocentrism is one of the CB project's leading ideas, i.e., team work. If you cannot undertake yourself the study of other languages, cultures, ages, etc., try at least to collaborate with colleagues coming from these different perspectives.

Team work has a positive impact also on another issue, i.e., the problem of disciplinary research. As already hinted at (§ 1, Freschi 2011) disciplines are a rigid frame, one over-loaded with historical and accidental elements, so that the advantages they offer (a methodology shared by a group of people, shared background knowledge and the like) are often overshadowed by the limitations they involve. Do philosophers of language really want to avoid discussing with their colleagues in Linguistics? Can linguists endure being cut off from research on living or dead languages, just because they are done within a different framework (e.g., that of “philology”?) Can philological analyses of mathematical treatises be sound, if done by people lacking a mathematical training? And so on.

But what is the alternative to disciplinary/disciplinated research?

- Multidisciplinarity is the juxtaposition of several disciplinary perspectives, without aiming at constructing a broader framework. It is good for a first encounter of scholars working on different topics.

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<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Ciotti, during the final round table, made us for instance consider the claim that language is among the topics about which a universalistic theory can be plausibly construed. This claim seems now non-controversial, but only because of the success of Chomsky's influence on the Academia. Not so many scholars would have subscribed to it a few decades back.

<sup>8</sup> Not to speak of the advantage of having our own presuppositions shaken and new questions risen.

- Interdisciplinarity, by contrast, aims exactly at the construction of such a broader framework. The problem is that interdisciplinary frameworks (also called “Transdisciplines”) often crystallise into disciplines (cf. the case of “Structuralism” or “Marxism”).<sup>9</sup>

Instead, we aim at a dynamic encounter of scholars who are ready to question what they are doing while keeping on doing it. We would like, for instance, to do philosophical work on texts while critically editing them with the help of all linguistic and philological tools. To avoid a supermarket-like form of eclecticism, which would end up with the choice of just what fits with one's own preferences or implicit biases, this must be done within an open team of different people, so that the component of critical questioning is never appeased. This is the rationale of the Coffee Break Project and of its lack of a closed “editorial committee”.

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<sup>9</sup> See also van den Besselaar and Heimeriks 2001.

Elisa Freschi (University of Vienna and Austrian Academy of Sciences) studied South Asian studies and Philosophy. She works on Indian Philosophy (especially Mīmāṃsā and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta) and on comparative philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of language, deontic logic and on the re-use of texts. She is a convinced upholder of reading Sanskrit philosophical texts within their history and understanding them through a philosophical approach. Among her publications: *Duty, language and exegesis in Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā* (2012), *Rule-extension strategies: Ritual, exegetical and linguistic considerations on the tantra- and prasaṅga-principles* (2013), *The reuse of texts in Indian philosophy* (2015, ed.) and *Adaptive Reuse: Aspects of Creativity in South Asian Cultural History* (2017, edited with Philipp A. Maas).

Part 1:  
Sociocultural Constructions of Sexuality in  
South Asia

editor:  
*Daniele Cuneo*





## Sociocultural Constructions of Sexuality in South Asia

*Daniele Cuneo*

This short introduction focuses on the historical and constructed nature of sexuality, on the normative aspects of the discourses that develop around it, as well as on its inevitable entanglements with issues of societal control, power relations, and violence. It aims to show how the papers in the present panel converge in highlighting the multifaceted and polymorphic role of various South Asian discourses on sexuality in their attempted 'construction' of a normed individual as the basic building block of the society envisioned by the authors of those very discourses.

The driving idea behind this section of the proceedings and behind the panel that originated it can be sketchily expressed in the following, working axiom: In any cultural milieu, any discourse on sexuality is a historical and social construct, which –more often than not– embeds in itself an understanding of itself and of sexuality as natural objects, paradoxically independent of any history and culture.

On the premises of this historical and constructive nature of sexuality as ideology –both on a personal, psychological level and on a shared, social level–, this section of the proceedings aims at showcasing a selected number of instances of discourses on sexuality gleaned from the history of South Asia, expressed in different cultural media, and expressive of different historical and social milieus. A clear reference point in using this interpretive framework and this charged terminology is Foucault's intellectual enterprise and his call for scholarship to develop an 'analytics' of power through which sexuality might be better understood, a micro-analysis of how power controls sex by laying down rules for it to follow, normally within a background of self-understanding that masks the intentions of hegemonic classes by disguising the necessity of obedience as beneficial and indispensable to maintaining law and order. In the phrase 'discourse of sexuality', the issues of gender identities, gender relations, and gendered effects of power, i.e. the crucial focus of gender studies, cannot but occupy centre stage. Nevertheless, the term 'gender' is extremely heavy and viscous with a decades-long debate whose dust has not yet settled down, rather constantly stirred up by a muddled plurality of religious and political agendas, often aiming at blurring the carefully drawn and constantly re-negotiated differences between gender roles, sexual orientations and biological sexes that have occupied both the scholarly debate and the public domain of Western post-industrial

society. For this very reason, the choice of an overall title that does not explicitly mention the term 'gender' wishes to be paradigmatic in its attempt to turn the attention to the very practices of sexuality and all the possible modes through which they are normed, i.e., not only by way of gender polarization, but also through any other set of normative criteria and practical restrictions that might be used to curb, for instance, the uncontrolled force of Eros, commonly feared as being potentially disruptive of social and political stability.

In view of the generally accepted scholarly necessity to step out of the categories and value judgements that the various cultural traditions tend to naturalize, the methodological and heuristic foci are meant to be on the analysis of the tensions within and without the data under scrutiny, especially in the attempt to exhume the dynamics of power and knowledge that harbour the rationale of any discursive practice, and to unearth the practical and theoretical violence inherent in any attempt at naturalizing and universalizing normative conceptions of human behaviour and self-understanding. Therefore, on the assumption that any kind of discourse is at least implicitly normative, a central issue tackled by the papers in this section is the following: how far the discourses on sexuality throughout South Asian history and cultures have been a tool to construct the individual, to create a subject, and to constitute a specific kind of identity and the consequently ensuing form of society. In Foucauldian jargon, the issue consists in the origination of individuality as the product of the power/knowledge technology that is sexuality.

Against some of Foucault's somewhat brisk insights, however, the following papers show, for instance, how the attempt to disinter the truth of sex as the innermost core of the individual, mainly understood and conceptualized as such due to sexual choices —along with its possible corollary that sexuality is to be considered as a privileged locus for the identification of deep meaningfulness— is not at all a phenomenon peculiar to the West, let alone peculiar to the West after the 18<sup>th</sup> or the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see, for instance, the centrality of chastity and asceticism in many strands of South Asian traditions). Against what, according to some of his critics, could be defined as Foucault's disregard for the capacity of the individual to act, resist and change the grid laid down by the ubiquitous mechanisms of power, two of the following papers (Bevilacqua and Lorea) highlight that very agency and the creatively interpretive capacity of single, historical individuals, who have variously negotiated novel forms of self-determination against the backdrop of the dominant understandings of sexuality.

It is customary of prefatory essays to go over the various papers being introduced and to direct the spotlight on the most fundamental aspects and challenges being tackled by them. This cursory but hopefully significant sampling of cases from South Asia starts with the Vedic period, focusing on

an instance of the conceptualization of gender polarity and its relation to power in the most solemn amongst the Vedic rituals. Marianna Ferrara shows how the religious construction of female sexuality and its implicit link to fertility is intertwined with the conferral of masculine authority to the patrons of Vedic rituals on the part of the very religious practitioners who authored the ritual texts prescribing the aforementioned rites. Moreover, she shows how royal sexuality cannot but be interpreted as a central point of contention between religious and political elites as well as a field of tension and negotiation that actually turns into a metonymy for the field of power itself, especially insofar as the control over the sexual life of the political elite is ultimately equivalent to the control over their reproduction, i.e. over succession, and therefore the control over the reproduction of power itself.

The section continues with a paper by Daniela Bevilacqua who takes the reader up to the contemporary world of South Asia and its orders of Hindu renouncers, without however disregarding the historical trajectory of texts and lived religious experience that have shaped present-day practices and ideals. The focus of the essay is on the entitlement of women practitioners to become ascetics. Thus, through a methodology that is both historical and anthropological, she investigates the limitations suffered by women in their religious and social agency, especially insofar as the choice of an ascetic path would necessarily determine the break of brahmanically sanctioned norms of femininity, such as, for instance, complete dependence on and submission to the male order. Even more interestingly, the paper investigates how the choice of asceticism can become an instrument of “gender empowerment and a means of freeing women from the shackles of a patriarchal society”, although the carefully analysed phenomenon of the ‘motherisation of female asceticism’ seems to parade against the actuality of such a release from patriarchal norms. Moreover, the article is particularly enriched by its focus on the tangible *Erlebnis* of a contemporary female ascetic of the Rāmānandī tradition, whom the author met and interviewed during her fieldwork.

With the paper by Carola Erika Lorea, the chronological focus remains contemporaneous, but the geographical one shifts to the East, to the world of Bengali mystic practitioners and itinerant performers known as Bāuls. The enigmatic songs composed by the saint-songwriter Bhaba Pagla (1902 – 1984) are analysed as inherently and purposely polysemic. On the basis of an investigation deliberately grounded on their receptions by performers and devotees, the plethora of the songs’ meanings is organized along a threefold interpretive matrix. Starting with a first superficial, literal layer, through an exoteric devotion-centred hermeneutical middle ground, the esoteric depth culminates in a diversified overabundance of Tantric meanings (loosely understood) that are focused on the soteriological significance of “an anthropoietic sexuality based on the restraint of the senses,

especially of sexual desire, and the identification of sublimated carnal love with divine love.” At this monistic level, even the man–woman dichotomy recognised by the Bāuls as the only real difference amongst humans is ultimately overcome in a supreme experience of mystic/sexual unity brought about by techniques of control over reproductive substances and practices. Among many other reflections on the ratio of polysemy within the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Bāul songs, the paper provides an analysis of the various interpretations —conveniently polarized as ‘devotional’ or ‘tantric’ ones— as mirrors of diverging beliefs on the religious use of sexuality on the part of different social agents, who are furthering conflicting agendas of religious proselytism, social control and cultural identity.

The concluding paper of this section investigates the management of sexuality in a cultural medium of the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries: the glittering universe of Indian cinema. On the background of a cinematic history of the complex dialectics between the hardships of censorship and the representation of untamed eroticism, Tatiana Szurlej’s contribution is centred on the depiction of feminine sexuality in those crucial moments of Bollywood movies that are the item songs (or item numbers) and the dream sequences, both in the post-independence as well as in more recent developments, among the many ways of tricking censors into allowing the allure of Eros within the warp of cinema. The evolution of item songs is traced from their first introductions, when they were performed by ‘foreign’ vamps, epitomising the dichotomy between Hindu purity and Western lasciviousness, through the cinema in the seventies in which the female protagonists as well “started to be exposed like never before”, up to the many strands of later and contemporary movies, in which ‘excuses’ such as the Holi festival were common stratagems for vouchsafing the “voyeuristic pleasure to the viewer”. The item numbers evolve, so to say, in the dream sequences, in which the representation of sexuality is psychologically twice removed from reality by force of the ontological status of the scene, fictional even within the already fictional world of cinema. Tatiana Szurlej identifies one more evolution in the ‘film songs’ formula in the massive influence of the Indian star-system, due to which guest stars can just make their appearance in a movie where they play no other role than a beautiful dancing and singing body.

It is also more than worth mentioning that, on the occasion of the conference in Turin (4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> September 2013), Mrinal Kaul delivered an extremely rich paper on the interconnection between Hindu nationalism and the role of sexuality, thoroughly investigating the conceptualization of India as the chaste Bhārat Mātā, ‘Mother India’, and of the (often Muslim) ‘Other’ as a male molester with the wickedest of intentions, to be dutifully persecuted and severely chastised by the pure, Hindu protectors. Unfortunately, due to other scholarly commitments, Mrinal Kaul was not able to finalize his paper on time for the publication of these proceedings.

As previously warned against, the cursory nature of this sampling would have of course benefitted from an even larger spectrum of cases, cultural scenarios and diverse medias under scrutiny. For instance, an example from the uniquely hybrid Indo-Islamic civilization would have certainly enriched the depth of the hermeneutical gaze by including a further perspectival take on the issue, but there is no point in searching for an endless list of regretted omissions. The reason for hinting at matters not treated here is clearly just the desire to highlight the need for further similar volumes and projects, as the topic is far from being comprehensively dealt with by previous scholarship, let alone by our present contributions.

To conclude, the aim of the aim (the *prayojanaprayojana*, in the technical terminology of the Sanskrit commentarial tradition I fondly cherish) of this section cannot be but the development of an encompassing interpretive framework that could account for why, how and how successfully the various discourses on sexuality in South Asia have brought about both intended and unintended effects on history, society and individuals. One might well consider that the extent of the success with regard to this huge, unwieldy task is given away by the incapacity of this short preface to synthesize an overall picture or to pinpoint a specific result of sorts that undergirds the various contributions and approaches to the issue of sexuality in South Asia. However —let the incomplete nature of the scholarly enterprise be what it may— a central issue for any collection of articles is whether the contributors have anything interesting to say. And, in my opinion, the richness of the presented material, the understudied nature of the area, and the subtlety of the scholarly approaches that the various authors have displayed do already vouchsafe for this kind of success. But, more importantly, the following papers are being offered to the readers as a missing building block, hopefully a solid and well-shaped one, in the construction of that very encompassing interpretive paradigm for sexuality in South Asia, the search for which cannot yet be declared over (if it ever can), but whose flickering silhouette has now become less blurred.

After obtaining his Ph.D. from the University of Rome “La Sapienza” on Indian aesthetic theories, Daniele Cuneo worked at the Vienna University on Sanskrit Logic and at the Cambridge University in a project on Manuscript Studies. His main areas of expertise are Sanskrit philosophy of language and aesthetic thought, but his research branches out into epistemological and metaphysical disputes among Brahmins, Buddhists and Jains as well as their possible bearing on contemporary philosophical questions. He is the current Lecturer of Sanskrit and Ancient Culture of South Asia at Leiden University, the Netherlands. Visit his academia page for a complete list of publications.

## Sexuality as a Promotion of Power:

### How the Chief Wife becomes a Means of Persuasion in the Vedic Rhetoric on Kingship

Marianna Ferrara

In the ancient South Asian texts about ritual known as *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas*, the wives of the king play an interesting role in terms of bodily actions and ritual rhetoric. Especially the so-called “chief wife” (*mahiṣī*) is described as a central and liminal player who serves as a sexual counterpart of the king at the main solemn rituals, i.e. *Aśvamedha* and *Rājasūya*, involving the travel of a horse in unconquered lands and the royal consecration, respectively. In this essay I suggest that the construction of female sexuality is a crucial point to fix the boundaries around the notion of authority, not only that of the king, but also that of his practitioner, i.e. the *brāhmaṇa* or *purohita*. From this starting point I suggest also that the chief wife of the king may be reconsidered as one of the most strategic actor on a ritual and political stage. I will try to show that the *mahiṣī*'s sexual function in the ritual exegesis had gained value, in connection with the attempt to deify the human *primus inter pares* of the political organisation, i.e. the king. More specifically, I will deal with the ritual language and codification concerning the *mahiṣī*'s sexuality in order to illustrate the formulation of her body in the rituals prescribed in the *Brāhmaṇas* about solemn rites. I will discuss how the persuasive force of description and prescription about her bodily actions served as a means of persuasion in displaying the king's power. Finally, I suggest rethinking the role of gender in royal rituals from the perspective of literary criticism.

#### 1. Introduction

In this essay I deal with the role of the chief wife (*mahiṣī*) in ancient Indian symbolic practices, specifically the rituals known as *Aśvamedha* and *Rājasūya*, involving the ritual sacrifice of a horse and the royal consecration, respectively. The choice of these two rituals is due to the central role of female sexuality in the definition of masculine authority in connection with the construction of the sovereignty. It is not my intention to hold that female sexuality had not been represented before; rather, I show that its function in the ritual exegesis had gained value, in connection with the attempt to deify the human *primus inter pares* of the political organisation.

My starting-point is developed from Stephanie Jamison's arguments about the introduction of the wife (*patnī*) in the late Ṛgvedic period as a mirror of «the anxiety or the conservative backlash created by profaning the purity of the old male-only ritual with a disruptive female presence»

(Jamison 2006). The transition between the early Ṛgvedic period to the time of the Brāhmaṇa-texts is marked not only by the introduction of the *patnī* in the ritual, but also by her qualification as a rhetorical device in supporting the ideal-type of sovereignty and of an alliance between the practitioners and their patrons. The *patnī* is, in some cases, a *mahiṣī*, the chief wife among other ladies, but her chieftainship is also connected with her role as the chief's wife, the female counterpart of the masculine power and of the political authority. The idea of the introduction of the wife suggested by Jamison offers the terms to pose the subsequent questions: How has the function of the female sexuality, and of the chief wife's sexuality in particular, been represented in connection with the sovereignty? Might this innovation have contributed to the promotion or reinforcement of the alliance between the practitioners and their special patrons (chiefs, leaders, kings)?

In order to answer to these questions, I will attempt to illustrate how the religious elites have tried to fix the boundaries of the alliance with the political leaders, gaining a dominant position in the religious market. On the basis of this attempt, the requalification of the wife in the ritual context had allowed the expansion of religious control over an essential aspect of life for the patrons, who were in a position of undisputed leadership. Sexuality, reproduction, and progeny shall be the components through which the wife, especially, the chief wife (*mahiṣī*) will be investigated. This becomes all the more significant when we take into account two points: 1) the patrons of rituals (*yajamāna*) mentioned in the texts were not common people, but chieftains or kings; 2) all the texts about rituals have been composed by religious elites, so everything we happen to know about them is basically the embodiment of their point of view, interest, or selection.

## 2. Promotion of power through ritual from the reader-response criticism approach

Based upon the conception that the patrons of these rituals (*yajamāna*) were not common people, but chieftains or kings, I intend to stress the social capital involved in the construction of *yajña*, i.e. the brahmanical ritual practice to honour gods. I align with Heesterman, Witzel and others (Whitaker 2011; Proferes 2007; Witzel 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; Heesterman 1995; 1993; 1985; Kuiper 1960; Oldenberg 1894), on the idea that there were rivalries among ritualists (i.e. *brāhmaṇas*) or families of ritualists, involved in the attempt of systematizing the ritual practices concerning *yajñas*. Any effort in promoting their ritual activities was addressed to particular groups of society. According to the most ancient sources, these members were high-ranked persons, engaged in political and military activities to protect people and their villages; these “protectors” had been indicated to also be the patrons of the *brāhmaṇas* by whom they have been frequently portrayed as liberal, brave, and wise. This agonistic scenario – i.e. the competition to provide religious service to this typology of ritual



users – provides us with a new perspective to rethink the concept of tradition in the dominant discourse about ritual. This is also very useful for reconsidering the political use of ritual prescriptions.

For these reasons, I propose to interpret these “protectors” as ideal users of religious practices and as potential readers of the compositions. Saying “ideal users” of the compositions, I refer to the systematization of the most ancient collections of religious texts, namely, the four Vedic Saṃhitās within which the Aśvamedha and the Rājasūya have historically been based. In these texts there is a definite distinction in the roles within ritual organisation, where a religious representative (i.e. an officiant) is said to act *for* the sake of his patron; this officiant is said to act *as if* he was his patron. While the interrelationship between the officiant and his patron appears to be a rule, the social status of these two actors is straightforwardly described. As I assume that a description in religious texts is always an attempt to prescribe roles, ranks, and relations, the fact that the patrons are always indicated as being members of the political elite is not, in my view, coincidental, but intentional. Thus, saying that the ritual users were warriors or kings, the composers aimed to define the ideal-type of patron: the one who has always been indicated as being high ranked and generous toward his officiants. To better reveal the insider discourse, I propose to interpret the ritual patrons as not only “ideal users” but also as “potential readers”: this operation situates the act of composing religious texts *in the* context. Literary theories on the reading process show how a composition may be an intentional act of writing addressed to the ones who will read it. In our case, the religious compositions were presumably recited so that they were listened to by the ones who participated in ritual events.

A different scenario could also be envisaged: what if the ancient religious market offered other ways to honour gods? It is hard to prove that at the time of the ritual systematization, known as the Śrauta reform, other religious groups (i.e. who did not support or preserve the Vedic knowledge) might have performed rituals for common people or for the royal members; nevertheless evidences are not enough to deny this hypothesis. In a grey zone between history and possibility, we have good reasons to postulate that the canonized texts did not describe how the world was, but prescribed how the world ought to be, and consequently, what it ought not to be might have been excluded from the recommended perspective. But “ought, implies can.” Therefore, the aspect of rethinking the performative character of the symbolic manipulation must always be kept in mind when we read these texts.

I propose to use the framework just described to investigate how the discourse on authority might have been promoted through the symbolic manipulation of masculine power and sovereignty

and how it is related to the religious construction of female sexuality. The emphatic point of this methodological approach is that the performance of ritual, as well as its canonisation in transmission (cf. Patton 1994, especially Carpenter 1994), implies intentionality (McCutcheon 2003; Bell 1997; 1992; Geertz 1973). In this perspective, I propose to use a new category – “new” in the field of religious studies, but well-known in literary criticism – that has been theorized between the 1960s and 70s, which concerns the reader-response criticism (Booth 19612; Iser 1974; 1980 [1976]; Eco 1979a; 1979b). I propose to use the category of the “hypothetical reader” (Iser 1980 [1976]) in order to investigate the subjective character of the text from the point of view of the composer, interested in communicating with his ideal reader or listener (Herman 2011).

The difference between hypothetical and ideal reader has been variously approached in the field of readership, as well as authorship (cf. Eco 1979a, 1979b; Suleiman, Crosman 1980; more recently Fludernik 2009; Prince 2009; Schmid 2010; Herman 2011, esp. 64-74). The crucial point concerns how empirically and historically we may reconstruct a reader of whom we know nothing except that which may be deduced from the text itself (*intentio operis*) and/or from the author’s representation of him (*intentio auctoris*; cf. Eco 1979a, 1979b). Some reader-response theorists conceive of the reader as being purely abstract, as an ideal recipient, and do not give a substantial difference between the abstract and the concrete reader, because of the fictive nature of him (cf. Schmid 2010, 80 ff.; Iser 1980 [1976], 22 ff.). However, the reader in my approach has a role and is absolutely empirical, real, historically based, or in Foucauldian terms, *assigned to the discourse*. “The problem – as Iser clearly highlights – is whether such a reconstruction corresponds to the real reader of the time or simply represents the role which the author intended the reader to assume” (Iser 1980 [1978], 28). This is a critical point. The reader can be drawn from existing documents – in our case: from the bards’ eulogies, the praises, and the ritual prescriptions. This reader is the ritual patron, the king, the warrior who is called to act, to fight, and to empower himself together with the gods.

As the Vedic texts are prescriptive in nature, the assumed perspective here provides a new point of view and new glimpses into the framework – social, political, economic – in which the sexuality of the leader/reader and of his wife had been socially constructed and ritually re-qualified. The data for this examination is provided by the ancient texts belonging to different canonical collections whose compilation is rather late. In other words, while the content of these texts had been said, heard, and transmitted in a very ancient period of Indian history, the passage from orality to the written text happened much later (Torella 2006). However, the question of whether the intended reader is or is not contemporary with the author is not at stake here, because the “desired” reader *becomes* contemporary when the author is interested for him to be such.

What I intend to stress here is that the unnamed reader is always contemporary to the extent that he most likely has emerged from the exegesis on religious service and on the authority of the intended user.

### 3. Female sexuality on the ritual stage: a parameter of change in the brahmanical representations of sovereignty

The role of the wife in ritual activity may be investigated as a rhetoric strategy. To do such, I will take into account two methodological factors. First, it is essential to keep in mind that in the Vedic texts the meanings and the functions attributed to the ritual actors belong to a wider discourse concerning the practice for honouring gods, a practice that Vedic authors called *yajña*, but that most translate as “sacrifice”. This translation is taken from the western vocabulary by anthropologists and ethnologists from XIX century onwards and deletes the etymological meaning that is merely “to offer, to honour” (Ferrara 2016). To the end of my examination this detail is useful in order to investigate the ritual rhetoric, for every practitioner was interested in representing his practice as the most efficacious, the most spectacular, and the best of all (cf. Lincoln 1996; 1989). From this perspective, the attention on “the power to fixate certain semiotic markers” (Benavides 1989) may help to rethink how little semiotic details may result into a cluster of taxonomic distinctions (cf. Smith 1994; 1989; Lincoln 1991; 1989; 1986). This is the framework into which I propose to investigate the ritual construction of royal sexuality in general and of female sexuality in particular.

With these premises I assert, with Jamison (2006; 1996), that the introduction of a wife in the ritual is an innovation laden with layered meanings and efficacy. To this end it is helpful to quote the words of the indologist Brian K. Smith, who noticed that the ritual is a laboratory where the human and imperfect things have been transformed into the divine and perfect ones (Smith 1996, 291). This aspect becomes heuristic if we pay attention to the evidence that the ideal-type of the user of the ritual practice – the one who is mentioned in the most ancient Vedic texts – is a powerful and dominant figure: a leader, a chieftain, a warrior, or, in most cases, a *rājan*. If the ritual recitation is interpreted as a legitimizing context, then we realize its prescriptive nature concerning the division of the roles and their classification, and the “introduction” of women in ritual codification (even if the composer does not declare the new account as such).

In the second place, we should take into account the structure of the discourse itself. Using this Foucauldian category, I interpret the term ‘discourse’ not as being unilateral, but bilateral: implying the speaker or a community of speakers on one hand and the hypothetical or postulated audience on the other (Foucault 1971). This framework provides us with a useful point of view to examine the

rhetorical strategies of communication and persuasion in ritual prescriptions. Specifically, we must reckon with the fact that the religious discourse in the Vedic texts concerns two typologies of elites: the patrons and the encoders (i.e. theologians and practitioners; Ferrara 2013, ch. 4.).

For these selected agents, some issues at stake are of crucial importance. The devotees mentioned in the texts are the leaders who aim at reaching the benevolence of the gods and the prosperity of their kingdom. In more practical words, the main interest of these leaders is to preserve their leadership from the potential antagonists (Roy 1994). So, in order to preserve the leadership, it is also required to keep certain others out of the reach of power. Similarly, the practitioners aim to ensure their economic prosperity by means of the gifts and the fees they receive from their patrons. Ritualists who had been able to obtain an advantageous position in the service of the kings certainly did not want to renounce their position, which assured a constant economic support and the acquired social rank, in front of other competitors.

From this perspective, the ritual has really been a laboratory in which the imperfect humans aimed to represent themselves as unapproachable: the practitioners did it in the eyes of their sponsors – the *yajamānas* – in order to preserve their social position among the other religious competitors; the sponsors as users of brahmanical ritual did it in the eyes of their political supporters – i.e. common people – in order to preserve their rank among the potential political adversaries. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the potential users of the brahmanical rituals might also have been themselves a kind of competitor in respect to the priests, in case they intended to lead the way of life of the *brāhmaṇas*.<sup>1</sup> Now let us focus on the main theme of this work: the function of feminine sexuality in the ritual discourse on power.

The idea that women have been introduced to ritual has been held some years ago by the indologist Stephanie Jamison (Jamison 2006). She also sustained that we find evidence of this change in the most ancient collection of texts, the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*. Jamison's main argument was that the participation of the wife (*patnī*) of the patron (*pati*) in rituals is an innovation brought about by some authors at the time of the *Ṛgveda*'s composition. She has noticed that in the *Ṛgveda* there are a few occurrences elucidating upon the function of a wife. However this theme is largely present in the late

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<sup>1</sup> The Vedic collections offer many cases of betwixt and between characters that, belonging to the warrior elites or having military features, accomplish or wish to share the religious knowledge or the brahmanical way of life. Some examples are given by the case of the *Vrātyas* in the *Saṃhitā*- and in the *Brāhmaṇa*-texts, and that of king Janaka in the *Upaniṣads*. The epic *Paraśurāma* (i.e. “axe-wielding Rāma”) – a *brāhmaṇa* who became a warrior is a case of the reversal of the roles, that shows how dangerous it may be to try to change the social assessment and its rules. For an updated bibliography on the *Vrātyas*' question see Ferrara 2015; on Janaka and other *upaniṣadic* kings see Black 2011, 2007; on *Paraśurāma*, see, among the most recent studies, Collins 2012.

collections: specifically in the *Yajurveda*'s collections there are large volumes of data, episodes, and prescriptions concerning the role of a wife in the ritual. This change led Jamison to think that the role of the wife has been encoded from a certain time onwards, when the ritual practice for honouring the gods (namely, *yajña*) was already highly encoded, i.e. in the Śrauta period (Jamison 2006). What is not very clear is the reason why this change took place, yet Jamison left the question open. I think that we may find an answer in the socio-historical approach to the development of the practice for honouring the gods, specifically in the history of the ritual practice called *yajña*. In short, I show the ways through which the hegemonic ritual encoders have tried to impose the practice and to make it advantageous in the eyes of their users and authoritative for reiterating their political and social position. This requires an exploration of the ritual rhetoric involved in the most solemn of royal rituals, the *Aśvamedha* and the *Rājasuya*, respectively.

### 3.1 *Aśvamedha*

The codification of the *Aśvamedha* ritual concerns the spread of the king's power and authority beyond the kingdom's boundaries and is thoroughly presented in the Yajurvedic texts. According to most of the recensions, the ritual started with the voyage of a special horse, selected for his beauty, powerfulness and speed to wander on a foreign land for a long time. The lands that were touched by the horse would become a part of the new kingdom. Among the five Yajurvedic collections available, only two, the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* and the *Vājasaneyī Saṃhitā*, prescribe a sexual intercourse between the chief wife and the horse at the *Aśvamedha* ritual, soon after the killing of the horse. The intercourse was called *mithuna*, i.e. "union", "couple", and involved a contact of the penis (*śiśna*, *pasas*, *gr̥ḍa*, *sthūra*, *sapa*, *śepa*) of the horse with the genital area (*sardigr̥ḍi*, *bhāga*, *gabha*, *muṣkāḥ*, *sakthī*) of the chief wife. During the contact, the other ritual actors repeated a special group of verses called *āhanasya*, i.e. "concerning what is beaten, pressed or flourishing" (from *āhan-*, "to beat, strike at", but deriving from *āhanas*, "to be beaten, be pressed"; EWA, s.v. *āhanás*; KEWA, s.v. *āhanáh*; Parpola 1983). However, in its broad meaning the term *āhanasya* is generally translated as "erotic" or "obscene". The scarce use of the term *āhanasya* in literary sources does not help to definitively state what meaning might have been conceived of in the mind of the *mithuna*-passage's composers. However, in the Śrauta texts concerning the *aśvamedha* we find the verbal root *abhi-mith* which may be interpreted as

“to address [words or verses] for the sake of union”, while others translate it as “to address with insulting or hostile speech”<sup>2</sup>.

The meaning as ‘obscene’ is instead clearly influenced by the puritan approach of previous scholars who tried to interpret this ritual, but this translation of the term *āhanasya* implies also a misunderstanding of the ritual performance as completely negative. Instead, this is not the definitive message of the ritual, which is aimed at promoting and supporting the fertility of the ritual patron in empirical terms. Moreover, the translation of *āhanasya* as obscene is not consistent with the logic of ritual that is aimed to regulate and control the sexual behaviour and semantics by the means of the officiants.

At the *emic* level of interpretation (cfr. McCutcheon 1999; von Stuckrad 2013; 2010; 2003) of the text, these “erotic” verses were addressed to the chief wife for the sake of the intercourse, during which the king was represented by the horse. Keeping in mind this combination, the performance provides some meaningful clues: a request for fertility was probably involved in the act of putting the chief wife’s and the horse’s sexual organs close to each other, but at the same time the exhibition of the horse’s masculinity reiterated the rich symbolism of warrior-hood, maleness, and kingship (Whitaker 2011; Proferes 2007; Roy 1994; Gonda 1966; Heesterman 1957). While the chief wife was practically engaged in a spectacular intercourse with the dead horse, the human king is said to gain prosperity and power for he was the real beneficiary of the ritual. What the texts further say is that, unlike her husband, the chief wife was addressed by the other participants with abusive terms. This aspect deserves attention in order to rethink the role of sexuality in the construction of kingship in these texts and, vice versa, to rethink how the construction of kingship impacted the social construction of sexuality. As the historian Kumkum Roy noticed, the king increased his power for he did not need to engage himself in physical intercourse: «In this sense, the notion of procreation, like that of creation, sanctified through rituals, distanced the *rājā* from the people in general, and women in particular» (Roy 1994, 121). This shift was due to the priest’s action for only the ritual specialist was empowered to manipulate the words and the substances of the ritual.

It is noteworthy that historically the description / prescription of the sexual intercourse is contained in few texts: namely in two *Samhitās* of the Yajurvedic tradition – *Taittirīya* and *Vājasaneyī* – and in the little un-canonised collection of stanzas attached to the *Rgveda*, called *khila*, “appendix” –

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<sup>2</sup> MW, s.v. *āhanasya*; EWA, s.v. *METH*:- “feindselige Rede”. See *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* 15.30 and *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 20.18 and their English translation by G.U. Thite and C.G. Kashikar.

or lit. the “uncultivated land”<sup>3</sup> that had been definitively excluded by the *cultivated*, i.e. canonical collection of *ṛcas*. The topic of the *Khila-sūkta* 5.22 is very similar to that of the *Taittirīya* passage on the sexual intercourse; it presents a more similar use of the term *mahiṣī*, the “great buffalo female” conventionally translated as “queen” or “chief wife”, than in the Ṛgvedic hymns, where the *mahiṣī* seems to be a married woman, but not necessarily a crowned wife. For instance, in the fifth book of the *Ṛgveda* the *mahiṣī* is described as a wife, without any reference to the social status of her husband:

*Ṛgveda* 5.37.3

*vadhūr iyám pátim ichánty eti yá im vāhāte máhiṣīm iṣirám |*

“Here she goes, a bride seeking a husband who will take her home as a vigorous *mahiṣī*.”<sup>4</sup>

Even when the *mahiṣī* is linked with the god Agni as the one who *deveṣu rājati*, “shines/rules among gods”, the double possibility to translate the root *raj-* as “to rule” and “to shine” makes the meaning as crowned queen hard to hold without exception:

*Ṛgveda* 5.2.2

*kám etám tvám yuvate kumārám péṣi bibharṣi máhiṣī jajāna |*

“Young woman, who is this child whom you carry as his wet nurse? The *mahiṣī* has given birth to him<sup>5</sup> [Agni].”

A more clear meaning is, instead, attested in the *Atharvaveda* by Śaunaka, where the term *mahiṣī* is well distinguished from “*nārī*, “woman”, and denotes the exceptional feature of *mahiṣī* in connection with her peculiarity to shine/to rule (*raj-*):

*Atharvaveda Śaunaka* 2.36.3

*iyám agne nārī pátim videṣṭa sómo hí rájā subhágāṃ kṛṇóti |  
súvānā putráṅ máhiṣī bhavāti gatvá pátim subhágā ví rājatu ||3||*

“O Agni, may this woman find a husband; indeed, Soma the king makes her wealthy. Generating progeny, may she become *mahiṣī*; going toward [her] husband, may she shine/rule with prosperity!”

<sup>3</sup>Or “with some lacuna” in opposition to *akhila*, “without lacuna, complete” according to Bhise 1995, 13; KEWA, I, 309-310; Scheftelowitz 1906.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Brereton, Jamison 2014, II, 703.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Brereton, Jamison 2014, II, 663.

Also in the *Khila* 5.13.6, the *mahiṣī* is not clearly linked with the king, but with “the one who goes to battle”, *yúdhingamáh*. The first attestation where the *mahiṣī* is with no doubt described as the king’s wife is the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*, then also in the *Kāṭha Saṃhitā*, both the versions belonging to the Kṛṣṇayajurveda tradition. The context for action is the Rājasūya rite. However, in the *Khila-sūkta* containing the *āhanasya* verses (5.22) the *mahiṣī* is called *mahānagnī*, lit. “great naked” (Vasilkov 1989-1990, 390 ff.; Witzel 1997b, 397), *nagnā*, who is either the “harlot” of the horse, a “ritual prostitute”, according to most scholars<sup>6</sup>, or the “naked earth” according to others (Dange 1971, 68-82). A possible transition may, thus, be hypothesized in the *Khilāni*. The reason for the semantic transition between the *Ṛgveda* and the *Khila*-hymns might be due to the conflicting times of composition. Probably a semantic shift occurred after the *Ṛgvedic* times, since from the linguistic point of view, the *Khila*-verses are generally considered to be composed later than the *Ṛgveda*, in the same period as the *Yajurvedic* collections (Witzel 1997a; Bhise 1995). If we assume the chronological proximity between the *Khila-sūkta* 5.22 and the *Taittirīya* prose-texts on the *Aśvamedha* rite, a question arises: at the time of the *Yajurvedic* and the *Khila* codification, what instigated the priests’ interest for the chief wife’s sexuality, which was not so relevant at the time of the *Ṛgvedic* composition?

A starting-point to give an answer may be the study of Vasilkov (1989-1990) on Draupadī, an epic character of the *Mahābhārata* whose life is marked by several episodes in which her sexuality and nudity are involved in some respect; specifically, Vasilkov mentions the episode in which Draupadī enters an assembly hall, namely, a place for only men. In one case, the assembly hall is that of the Kaurava princes, i.e. the rival cousins of Draupadī’s five husbands; in that place she has been mistreated and humiliated by being led “with a single garment on her”<sup>7</sup> in front of all the warriors into the hall where married women would not go, i.e. the “men’s house”. In another case, the assembly hall is that of king Virāṭa’s court, where Draupadī lived for some time in disguise as the queen’s chambermaid. During her journey to the Virāṭa’s court, Draupadī alias Sairamdhri pretended to be married with the Gandharvas, the divine troop, in order to preserve herself from the eyes of other men. In this second episode, her access into the hall created no scandal. Vasilkov argues that the lack of scandal is due to the new personality of Draupadī as a woman who belonged to several men, i.e. a woman who had already had pleasure with more than one man. A little truth was

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bhise 1995, 226; Keith, Macdonell 1920, s.v. *mahā-nagnī*: courtesan, paramour.

<sup>7</sup> *Mahābhārata* VIII.67.1-3.



concealed in this new undercover personality of Draupadī, because she really was married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers. But in the view of the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī should not be allowed to enter the “men’s house” (*sabhā*) because this place was perceived of as a place of pleasure for men, not for women. The only women who might have been allowed to enter there ought to have been those who provided pleasure to men. This should be offensive for a wife and for her husband, even if she was married to several men. The arguments of Vasilkov are more subtle than how they are here resumed; however, his accounts on the link between women’s sexual pleasure and the “space for only men” are a good starting-point to rethink the re-semantisation of the chief wife as the “great naked woman” (*mahānagnī*) or the “great buffalo female” (*mahiṣī*) at the royal ritual. Through observing the related texts in detail it is possible to clarify the dynamics of re-semantisation in the context of ritual activity.

According to the *Samhitās*’ ‘long version’ – then abridged in their respective *Śrautasūtras* – the spectacular intercourse between the chief wife and the dying horse was accompanied by a series of verses that were practically recited by the priests and the maidens participating in the ceremony (Dumont 1927); but the main character was the “chief wife” (*mahiṣī*). In the version of the *Śukla Yajurveda* as well as in the Kṛṣṇa recension, a detailed recitation conducts the actions and gives the sequence of the performance; therefore we may consider this passage as a real prescription of the ritual. But in the XIX- and XX-century translations of the Vedic texts (Dumont 1927; Keith 1914; Scheftelowitz 1906; Griffith 1899; Eggeling 1882-1900), the intercourse passage has been removed or partially translated. Here I give the full translation, for it provides evidence that female sexuality enters into the texts to empower the relation between ritualists and their sponsors and serves to re-establish the power positions of specific groups.

An indication of how the social construction of sexuality might become a means of promotion of the warriors’ values and symbols is presented in the following passage:

*Taittirīya Samhitā* 7.4.19.1-2

*ambe ambāly ambike nā mā nayati kás caná | sasásty ásvakáh || súbhage kámpīlavāsini suvargé  
loké sám prórṇvāthām | áhám ajāni garbhadhám á tvám ajāsi garbhadhám | táu sahá catúraḥ  
padáh sám prá sārāyāvahai | vṛṣā vāñ retodhá réto dadhātūt sakthyòr grdám dhehy añjím  
údañjimm ánv aja | yá strīñām jīvabhójano yá āsām ||1|| biladhāvanah | priyá strīñām apīcyàḥ |  
yá āsām kṛṣṇé lákṣmaṇi sárdigrdim parāvadhīt || ámbe ámbāly ámbike nā mā yabhati kás caná |  
sasásty ásvakáh || úrdhvám enām úc chrayatād veñubhārám giráv iva | áthāsyā mádhyam  
edhatām síté vāte púnann iva || ámbe ámbāly ámbike nā mā yabhati kás caná | sasásty ásvakáh ||  
yád dhariṇí yávam átti ná ||2||*

“Mother, Mom, Mommy (ambe ambāly ambike). No one led me [to the horse]! The little horse is asleep. O fair one dressed with Kampila clothes, clad in fair raiment in the world of heaven be you two covered. Could I lead the bestower of the embryo, could you lead the bestower of the embryo? Together, we make the four limbs fully stretched. Could your male, inseminator bring the semen, [could he put] the penis between the thighs! Could you conduct the anointed [one] along the buttock until the top. [The one who] is the women’s pleasure, the purifier of [their] hole, the pleasing secret of women whose vagina he subjugated beyond the black spot.

ambe ambāly ambike. No one led me [to the horse]! The little horse is asleep. Hold her high, like one who brings a load of bamboo on the mountain. May the one who is at the midst prosper like one who cleans oneself up the breeze.

ambe ambāly ambike. No one led me [to the horse]! The little horse is asleep and does not eat any grain of barley [anymore].”

It is absolutely clear from the words mentioned above that the chief wife ought to get her vulva in contact with the dead horse’s penis – or its “hind quarter near the anus”.<sup>8</sup> Several scholars had considered this passage as *merely a description* or a fantasy of the authors (Malamoud 1996; Puhvel 1970; Eliade 1958; Keith 1925; Oldenberg 1894). But I do not agree with this reading of the passage because a singular detail allows us to think that it was not a fantasy at all. According to the Vedic prescriptions,<sup>9</sup> animals were killed by asphyxiation, but it is known that a slow suffocation of males can produce penile erection (Jamison 1996, 68). I am tempted to interpret this ritual technique not *merely as an attempt* to stress the fertile character of the ritual<sup>10</sup>, rather as an “empirical” practice to exhibit the fertilising attribute of the sexual contact with the dead horse, being the representation of the empowered king. It is undeniable that this performance might have appeared very suggestive in the eyes of the participants; it may be added that, from an ethological perspective, the engagement in a costly ritual labour recalls the “conspicuous consumption” theory by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), recently rethought by Gustavo Benavides in the field of the history of religions: the costly display of the physical attributes is a well-known phenomenon for many animal species to promote or to make visible their rank, role, strength, and function (Benavides 2013; 1989). Indeed, the purpose of the ritual was to exalt the king’s sexuality as an exhibition of his high power (Jamison 1996; Roy 1994; Doniger 1980); therefore it seems appropriate to say “the end justifies the means”,

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<sup>8</sup> MW, s.v. *gr̥da*.

<sup>9</sup> *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 20.17.8-9. See Jamison 1996, 68 and 274 n.114; Heesterman 1985, 87 n.27.

<sup>10</sup> As it has been suggested by Jamison 1996; Roy 1994; Malamoud 1989; Doniger 1980; Puhvel 1970; Gonda 1969; Heesterman 1957; Coomaraswamy 1942; Dumont 1927.

where the means is the practice to make *visible* the fertilising power of the king through the exhibition of the sex organs of the horse, and then, through the *mise-en-scène* of the union (*mithuna*) with the chief wife.

We come across a new point of view if we compare the passage above with the more ancient versions of the prescription of the sexual contact. In this case, the most ancient version is contained in the earliest collections of the Yajurveda canon, namely the *Maitrāyaṇī* and *Kāṭha* recensions. The text is very similar in some detail:

*Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 3.12.20 [166, 9.13–167, 1-2] (Von Schroeder 1881-1886)

~ *Kāṭha Saṃhitā* 5.4.8

*ámbyámbike ámbālike ná mā nayati káscaná | sásasty ásvakáh súbhadrikāṃ kāmṗilavāsínim | gaṇānāṃ tvā gaṇápatiṃhavāmahe priyānāṃ tvā priyápatiṃ havāmahe nidhínāṃ tvā nidhípatiṃ havāmahe vaso mamáḥámajāni garbhadhámá tvámajāmi garbhadhám || tau mahá catúraḥ padáh saṃprásārayāvaḥ svargé loké prórṇuvātāṃrvyśā vāmásvo retodhá réto dadhātu ||*

“Mother, Mom, Mommy (*ambe ambāly ambike*). No one led me [to the horse]! The little horse is asleep. [No one led me] who is the little lucky [woman] dressed with Kampila clothes! We invoke you, leader of troops, we invoke you, beloved leader of the beloved ones, we invoke you, bestower of treasures. Could I conduct the bestower of the embryo, could you conduct the bestower of the embryo? Together we make the four lower limbs be stretched. In the world of heaven may you two be covered, could your male, the inseminator, put the semen!”

If we consider the *Taittirīya* recension alone, we can deduce that here a sexual intercourse was involved, specifically between the one “who put the semen” (*retodhā*) and the one “who is dressed with the clothes of *kāmpīla* (tree)”<sup>11</sup> or “from Kampila town”.<sup>12</sup> The reproductive function of the chief wife is clearly connected with the chieftainship of the horse / king. In the version of the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* the epithets addressed to the horse evoke the warrior dimension of the Ṛgvedic hymns: in fact he is referred to as *gaṇapati*, “leader of the troops”, and as *Bṛhaspati*, the priest-god, in RV 2.23.1. From the same hymn, the mantra *gaṇānāṃ tvā gaṇapatiṃ havāmahe* (“we invoke you, leader of troops”) is extracted. The variants of this verse are composed with the term *priyāpati*, “beloved leader of the beloved ones”, and the expression *nidhīpati vaso*, “bestower of treasures”.

I have the impression that the “spectacularity” of the intercourse (*mithuna*) between the chief wife and the dead horse is the most refined product of an ancient discourse on the efficacy of ritual.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jamison 1996, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dumont 1927.

Basically, it expresses the certitude of the ritual in empirical terms. Both for the practitioners and for the success of the practice, the rhetorical effect was the accumulation and concentration of symbolic capital. Specifically the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines the social construction as ‘credit notoriety’ (Bourdieu 1972, 310-311), as an “anticipation of profit” that is not simply a relation of communication between a sender and a receiver, but it is, first and foremost, an economic exchange (Bourdieu 1972, 301; Bourdieu 1991; 1982b).

Another factor has to be taken into consideration. Several data in the Ṛgvedic hymns allow us to think that, amongst the ritual practitioners, there were rivalries and competitions at the social as well as the symbolic level (Whitaker 2011; Proferes 2007; Witzel 1995b; 1995c; Kuiper 1960). Some competitions are reflected at the composition level. For example, the different recensions of the text at our disposal show that the *Maitrāyaṇī* and the *Kaṭhaka* theologians did not assume the sexual contact, while the *Taittirīya* codifiers absorbed the idea of a performed intercourse as it appears from the *Khila* hymn. It is not excluded that the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* and the *Kāṭha Saṃhitā* codifiers had in mind the performance of a sexual intercourse, but they did not prescribe it as “facts to do”; they just evoked it. Nothing much can be said about the encoders of the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* and the *Kāṭha Saṃhitā*, but it is possible to investigate the reasons why other theologians did not simply evoke the enactment of the ritual, in their respective recensions.

We could begin by wondering if it is just a matter of style. Frankly, I do not think so; furthermore, some arguments are provided by the political context. For instance, Hermann Kulke, who examined all the passages where a *Rājasūya* – the other solemn rite to promote kingship – is prescribed, holds that “large parts of the ceremony appear to have served the very purpose to stop the population from running away and to accept the ‘royal’ *sūamāna*, the sacrificer, as their ruler” (Kulke 1992, 195). Indeed, it is a matter of fact that frequent migrations, suggested by linguists and historians of ancient South Asia<sup>13</sup>, had most likely impacted the forms of cohabitation. This instigated the formation of new leaderships or at least the modification of the old ones, urging an adequate ritual labour to preserve a state of existent order or a particular hierarchy. Also, we should not underestimate the fact that when populations are on the move, other strategies are required to support the local authority – and the related hierarchy and leadership. These may be different from the strategies that construct a political and social order related to the control over a territory or

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Parpola 2009, 149-162; Parpola 2004, 482; Parpola 2002, 43-102; Kulke, Rothermund 2004 [1998], 48-49; Witzel 2001, 62, 66-67; Witzel 1997a, 303-304; Witzel 1989, § 5.1.

throughout a centralized and settled authority<sup>14</sup>. However, the Aśvamedha was addressed to promote the expansion of the power over territory and to legitimise war beyond the boundaries of the kingdom. For that reason, many scholars agree with the idea that when the prose-texts had been composed the political organisations in the northern lands of South Asia were stratified and centralised<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2. Rājasūya

Many scholars consider the Rājasūya rite to be older than the Aśvamedha, not because it is mentioned in the oldest sources, but because the function of this rite is very basic. A ritual for legitimising the social and political superiority of a leader is present in every ancient society where the social and political superiority of a man amongst other men must be re-qualified as arbitrarily “natural”.<sup>16</sup> Historically, while we find some mention of the Aśvamedha rite in the *Ṛgveda*, we have no mention of the Rājasūya at all in the most ancient collection, with only few questionable data being available in the *Atharvaveda* (Schlerath 1960). This could be a good reason to hypothesise that the Rājasūya was the most refined and spectacular version of an older ritual to legitimate leadership (Heesterman 1957; Rau 1957).

For the purpose of this article, it is remarkable how the chief wife is connected with the leadership in the Rājasūya ritual. Assuming that all of the elements of the Rājasūya ritual have a role within the general purpose of legitimizing the king, also the mention of the wife in the ritual to legitimise the king’s or the leader’s superiority is to be considered as functional. Specifically, the social construction of the chief wife’s sexuality is provided in the ritual prescription in order to improve the king’s status and consent. The frame concerns the ritual for legitimising his superiority among people (*viś*) and among his peers (*kṣatriya*, “warrior,” or *śajāta*, lit. “relative” or, in the broader sense, “companion”; Kulke 1992; Thapar 1984), as well as for institutionalizing a “situation of inequality” (Bronkhorst 2012).

As I stated previously, occurrences of the term *mahiṣī* are very old, but this term did not literally mean the “king’s wife” in the *Ṛgveda*. In the few occurrences when this term appears, the *mahiṣī* is described as a wife who follows her husband (RV 5.37.3) or as a mother, namely Agni’s mother (RV

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Miller 2011, 97 ff.; Rüstow 2014, 100 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Proferes 2007; Witzel 1997c; Witzel 1995a; Scharfe 1989; Rau 1957.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Bourdieu 1982a.

5.2.2)<sup>17</sup>, but the meaning of “king’s wife” is present in the *Maitrāyaṇī*, *Kāṭha* and *Taittirīya* collections. These are also the textual collections that support an advanced idea of sovereignty (Tsuchiyama 2007; Proferes 2007; Roy 1994; Kulke 1992; Heesterman 1993; Thapar 1984; Rau 1957). The semantic shift suggests a change in the way to represent the political entity. Other elements may support this idea, such as the division of the roles within the political organisation and the involvement of new figures in the ritual in connection with the political hierarchy in the *Rājasūya* - a rite whose main purpose is to legitimatise the authority of a *rājan*, the leader. Once again, the context is highly political; it is public and claims to communicate ideas to a wide audience. The chief wife is mentioned amongst the *ratnins*, lit. “endowed of *ratna*, jewel, treasure.” As the most important representatives of the kingdom,<sup>18</sup> the *ratnins* offered an oblation for the sake of the kingdom. This part of the *Rājasūya* is named *ratnihavīṃṣi*, “oblations by the *ratnins*”.

The chief wife is asked to participate in the performance as a *patnī*, the “householder’s wife”. It is noteworthy that the chief wife is not the only wife asked to perform. She is accompanied by a second wife, named *parivṛktī* (or *parivṛktā*), the “discarded, rejected, dismissed one”. Both the wives are represented in contrast to each other: one is like the benevolent goddess Aditi, the other as the dangerous goddess Nirṛti. This contrast is said to bestow prosperity upon the patron of the ritual if, and only if, it is controlled by the ritual action of the priests. The same passage is found in another text of the Taittiriya canon, the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (1.7.3), where the participants are called *rāṣṭrasya pradātāraḥ*, “bestowers of the kingdom”.

What is remarkable is that the chief wife acts as one of the best representatives of the kingdom together with the most important dignitaries. As a result, on the third day she offers an oblation directly after the priest and the king. The complete list of the *ratnins* is, with some variations, as follows (Scharfe 1989; Sharma 1959; Rau 1957):

Ritual actor		MS	KS	TS	TB
priest	<i>purohita</i> or <i>brahmán</i>	Bṛhaspati	Bṛhaspati	Bṛhaspati	Bṛhaspati
king	<i>rājan</i>	Indra	Indra	Indra	Indra
chief wife	<i>mahiṣī</i>	Aditi	Aditi	Aditi	Aditi

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kazzazi 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Rau 1957; Horsch 1966; Rocher 1986: 54 and ff.

discarded wife	<i>parivṛkti/ā</i>	Nṛrti	Nṛrti	Nṛrti	Nṛrti
chief of the troops (commander-in-chief)	<i>senānī</i>	Agni	Agni	Agni	Agni
herald / bard or charioteer and wheel- maker (craft specialist) or king's messenger	<i>sūta</i>	Varuṇa	Varuṇa	Varuṇa	Varuṇa
treasurer / responsible for the financial assets or responsible for the care of the royal leader	<i>kṣattr</i>	Savitṛ	Savitṛ	Savitṛ	Savitṛ
custodian of the store or driver (holder of the reins), charioteer of an inferior kind	<i>saṃgrahīṭṛ</i>	Aśvin	Aśvin	Aśvin	Aśvin
collector or distributor of voluntary fees	<i>bhāgadūgha</i>	Pūṣān	Pūṣān	Pūṣān	Pūṣān
chief of village / village representative of people	<i>grāmaṇī</i>	Marut	Marut	Marut	—
dice thrower or distributor of land plots for sowing (dice may have been used in distributing shares by lots)	<i>akṣavāpa</i>	Rudra	Rudra	Rudra	—
butcher (distribution of beef, mutton etc.) or (maybe official) cook	<i>govikarta</i>	Rudra	Rudra	—	—
carpenter and chariot- maker (experts in metal working and crafts)	<i>takṣa-rathakāra</i>	Viṣṇu	Viṣṇu	—	—

However, even if the chief wife and the other dignitaries are mentioned, they do not take action, and instead the king and the officiant do. To sanction this alliance through the *ratnihaviṃṣi* the Taittirīya theologians conclude:

*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1.8.10

*yé devá devasúva sthá tá imám āmuṣyāyaṇám anamitráya suvadhvam mahaté kṣatráya mahatá ádhipatyāya mahaté jánarājyāya | eṣá vo bharatā rājā sómo 'smákam brāhmaṇāṇāṃrrājā práti tyán náma rājyám adhāyi svām tanúvaṃ váruṇo asísrec chúcer mitrásya vrátyā abhūmámanmahi mahatá rtásya náma*

“O you gods that instigate the gods, do you instigate him, descendant of such a one, to be without foes, to great lordship, to great overlordship, to great rule over the people. This is your king, O Bharatas; Soma is the king of us brāhmaṇas. This kingdom has verily been named, Varuṇa has diffused his own body. We have become obedient to pure Mitra. We have magnified the name of the great order.”<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

What can we learn about the social construction of sexuality from the above discussions? In the Yajurvedic texts there is a great emphasis on the wife’s sexual function. This is a parameter to investigate the use and the re-qualification of sexuality in the religious re-telling and its service for the political cause. Substantial data provides information about the political hierarchy and the social stratification. The function of the ritual construction of the eminent and masculine sexuality should be revisited in the view of this re-configuration.

The leader took advantage of this kind of symbolical capital. He gained the support to legitimize his innate superiority as “natural”, and also to preserve his right to rule. Without such efficacious ways to preserve his title to rule, his power could be lost; but adequate ritual practices construct the semiotic boundaries of his entitlement, and furthermore, the image of fertility contributes to improve this goal.

It is remarkable that the importance of the wife in order to improve the king’s fertility is represented as something that ought to be controlled, in order to preserve prosperity. “Exaggeration” of the feminine action was considered to be dangerous; for this reason every female participant, necessary although potentially dangerous, ought to be kept under control by means of the symbolic actions of the priest. Somebody might object that these are all elements of a ritual

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Keith 1914.



rigidly codified. Actually they are, but the chief wife only, as the sexual counterpart of the chief in the ritual for fertility, is specifically perceived as a mediator with the most “natural”, i.e. extraordinary and uncontrolled aspect of sovereignty: its continuous existence from father to son. For the sake of this uncontrolled as well as necessary aspect, the wife’s engagement in the ritual has to be regulated through a code of behaviour. In fact, the intercourse between the chief wife and the horse has to be performed attentively in order to improve the prosperity of the king-patron. All the women who were called to act in these prescriptions have some agency because of their sexuality as a functional element for the improvement of the ritual performance’s efficacy.

A critical point deserves attention: those who fixed the boundaries of such domain were males, specifically a class of males involved in the religious narrative of power. The agency of the wife – and of the wives generally – was denied right from the beginning: even during the intercourse, when the chief wife is a key player of the performance, she is said to perform adultery. A monogamic reading of the ritual may lead us to interpret the reproaching of adultery as an odd semantisation of the intercourse – the king is cheated –. However, I think the notion of adultery had served as a public representation to keep the wife’s authority subservient to that of the husband. This becomes a rhetorical device to exhibit the normalised (and then naturalised into social and cultural norms) behaviour according to which a man may have more than one wife, while a wife may belong to only one man. This idea is reiterated in the *Taittirīya* canon, when it is said that

*Taittirīya Samhitā* 6.6.4.2-3

*yám [...] suvargá kāmasyátha hrásīyāmsam ākrámaṇam evá tát sétuṃ yájamānaḥ kurute  
suvargásya lokásya sámaṣṭyai ||2||*

*yád ékasmin yūpe dvé raśané parivyáyati tásmād éko dvé jāyé vindate yán náikāṃ raśanāṃ  
dváyor yūpayoḥ parivyáyati tásmān náikā dváu pátī vindate*

“For him who desires the heaven he should set it up with the southern half the higher, then the [northern] half the lower; verily the sacrificer makes it a ladder and a bridge to attain the world of heaven [2]. In that on one post he twines round two girdles, therefore one man wins two wives; in that he does not wind one girdle round two posts, therefore one wife does not find two husbands.”<sup>20</sup>

Following this principle, the priests act for revolving the practice around the interest of the husband, here in the double role of “ritual patron” and “leader of the group”.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Keith 1914.

To better put into context the theologians' contribution to the promotion of the kingship process and the preservation of it through marriage we should consider another factor previously mentioned: how the competitions among practitioners impacted on the act of composing ritual prescriptions. It is more than confirmed that the ritual practitioners known as Brāhmaṇas or Ṛṣis were vying with each other for being the king's priest (*purohita*; Whitaker 2011; Proferes 2007; Witzel 1995b; 1995c; Heesterman 1995; 1993; Kuiper 1960). The symbolic discourse was the most powerful means to legitimate the supremacy of a lineage over other competitors and to preserve a tradition as original among other potential lines of audition (Squarcini 2008, 86-99). The priest's task is said to be the symbolic protection of the kingdom. For the success of the ritual goal, the *purohita* is said to receive abundant fees gaining social prestige. In more theoretical words, there was a space for bargaining power in the contractual religious discourse amongst the hegemonic agents. However, among them the women were but a symbolic capital to be concentrated, reiterated, and exhibited during public festivals: on the one hand there was the ritual patron / leader, on the other one there was the priest, who was the real executor of an institutionalizing practice. In a gender-oriented discourse, as the Brahmanic discourse surely was, the function of a wife should be interpreted as a message by men addressed to men, namely, the men of the group or, in the Vasilkov's words, the men of the house.

The ritual context is therefore highly performative and it involves important implications at the political level. The encoders elaborated a wide range of semiotic marks that indicate the boundaries between masculine and feminine domains, but also between dominating and dominated agents. Of course, as Johannes Bronkhorst has recently stressed, “[s]exuality is not only about dominance and submission. Ritual, too, does not always or necessarily concern relationships of dominance and submission” (Bronkhorst 2012). However, the re-semantisation of the wife in the great royal rituals at the time of the Śrauta codification should be inserted into an historical context when there was a need to talk of sovereignty and supreme dominance. Elaborating a code of ritual manipulation, the ritual specialists appropriated the most pragmatical aspect of the patron's life – reproduction, progeny, and sexual life, and acquired new ways to communicate, consolidate or simply perpetuate the socio-political situation.

To conclude, if the introduction and re-codification of the wife's function is a strategy of efficacy, in the Aśvamedha rite the spectacularity prescribed by some authors is nothing but the attempt to affirm the discourse on the specialist's competence in a context where perhaps ritualists had not an exclusive position in the religious market; an attempt to gain authority and entitlement over the acts of codification against other religious competitors. To this end, it is useful, once more,

to keep into account the Bourdieusian logic of symbolic acts of institutional identification (Bourdieu 1990; 1991), according to which distinction and identification are two faces of the same coin: identification with a group means in fact distinction from other groups. If we consider the ritual codification as a reading of the distinction / identification processes from inside, it follows, in Bourdieusian words, that the more dangerous a situation has become for the group, the more codified a social practice has become for the sake of distinction: the codification's degree has varied as a consequence to the degree of danger. In the current case the danger is double: on the one hand the risk for ritualists is to not be distinguishable from others in the religious market; on the other one the risk for the high ranked users of the ritual is to not be distinguishable from others in the hierarchical scale. The construction of female sexuality is a crucial point to fix the boundaries around the notion of authority, both political and religious, through the ritual actors. The chief wife is nothing but the "first lady" who is asked for acting for the sake of boundaries to be fixed, exhibited, and reiterated through the ritual. What was the agency of the chief wife in the ancient past cannot be said through the words spoken by the ritualists, because of their interest in taking part of the authority here promoted. I tried elsewhere, as Jamison did, to rethink the women's role and authority in the symbolical and social space managed by them – the hospitality (Jamison 1996), but that is a different story. Instead, I tried to examine two singular representations of the sexuality of the chief's wife as a ritualised and idealised sexual counterpart of the chief's masculinity. This approach provides a new point of view to rethink how the specific representations of female sexuality might have been useful to stress the alliance between very important ritual users – the kings – and Brahmanic lineages in the ancient religious market.

A concluding remark: an investigation on the symbolical space reserved for the chief wife/chief's wife provides us with the understanding of how women were perceived and represented from a Brahmanical point of view. At this level of interpretation, the most important ritual actors – the kings and his wives – served as a model to reiterate the authority of the kings and, at the same time, to promote the efficacy of their personal way to honour the gods.

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## Are women entitled to become ascetics?

An historical and ethnographic glimpse on female asceticism in Hindu religions

Daniela Bevilacqua

This paper looks at the position of women in Indian asceticism through an historical and anthropological perspective. Introducing at first the traditional view that Brahmanic texts offer on the topic - women are innately impure therefore they do not have a natural inclination to dharma- the paper goes on demonstrating that women have always found ascetic paths to answer their religious quests. However, for these paths were jagged by social obstacles, women often lived their religious experience as a private one or had to cut the social norms in a revolutionary way to follow them. As a result of this discouragement, female participation remains low to be acknowledged and to become a normal reality rather than an exceptional one by the Indian lay and ascetic societies. Through examples from the past and the present, this paper shows that asceticism was and still is a path to realize an individual empowerment for those women who deliberately choose it. In contemporary India, the role of female ascetics is improving thanks to the new historical background: some have gained a position in traditional orthodox groups, others have created their own sect, and some others have become predominant activists in political and social movements. However, these female ascetics and gurus are still recognized as extraordinary, exceptional individuals. Women in the *sādhu samāj* continue to experience sometimes discriminations and difficulties, as they cannot strive for the highest assignments but in exceptional cases and outstanding characters. Therefore, as the case study of Rām Priya Dās presented in this paper demonstrates, the path to asceticism is still hard to follow and it needs a deep motivation and a strong personality to face the opposition of family and society.

This paper is the result of a lucky encounter I had during my fieldwork in Varanasi: while I was looking for religious centres belonging to the Rāmānandī order (*sampradāya*), I bumped into a Rāmānandī temple/*āśram* managed by a woman, Rām Priya Dās, who belongs to the *tyāgī* branch of the *sampradāya*. *Tyāgīs* are ascetics who follow a religious discipline (*sādhanā*) focused on renounce and austerities, and usually have a wandering lifestyle. During my fieldwork I met very few female Rāmānandī ascetics, and to find one involved in such a spiritual path prompted me to get acquainted with her. However, as my fieldwork was about to end, I could spend with Rām Priya Dās only few mornings. Since I was not able to obtain much information from her, I asked about female asceticism to bachelor students (*bramhacārins*), to the Jagadgurū of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* living in Varanasi

and to his lay followers. Then, I confronted my data with those of several studies dealing with the topic of female asceticism.

The word asceticism in India has multifarious meanings, and does not always coincide with renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*)<sup>1</sup> as it can be accomplished also in the domestic realm. Therefore, asceticism can manifest in different contexts: remaining located within the ordinary social world; rejecting social roles; going beyond the structures of society (in this latter case asceticism coincides with renunciation). As Burghart affirms (1983, 643):

The only general statement which one can make concerning asceticism in the religious traditions of south Asia is that all ascetics see themselves as followers of some path which releases them from the transient world (not the social world) and that all ascetics distinguish themselves from non-ascetics who do not seek such release. The criteria must be specified in each case, for one sect does not necessarily accept the criteria of other sects.

The flexibility of the concept of asceticism makes even clearer the limitations suffered by women who were (and still are) often hindered not only from undertaking a wandering ascetic lifestyle, but also from following an ascetic path inside the domestic domain.

In the last decades several anthropological studies have analysed and described female asceticism, underlining both the participation of women in religious traditional orders and the development of new groups. It is difficult to have precise statistics on the ascetic population in total and to evaluate the female percentage: Khandelwal takes into consideration the works of Denton (1991), Gross (1992), Narayan (1989) and Ojha (1981), and assesses that female ascetics might be the 10-15 per cent of the entire ascetic population (1997, 80).

These studies (Clementin-Ojha, Denton among the others) have shown that the reasons that could drive a woman to become an ascetic are not always connected to a religious call – which remains, according to the aforementioned studies, the main cause– but to critical, social or economic conditions. For this reason widows and all those women<sup>2</sup> without the protection of a man<sup>3</sup> can be

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<sup>1</sup> As argued by Bronkhorst (1993), Indian asceticism may be linked with two different religious traditions: one has Vedic origin and concentrates on obtaining superhuman power through austerities and self-inflicted sufferings, while the other is non-Vedic and uses practices of meditation and abstinence from activity to reach the release from rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

<sup>2</sup> The life of a widow is described in the *Stridharmapaddhati* and follows the rules of the *vidhavādharma*, the appropriate behaviors of a widow. Widowhood is considered particularly polluting and inauspicious, as a widow is perceived as not having been strong enough to ensure her husband's longevity. However, as reported by Den-

subjected to economically precarious situations and can decide to begin an ascetic life as a more suitable dignified alternative. As Clémentin-Ojha reports (1998, 5), a woman who walks out of society “tends to be suspected of wanting to misuse her freedom” and can become victim of sexual harassment

Therefore, the path toward asceticism for women was and still is much more difficult than for men, and the fact that a woman decides to undertake the ascetic path is often highly socially criticized. The ascetic choice is primarily seen as a self-determination that lacerates, at least to some extent, the usual image of female gender and sexuality as depicted by the Brahmanic tradition, that is to be completely dependent and submitted to the male dominating order.

The presence of female ascetics and guru is accepted as exceptional, while the ascetic path for a woman is sometimes favourite to annihilate the dangerous, unrestrained and unchecked sexuality of a widow or a woman who cannot get married and therefore be under the control of her husband. In both the cases, the female ascetic is transformed into a socially benign, motherly figure, deprived of sexual and potentially harmful connotations.

This paper frames female asceticism in a general historical perspective to answer the question whether women were and are effectively entitled to become ascetics, and at the same time it inquires whether asceticism creates a kind of gender empowerment and a means of freeing women from the shackles of a patriarchal society.

### 1. Women in Brahmanic sources

To understand why women who want to become ascetics or renouncers have to face the opposition of lay society and male ascetics is necessary to introduce the idea of women and the role that is attributed to them by Brahmanic sources.

Taking into consideration normative Brahmanic sources, they appear internally coherent about the topic of female asceticism: although in only few texts<sup>4</sup> it is forbidden, it is always discouraged and

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ton (2004, 43), the reality a widow has to face is shaped not only by textual sanctions but mostly by the social context, which is often characterized by physical and emotional violence. Therefore, for those widows who have not to take care of children, the ascetic path may represent a valid alternative.

<sup>3</sup> That means those women rejected and driven away by their husbands, women whose husbands become renouncers, women who cannot afford the dowry, women who have lost everything and do not want to spend their life as beggars, women unfit for the marriage market, women who prefer to be unmarried.

<sup>4</sup> Namely the *Smṛticandrikā*, *Arthaśāstra* and *Strīdharmapaddhati* (Denton 2004, 23).

considered as inappropriate for women. Texts such as the *Manusmṛti*, and many centuries later, the *Strīdharmapaddhati*<sup>5</sup> explain that women are supposed to follow a specific dharma (*strīdharma*), which depends on their nature (*strīsvabhāva*) and which is fully accomplished through marriage, householder life and the growth of children.

As described by Denton, it is due to the processes of menstruation<sup>6</sup> and childbirth<sup>7</sup> that women are considered innately impure and sinful, and therefore lacking natural inclination towards *dharma*. Because of this impurity, a woman has to follow several ritual acts to achieve a pure state, a condition that is shared with Śūdras, and because of her supposed sinful nature, she has to be controlled and protected by a male authority (2004, 25-26).

The *Manusmṛti* argues that “Even in their own homes, a female—whether she is a child, a young woman, or an old lady—should never carry out any task independently. As a child, she must remain under her father’s control; as a young woman, under her husband’s; and when her husband is dead, under her sons’. She must never seek to live independently” (Olivelle 2008, 55).

Furthermore, as women are deemed not appropriate for Vedic knowledge<sup>8</sup> and for orthodox religious practice, they get initiated into their community through the marriage. According to the *Manusmṛti*, marriage is the Vedic sacrament for women and, as a consequence, should be obligatory for them.<sup>9</sup> This ratifies that a woman can accomplish her life only within marriage and through family.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Despite an early period for the *Manusmṛti* (between 200 BCE and 200 CE), the *Strī Dharma Paddhati* was written in Thanjavur in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a *paṇḍit* minister named Tryambakayajvan (Leslie 1992, 108).

<sup>6</sup> As Olivelle claims (2008, 115), it is thought that menstrual flows harbour living creatures, and which cannot be revealed naked in public.

<sup>7</sup> Leela Mulatti shows that among the five pollutions (excluding caste and death pollutions) three affect only women: temporary pollution during menstruation; pollution during a period ranging from 5 to 1 month and half after childbirth and permanent pollution for widows. In the first two conditions a woman is not allowed any socio-religious activity (1989, 10).

<sup>8</sup> As A. S. Altekar notices, in ancient times girls underwent the *upanayana* ceremony and were educated together with boys. Nevertheless, by the 300 BCE women’s education suffered an arrest caused by the new fashion of child marriage. This meant a “serious handicap to advanced studies” for girls, as the age in which these studies were usually accomplished, that of 12 or 13, became the new marriageable age. Hence, the *upanayana* was first reduced to a formality to accomplish before marriage, and then dropped out altogether (1962, 16).

<sup>9</sup> According to Altekar, one of the reasons why marriage became obligatory was to react to the joining of Buddhist and Jain orders by maidens without a genuine spiritual urge, or without the permission of their elders. Social thinkers decided to prevent such abuses by making the marriage obligatory for girls. Marriage did not become obligatory for men, and following Altekar’s thoughts, the real reason “seems to have been the recognition

Theoretically there is no place for women in Brahmanic asceticism: according to Dharmaśāstra, *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation) is provided exclusively to men of the three higher *varṇas* –the so-called twice-born (*dvija*)– who have access to *Vedas* and are qualified to offer sacrifices. The asceticism a woman can undertake is inside her own married life. As stressed by Clémentin-Ojha, the *Smṛti* literature teaches an ethic of self-abnegation and equanimity to women:

Entirely dedicated to their husbands (*pativrata*) and forgetful of themselves, the ideal Hindu wives live within the pattern of married life an austere lifestyle marked by privations (such as food restrictions) and regular fasts [...] Through the total surrender to her husband's will, sacrificing her own desire to serve him, she ceases to belong to herself. (2011, 62)

The married life becomes then a *sādhanā* (religious discipline) and the wife a *sādhvī*, female form of *sādhu*, which commonly designates the perfect wife and not the female ascetics.

## 2. Presence of women in religious fields, a historical perspective

Despite these normative presuppositions, there is evidence in the Indian literature that women were able to undertake ascetic path in several religious currents, especially those based on the feminine principle of *śakti* (divine feminine) and those focused on *bhakti* (devotion), as well as in orthodox orders. As Marie-Thérèse Charpentier suggests, it is likely that those represented in dharmic and *śāstric* literature are idealized women and idealized behaviours for women, intended as symbols, which are not completely representative of women as agents (2010, 32).

Ancient *Upaniṣads* portrayed women as intellectuals and experts of religious matters. Pechilis gives the example of the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* wherein three typologies of women are presented while interacting with the sage Yājñavalkya (2004, 12-13). Gārgī, a philosopher with a solid education in sacred knowledge, is described questioning Yājñavalkya on the nature of the Brahman.<sup>11</sup>

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by society of the simple fact that an unmarried woman has to face greater risks in society than an unmarried man”, and that “public opinion also is much less sympathetic to a woman who has gone astray even unwillingly, than a man who leads a vicious life deliberately”. (1962, 32-34, 35)

<sup>10</sup> Altekar informs us that in the *Mahābhārata* is told the story of Subhrū the daughter of the sage Kuni. Her father wanted to her to get married, but she preferred to remain unmarried in order to practice severe penance. At the time of her death she learnt that she could not go to heaven because her body was not consecrated by the sacrament of marriage (1962, 33).

<sup>11</sup> Altekar affirms that “the topic of her enquiry were so abstruse and esoteric in character that Yājñavalkya declined to discuss them in public [...] she was a dialectician and philosopher of a high order” (1962, 12).

Yājñavalkya's wife, Maitreyī, it is said, "took part in theological discussions", which demonstrates that she received an education on religious subjects; while the second wife of Yājñavalkya, Kātyāyanī, is described as concerned mostly in "womanly matters". Altekar (1962, 12), reporting other examples, affirms that these female philosophers "used to remain unmarried throughout the life in order to carry on their spiritual experiments unhampered".

Descriptions of women as philosophers, hermits, and renouncers are present in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, but also in Sanskrit dramas and poems. For example, in *Śākuntala*, Kālidāsa introduces a female wandering ascetic (*parivrajikā*) called Paṇḍitā Kauśikī, well versed in the *Vedas*. In the *Daśakumāracarita* (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century) Daṇḍin refers to a female ascetic undergoing hard penances. The *Mattavilāsa* by Mahendravikramavarma (7<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Malatimādhava* by Bhavabhūti (8<sup>th</sup> century) introduce female followers of extremist ascetic sects (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 63).

The currents of *bhakti*, which spread across different Indian regions since the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, gave importance to devotion and surrender to God through a path based on love, where the mediation of Brahmins and Sanskrit texts were not necessary. The *bhakti* ideology spread in several directions, so that the term encompasses a wide number of groups and traditions both orthodox and reformist.<sup>12</sup> As *mokṣa* (release) depended on God, and all the human beings were considered as the same before God, theoretically, gender and status were not discriminating factors to follow the *bhakti* stream. Therefore, as devotionism became central to women's religiosity, they got the right to actively participate to religious activities (Denton, 1992, 213).

Another current that accepted women was formed by *Śākta* groups. Denton defines *Śāktism* as the worship of the Goddess, and *Tantrism* as the worship of the feminine through "ritual forms of sensual indulgence and seek occult powers" (2004, 118). These religious currents regard the *Śakti* to be the power of God. As argued by Gupta (1992, 205), "personified as a Goddess, Śakti is described as being created from God's blazing consciousness", the medium through which God creates the world: "as the world is both created from within her and held in her, she is looked upon as the cosmic Mother who has created the world and nurtures it herself" (1992, 207). Because of their potentiality to be mothers, women are closer to *śakti* than men, and to be a woman is considered a blessing in itself, reason why many Śākta religious texts provide a respectful treatment of women. Therefore, women gurus were (and still are) even preferred in tantric schools. Denton stresses that there are two prominent themes in tantric practice: the centrality of the body as a vehicle to attain salvation, and

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<sup>12</sup> For a proper analysis of the orthodox and reformist sects, see Tripathi (2007).



the inversion of the standard social relations. These permitted women to disregard the *strīdharmā*, to have a sexual partner, use intoxicants and “engage in all manner of activities no traditional or orthodox woman would dream of doing” (Denton, 1992, 229). Moreover, the worship of virgins and married women as symbols of the goddess, found among tantric groups, “instil a sense of self-respect and confidence in those and other women of the community and also teach men new ways to look at their womenfolk” (Gupta, 1992, 207).

For women were supposed to share the same religious state of Śūdras, even those orthodox orders that granted the opportunity to enter *saṃnyāsa* to Śūdras allowed often the same right to women as well.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as Clémentin-Ojha remarks (2011), given the presence of several sub-sectarian orders, and the autonomy of gurus in selecting and recruiting disciples, women were also admitted in some section of orders that traditionally did not concede their recruitment. For example, the orthodox Daśanāmī *sampradāya*, that brings its organization back to Śaṅkarācārya, theoretically does not admit women to enter *saṃnyāsa* because Śaṅkarācārya, who was an orthodox Brahman, did not accept female presence among ascetics. Nevertheless, it is likely that because some groups of *sādhus* (known as *nāgās*) allowed initiation for Śūdras, even women were allowed to get initiated in those sub-groups.

As already mentioned, a sectarian tradition that recognized the right to *saṃnyāsa* to women is the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, a Vaiṣṇava order supposed to be established by Rāmānanda around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Rāmānanda is said to have given initiation (*dīkṣā*), to anyone without considering caste, religious affiliation or gender. The fact that he gave *dīkṣā* to women as well would be testified by the presence of two women among his circle of twelve disciples: Padmāvati and Susrī. He taught that human beings have the same possibility of religious development, because the *bhakti* path is made of love, devotion and complete surrendering to God.<sup>14</sup>

A woman who succeeded in engaging an ascetic life can choose the path according to her religious believes and background.

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<sup>13</sup> As Olivelle reports (280) although the renunciation of Śūdras and women was considered illegitimate by the *Dharmaśāstras*, it was a common phenomenon in ancient India. This fact was recognized by law. Śūdra and female renunciators had a legal standing; several provisions of Hindu law attempt to regulate their intercourse with society.

<sup>14</sup> Other early religious orders that support female presence were the Mahānubhāv in Maharashtra, the Nāth *yoginīs* and the Bāul of Bengal (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 64).

Women connected with the Śaiva cult may choose to become *saṃnyāsīnīs* (initiated into one lineage of the Daśanāmi *saṃpradāya*) while those influenced by *śākta* and *tantric* currents are usually called *yoginīs*, name also used for female ascetic of the Nāth panth.

Those devoted to Viṣṇu or one of his *avatāras*, can follow the ascetic path present in the various Vaiṣṇava *saṃpradāyas* and become *vairāginīs* (detached from the world) or *tyāginīs*, but also can live as *brahmacārinīs* (maiden) in female institutions or in their marriage life.

A particular position is held by female Baul renouncers of West Bengal and Bangladesh, who define themselves as *saṃnyāsīnīs*, *tyāginīs* and *vairāginīs*, but their ascetic life is based on ritual sexual practices, as Baul renouncers are expected to be in a couple.<sup>15</sup>

There are examples of ascetic life undertaken also in marriage, as the work of Frank Ernest Key (1995) on the Kabīr *panth* suggests. He says that in a section of the *panth* there are *vairāginīs* who usually are the wives of men who have become *vairāgīs*. In similar way, we can suppose that the wives of householder *sādhus*, like the *gharbhārīs* of the Rāmāvat *panth* cited by Horstmann (2003, 107), lead ascetic lives as well. The fact that the wife of a householder ascetic follows the path of her husband is not uncommon: one famous example is given by Sarada Devi, wife of Ramakrishna who, after the death of her husband, became the guru of his disciples.

Another example is given by the Swāminārāyana *saṃpradāya* (beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). As Raymond Williams explains, there are female ascetics in the group known as *sāṃkhya yoginīs* who receive the initiation from the wife of the *ācārya* of the *saṃpradāya*. They live in women's temples following strict ascetic rules, taking care of the place and conducting discourses for women.<sup>16</sup> From the same modern Hindu stream, there are *brahmacārinīs* and *saṃnyāsīnīs* who belong to new groups led both by female and male gurus.<sup>17</sup>

The external appearances of female ascetics are codified according to the belonging group. Hence *vairāginīs* and *brahmacārinīs* will dress in white, in yellow, or in a light orange; *saṃnyāsīnīs* in saffron while *yoginīs* in saffron or red, like the *bhairavīs*; *sāṃkhya*

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<sup>15</sup> On the position of women in Baul tradition, see Knight (2006, 191).

<sup>16</sup> See Williams (2001, 117).

<sup>17</sup> Tripathi gives the example of Bhagwan Rajneesh, famous as Osho, who founded a new ascetic institution called New-Sannyas where women were entitled to become renouncer (2007, 244).

*yoginīs* wear instead dark red clothing. Also the *mālā* (necklace) they wear discloses their affinity, *rudrākṣa* for *śaiva* groups, *tulsī* for *Vaiṣṇava*, as well as the *tilak* they apply on the forehead. To generalize it can be said that a *tilak* with horizontal lines manifests a *śaiva* and *śākta* affiliation, while two/three vertical lines a *Vaiṣṇava* one, although the sub-differentiation are innumerable (see Entwisle 2003). Female ascetics can have shaved hair, or they can keep their hair short or loose or have *jaṭā*, hairstyles which contrast the traditional tied style of a Hindu housewife (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 64).

The life style of a female ascetic depends on the specific *sādhana* she decides to follow. As described by Clémentin-Ojha (2011, 64):

Their ascetic practices also differ depending on whether they attribute importance to the body as a vehicle of spiritual liberation, to devotional practices, or to ecstatic attitudes. While some show little awareness of the external world, others strictly follow the conventional rules of social behaviour. *In all that, in fact, they do not sensibly differ from the male ascetics* [italic mine]. And like male ascetics too, they depend on generous lay disciples for their daily survival and for the organization of many practical aspects of their life.

Female renouncers have to decide whether to have an itinerant life, roaming around from one pilgrimage site to another, or to settle in *āśrams* or other religious institutions. Those who keep travelling often move in groups to protect themselves. As Hausner and Khandelwal argue, “a community of women is protective, from men, from naysayers, and from doubting, angry, or resentful householder community members who might use the logic that if a woman has rejected her place in the world, she can be treated with violence or disrespect, as if she is no longer truly a member of society” (2006, 8). The mobility an ascetic can have can be, according to Hausner and Khandelwal, a real input for driving a woman to undertake the religious path. Having a wandering style of life is considered as a proof of strength because usually women in India are afraid to travel alone, and in many cases they are not even allowed to do so (2006, 9). However, as stressed by Khandelwal “an ochre robes does not in itself provide an escape from the everyday concerns of being a woman in north India” (1997, 91).

This statement brings us back to the issue of the difficulties that women have to face before undertaking the ascetic path, since this life choice is criticized not only by lay people but often by ascetics too. In the first section I have described the Brahmanic idea of women, now I will focus on the ascetic perspective that will further help to understand the reasons of such obstacles.

### 3. Women on the difficult ascetic path. Examples from the past

Asceticism is seen as a practice and a path for men, in which one of the most important practices to follow is celibacy. The importance of celibacy leads to a negative approach toward women: the presence of women is negative because they are sexually dangerous. According to Olivelle, in ascetic works there are frequent allusions to the nasty nature of a woman's body and to the dangers that women pose because they are seen as object of desire (2008, 111). An ascetic text declares: "a man becomes intoxicated by seeing a young woman just as much as by drinking liquor. Therefore, a man should avoid from afar a woman, the mere sight of whom is poison" (2008, 112).

Over the centuries, general portraits of female ascetics describe them as "untamed destructive selfish, malicious women with occult powers, who attack male renouncers, enchant, imprison and abuse them physically" (Gold 2006, 256).

We find such a portrait in the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Parcaī* written by Anantadās, a Rāmānandī ascetic (the *sampradāya* to which Rām Pyar Dās belongs too). In the *Parcaī* dedicated to Pīpā (a disciple of Rāmānanda), the description that Anantadās does of a speech between Rāmānanda and Pīpā's wives demonstrates the possibility for women to undertake the ascetic path:

He [Pīpā] will wander in strange lands, living on alms, with a shaven head and the garb of an ascetic, he has given up all the attachment to caste, status and family honour. A king and a beggar are equal in his eyes. He has no thought of sleep or hunger or pain or pleasure. Sometimes he might wear clothes, at other times he will go naked. This is my path, consider whether you can walk on it. [...] If you can do the same, then you can come with us, ladies.<sup>18</sup>

However, Anantadās' own idea seems different when he says:

Women have confused minds, they cannot tell evil from good. What is the point in their being instructed by a swami? They are impure and always full of lust. A woman is called a source of disagreement and pain. Gods, men and demons -she brings them all to naught. She attracts everyone with her beauty and dance, leaving no place of refuge even in hell. A woman leaves no one, she seduces both householders and ascetics. (2.6b 1-2)

He continues: "some women take you straight to hell, while others take you on the path of bhakti (2.7-11)". This exemplification of womanhood is represented by Angad's wife:

The wife of Angad was a fine lady she took good care of her beloved. [...] Blessed is the woman who is good for her husband and stops his downward fall. (2.11-12)

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<sup>18</sup> See Winand (2000, 156).

Thus, even in a *sampradāya* that was supposed to accept everyone, one of its most known 17<sup>th</sup>-century *sādhu* shared a Brahmanic generalized idea about women, accepting asceticism only for those who were ready to follow the arduous path of renunciators, while supporting the idea of *pativrata*.

Medieval sources, like hagiographies, devotional poems, autobiographies and contemporary studies are important sources to have glimpses of real lives. They describe the difficult life a woman has to face to satisfy her religious quest if this drives her out of the boundaries of life as socially constructed. There are also cases of married women who, as soon as they decided to dedicate their lives to spiritual achievement, had to face tensions created by their family, as they were supposed to follow the normal conduct expected from women. Social blame frequently recurs in legends, folktales, and biographies irrespective of the religious ascetic paths women attempted to venture.

We have first glimpses of the difficulty a woman could face before undertaking a religious/ascetic path from Tamil Nadu. Gupta reports the story of Ammaiṅkār present in Cekkīṅkār's *Periyapurāṅam* (12<sup>th</sup> century). She was a saint-poetess of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, who was kept in high respect by other *śaiva* poets and devotees. The story goes that she was a beautiful woman who, through her religious practices, was able to acquire such occult powers to scare her husband and push him to abandon her. Therefore, she decided to leave her home to practise devotion in the forest where she obtained two boons from Śiva: to become an ugly ghost and to witness Śiva's dance (Gupta, 1992, 196-197). Ammaiṅkār's new state stresses her being out of the social "normal" world, becoming, according to Denton, a prototype of the *aghorinī* a "human form of Bhairavī, female counterpart of Bhairava, Śiva as ghoul" (2004, 164).

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there is the example of Mahādevī, a *śaiva bhaktā* who became a member of the Vīraśaiva sect.<sup>19</sup> She left her husband after the marriage, as he did not become a *śaiva* devotee as promised. As Gupta says "Mahādevī became so angry and frustrated that she left the conjugal home and discarded everything she possessed, including her clothes. She wandered alone and naked, her long dishevelled hair covering her nudity" (1992, 198). Mahādevī dedicated her life to the devotion of the Śiva *lingam*, so she entered into the Vīraśaiva group at Kalyani, where Allammā Prabhu initiated her. She started a life of wandering and begging, living in caves, following an ascetic path based on physical renunciation and rigid disciplines. Denton argues that her male contemporaries recognized

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<sup>19</sup> To specific information on the privileged status of women in the Vīraśaiva group compared to average Hindu women, see Leela Mullatti, *Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women*, Abhinav Publishers, 1989.

her as an enlightened woman, and kept transmitting her spiritual achievement through her religious verses (2004, 154).

Another exemplary life is that of Lalleśvarī (14<sup>th</sup> century), a Brahman woman from Kashmir, who was turned out of her conjugal home by her mother-in-law because she never had children and had a deep religious and independent spirit (Gupta 1992, 200). Instead of going back to her natal home, Lalla decided to take up the life of a female tantric renouncer practising yoga: she began a wandering life wearing few clothes,<sup>20</sup> following the left-hand path of the tantric tradition, using both wine and meat in her religious offerings. According to Gupta, Lalla led the life of an *avadhūta*, a tantric master who realizes the true nature of reality becoming indifferent to social and religious norms. It is likely that her antisocial way of life brought her criticism and even abuses, as she reports in some of her poems. However, she was able to overcome such criticism and win the respect of society with her honest spirituality: through her ecstatic behaviours and profound religious sight, she achieved the respect of exponents of the Kashmiri tradition and Sufis of her time (1992, 201).

In the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, there is the famous example of Mīrā Bāī. According to the tradition, she was a Rajput princess married to Bhoj Raj, the son of Rana Singh. Until the death of her husband, she was allowed to worship Krishna according to her wish, spending most of the time at the temple singing and dancing before the image, going into *samādhi* (deep state of meditation). When her husband died, Mīrā's relatives-in-law started disapproving her way of life, which, as also Nābhādās<sup>21</sup> writes, was against domestic duties and modesty. They asked her to act as appropriate, and also tried to kill her, but Mīrā was miraculously saved. Probably after these episodes she went back to her parental home, to move then to Dwarka under the protection of her brothers and cousins (Gupta 1992, 204). Although Mīrā was completely absorbed in her religious *sādhana*, careless of the society blame, she could not totally disregard her social responsibilities but had to compromise, continuing to live in the society (Gupta, 1992, 202-204).

Another example of asceticism remaining in society is that of Bahinā Bāī (1628-1700), who devoted her life to spiritual practices and the duty towards her husband. In her autobiography, Bahinā Bāī tells that she became a devotee of a low caste saint, Tukāram, and focused her deep devotion towards Viṭhoba, a form of Viṣṇu. Gupta explains that her husband did not want her to

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<sup>20</sup> According to Denton, she obtained *mokṣa* after winning an intellectual debate about her nudity (2004, 156).

<sup>21</sup> Nābhādās was an ascetic of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* who wrote at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the *Bhaktamāl*, a spiritual garland whose seed were the lives of exemplary *bhaktas*. Mīrā Bāī is the only woman to find a proper space in it.

attend Tukārām's sing sessions because, as she started having trances, people began to come to their house to visit her, a shameful event for a respected Brahman family. As Bahinā herself writes, her husband tried to change her attitude, even with violence (1992, 204). Gupta reports that finally, she solved the conflict "by totally internalizing her religious activities" dreaming that the saint Tukārām had given initiation to her. She was a dutiful wife but mentally she had renounced all the attachments to life: when she became a mother, she did not accept her son as a son but as a fellow religious aspirant and a friend. In this way, she was able to "reconcile herself to staying home as a humble wife and to curbing her desire to visit temples" (1992, 205).

These here reported are just a few examples of the female religious characters who were somehow<sup>22</sup> able to create religious models that later female ascetics have taken into consideration to justify their religious attitude.<sup>23</sup>

The shortage of narrations about female ascetics in the past is a proof that the literary works, especially non-autobiographic ones, were highly influenced by the patriarchal values of society and were distorted by male writers. Therefore, because the behaviours of female ascetics represented a challenge for the society they lived in and were not those expected for women, they were described mostly in exceptional cases and, as a consequence, they were not models to imitate.<sup>24</sup> Referring to Vaiṣṇava authors who had to write about Sītā Devī – who became a *guru* after her husband's death, in the second generation after Caitanya (16th cent.) – Manring underlines that "they had to find a way to talk about her that would make it clear that her case is very unusual, lest other women develop similar aspirations" (2004, 61).

In the next section I will provide a present example introducing the character of Rām Priya Dās.

#### 4. A woman on the ascetic path. Rām Priya Dās

I met Rām Priya Dās in the Rām Jānkī temple, a temple/*āśram* close to Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ in Varanasi, which is under her management. The first time I met her, I was at the end of my fieldwork, so I did

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<sup>22</sup> I used the word "somehow" to stress that these stories do not make a full portrait of the personages, and in fact, as Clementin-Ojha remarks, "the main piece of evidence of their existence is to be found in their own poems" (2011, 64).

<sup>23</sup> A later example is offered by Banāsā, a saint of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Horstmann, "the persona she came to be was created on the model of the paragon of the female bhakti Mīrā Bāī, and the way she would experience and articulate what she experienced was molded by the tradition of female bhakti as well" (2003, 11).

<sup>24</sup> As Gold argues, even today there are Rajput men who do not support the example of Mīrā Bāī and instead support and justify the attempt made by her relatives to kill her (2006, 263).

not have the opportunity to collect much information. However, few years back, during another fieldwork, I could spend more time with her and I could create a closer relationship. She always replied nicely and openly to my questions, and slowly she also told me few episodes of her childhood, despite quite often ascetics do not want to share their past, since they are supposed to be detached from their previous social life. Thanks to the friendly relationship we built, I could gather pieces of her life story to outline here her portrait and her path towards asceticism.

Rām Priya Dās is one of those women who find the married life unsuitable, while feeling a strong spiritual call. When she was only six years old,<sup>25</sup> she used to attend the religious practice that, in a cave, a *tyāgī* (Śrī 108 Śrī Rāmcaraṇ Dās Tyāgī jī, who was to become her guru) was performing. She continued to go and look at him for six years, crying desperately when her parents did not allow her to go. Usually, they went to pick her up when the sun was high over the cave in which the *tyāgī* was performing his austerities, because at that time they were sure that he had already come out to have his meal (only milk) and that he had given some to the little girl as holy food (*prasād*).

When Rām Priya Dās was twelve years old, she spent one year doing *sevā* (service) in Śrī Rāmcaraṇ Dās' *āśram*, and when she was thirteen years old, she got initiated into the Rāmānandī order and started practising yoga. Obviously, her family did not appreciate her involvement into this *sādhanā*, they tried to change her mind but finally, they had to acknowledge her serious commitment and her desire to continue the ascetic life. When she got initiated her family cut every relationship with her, and Rām Priya Dās became part of the *sādhu samāj*: “This is something natural”, she said to me, “once you walked through the boundaries of the lay community, and you enter in this new one, all are your brothers and sisters.”<sup>26</sup> She did not feel to have lost a family, but to have changed it. Nevertheless, even if she did not say it openly, the entrance into this new family was not that easy, because of her being a woman. She told me that her guru trained her properly so that she could behave correctly in different situations and with different people, especially with important gurus, to gain their respect and acceptance.

Like all the *tyāgīs*, Rām Priya Dās has *jaṭā* (knotted hair) and she wears unstitched pale ochre clothes, and earrings and a *mālā* (necklace) made of *tulsī* –basil– the plant sacred to Viṣṇu. On her

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<sup>25</sup> At that time she also got tattooed the names of Rām and Sītā (the main deities of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*) on her arm without telling her parents. Usually, Indian girls get tattooed the name of their husbands, but she told me that even at that age she knew that her path would have been under the protection of Rām and Sītā. She hid the tattoo until it was completely healed.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, February 2013.



forehead the Rāmānandī *tilak*: two white lines that unify between the eyebrows and stretch down a bit on the nose, with a red line in the middle.

She followed her guru to Varanasi 27 years ago, in the Rām Jānkī Mandir, a place supported especially by devotees from Gujarat. It is a four floors building, with a Hanumān temple in the low ground and a Rām temple in the first floor. On the first floor there is also the kitchen and the room of Rām Priya Dās; on the second and third floors there are rooms to host ascetics and pilgrims. When Śrī Rāmcarāṇ Dās decided to leave the temple to continue his *sāadhanā* in Gujarat, she became the *mahant* of the place.

Not many people frequent the Rām Jānkī Mandir, often they are pilgrims from Gujarat since the temple is actually supported by a Trust set in Rajkot, Gujarat. However, this low flow does not bother Rām Priya Dās who continues to live her life according to the rhythm of the temple. There, *bhajans* (devotional songs) are chanted since early morning till late evening, with a pause only at 12 AM when the god is fed and the temple is closed till 4 PM. In the morning *sādhus* prepare *prasād* (blessed food) for devotees and ascetics, sometimes with the help of Rām Priya Dās.

Rām Priya Dās is not involved in social activities, which she does not consider as “job for *sādhus*”, a behaviour differing from that of many female gurus who focus their activities on *sevā* and social work. Her *sāadhanā* is based on yoga, which she mastered completely as it is shown in the photos on the walls of the temple: a thirteen years old Rām Priya Dās is displayed doing several difficult *āsanas* wearing a simple unstitched white clothes, while in other later pictures she is shown while doing the *nām jāp* with a *tulsī mālā*. Two more photos show her doing *tapasya* (strenuous activities aimed to focus the mind and to improve religious strength): during one *tapasya* she stood up one year on both the feet and one year standing on only one foot; for the second *tapasya* she was covered with soil for nine days until the sprout of millet seeds from the soil. She told me that she had performed this *tapasya* nine times in different places in India.

Today, her daily routine is completely influenced by her *sāadhanā*: she gets up at 3 o'clock every morning and from 3.30 till 5 she does *prāṇāyām*, *āsanas* and *vyāyam* (exercises) and mostly, meditation. Then, she spends a couple of hours in the morning and in the evening doing *adhyāya* that is reading and studying religious books. These readings have a devotional purpose since, according to her, devotion is the base for each action and it is the path that leads towards the grace of God.

When I asked her about the low number of female ascetics in the *sampradāya*, she replied that it is not that low, but that it is more difficult to see female *sādhus* since most of them live in *āśrams* and, therefore, they have less visibility compared to male. She made the example of her previous *āśram* in Gujarat, wherein almost a dozens of female *sādhus* lived. She agreed in saying that not many women

follow the *tyāgī* path since it is an arduous one, based on physical and mental efforts, much more difficult than the path of *saṃnyāsīnīs*, whose number is indeed increasing. She does not completely support the spread of female gurus, as they act against the ascetic tradition, especially the Daśanāmi tradition where Śaṅkarācārya forbade *saṃnyāsa* to women. However, she is also for the recognition of rights for female ascetics: she supports the creation of a *mahila akhārā* to organize the camping of female ascetics in the Kumbh Melā and their bath in the holiest days.

Rām Priya Dās's attitude toward ascetic life is orthodox in the sense that she deeply respects and follows the inner rules of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and of the ascetic society that is mainly for men. She does accept the bounding rule that she cannot give *dīkṣā* (initiation) to anyone, not even to lay people.<sup>27</sup> This rule does not allow her to become a guru and by consequence she cannot begin a tradition (*paramparā*) or continue a tradition to pass out. In fact, a religious discipline is passed out by a guru through his/her disciples (*guru-śiṣya-paramparā*) and it is because of these *paramparās* that various religious tendencies in a *sampradāya* form.<sup>28</sup> For this reason a girl who was living in the temple got her initiation from a male *tyāgī* guru of the order. This girl was mentally challenged, and she is not really into ascetic practice, so she used to spend her time helping Rām Priya Dās cooking food and cleaning the place. However, Rām Priya Dās found a simple way to make her do a different kind of *nām jāp*: she taught the girl to write the name of Rām on a notebook, so that she can fill pages with the repetition of God's name.

The story of Rām Priya Dās shows that she had to fight against her family to follow the ascetic path, and that only the strictness and the respect of traditions made her able to reach her actual position and the support among other Rāmānandīs. In fact, she needed the support of the Jagadguru Rāmnareśācārya when she arrived in the Rām Jankī temple with her guru (the idea that a *tyāginī* and a *tyāgī* were living in the same temple had arisen rumours). Later on, she had to face critics when she began to manage the temple, although in Benares there are many religious centres led by women.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Clementin-Ojha describes a *vairāginī*, Rām Dulārī Dāsī who, instead, began to have disciples after the death of her guru and her disciples provided her with an *āśram* when she became too weary for wandering around (1988, 5).

<sup>28</sup> As Clémentin-Ojha points out "This has been going on in India from time immemorial so that any guru of today is theoretically the inheritor of an ancient tradition" (*Manushi* 3).

<sup>29</sup> In Varanasi there are several centres managed by female gurus, both linked to traditional *sampradāyas* and new centres, which have captured the attention of Clémentin-Ojha (1990) and Denton (2004).

I collected different observations about Rām Priya Dās after our meetings, useful also to add further remarks about female asceticism and to introduce another issue, that of the “motherization” of female ascetic.

### 5. Approaching female ascetics, interpreting female ascetics

When I talked about Rām Priya Dās, a brahmacārin from the Śrī Maṭh<sup>30</sup> told me that he does not have her in great esteem. He argued that she created a scandal when she was living in the temple with her guru, with whom she actually had a love story and from whom she got pregnant (!).<sup>31</sup>

According to him, the presence of female ascetics in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* depends on the low profile of the majority of the *sādhus* of the group, who lack a proper orthodox knowledge and therefore accept even women among them. He justifies his statement referring to Brahmanic texts. He said:

According to the Manu Smṛti men have 8 *guṇas* (qualities) more than women, so they can tolerate ascetic discipline better. For this reason, although there have always been *sādhvīs* and female ascetics in Indian history, for women it is better to complete their religious path through the marriage, which is the best way for them to get *mokṣa*. A *sādhvī*, indeed, can follow some rules and disciplines, showing her affiliation to a *sampradāya*, but she cannot follow the same practices as a man, neither she can live in the same way of a man. First of all because of her monthly impurity, secondly because some yogic practices are thought for a male body, like the retention of semen, or the mortification of his penis. As there are no equivalents for women, they cannot physically destroy the pleasure, so that they keep desiring.<sup>32</sup>

A different comment was given by the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya (the official leader of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*). He has Rām Priya Dās in great esteem because of her religious practice and for how she is managing the temple. When she is present during *sammelan* (gathering), it is not rare that he introduces her stressing her role and value. His openness relies on his being part of a *sampradāya* that since its very beginning has a tradition of female ascetics. In fact, while talking

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<sup>30</sup> The Śrī Maṭh is a temple/*āśram* built in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century on the place where, according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānand had his *āśram* and used to preach. Now it contains the *pādukā* (foot step) of Rāmānand and it is the residence of the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya.

<sup>31</sup> Nobody I talked with lately mentioned this event ever. Therefore, I could guess that this was just a rumour spread in the past to slander Rām Pyār Dās.

<sup>32</sup> Interview April 2013.

about female asceticism, Rāmnareśācārya introduces immediately the fact that Rāmānanda had female disciples. And he added:

The possibility of development of the human being is the same, external and internal development. Since in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* the *sādhanā* professed is based on love and devotion towards god and on the idea of *prapatti* -which doesn't need a specific or peculiar knowledge- the *sevā*, the *śaraṇ* to god, it is open to anyone, and gender distinctions are meaningless. [...] Putting in a corner all the different disciplines, a *bhakta* thinks about the well-being that comes from god. If you think about religious practice like that, then the meaning of male and female doesn't exist. And for this reason Rāmānandācārya opened his door even to females [...] Nevertheless the number of female ascetics is much lesser than that of male, the number for examples of *tyāginī* is not big.<sup>33</sup>

According to the Jagadguru, the reason for such a low number of female ascetics is that the *sādhu samāj* (the society of ascetics) is organized by men and for men, and asceticism, with its rules and organizations, was thought for men. Therefore, the presence of female ascetics changes, especially in a practical way, the structure of asceticism. He gave to me the simple example of an *āśram*, where the contemporary presence of female and male ascetics could be problematic,<sup>34</sup> both for the *sādhanā* and for the practical organizations of the spaces. In fact, when there are women in religious-ascetic places they cause, indirectly, a problem, as their presence among *sādhus* has always arisen malicious gossip among people.<sup>35</sup> Being an *ācārya*,<sup>36</sup> he also underlined the more *saṃsārik* (worldly) attitude of women: the fact that they think more about marriage life, husbands, children, than men do. They have a “*Śṛṅgār kā jīvan*”, a natural inclination to devotion to their husbands and to sexual life.

Therefore, even the Jagadguru considers marriage as the normal and best path for the accomplishment of a woman, although he agrees that women with a pronounced religious attitude and spiritual talent should undertake the ascetic path as well as women who cannot or do not want to

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<sup>33</sup> Interview April 2013

<sup>34</sup> As Tripathi shows (2007, 176-179), the approach of *sādhus* towards women is varied (he uses a classification which ranges from strong hatred to strong regard). The importance of celibacy drives ascetics in regarding women “as a great hurdle in the path of salvation”, to such a point that some ascetics prefer not to come into contact with them. Therefore, the presence of female ascetics in an *āśram* may represent a distraction for male ascetics (and obviously vice versa).

<sup>35</sup> The Jagadguru said that also in my case, as I was spending time at the Śrī Maṭh, it had been necessary to make clear my role there, to justify the presence of an unmarried woman in an ascetic community.

<sup>36</sup> An *ācārya* is a teacher learned in classical Brahmanic literary tradition.

be married. He claimed that, in any cases, the door of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and other orders are open for women.

Laypeople, especially women, gravitating around the Maṭh often show a detached/suspicious behaviour towards female ascetics. Many of them support celibacy (after a wrong marriage) and the *bhakti* path as the asceticism suitable for women rather than a proper renunciation path, which is deemed appropriate for elderly women. In fact, many female devotees expressed the desire to retire in an *āśram* following their guru as soon as they do not have anymore family duties to accomplish.

However, as we have seen in the aforementioned life stories, a female ascetic who is recognized for her faith and spiritual value succeeds in capturing the attention and the respect of people, and begins being venerated and considered as holy as male ascetics. They support lay people with religious and moral advices like male ascetics do. Therefore, once a female ascetic is brought back to a kind of archetypal role of “mother”, she is re-integrated in the society and accepted as a positive element. The identification of a *sādhvī* with a mother is a way to nullify her sexual power and her possible sexual freedom, bringing her toward a peaceful, harmless and rather enhanced role.

The *motherization* of a *sādhvī* is even more obvious when she also is a guru. There is not a common, female form of the word guru, so that a female guru is usually called Mātā jī, “revered mother” (Clementin-Ojha 1998; Pechilis 2004). Calling a women “mother” avoids a range of meanings associated with the marriage or with “courtesan’s proposition”, preventing women from being looked at in sexual terms (Pechilis 2004, 8). Pechilis argues that the source of authority of male and female gurus has a meaningful difference: while in the tradition of male gurus the importance of a guru is valued considering structures such as the guru lineage (*paramparā*), the teachings received and the *gurukula* system, “a prominent theme in the tradition of female gurus is personal experience<sup>37</sup> both in the sense of independent spiritual realization outside of initiation in a lineage as well as a pragmatic orientation that relates experience of the world to spiritual knowledge” (2012, 114).

However, it seems that sometimes even scholars have a tendency to interpret some behaviours of female ascetics as depending on a natural motherly attitude, while similar behaviours are not interpreted as a fatherly attitude in the case of male ascetics. I will give here few examples to explain my point. In her article, Hausner describes *yoginīs* from Northern India and she says that they use renunciation to move out from their society to

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<sup>37</sup> Although there are many female gurus who belong to traditional *sampradāya*, many got their initiation by another female guru or are self-initiated.

enter, nevertheless, in another community, in a new place and with a new status but mostly doing the same activities of wives: feeding people, protecting children and teaching religious values (2006, 126). This attitude of caring for people in a single location, Hausner continues, is typical of female ascetics and is stressed by their being often called with the epithet *Mā* (2006, 131). Even, Khandelwal's point of view on female and male roles seems to be based on a standardized model, where only the female can be the lovely compassionate mother while the male lacks a female touch: she explains that "the relationship with a paternal figure, whether loving or authoritarian, cannot be symmetrical to that with an intimate nurturing mother" (1997, 93). From my experience, I noticed that many devotees and disciples call their male guru *Bāpu* (father), and that many *āśrams* with male ascetics feed community of wandering ascetics and common people. In the same way, it has often happened that male ascetics take care of children and teach them –one of the most famous example (17<sup>th</sup> century) is the five years old *Nābhādās* found by *Khiladās* and *Agradās* in the forest– but I have never found an interpretation of these events as a consequence of their inner "fatherly" attitude.

The second example I want to analyse is based on the interpretation DeNapoli gives of the narration of the story lives of *sādhvīs* in Rajasthan. She argues that their approach with asceticism, and in general with god, is marked by the themes of duty, destiny and devotion<sup>38</sup>, which would depend on the gender of the ascetics, for they result in opposition with the themes that marked male ascetics, identified as detachment, work and effort.<sup>39</sup>

Although I agree with DeNapoli in considering the use of the themes of duty, destiny and devotion as "narrative strategies through which means Rajasthani female sadhus neutralize widely-held, societal perceptions of their lives as transgressive and construct themselves as unusual, yet traditional women who act by divine order", I do not regard those themes as a female prerogative.

In fact, it seems to me that these examples tend to create a generalization, as they do not properly take into consideration the *sādhanā* that these ascetics undertake.<sup>40</sup> According

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<sup>38</sup> Duty is perceived as the "to do" for God, a duty to serve God; the destiny is considered as the force who led them to asceticism "it happened because was written in my destiny"; devotion represents their path to reach the Truth (DeNapoli 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. DeNapoli (2009).

<sup>40</sup> Only in a footnote, Khandelwal recognizes that "this may not be true of female renouncers who live an itinerant rather than settled lifestyle" (1997, 96, n23).

to me, it is the *sādhanā* that influences the activities of the *sādhus* and their perspectives, through which, obviously, they satisfy and reply to different needs. During my fieldwork, I met several male *sādhus* who described their approach to god and asceticism in the same way as the female ascetics described by DeNapoli, because, like them, their *sādhanā* was based on *bhakti*. In opposition, Rām Priya Dās did not seem to show a particular motherly attitude and for describing her becoming an ascetic she stressed that it was her own decision, her wish to detach herself from the world, reaching god through *tāpasya* and *vairāgya*. Even Denton, referring to the renunciators she worked with, involved in the so-called “path of knowledge” through mantra repetition, meditation and yoga, says they did not show a particular devotional approach, and in fact they do not capture Denton’s attention for their “motherly” attitude (1992, 221).

Generalized labels to define what is “typical female” and what is “typical male” risk of flattening the idea of female asceticism. In fact, as Denton argues (2004, 104):

Women [and man, I would add,] become ascetics for a wide variety of reasons and a summary of the social, cultural and economic factors that push them toward asceticism cannot adequately reveal the degree to which strivings of a more religious or spiritual sort draw them to this way of life.

Hence, only further comparative studies, not only between ascetic and householder women but also between female and male ascetics sharing the same *sādhanā*, could display in factual terms what differs in their practice and approach, and make understanding whether differences depend on gender, and whether some activities, as the *sevā* intended as social work, is typically female or is a shared characteristic among those ascetics (also male) who have a sedentary life and have to deal with the modernization of Hindu society.

## 6. Modernization of female asceticism

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, new inputs have been given to female asceticism by outstanding figures such as Vivekānanda and Dayānanda Saraswatī. Wendy Sinclair-Brull argues that Vivekānanda, after a period abroad, realized the necessity for the rising of Indian women, to actualize through their education (1997, 64):

His plan was not to produce a generation of well-read, modern wives, who would support their husband’s careers, but rather to foster women of renunciation and high spiritual attainment, who would raise a new generation according to Vedic tradition. And for Vivekananda, education was the key.

Before Vivekānanda, also Dayānanda had demonstrated an open approach towards female asceticism. In fact, a central belief of his Ārya Samāj was that in “ancient Hinduism” gender difference in education and religion did not exist, therefore it was necessary to encourage both secular and Sanskrit education for girls and to allow female members to take *saṃnyāsa* from a guru of their own gender (Khandelwal 2006, 42). Such kind of approaches, catalysed perhaps by the presence of the English Raj<sup>41</sup> and the spread of new forms of Hinduism, favoured an evolution of women’s role in asceticism. In effect, new female religious organizations arose.

In 1937, the Brahma Kumari, a sect comprising almost exclusively women, was established by Dada Lekhraj in Sindh and after the Indian Partition, shifted to Mount Abu (Rajasthan) in 1950. As it can be read from the Brahma Kumari web site, the spiritual trust was constituted of a committee of nine young women led by Om Radhe.<sup>42</sup> Dada Lekhraj, who was himself a spiritual and enlightened person, gave all his belongings to this female trust with the purpose of spreading his religious realizations. With the passing of time, the first unit of three hundred spiritually empowered women reached different parts of India to convey the trust message and, later on, they were able to open branches of the Brahma Kumari all over the world. Although Clementin-Ojha argues that the monastic order “was founded by a male and has no powerful female figure for identification” (2011, 64), the web site presents several outstanding female figure (like Mateshwari Sarasvati) who, since the beginning, took care of the organizations from a practical and spiritual point of view.

As reported by Rüstam (2003, 152), in 1946 a *saṃnyāsini* of the Ramakrishna Math, Asha Debi, published an article titled *Sannyāse hindunarīr adhikār* (The Hindu woman’s right to *saṃnyāsa*), which referred to Vivekānanda’s idea to establish a women’s Math. In 1954 she organized a branch for *brahmacāriṇīs* and named it after the wife of Ramakrishna, the Śrī Sarada Math.<sup>43</sup> Few years later, with the ordination of several *brahmacāriṇīs* into *saṃnyāsa*, this feminine branch became totally independent from the male control. Rüstam reports that the Sarada Math main activity is social service, following the religious *sādhana* as understood by Sarada Devi: liberation of the self and the welfare of the world, through philosophical studies and training in practical abilities as well (2003, 157).

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<sup>41</sup> For example Denton, considering the development of female institutions, connects them to the structure and organizations of Christian monastic orders (1992, 222).

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.brahmakumaris.com/about-us/history.html> [Accessed March 2014]

<sup>43</sup> The already cited study of Sinclair-Brull (1997) is completely dedicated to the description of the foundation and organization of this female branch of the Ramakrishna order.



Other institutionalized female centres are the *kanyā pīṭh* (seat for virgins) arisen under the influence of the first *pīṭh* established in 1940 by Ānandamayī Mā, one of the most famous woman saints in India. In her study, Denton analyses three of these centres in Vārāṇasī<sup>44</sup>, which host *brahmacāriṇīs* (female novices) formally initiated into celibacy through the *dīkṣā* mantra given by the head female renouncer. Interesting to our context is the report Denton gives about who are the *brahmacāriṇīs* living in these centres. From her data it results that (Denton 2004, 137-138):

Few have entered the ascetic world out of an entirely free choice. [...] (i) most have been placed here by impoverished, high caste families unable to provide a dowry for them, (ii) some have been sent by relatives unable to feed and clothe an orphaned child, (iii) some have parents who simply desire an orthodox education and protection for them, (iv) a few appear to have either been rejected by their husbands [...] (v) some are unable to compete in the marriage market because of physical disability or unattractiveness, suspicions about mental or emotional capacity, or relatively advanced age.

These examples show that the purpose of many female religious centres is actually to improve the education of girls, enabling them to receive traditional religious teachings that can provide them with the opportunity for a good marriage or with the chance to continue a retired, ascetic way of life. In fact, their religious/spiritual imprint has specifically ascetic characteristics, based on the instructions given by the female gurus who established the *pīṭhs* and led them, however these girls are not properly ascetics, as they do not take a *saṃnyāsa dīkṣā*. Many of these centres, and many female gurus often encourage people to respect their *svadharma*, supporting the caste system and the orthodox values of Hinduism.

According to Clémentin-Ojha (1998, 35), as a consequence of their non-conventional status, female renouncers and guru do not use asceticism as a platform to criticize aspects of Hindu society. They are rebels towards the social norms for their own life, but they are not revolutionaries.<sup>45</sup> The scholar supposes this is essential for their “survival”: female renouncers participate to the rules of orthodoxy and, at the same time, they try to justify their asceticism connecting it to the *Strīdharmā* and especially to the idea of motherhood. Many female gurus are heads of organizations focused on

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<sup>44</sup> Denton has described in detail the organizations and structures of the *kanyā pīṭh* of Ānandamayī Mā, that of Gaṅgā Mā called Ānanda Devi Matr *Kanyā pīṭh*, and the *āśram* of Śrī 108 Śobhā Mā (2004, 128-137).

<sup>45</sup> As underlined by Ramanujan, also in the past male saints often addressed their poems towards social reforms, whereas female saints “despite the enormity of the social protest implicit in their life as they reject parents, husband, children, household, shelter, even clothes” preferred to focus their poetry on love and devotion, disclosing a poetry based on private and interior themes (1982, 323).

social activities and *sevā*, which is interpreted as the religious expression of a motherly attitude.

Rüstam explains this aspect as an evolution of Vivekānanda's idea of social service (2003, 161):

In the past the rejection of an ascetic life for women was a result of the common understanding which limited the role of women to their responsibilities as wives and mothers -their *stri dharma*. This contradiction was now resolved by Vivekananda's new interpretation of asceticism. By connecting the endeavour of individual salvation with social service, female asceticism too, got a new dimension –the motherly taking care of the needy. Female ascetics are giving up biological motherhood, to replace it with spiritual motherhood.

Therefore, it is likely that this *sevā* approach and the motherly attitude represents a contemporary development that some female ascetics have assumed to be accepted by society, creating a theoretical compromise between what is considered traditionally natural for women and asceticism.<sup>46</sup>

However, some meaningful changes have arisen in the last decades. New developments have affected also the orthodox stream of asceticism: in the Hardwar Kumbh Melā of 1998 has been established the Akhil Bhartiya Sadhvi Sammelan, a meeting of *sādhvīs* affiliated to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and connected to the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad, a group within the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)<sup>47</sup> whose aim is to build up a network of *sādhvīs* (Rüstam 2003, 144).

In 2001, during the Mahā Kumbh Melā in Haridwar, female *saṃnyāsīnīs* were standing on the chariot of the Mahā Nirvāṇī Akhārā, and there was even one chariot with a woman sitting on the throne. She was Gītā Bhārtī, the first woman to be elected as Mahā Maṇḍaleśvarī of the Nirvāṇī Ākhārā. This means that she had been appointed as one of the spiritual leaders of the *akhārā*, having the right to initiate also male members into the order.

In the Māgh Melā of Allahabad 2014, *sādhvī* Trikal Bhavanta led a group of about 50 women ascetics and proclaimed the formation of a new *ākhārā* only for women. The purpose of her action was to raise woman pride and place in the religious hierarchy, as according to Bhavanta though women do hard work in all the *akhārās*, they stay in a subjugated position in a system run by men.

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<sup>46</sup> Obviously, this does not mean that the idea of women as spiritual/religious mothers was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in several traditions the mother's role is highly considered (see the *śākta* idealization of maternal function) but that it had a further development which could justify the increasing number of female gurus.

<sup>47</sup> The VHP is an organization arisen from the soil of the Hindu nationalism with the purpose of gathering Hindu religious leaders for the improvement and maintenance of the Sanatana Dharma. The BJP is a political party that supports the voices of the right wing.

A similar position is held by Ānandamūrti Gurumā. This female guru, Charpentier says, “advises parents to make their daughters strong and powerful in order to make them self-supportive. She states that this can be done in two ways: first, through education, and second, through professional training eventually leading to financial independence. [...] She also advises parents to let their daughters train martial arts in order to acquire inner strength and be able to defend themselves against street Romeos [...] She refuses to reproduce cultural values, thus openly challenging conventional Indian standards. She consciously uses her socially sanctioned position as spiritual master in subversive ways, thus challenging all forms of oppression that support patriarchy” (2010, 256).

However, these developments often do not find the support of the male counterpart, nor of those female ascetics who respect the tradition, as Rām Priya Dās, because they are considered against the tradition.

## 7. Conclusion

To give a reply to the question “are women entitled to become ascetics?” it seems quite clear that women are and have always been entitled to become ascetics since it has never existed a real and strict ban on asceticism for them. However, their paths towards asceticism and renunciation was always jagged by many social obstacles that lead them to live the religious experience in a half-domestic realm, as a private experience, or to cut the social norms in a revolutionary way. Examples of female asceticism have been transmitted through narrations and hagiographies, but their purpose was to stress an extraordinary religiosity, not to present social models for other women. As a result of this discouragement, female participation remains low to be acknowledged by the Indian society and to become a normal reality rather than an exceptional one in the *sādhu samāj*.

In fact, women in the *sādhu samāj* continue to live some discriminations and difficulties, as they that cannot strive for the highest assignments but in exceptional cases and outstanding characters. Female sexuality is often tamed and hidden. In fact, while, for example, *nāgā* ascetics can walk and participate to religious gathering naked, *nāgā sādhvīs* are never naked, but they wear a cloth draped all around their body. Furthermore, while some male ascetics are renowned for practices that are based on the showing of the control of their sexuality, there are no female counterparts to them, as if the control of female sexuality and its repression is given for granted or, in any case, is not something to show off.

However, it is true that female ascetics have a degree of individual freedom that a householder woman cannot enjoy. Therefore, asceticism was and still is a path to realize an individual

empowerment for those women who deliberately choose the ascetic path for their personal belief and religious quest. However, this does not lead always to a complete equality with male ascetics because female ascetics are aware that there are various kinds of limitations because of their gender. On the other side, for those women who became ascetics not for religious purposes, being ascetics is a protective label, and by consequence, rather than being a sign of empowerment is the result of a “social fear”.

In contemporary India, the role of female ascetics is improving thanks to the new historical background: some have gained a position in traditional orthodox groups, others have created their own sect, and some others have become predominant activists in political and social movements.<sup>48</sup> However, these female ascetics and gurus are understood as manifestations of goddesses and are able to reach leadership positions because they are recognized as extraordinary, exceptional individuals. Therefore, the special consideration given to them doesn't affect women in a wider perspective.

It is likely that the increasing number of female ascetics may encourage further women to undertake the ascetic path. However, as the case of Rām Priya Dās has showed, the path to reach such a goal is still very hard to follow and it needs a deeply motivation and a strong personality to face the opposition of family and society.

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<sup>48</sup> Exemplary are Sādhvī Ritambara and Uma Bharti, politically active during the 80s and especially during the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. As argued by Kalyani Devaki Menon (2006:142) female ascetics were part of a specific nationalistic propaganda, where their being renouncers and women was used to stress and create the value and morality of the movement.

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## “How many know how to (make) love?”<sup>1</sup>

Semantic understanding of Bengali Bāul songs and politics of power in the lineage of Bhaba Pagla

Carola Erika Lorea

The songs performed by the Bāuls of Bengal are characterized by a charmingly enigmatic language by which terms and practices related to the dimension of sexuality and ontogenesis are concealed under the veil of intriguing metaphors. While the *orature* of the Bāuls has been widely explored from the literary as well as the religious point of view, the question of the semantic reception of the songs has rarely been considered. The semantics of these songs concerns the fundamental opposition between man and woman, as the only unborn difference Bāuls acknowledge in human beings. The foundation of such a difference lies in the sexually active body. Although, for a meaningful practice of ritualized sexual encounter (*yugala-sādhanā*), male-female identities (*svabhāb*) have to be transcended, and male practitioners are recommended to adopt a feminine nature (*nārī bhāb*). This article will focus on the problem of the interpretation and understanding of Bāul songs revealing how a diverse typology of listeners or performers can differently explain the meaning of a song and its allegorical images related to the microcosmic body of the practitioner.

The analysis of the interpretations of a selected sample of ‘songs of practice’ (*sādhanā saṅgīt*) composed by the saint-songwriter Bhaba Pagla (1902 – 1984) will show how the lyrics are understood and explained on different levels according to the social and religious background of the informant: a superficial, literal layer; a *bhakti*-oriented metaphysical layer; and an esoteric-Tantric layer, decoded and orally transmitted by living gurus. Combining the approach of the contextual theory of the study of folklore and verbal arts with the theories on the interpretation of metaphors and the semiotics of reception, I will try to show how different exegeses of the same songs – collected during an ethnographic investigation in the field – can at times encourage the institutionalization of a cult purified from its embarrassing ‘Tantric’ aspect or, in other cases, reinforce the system of beliefs about bodily fluids and sexuality of an esoteric community. The problem of the heterogeneity of oral interpretations and the polysemy of songs’ meanings will lead to a discussion on the politics of power that entangle emerging Bengali cults and their negotiation between universalism and esoteric secrecy.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pirīt karā jāne kayjanā*, a song composed by Bhaba Pagla and widely performed by the Bāul singers throughout West Bengal.

## 1. Introduction

The framework in which this paper is inserted concerns the problematic evolution of the literary repertoire of one particular oral tradition: the esoteric Bengali songs composed and performed throughout West Bengal by groups of mystic practitioners and/or itinerant musicians generally called Bāuls. The Bāuls are well known for their antinomianism and their strong belief in (and practice of) equality among human beings, castes and religions. It is a common saying among Bāuls that there are only two *jātis* on Earth: males and females, being the only evident differentiation when one comes, naked, in the world<sup>2</sup>. Their *sādhanā* (practice for self-realization) is highly interiorised, it neglects exterior ritualism such as icon worship and pilgrimage, and involves a set of body-centered practices and techniques (*deha-sādhanā*, i.e. knowledge and control of breath and of bodily fluids and emissions) based on the control of the five elements of nature in their embodied, microcosmic form.<sup>3</sup>

The set of beliefs and practices transmitted through the songs of the Bāuls is centred around a soteriological use of sexuality and a comprehension of the dynamics of universal creation-destruction through the knowledge of ontogenesis and the control of human reproductive substances and processes (Salomon 1991: 180; 272). Similar Tantric-yogic practices represent a shared heritage that is common among several groups and lineages of Bengali esoteric cults that emerged from the same Sahajiyā-Nāth-Sufi confluence of ideas in pre-modern Bengal (Cashin 1995: 17). Thus different groups of practitioners, who may call themselves using numerous and heterogeneous self-definitions, such as *bāul*, *fakir*, *darbeś*, *baiṣṇab*, *kartābhajā*, *lālanśāhī*, etc. share a common cosmology, soteriology and a set of body-centred practices that are referred to, in the oral corpus of their songs, with a similar and overlapping terminology (Cashin 1995: 15; Cakrabarti 1985: 9-11; Lee 2008: 69-72).

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<sup>2</sup> This strongly polarized view of the male and female gender seems to leave little or no space at all for a third gender or other, differently perceived gender identities. This is not totally true, if we consider that, for practitioners, even the fundamental opposition between *nārī* and *puṣ* ultimately has to be transcended: expert practitioners ought to realize their inherently transgender identity in order to successfully conduct the practice of the union (*milan*). For this reason, a famous and controversial verse of the Kartābhajās, a sister sect of the Bāuls (Banerjee 1995), says: “the woman must be a *hijrā* [hermaphrodite] and the man must be a *khōjā* [eunuch]”. For an ‘ethnography of meaning’ of this sentence, see Urban (2001: 98-100). For a study of ‘third gender’ identities, homosexuality and androgynous elements in the Indian tradition, see O’Flaherty (1980) and Wilhelm (2008).

<sup>3</sup> It is not my priority in this paper to give a full account of the esoteric practices involved in the religious aspect of the Bāul doctrine. Furthermore, the literature on this topic is quite rich: see for example Jha (1995, 1997, 1999), or, in English, Openshaw (2004), Fakir (2005), Hanssen (2001) and others.

In this paper I am going to analyse the oral tradition of Bengali esoteric songs through the particular case of the songs of Bhaba Pagla (Bengali *Bhabā Pāḡ'lā*, or Bhaba “the mad”<sup>4</sup>, ca. 1902-1984).<sup>5</sup> Born in Amta, a village in the Dhaka subdivision of Bangladesh, as Bhabendramohan Ray Chaudhury, Bhaba Pagla is known as a very talented musician, an ecstatic composer of religious songs (*sādhana saṅgīt*) and an enlightened spiritual teacher, revered by his extraordinarily heterogeneous devotees as a *siddha* and an *abadhūta*, a realized saint and a perfected being with miraculous powers. He composed an enormous number of songs, some written down, and others developed extemporaneously while playing the harmonium. Some of his songs have been published by the most zealous among his devotees (Khetri 1989), and by amateur and professional researchers of Bengali literature (Bandhyopadhyay 1988; Cakrabarti 1995). A good amount of his handwritten compositions are preserved in the cupboard of his grand-son Sanjay Chaudhury in the main Kālī temple that Bhaba Pagla himself founded in Kalna (Bardhaman district). Nevertheless, the most vibrant and rich collection of Bhaba Pagla’s songs is preserved in the memory of the performers, who may be both Bāul singers or disciples of the lineage of Bhaba Pagla, or even professional singers of *śyāmā saṅgīt* (devotional Śākta songs, like those of the famous saint-poet Ramprasad Sen; see Seely and Nathan 1982 and McDermott 2001) and Bengali folk songs. The notes of Bhaba Pagla’s *sādhana saṅgīt* resonate in the fairs and on the stages of almost every corner of West Bengal, where his songs are particularly diffused in the districts of Birbhum, Bardhaman, Bankura and Nadia. Played in a multiplicity of performative occasions, his compositions can be heard at Bāul festivals (Bāul or Bāul-Fakir *melā*), at the gatherings and fairs dedicated to Bhaba Pagla (e.g. at the annual *mahāpūjās* at the temples and ashrams he founded, etc.), and at the intimate music sessions that take place in the evening among the disciples of the lineage, on the veranda of a little Kālī temple or an ashram. Due to the recent popularization and commercialization of Bāul songs and their triumphal entry in the realm of the recording and film industries (Ferrari 2012: 32-33), it is not uncommon nowadays to hear a song of Bhaba Pagla in a Hollywood-like production partly set in Kolkata (for instance, in a short scene of the

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<sup>4</sup> Madness is seen, in both Siddha and Bhakti traditions, as a praiseworthy quality: rather than clinical madness, it refers to the condition of the self-realized, who is seen by common men as a madman. Attributes such as Pāḡlā, Khyāpā etc. are recurrent as epithets for important personalities of the Bāul realm. See Kinsley (1974), McDaniel (1989), Feuerstein (2006).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the composer and his relationship to Bāuls in the context of religion and folklore in modern and contemporary Bengali history, see Lorea (2016).

film *The Namesake*, directed by Mira Nair, a couple of Bāuls sing one of Bhaba Pagla’s songs) or in a commercial *masala* film made in Tollywood.<sup>6</sup>

Bhaba Pagla gathered a wide number of disciples during his lifetime and created a network of followers based around the ashrams and Kālī temples that he founded. As a memory of his message, he left a very cryptic and mixed repertoire of compositions in which he indiscriminately used a miscellaneous assortment of Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, Islamic, Tantric and *dehatattva*-related terminology. After his departure, his charismatic personality started to be revered in different ways by different strands of Bengali popular religiosity at the same time: on one hand, he is revered as a powerful and accomplished guru by the heterodox strand connected with the initiatic religion of Bāuls, or, more generally, by *bartamān panthis*<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, he is quasi-divinised and worshipped as a Śākta saint by a more conservative and orthodox strand, tinged with the philanthropic and reformist zeal of Vivekananda’s “neohinduism” (Basu 2002; Sellmer 2007).

The former strand is esoteric and non-institutionalised. The latter is exoteric and institutionalised; it strongly supports a path of devotion (*bhakti mārg*), charity and social “service” (*sebā*)<sup>8</sup> as a religious practice. This orthodox strand is led by affluent disciples based in Kolkata, who organize gatherings, “brotherhood marches” and religious debates at the famous Kālī temple of Dakshineswar, and by the *adhikārīs* in charge of the rituals at some of Bhaba Pagla’s Kālī temples; most of them took formal renunciation (*sannyās*) in the Giri order of the Hindu monastic tradition known as *Daśanāmī sampradāya*.

Between the two divergent streams lies a variegated multitude of followers, devotees, singers and performers of Bhaba Pagla’s songs: they creatively negotiate between the unorthodox and the orthodox poles in a varied and rich continuum of religious creeds and behaviours associated with the historical figure of Bhaba Pagla as the founder of an incredibly ramified *paramparā*.

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<sup>6</sup> During one of the last visits in the main temple, situated in Kalna (Bardhaman district), one of the oldest disciples of Bhaba Pagla was having me listen, from his mobile phone, the cover song of *Nadī bharā dheu* (“The river is full of waves”), a very popular song of Bhaba Pagla, in its disco-remake for the movie “Jio-kaka”. The same song has been recorded in a hard-rock version by the fusion Bangla band “Bolepur Bluez” (the song is on You Tube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1cc\\_PzpEdo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1cc_PzpEdo), last visit 20/01/2015).

<sup>7</sup> The term refers more broadly to adepts of the same body-centered esoteric religious practice who may not comfortably refer to themselves as ‘Bāuls’, a controversial definition that does not match any rigid identity (see Urban 1999). It has been largely used by Jeanne Openshaw to indicate the various lineages of practitioners that believe in *bartamān* (that which is experienced by one’s own senses and direct experience) as opposed to *anumān*, inference derived from sacred scriptures and dogmatic prescriptions (Openshaw 2004: 113-117).

<sup>8</sup> On charitable activities and the connection between *sebā* and the institutionalisation of the Ramakrishna Mission see Pandya (2014: 89-114).

How can a single guru be the initiator of such a diversified number of traditions, and in such a short span of time? In this article I argue that the polysemy of Bhaba Pagla's song texts potentially allows the religious message of the same character to find a place in disparate religious currents. Bhaba Pagla's songs are inherently open to be interpreted in different ways according to the profile of the performer, the guru, or the member of the audience who is interpreting them.

Ascribing to the wider tradition of esoteric songs in Bengali, Bhaba Pagla's songs are similar to Bāuls' and Fakirs' songs for they are characteristically polysemic and multi-layered, and the widespread use of metaphors and enigmatic expressions allows them to be semantically understood according to different interpretative layers: a literal layer; a metaphysical-devotional layer, accepted and transmitted by the more orthodox stream of devotees; and an esoteric layer that decodes the metaphorical language according to the Tantric-yogic *deha-sāadhanā* transmitted among the initiates.

The possibility of multifold interpretative lines is inherent in the linguistic strategy known as *sandhyā bhāṣā*, the twilight/intentional language (Bharati 1961: 261-265) that typically accompanied Bengali Tantric literature since its very beginnings, from Buddhist Sahajiyās' compositions of Medieval *caryāpadas* until the more recent and popular refrains of Lalon Fakir's songs.<sup>9</sup> Most of the scholars who discussed the literary devices and the functions of *sandhyā bhāṣā* were interested in the reasons why this code-language was employed. Many described the causes that brought to the necessity of using a secret language to conceal esoteric messages (Eliade 1958: 250-251), while others reasoned on its structure and on the connections between metaphorical worlds and cognitive processes (Hayes 2003, 2006). I will instead focus on the consequences of the use of a multi-layered symbolic language. Through the analysis of a selected set of interpretations of some of Bhaba Pagla's songs, I will focus on how the form and literary devices utilized in Bhaba Pagla's *sāadhanā saṅgīt* justify the emergence of apparently contradictory cults and witness the increasing institutionalisation of a twentieth-century Bengali representative of "religious madness" (McDaniel 1989; Feuerstein 2006).

In this paper I will investigate:

- how the semantic understanding of the same lyrics changes according to the different context of reception and individual receptors.
- how we can explain the heterogeneity of meanings attributed to a single song or a single metaphor within a song.

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<sup>9</sup> Practitioners do not refer to the language of their songs as *sandhyā bhāṣā*, but rather they describe it through various expressions: for example, the language of signs, saying through hints, or the upside-down language (see Section 4).

- the role of *sandhyā bhāṣā* in the emergence of considerably different *paramparās* descended from the same founder-guru.
- how a methodology concerned with the study of local interpretations can improve our understanding of religious practices.

In order to explore the possible solutions to the problematic questions that I mentioned, I use the oral exegesis provided by my informants – mostly *dīkṣā* gurus (gurus who are authorized to give initiatory mantras), performers and disciples of the Bhaba Pagla lineage – and elaborate upon the oral and written sources that I collected during two years of fieldwork (July 2011 – August 2013) in West Bengal with the theoretical and methodological tools provided by the *contextual* and the *performance theory* of the study of folklore and verbal arts (Ben-Amos 1971; Abrahams 1972; Bauman 1984). This interdisciplinary approach is based on the assumption that the analysis of a folkloric production – a text – has to be understood within its performative context, taking into account its existence as an 'event' - rather than as a static 'product' - created by the dialectic interaction between performers, audiences, socio-cultural milieu and spatial-temporal settings. Combining the folklorists' perspective with the approach towards metaphorical language, meaning and interpretation proposed by linguistic theories on metaphor and the semiotics of reception (Lakoff and Johnson 2008; Eco 1990; 2004), I attempt to connect the existence of contrasting interpretations of song texts with the politics of power that affect emerging Bengali cults in their negotiation between universalism and esoteric secrecy.

## 2. A theoretical premise on the study of interpretation and meaning

Attempts to explicate this poetry can easily go awry. If you ignore traditional lore, you're a fool. If you approach the material as a scholar pulling long lists of meanings and equivalents out of your pocket, you're a fool. If you don't have an intimate, immediate understanding of the poem, you have nothing. If you report your personal interpretation, why should anyone believe you? Even in assuming that there is a hidden meaning to be dug out, you may be playing the fool: who is to say you are not describing a naked emperor's clothes?

Upside-down language should make you feel like a fool: that is part of its function.

Linda Hess (1983: 314)

In her article on the “upside-down language of Kabir”, Hess (1983) rightly points out that it is incredibly difficult to interpret the well-known Sant poet's songs, which abundantly use paradoxical

images, riddles and yogic jargon. In her struggle to find a coherent method for analysing Kabir's verses, Hess reveals a number of factors that make a serious study of esoteric songs extremely challenging, which may in fact be valid for the context of Bengali esoteric *orature* as well.

First of all, the scholar of esoteric literature has to face the ethical and epistemological problem (Urban 1998) of whether one can ever know with certainty the true substance of what is hidden, and then, supposing one can, the question of whether one should reveal it publicly, an issue that Hugh Urban has called the "double bind" of secrecy (1998, 209). Dealing with the interpretation of esoteric songs, songs that concern practices reserved to the insiders of a particular lineage, the researcher has to be aware of the limited access one may have to the concealed teachings; even if the researcher has received formal initiation into the lineage, one has to consider that certain truths may be accessible only to particular stages of advancement of one's personal practice. Moreover, the revelation expressed by an esoteric song is supposed to be understood through a practitioner's experience and intuition, and not by the means of a scholar's analytical and literary study. In this sense, as Hess cleverly suggests, it is basically useless to compile long lists of esoteric terminology and glossaries of esoteric metaphors in order to create the illusion of 'correct' interpretations of the 'songs of *sādhana*', as some studies on Bāul songs have tried to do (Ray and Tat 2006: 24-30).

With this brief premise on the difficulty of analysing the *content* of the knowledge transmitted through song texts' interpretations, I suggest that a legitimate approach to the study of the songs' meaning is offered by a "phenomenology of songs' understandings," a comparative study of the *form* (Urban 1998: 218) of the interpretations that are given by those who have the authority to confer a meaning, i.e. the members of Bhaba Pagla's lineage and the cultural mediators of his religious message: Bāul performers. In this way we are eloping from the constrictive "double bind of secrecy," for we will not be concerned with finding out *the* correct interpretation of one song, but rather we will focus on how different interpretations look like, in which points they differ, why they differ, what sociocultural traits and religious affiliations are associated with each interpretative layer, and similar problematic issues.

The study of meaning and interpretation of Bāul songs would add an important dimension to the understanding of an oral tradition that has rarely been investigated from the point of view of its *reception*. While the academic literature concerned with Bāuls' tenets and texts has been widely explored from the literary (Cakrabarti 1990), anthropological (Hanssen 2001; Knight 2011 etc.) and religious point of view (Sharif 1973; Wahab 2011; Salomon 1991 etc.), very few tried to present an *emic* understanding of what Bāul *gān* – songs which constitute an encyclopaedia of beliefs, techniques, and codes of behaviour for the initiates – is all about from the "native point of view" (Geertz 1974). The

focus on individual interpretations, instead of a group’s tradition, could add an important aspect in the study of esoteric cults and their “verbal art” (Bascom 1955) for multiple reasons.

Firstly, the study of the reception of song texts can reveal the lack of uniformity among “the folk” - an entity that has long been considered as the “anonymous masses of tradition-oriented people” (Dorson 1978: 23) - and the existence of conflictual dimensions among audience and performers of a same genre. In the words of Bonnie C. Wade (1976: 74):

For folklorist John Greenway, one of the most important facets of this type of study of folksong texts is that it can reveal the lack of uniformity in sentiment on the part of “the folk” - a lack which he suggests might come as a surprise to those who have been educated with the rather unconscious assumption (reinforced by much folklore research) that "the folk" all feel the same way about things. Greenway feels that there is much to be gained from understanding conflicting points of view in song texts. The Denisoff and Truzzi studies illuminate Greenway’s point that “the folk” do not all feel the same way about things. Studies of conflicting ideology in folklore further expand the functionalist argument on social function of song texts.

In fact, it is indeed through a functionalist study of the songs that we will try to explain conflicting understandings of Bhaba Pagla’s songs according to different social and religious strata in the final section.

In the second place, reporting local exegesis of an oral repertoire gives us an account of what the folklorist Alan Dundes called “oral literary criticism” (1966), a dimension that reveals culturally relevant perceptions of a literary genre's aesthetic ideas, literary taxonomies and the uses of figures of speech according to indigenous criteria. If the oral repertoire we are dealing with is not only a folkloric literary production with an entertaining and aesthetic function, but also – and especially – a religiously significant utterance that accompanies a practitioner’s *sāadhanā* and delineates his identity within a religious group (Trottier 2000: 75-77), then we have what Frank Korom has called an *oral exegesis*:

Because religious texts and oral utterances generate the possibility of many interpretations by a local community, an inquiry into individual understandings can enable a move outward from the individual to the community in order to address the larger question of the interdependence between “local knowledge,” world-view and belief systems. Taken together these three engulfing cognitive domains dynamically inform and construct the indigenous conceptions that underlie religious practices. [...] The study of interpretation in small oral community might enable us to account better for religious change, since significant transformations may occur in very short spans of time. (1997: 154)



Korom has cleverly brought out the relation between contrasting interpretations and religious change, an issue that will turn out to be very resourceful in order to comprehend the diverging understandings of Bhaba Pagla's songs, contextualized in the framework of the relation between the impact of modernisation<sup>10</sup> in rural Bengal and the marginal sexo-yogic interpretations transmitted by a minority of esoteric practitioners.

Among the few scholars that applied the call for an "oral literary criticism" and an "ethnography of speech" (Hymes 1962) to the study of the metaphorical mode of discourse, it is remarkable and worthy of mentioning the study of Keith Basso (1976: 93-121), who investigated the modalities of interpretation of metaphorical speech among Western Apache and revealed indigenous semantic theories for the explication of implicit meanings. In the context of Indian esoteric literatures, it is legitimate to suspect that most of the scholars simply acknowledged the difficulty of making sense of local exegesis and promptly abandoned the task. Thus Kiehnle (1994: 306) sadly admitted that her work on the songs of Jñāndeva are full of "'may be' and 'might be'" that "show how insecure the interpretation is when exclusively based on the readers' acquaintance with the *Jñāndeva Gāthā* and related texts like those of Haṭhayoga [...] and not on any living tradition." In a similar way, Glen A. Hayes conducted an inspiring analysis of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā literature in the light of the most up-to-date linguistic and cognitive theories on metaphor but realized that for these "unsystematic Tantric groups" (2003: 167) we do not have a definite textual corpus to work on, and in the lack of "a written commentarial tradition [...] we are faced with many problems in hermeneutics – complicating an already difficult task. [...] For modern scholars to move beyond basic vocabulary to the analysis of metaphors is thus even more difficult" (Hayes 2003: 167).

I propose that the difficulty faced by the above-mentioned authors can perhaps be extricated if we rely on the interpretations that are orally transmitted among the disciples of a *paramparā*. This is especially important if we are concerned with religious traditions that give absolute priority to the

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<sup>10</sup> It is necessary to clarify here that with the term "modernisation" I mean to refer to a concept that originated in the West (Patil 2002, 57), defined as "a process based upon the rational utilisation of resources and aimed at the establishment of a modern society [...] characterised by the application of technology, by extensive social interdependence, urbanisation, literacy, social mobility" (Welch 1971: 2). Agents of modernization in India have been identified as results of the British rule (Patil 2002, 60): rapid transport and communication, Western education, printing press, newspapers and periodicals, industrialization, cooperative societies and banking institutions, modern leadership. To these factors, it is important to add, for the understanding of this research context, the diffusion of Western science and medicine (P. K. Bose 2002) and the governmental support of healthcare based on biomedicine.

spoken word of a Guru rather than to the written text.<sup>11</sup> In this way we would rescue ourselves from the derogatory label of *adepti del velame* (“adepts of the veil”) that Umberto Eco (1990: 89) attributed to those who *overinterpreted* texts, hunting for esoteric meanings where there was possibly none and obsessively looking for symbolic signifiers. In the next paragraph I will apply the proposed method for the understanding of a very little selection of Bhaba Pagla’s songs and report the oral exegesis of some metaphors that are crucial in the “construction of sexuality” of some contemporary heterodox lineages of West Bengal.

### 3. The vulture of desire and the death of self-control: oral exegesis of Bhaba Pagla’s songs

In this paragraph I discuss a small cross section of the oral exegeses and interpretations that I collected during a field-work conducted with the disciples and the performers of Bhaba Pagla’s songs. The songs that have been selected for this article are *Maraṇ kāro kathā śune nā* (“Death pays heed to no one”) and *Pirīṭ karā jāne kayjanā* (“How many know how to (make) love?” - the same verse that I chose as a title for this paper).<sup>12</sup> There are several reasons why I have chosen these two particular songs. First of all, they are very much alive in several performative contexts: they are not strictly reserved to initiates and thus are very well known and frequently heard in many different occasions, from Bāul melās to Kālī pūjās, from intimate gatherings of spiritual teachers and disciples (known as *sādhu saṅgas*) to recorded albums of Bāul songs. Consequently, it is more comfortable for local informants to interpret them. Secondly, both songs deal, in at least one of the proposed layers of interpretation, with the “construction of sexuality” that characteristically permeates the life of the practitioners: an anthropoietic sexuality based on the restraint of the senses, especially of sexual desire, and the identification of sublimated carnal love with divine love – values which lead, as a result, to the attentive avoidance of seminal discharge, and thus to an effective contraceptive method (Lorea 2014b).

The song *Maraṇ kāro kathā śune nā* (“Death pays heed to no one”) is apparently a song of the category locally known as *maraṇ smaraṇ*, the remembrance of the inevitability of death in order to find out what is really important in life. The noun *maraṇ* though has different meanings according to

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<sup>11</sup> A famous passage of the *Kaulāvalīnirṇaya* says “The fool who, overpowered by greed, acts after having looked up [the matter] in a written book without having obtained it from a guru’s mouth, he also will be certainly destroyed” (Goudriaan and Gupta 1981: 12). Similarly, we read in the *Rasaratnākara*: “Neither sequence (oral teachings) without written sources nor written sources without sequence (are acceptable). Knowing the written sources to be conjoined with sequence (oral teachings), the person that then practices partakes of the siddhis.” (White 1996: 161).

<sup>12</sup> An exhaustive selection of songs of Bhaba Pagla has been translated by the author (see Lorea 2016: 257-283).

the interpretation offered by informants belonging to different strands of religiosity, who are practicing different stages of *sādhana*. The term superficially means “death” in its most literal and common use. But in the language of the esoteric songs it means “seminal discharge”, an undesirable incident also referred to as “falling” or “breaking”<sup>13</sup>, suggesting the failure in the practice of “the protection of the stuff”, i.e. *basturakṣā*. *Bastu* indicates both the cosmic substance out of which the Creation is made and its equivalent microcosmic reproductive substance, which represents the highly valued fluids of the practitioners' body (Hayes 2003: 176). We can easily track the conventional association of the signifier “death” with the referent “seminal discharge” if we use the strategy of intertextuality, and therefore compare its occurrence with the whole corpus of Bhaba Pagla's songs, with the wider repertoire of songs of the same genre, and with the discursive metaphors that are used by gurus and practitioners of the living tradition, for “a single text cannot be fully understood as an independent, self-standing entity” (Finnegan 1992: 21). A common saying among Bāuls is that “one dies in the place where he is born”. Accordingly, in one of Bhaba Pagla's songs we hear the verse “*mūlādhār ādhāre janma mṛtyu kāraṇ*”: the vessel in the cakra at the base of the spinal chord, in which sexual energy dwells, is the cause of life and death. A number of Bāul and Fakir songs express the same concept using very similar metaphoric terms, showing that the connection between literal “death” and seminal emission as death in the context of *sādhana* is a canonical literary *topos*. For instance, Sudhir Cakrabarti (1985: 28) reports the song of Duddu Shah: “Life and death are in your hands... life is in keeping your *bīryarasa* [seminal fluid]... one who spills his *bīrya* falls on the way of the animal”. The first verse is strikingly similar to the one of Bhaba Pagla, and this reminds us that, in the absence of an indigenous concept of “copyright”, authors are free to borrow and recycle previously composed folkloric material if it fits their poetic needs; this is not perceived as a lack of originality or inferior talent; it rather highlights the opposite, for the poet is showing his acquaintance with previously composed expressions, or even entire sentences, that are well-established in the oral memory of the practitioners.

Death pays heed to no one;  
It can attack anywhere, at any time!

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<sup>13</sup> Seminal discharge is seen as detrimental for men's health in a number of South Asian medical traditions. It is then of crucial importance that the *sādhaka* becomes skilled in the techniques of preservation of his semen. In the ancient classics on religion, medicine and sexology, Haṭhayoga as well as Āyurveda, emphasis has been laid on the preservation of *śukra*. The relation between semen preserved in the body and strength, power and longevity has been transversally remarked, from the Āyurvedic treatise *Suśrutasaṃhitā* until Bengali medical journals of the Renaissance period (see P. K. Bose 2005: 148-164).

That Death cheats you spreading out the net  
that Mahāmāyā carries in her lap.  
People do nothing but talk,  
No one remained whom I could call “mine”.

You are still surviving, that's surprising!  
Nobody is keeping brahmacarya:  
if you could keep a patient detachment,  
Infatuation wouldn't have caught your body.  
Keep in mind you are going to die  
You'll see you'll live longer.  
Learn the proper sayings  
and the day of death will be known.

Life and death are in your own hands,  
this is Bhaba Pagla's true word.  
If you had taken shelter in Him/Her,  
you wouldn't have died before time.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the adepts of Bhaba Pagla's lineage and the Bāul performers with whom I was discussing this song recognized and explained the song as a recommendation to keep one's *brahmacarya*. If in the classic sense the word indicates a stage of a Brahman's life dedicated to the study of sacred scriptures and strict celibacy (Parmeshwaranand 2000: 249), within the lineage of Bhaba Pagla – as well as in Bāuls' speech in general (Openshaw 2004: 211) – *brahmacarya* means to retain one's *brahma*, the substance responsible for (pro)creation, without abstaining from sex. A *kabigān* singer<sup>15</sup> publicly interpreted the meaning of *brahmacarya* from the stage of a festival dedicated to Bhaba Pagla with the following words (see Fig.2):

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<sup>14</sup> The Bengali original text has been published in Cakrabarti (1995: 222). The same version is available on the online database of Bengali folk songs at <http://www.iopb.res.in/~somen/lokgiti.html> (last visit 20/01/2015). A quite mediocre performance of the song can be watched on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QqYFRyCOpk> (last visit 20/01/2015).

<sup>15</sup> *Kabigān* is a form of debate between two professional poets/singers who improvise their verses and sing with musical and choral accompaniment. He who fails to answer the riddles or is outwitted by the logic of the opponent loses the contest (see Hussain 1997: 493).

The most important thing is to recognize that the *pitrdhan* (the ‘wealth of the father’) preserved in men’s head<sup>16</sup> is equal to *param Brahma*, the Supreme Brahma, that which is responsible for creation, and one should always preserve it and control it so that it is not discharged unnecessarily<sup>17</sup>.

Bolay Ray Baul, a professional Bāul singer originally from the Jessore district of Bangladesh, who was performing at the same festival, gave a similar interpretation: “This song is to remind us that since we are born we will also die. Death could happen at any time, but it is also in your hands: since we are born we keep on distressing and damaging our body. If I don’t preserve the strength that is inside of my body, and I spoil it, I lose it, that is *maraṇ*. It means that one has to maintain his *brahma*”<sup>18</sup>. Bijayananda Giri Maharaj, the priest of the Kālī temple of Badkulla (Nadia district) founded by Bhaba Pagla, who took formal *sannyās* from a Hindu monastery, gave the following interpretation: “Life and death is in your hands... The death he is talking about concerns the body-centred doctrine (*dehatattva*). The loss of *bīrya* (semen) is *maraṇ*. Protect your *brahma* and you’ll not die unnecessarily<sup>19</sup>.”

From the interpretations given so far we can realize that the metaphorical “death” of Bengali esoteric songs is not at all a crystallized literary topos that is conventionally used in a fixed repertoire of themes: far from being a “dead metaphor” (Stern 2000: 28), its metaphorical referent is immediately recognized in the semiotic reception of the listener/performer/practitioner. Far more than a linguistic mode of expression, as Hayes has noted in the context of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās’ metaphorical language (2003, 165), the *sandhyā bhāṣā* employed in these compositions works together “with bodily experience and image schemata to create coherent metaphoric worlds”. What Glen A. Hayes has pointed out in his investigation of metaphors of life and birth (2006: 59-61) are equally valid for the analysis of this sexual metaphor of ‘death’. The signifier *maraṇ* simultaneously indicates a real-life experience - literal death - and a bodily experience - ejaculation - connected through an indigenous perspective on bodily health by the reason of which seminal emission is weakening and detrimental for men’s health. Ultimately, in the non-dualistic vision that the practitioner aspires to

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<sup>16</sup> It is a common belief and a deeply held Hindu notion that semen is stored in the brain. See Carstairs (1967: 84); O’Flaherty (1980: 45). The last verse of one song of Bhaba Pagla says: “the diadem of the brain / I tied it very well” (in T. Bandyopadhyay 1988: 136).

<sup>17</sup> The performance has been recorded in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district) in occasion of the “Bhabār Bhābnā Festival” in memory of Bhaba Pagla, 28/01/2013.

<sup>18</sup> Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district), personal collection of field-work recordings. Otherwise differently specified, all the oral sources used for this paper are available on request and belong to the personal digital catalogue of field-work recordings of the author.

<sup>19</sup> Interview dated 29/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

acquire, the two are not different, and “it is precisely the paradoxical identity of those two ontological opposites which the songs wish to stress”, as Per Kvaerne (2010 [1977]: 42) has remarked in respect to the function of polysemy in the language of the Medieval Tantric songs *caryāpadas*. In fact, “real” death and “microcosmic” death find a place side by side in the interpretation proposed by Gosain Amulya Ratan, one of the eldest disciples of Bhaba Pagla, and a *dīkṣā* and *śikṣā* guru<sup>20</sup> of a heterodox branch of this lineage:

If you acquire the power of *brahmacarya* you can fulfill everything. First “learn the proper sayings” [see third stanza], words of Hari, words of *sādhanā*: it means, learn from the practitioners how to work with your breath [*pracak*, *kumbhak*, *recak*, lit. inhaling, retaining the breath and exhaling]... So life and death will be in your hands, and you will live life after death being remembered, being alive on the mouths of the people: your body will die but your attainments, your actions (*karma*) survive<sup>21</sup>.

Some other members of the community of Bhaba Pagla’s lineage proposed very different interpretations. While the above-mentioned oral sources were referred by Bāuls, teachers of *deha-sādhanā* and initiatory gurus at least acquainted with body-centered practices, the disciples who belong to the more institutionalized side of the lineage preferred very literal interpretations. Gopal Khetry, an ardent devotee belonging to the urban milieu of middle-class Marwari businessmen, is the spokesman of the “exoteric” facade of the lineage. He manages the website [www.bhabapagla.com](http://www.bhabapagla.com) and organizes periodic gatherings in honour of Bhaba Pagla at Dakshineswar (the famous temple of Kālī, in Kolkata, connected with the religious activities of Ramakrishna) with the support of several religious and political groups. After the annual *mahāpūjā* of Digha (East Midnapore district) celebrated at the Kālī temple in his property, he introduced the custom of visiting hospitals and orphanages, bringing fruits and cloths to the sick and the poor. He feels that his mission is to propagate the message of his guru, which he does by stressing the universalistic aspects of equality and philanthropy contained in Bhaba Pagla’s message, and assimilating his path with the successful antecedents of Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Vivekananda<sup>22</sup>. In his interpretation of the song, “life and death are in your hands” in the sense that “a man that preserves *brahmacarya* and is truthfully

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<sup>20</sup> It is quite common among Bāuls to have a guru for the initiatory mantra and a different guru for the teaching of esoteric body-centered practice. See Openshaw (2004: 140-146)

<sup>21</sup> Interview dated 3/12/2012, in Jugpur (“Dhaka Colony”, Nadia district).

<sup>22</sup> Interviews dated 28/04/2013 (at the interviewee’s residence in Kolkata) and 12/02/2012 at Harbala Mandir in Digha (East Midnapore district). Gopal Khetry is also the editor of the magazines “Jaba Bhaba” and “Bhabamrta” and of several books, CDs and videos, of which a complete list is provided at <http://www.bhabapagla.com/journals.html> (last visit 25/01/2015).

involved in the way of *sāadhanā* becomes *trikāldarśī*, he knows past, present and future and he exactly knows on which day he is going to die”<sup>23</sup>.

Another literal interpretation was given by Dhulu Dhulu, the grand-daughter of Bhaba Pagla, a young woman who was participating as a member of the audience at the festival in Barrakpur: “Since we are born, we know we have to die. Death is sudden and unexpected. But we can control our life to a certain extent: we can avoid accidents, if we are cautious. That’s why Bhabā is saying ‘*marbe bale mane rekho*’, keep in mind that death is there, so you’ll beware and be more attentive”<sup>24</sup>. It might seem surprising that this exegesis was given by a disciple who has been growing up with the family of Bhaba Pagla himself, and, moreover, whose father is a *dīkṣā guru* of the lineage. After Bhaba Pagla’s death, though, the descendants transformed the main ashram of Kalna into the centre of an institutional cult that revolves around the divinised character of the founder. The sons and grandsons of Bhaba Pagla became the hereditary priests in charge of the Kālī temple of Kalna, acquiring a biologically-based spiritual authority which is quite alien to Sahajiyā religiosity and which is responsible for the institutionalization of the cult, as it has been the case with the Kartābhajā sect in Ghoshpara (Nadia district). Among the other factors that brought to the transformation of the Kartābhajās from an esoteric lineage to a well established exoteric sect, Sumanta Banerjee (1995) suggests a series of elements that we may compare and indeed recognize in the development of the young *paramparā* started by Bhaba Pagla, left in the hands of the grand-sons residing in Kalna:

- specifying a particular spot as the permanent headquarters of the sect;
- dynastic succession of gurus who claimed that the authority of the first guru was bequeathed on them;
- organized priesthood, consisting of a network of preachers in different villages and towns in charge of the converts whom they had proselytised;
- collection of money on a regular basis from the converts to the headquarters;
- a repository of written texts (mainly in the form of songs) explaining the religion of the sect, and “the rituals to be practised; and the continuity of the charismatic image of the founder [...] turned into another god by his immediate pupils who in order to perpetuate their personal authority over his devotees, build up an institution” (Banerjee 1995, 30).

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<sup>23</sup> Interview dated 28/04/2013 in Kolkata.

<sup>24</sup> Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

Before we discuss further considerations about the relationship between the institutionalisation of the lineage and the rejection of the esoteric interpretations of Bhaba Pagla’s songs, let us consider the second lyric and its contrasting oral exegeses.

How many know how to (make) love (*pirīt karā*)?  
In the rules and norms of love  
the fluid of desire (*kām rati*) is not only one.

Śyām-love and Kṛṣṇa-love  
like the lightening playing between cloud and cloud.  
In that way if love becomes your ally (*suhṛd*),  
that love is not going to break.

If the fire of love is flaming,  
burn the three qualities of your body into it.  
If the vulture flies by the three boundaries  
the vulture is not going to sit there.

Make love with her/him  
in the way the magnet attracts iron.  
Be united soul to soul  
nobody can split you.

Love has two eyes  
one is Rādhā and one Mohan.  
If there is one fluid, one passion,  
then don't let Bhaba’s father go<sup>25</sup>.

The song is about *rati-sādhanā*, the ritualized sexual intercourse that reiterates the dynamic of cosmological creation enacted by the principle of divine love (see Fakir 2005: 202; Hayes 1989: 31; Jha 1999: 345; Openshaw 2004: 216-224). It involves a particular use of male and female seed during the menstrual period of the woman adept, which we are not going to focus on for the purpose of this paper. Nevertheless, by the means of intertextuality we can recognize the pervasive occurrence of

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<sup>25</sup> The lyric has been published in Cakrabarti (1995: 214). A beautiful performance of the song has been recorded in the album "Bāulanīr Gān", UD Series (2010).



the term *pirīt* and its connotative aspect as a “cosmogonic love” and, mirrored in the microcosm of the practitioner’s body, a practice of love-making as taught among the esoteric lineages of Bengal<sup>26</sup>. Here as well we can observe the widespread practice of re-using and freely employing previously composed formulas or entire sentences already established in the repertoire: the verse “*yeman meghe meghe khele tarīt*” (“like the lightning playing between cloud and cloud”) immediately recalls in the oral metaphoric storage of the listeners’ mind the famous verse of Lalon Fakir “*mergher bidyut meghe yeman...*” (“like the cloud’s lightning is extant within the cloud”)<sup>27</sup>. The divine principle is extant within the human body, but it is not visible: like the lightening hiding within the clouds, it makes its appearance only “when positive and negative meet”, “when two clouds rub against each other”<sup>28</sup>. Such is the interpretation given by Gosain Amulya Ratan, the old disciple and *śikṣā* guru of the Namaḥśūdra caste who lives in a little village of Nadia known as Dhaka Colony, mainly inhabited by ex-refugees from East Bengal, and populated by a majority of low-caste Māhiṣya who worked as fishermen in their motherland, before the Partition brought them to the other side of divided Bengal. His exegesis gives a complete perspective on the kind of love, and consequently of love-making, that is sought after by a couple engaged in *sāadhanā*:

*Kām* is the satisfaction of the senses. But Love, *pirīt*, is not selfish. Śyām and Kṛṣṇa [first stanza after the refrain] are the same, both are *samān* (equal), Śyām is Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa is Śyām: if love is made in this way, it doesn’t break (there is no seminal discharge). Burn the three *guṇas*, be without qualities, without *ahaṃkāra* (sense of ego). Or you’ll not get pure love. The vulture [...] is destructive desire (*kām*). It is the *kām* that leads the matter to be wasted. [...] *Patan* (“falling”) happens when you realize you are a duality, you are making love with somebody else, somebody you are craving for and you want him/her to be yours. But if you remain stuck together as if through a magnet [see third stanza] to form a single unity, there is no ‘I’ and ‘you’, and this love cannot break. The two persons

<sup>26</sup> The appearance of the term *pirīt* as a principle of Creation appears, for instance, in the cosmology of Ali Raja, one of the most representative authors of pre-modern “Muslim Yoga literature” (Haq 1975: 397-422; Stewart 2001: 267; Hatley 2007: 365) in Bengal: in the English translation of David Cashin (1995: 93-94), we read: “The Lord by enjoyment of union gained the highest sentiment of love (*prema rasa*). In an undivided form he had not been controlled by passion (*rati*). In the absence of the pair (*yugala*) the mind does not grasp identity (*nām*). Without the pair identity and action are not revealed. Without union (*yuga*) the highest state (*siddhi*) is utterly ineffable. Niranjan became devoted (*bhakta*) to the love (*pirīt*) of the pair...” The concept of *pirīt* is central to the doctrine and practices of a wide range of esoteric lineages in Bengal, as it is evident if we look at the consistent frequency in which the term appears in their lyrics. See, for examples, the songs collected in the anthology edited by Jha (2009: 47-50). The song “*Piriter bhāb nā jene*” is very similar in form, content and symbolism and may well be compared for a deeper understanding of the teaching transmitted in its verses (the full lyric is on the database of Lok-Giti at [http://www.iopb.res.in/~somen/cgi-bin/Flk\\_sng/gen\\_pdf.cgi?porbo=Bāul&ganernam=225](http://www.iopb.res.in/~somen/cgi-bin/Flk_sng/gen_pdf.cgi?porbo=Bāul&ganernam=225), last visit 20/01/2015).

<sup>27</sup> The verse belongs to the second stanza of the song *Milan habe kata dine*, (for the full text see Ahmad 2002: 345).

<sup>28</sup> Interview dated 04/12/2012, Jugpur-Dhaka Colony (Nadia district).

in union [last stanza] are like the two eyes of a single individual [...], then *Bhabār bābā chārbe nā*: Bhaba is not letting his father, Śiva, go away. Śiva is semen: from Śiva and Śakti everything is created...<sup>29</sup>.

The love that connects the human experience to the divine experience is embodied in an elevated psycho-physical love that aims at uniting the polar principles of Śiva and Śakti as human beings: a homologous interpretation of this 'love-song' was provided by many informants who define themselves as Bāuls<sup>30</sup>. A completely different understanding arises from the interpretation of the renunciate Bijayananda Giri from the temple of Badkulla (Nadia). For him, the whole song is describing the ideal relation of the devotee (*bhakta*) towards *Īśvar* (God). This relation is completely free from carnal desire, *kām*, and it is impossible to experience by worldly human beings: “The divine love towards God is *aprākṛta*, it doesn't exist in nature, men cannot experience it: that is why the song says ‘*jāne kayjanā*’ (how many know?)”<sup>31</sup>. The same devotional level of interpretation was perpetuated by Sukumar Mistri, a very close direct disciple of Bhaba Pagla who lives a celibate life in the temple of Kalna with Bhaba Pagla’s grand-sons. According to him as well, the only “*milan*” (union) the song is talking about is the union between *ātmā* and *paramātmā*, between individual and universal soul. “It is not a union of *yugala*, which is a union of bodies: it is an inner union”. Moreover, he considers those who interpret the *pirīt* discussed in the lyric as a human love to be experienced between a woman and a man to be “disgusting... they are the worst kind of Vaiṣṇava, their *sādhanā* is just an excuse to justify sexual desire. There does not exist in the world any *sādhu* who can perform *yugala-sādhanā* without involving sexual desire. The greatest *sādhus* are all renouncers, they don’t unite with a woman”<sup>32</sup>, and thus he goes on listing a number of well-known religious figures who practiced strict celibacy, such as Caitanya, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

In the first kind of semantic understanding of the concept of *pirīt*, the esoteric level of interpretation connects the divine love described in the songs with an embodied love experienced by a couple of practitioners, which is identical to the selfless, pure Love experienced by a Creator. In the second modality of semantic understanding, the song is interpreted according to a devotional-metaphysical layer, and the only pure love conceivable is the a-corporeal love of the devotee toward

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<sup>29</sup> See previous note.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Satyananda Das Baul, interviewed on 19/04/2013 in Sonamukhi (Bankura district); and Gopinath Baul, interviewed on 16/01/2013 at Pāgli Mā Ākhṛā, Jaydev (Birbhum district).

<sup>31</sup> Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

<sup>32</sup> Sukumar Mistri, interviewed on 09/05/2013 at the temple of Kalna; and on 12/08/2013 at Jugpur-Dhala Colony in occasion of the annual *mahāpūjā*.

a theistic recipient. The embarrassing Tantric-yogic interpretations of the same concept are labelled as filthy and illegitimate and thus promptly rejected. This interpretation is in line with the religious teaching propagated and encouraged by the more orthodox subgroup of the lineage, which strongly promotes Bhaba Pagla as a representative of the *bhakti mārga*, the salvific way of devotion: in the words of the *adhikārī* of the Kālī temple of Badkulla, “Bhaba Pagla mainly recommended the way of *bhakti*. He himself was a yogi, a very powerful yogi. In fact, he could walk in the sky and appear in many places at the same time with his subtle body. [...] But he didn’t teach any yogic practice. [...] because nowadays modern devotees do not find it compatible with their life-styles. Instead, Bhaba Pagla made people close to God through devotion”<sup>33</sup>.

The theistic model of religious practice is the most successful among the urban middle-class and it definitely provides the interpretative pattern approved by the institutional backdrop of the lineage. Dhulu Dhulu, the already mentioned grand-daughter of Bhaba Pagla, ascribed this song as well to the devotional layer of interpretation and explained that the song is talking about “many kinds of love, the maternal and paternal love towards a son, the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa... the divine love that Bhaba Pagla experienced toward the Goddess”<sup>34</sup>. Like Dhulu, the majority of the members of the lineage adhere to the most exterior level of interpretation, ascribing to the devotional strand promulgated by the institutional authorities of the lineage. Even if they regularly attend religious gatherings and festive occasions such as *mahāpūjās* and religious fairs, they are not aware of the esoteric meaning of the most common metaphors and allegories, and do not seem to acknowledge the existence of a parallel transmission of esoteric teachings. This can lead us to think that:

- *Deha-sāadhanā* teachings and the language through which it is discussed in the songs is an heritage scarcely shared among the members of the lineage of Bhaba Pagla and proficiently mastered by a scarce minority.
- The strategies of concealment of esoteric beliefs and practices, and thus of the esoteric layer of songs' exegesis, are extremely efficient.

In the next sections, we are going to try to make sense of all these discrepancies among the different oral exegeses provided by members of the same lineage, initiated with the same *dīkṣā*

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<sup>33</sup> Bijayananda Giri, interviewed on 06/04/2012 at the temple of Badkulla (Nadia district) in occasion of the annual *mahāpūjā*.

<sup>34</sup> Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

mantra, practising the same rituals for exterior worship and sharing the same occasions of congregational festivity.

Previous works that reported conflicting oral interpretations of religious songs did not attempt to investigate the complex sociocultural dimensions and processes involved in the semiotics of reception. In most cases they simply acknowledged the intricate question of analysing the indigenous understanding of an oral tradition from the point of view of the insider, and then quickly turned to a different aspect of the literature under examination.

The songs of Bhaba Pagla that have been presented are interpreted in strikingly different ways; the devotees of the “orthodox branch” tend to idealize each metaphor uplifting the content from a “materialistic” (*bastubādī*) to a domesticated metaphysical level (for example, substituting the reproductive substances of *Puruṣ* and *Prakṛti* microcosmically represented by semen and menstrual blood with the Vedanta theological categories of *ātmā* and *paramātmā*). Similar situations of contradictory interpretations of body-centered lyrics by different spokesmen of a religious community have been experienced – in the context of Indian esoteric literatures – by Catharina Kiehnle (1994: 301-323), David G. White (1996) and Hugh Urban (2001).

In the paragraph “Songs of lust and love” (2001: 97), Urban presents some Kartābhajā songs that revolve around the theme of love, in both spiritual and sensual form. He had to face a relatively similar dilemma when he noticed that

The manner in which these songs are expressed is so vague and murky that it has left them open to radically different interpretations within the Kartābhajā community. Among the more esoteric disciples, these songs have been read in an explicitly left-handed Tantric sense, referring to explicit acts of sexual intercourse, whereas among the more orthodox majority, they tend to be read in a far more conservative, non-Tantric symbolic sense, referring to the symbolic relationship of the human soul with Lord Krishna (2001: 97-98).

Oversimplifying a living panorama, otherwise richly nuanced and difficult to grasp, the main divergences in semantic understanding consistently follow the opposition conservative/orthodox/devotional versus esoteric/heterodox/Tantric. The former guide-line for textual exegesis is supported by an establishment of socially powerful members of the community who aspire at an institutionalization of the lineage within the mainstream religiosity supported by the dominant culture; the latter represents a minority of practitioners who resists the incorporation of mainstream religious practices and protects its beliefs under the code-language of metaphoric teachings and prescribed secrecy. David G. White found a similar situation in the context of the contemporary exegesis of Nāth literature. Regarding a poem in which Gorakh Nāth compares the

subtle body to goldsmithing, White refers that the interpretation provided by the commentary of Srivastav and the Nāth Siddha editors is “overly spiritualized”, “to the neglect of most of this poem's concrete referents” (1996: 506).

Both Urban and White omitted to discuss the problematic coexistence of heterogeneous interpretations and in fact disregarded the possibility of “interpreting interpretations” for a deeper understanding of social change and politics of power in the field of esoteric religious cults. In the case of the manifold hermeneutics of Bāul songs, contrasting points of views fundamentally reflect divergent opinions on the religious use of sex. Outsider listeners and exoteric devotees do not recognize the erotic content of metaphors, and sexuality does not interfere with the religious dimension at all. Orthodox disciples and *sannyāsī* members of the community recognize sexual metaphors and interpret them as an encouragement to chastity: the soteriological use of sex lies in abstaining from it and cultivating divine love of an a-corporeal kind. Heterodox disciples and esoteric gurus interpret metaphors on sexual *sāadhanā* as teachings on the blissful experience of divine love through the union of bodies. This union is possible through a sophisticated training in numerous sexual techniques as well as emotional and psychological identification with the partner. *Sādhakas'* main modality of sexual intercourse is akin to what has been called *coitus reservatus*, a well-known yogic short-cut for liberation (Green 1972: 4), and a recommended practice in the “Art of Love” (Ellis 1937: 327-328) as well as in few experimental utopian communities in the United States (i.e. the Oneida community founded by Noyes; see Noyes 2001). In the practitioner’s perspective, salvific sex, devoted love and conjugal love are no different.

In the concluding section of this essay, I wish to advance further considerations on the study of oral traditional lore and local exegesis. I am going to present at first an “emic” hermeneutics of song texts<sup>35</sup>, and a local range of strategies used for interpreting Bāul songs. Then I will employ a functionalist perspective on the study of folklore in order to suggest some hypotheses that may explain why there is no univocal understanding of the songs called *sāadhanā saṅgīt*.

#### 4. Making sense of hermeneutical heterogeneity: “interpreting interpretations”

I’m very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense. Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a

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35 On the emic-etic distinction for the interpretation of texts see Cuneo (2011) and Benigni (2011), both a result of a previous Coffee Break Conference (held in June 2010 at “La Sapienza” University of Rome).

great deal more than the writer means. So, whatever good meanings are in the book, I'm glad to accept as the meaning of the book. (Lewis Carroll)

As I mentioned in the introduction, while several authors focused on the reasons that led esoteric composers/practitioners to employ a metaphorical and enigmatic language, I am more interested in discussing the consequences that such a form of linguistic expression entails. As we have just observed, the ambiguous language of *sāadhanā saṅgīt* is subject to openness, polysemy and hermeneutical difficulties. As a result, we have divergent interpretive lines, and each layer of semantic reception is preferred by a particular subgroup of the lineage. As a brief, additional example, let us consider the fact that one of the most famous verses of Bhaba Pagla, inscribed at the very entry of the main ashram in Kalna, recommends to seek liberation within *saṁsār*, as laymen and householders, and discourages formal renunciation (*sannyās*)<sup>36</sup>. In the lines of another song though, we hear the composer saying “*Brahmacārī sarbaśreṣṭha mānab*”: celibate Brahmacārīs are the best among humans, or, as interpreted by heterodox disciples, humans are the best creatures to approach *brahma*<sup>37</sup>. The Giris in charge of Bhaba Pagla's temples justify their choice for a life as renouncers quoting the mentioned verse, in which *brahmacarya* is interpreted in its most conventional sense of non-married life of religious discipline and sexual abstinence. For members of the esoteric lineage, *brahmacarya*, as we have seen, signifies the practice of a psycho-physiological discipline that fulfills the goal of avoiding unnecessary ejaculation, and therefore, in the light of this layer of exegesis, they condemn the renouncers' decision of taking *sannyās* and regard it as a sign of disobedience and betrayal of the guru's word.

How do the local community of adepts, singers, and listeners of the songs of *sāadhanā* make sense of the heterogeneous meanings attributed to the same metaphorical expression?

In the perspective of “oral literary criticism” (Dundes 1966), the existence of multifold possibilities of song interpretations is not perceived as problematic at all: the “unlimited semiosis” (Peirce in Eco 1990: 55) of the songs' metaphorical language is rather seen as an inherent characteristic of this mode of discourse.

First of all, what I am referring to as a “metaphorical” language is not discussed by the local community in terms of *upamā* and *rūpak*, the classic aesthetic terms that refer to these canonical

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<sup>36</sup> The main door of the temple complex in Kalna bears the message of Bhaba Pagla: “I am not a sadhu, I am not a *sannyāsī*, I live within *saṁsār*. [...] Bhaba says, do your duty in this earthly word, and whenever you have time, call Bhagabān's name.”

<sup>37</sup> The verse belongs to the song “There can be no *sāadhanā* in weakness” (*Dūrbalatāy hay nā kono sāadhanā*), which has been published in Cakrabarti (1995: 120).

literary devices and figures of speech (*alamkār*, lit. 'ornament'; see Gerow 1971: 9-22). They rather describe the language of the songs with the expression “*īṅgite baleche*”, of which a rough translation would be “he said through hints”. This suggests that there is a rooted awareness of the fact that the enigmatic language is indeed concealing a deeper level of understanding underneath the superficial-literal layer. Some informants, in fact, explicitly use the word “*gopan*”, secret, referring to the actual content of the songs:

“Bhaba Pagla’s songs are *ati-gopan*, extremely secret: not all the disciples would be able to explain them”, stated the already mentioned guru Amulya Ratan.<sup>38</sup>

The disciples who preserve the esoteric side of the transmission underline the importance of distinguishing between the *bahirāṅga* and the *antarāṅga* (the exterior aspect and the inner aspect) of Bhaba Pagla and his message. In his *bahirāṅga*, he maintained a respectable orthodox facade, performing daily *pūjās* to the icon of Kālī and showing himself as a Śākta adept so that he could be accepted by mainstream society. His *antarāṅga* teachings are secret and reserved to a few worthy initiates. At this level, exterior ritualism has no meaning; the divine has to be recognized within the body and coincides with the substances responsible for procreation. Accordingly, most of the songs of Bhaba Pagla can be interpreted in their *bahirāṅga* and in their *antarāṅga* aspect. The exterior/exoteric coating of his lyrics is the one related to the *bhakti*-oriented devotional layer of interpretation; the inner/esoteric decoding is restricted to few disciples and coincides with the *dehatattva*-oriented body-centred interpretation.

The disciples who are aware of the secretive core teachings often lament that nowadays nobody is interested in learning this aspect of the religious practice: most of them complain about the lack of seriously engaged disciples who can go deeper than the exterior, devotional and ritualistic worship:

“Nowadays there is no such disciple who wants to learn these techniques. People are disgusted, scandalized to hear about these practices on the use of the body. Where could I find such a disciple? Today people are too busy with *bahirāṅga*. They don’t want to hear inner things. See how many disciples I have: only in this village, forty households are my disciples. But I cannot find a Disciple as such”<sup>39</sup>.

In sum, the multiplicity of oral exegeses is understood as the interpreters’ different acquaintance with different sides of the religious message. But the “oral literary criticism” goes on showing an even more complex and sophisticated taxonomy for the hermeneutics of the corpus of

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<sup>38</sup> Interview dated 04/12/2012, in Jugpur (“Dhaka Colony”, Nadia district).

<sup>39</sup> Interview dated 02/02/2013, in Jugpur (“Dhaka Colony”, Nadia district).

songs. The disciples that define themselves as Bāuls, and those who are well versed in the tenets and practices of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, remark that *sādhanā* is divided into four progressive stages (namely *sthūla*, *pravarta*, *sādhaka*, *siddha*; see Urban 1998: 236; Jha 1999: 472; Openshaw 2004: 206-207). Each practitioner belongs to one of these four subdivisions of *sādhanā* (further divided into four: the *sthūla* of the *sthūla* level, followed by the *pravarta* of the *sthūla* level, and so on) and performs different practices according to his *deś*, his “country”, a metaphor employed to refer to one’s level and, correspondingly, one’s attainments. Following the structure of the spiritual-bodily *sādhanā*, the compositions of *sādhanā saṅgīt* are also divided into levels of understanding that match the level of psycho-physical experience achieved by the practitioner: each song belongs to a certain *deś*<sup>40</sup>. At the same time, all songs are interpretable according to every single “country of origin”. This ‘emic criterion’ of religious songs hermeneutics involves two basic ideas: the verses of the esoteric songs will have a divergence and a plurality of interpretations, for not all of the listeners/receptors belong to the same stage of spiritual progression; the interpreter that legitimately attains the authority to correctly interpret a song is the one who belongs to the same stage for which the song is supposed to be addressed. If this is not the case, then the listener would not be able to make sense of the song, or he would interpret it relying on its external/exoteric meaning. The local hierarchy at work in the semantic understanding of the songs is often discussed using the metaphor of school education and the division into classes:

Not all songs are performed in front of all people. Human beings are not all the same. They are divided into levels (*star*). You simply cannot explain certain things to everybody. If you give a child that studies in ‘class four’ a book for a kid who is in ‘class eight’, he won’t understand anything!<sup>41</sup>

In his clear explanation, Gour Pagla – the octogenarian disciple of Bhaba Pagla of the Namaḥśūdra caste who resides in the little ashram of Tehatta (Nadia) – introduces a very important point, which cannot be explored thoroughly in this short paper: I showed so far that ‘not all songs are understood by all people’, but furthermore ‘not all songs are performed in front of all people’. Different themes and topics treated in the esoteric songs are destined to different audiences and different performative contexts. The performer who is knowledgeable in the actual content of the

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<sup>40</sup> Among the disciples who perform Bhaba Pagla’s songs, this typical categorization was referred to in the interviews of Dibakar and Rina Das Baul (dated 26/11/2012, at Puruldanda, Santiniketan, Birbhum district) and Gopinath Baul (interviewed on 16/01/2013 at Pagli Ma Ākhrā, Jaydev, Birbhum district, personal collection of field-work recordings); see also Jha (1999: 413).

<sup>41</sup> Gour Pagla, interviewed on 09/07/2013 at his ashram in Tehatta (Nadia district).



songs has to be competent in addressing the right teaching according to the audience he is playing for, an operation which the sociologist Clinton Sanders would call “psyching out the crowd” (1974).

In the last pages I reflected upon the typologies of the interpretations offered by the community represented by the multifaceted lineage of Bhaba Pagla and I considered its point of view on the modalities of transmission of meaning. As a final consideration, I will now step back from the specific case of Bhaba Pagla’s repertoire, using it as a prism to look through the broader context of contemporary esoteric cults. The reception of Bāuls’ folkloric production reflects mechanisms of innovation, decline and change, if contextualized in the framework of rural Bengal, a modernising landscape under the impact of the dominant culture of a globalising nation (Islam 2006). Redeeming its validity from a socioculturally imposed and arbitrary notion of “East”, the case of the exegetical acrobatics of Bhaba Pagla’s songs can reveal recurrent patterns of creativity, evolution and *devolution* (Dundes 1969) of an esoteric tradition. In this perspective, I will try to delineate a series of arguments to make sense of the discrepancies among interpretations of a repertoire of esoteric folk songs and hope this will be useful for further research in the wider field of Tantric literature and for the “anthropologists of meaning” (Basso and Selby 1976).

In sum, why is a univocal semantic understanding of the songs of *sādhanā* not possible?

- Heterogeneity of orally transmitted knowledge.

The teachings expressed by the language of *sādhanā saṅgīt* are orally transmitted from guru to disciple: the numerous lineages of Bāuls, Fakirs, Vaiṣṇavas etc. who employ that language do not recognize a single founder or a single textual corpus which could be regarded as a sacred canonical scripture (see Jha 1999: 13; Das 1992: 415). Being relegated to the situational teaching of a living master, practices and customs often vary from lineage to lineage, and so does the semantic referent attributed to a metaphorical utterance.

- Exclusiveness and elitist character of esoteric knowledge.

The interpretation of the metaphorical language of the songs is meant to be accessible for a selected “secret society” of disciples (Jha 1999: 469 and 471). The secretive symbolic capital represented by the esoteric knowledge is discussed through a code-jargon (an idiolect, as France Bhattacharya would say, 2002, 266) that protects its content from the outsiders. Ergo the use of a chameleonic language, which takes different connotations according to the status of the interpreter, serves as an instrument of self-defense and a subaltern strategy of self-empowerment (Stewart 1990; Urban 1998) for marginalised groups of low-caste and low-class practitioners facing social pressure and moral reproach by orthodox religious establishments.

- Politics of power and institutionalisation.

The emergence of divergent textual interpretations is entangled in the dynamics of social prestige, power and authority within the folds of a recent religious cult: for a more successful proselytism among well educated Hindus from the urban middle-class and upper-middle-class, the embarrassing esoteric and yogic-Tantric aspect of the metaphorical language is systematically removed, while the devotional interpretation is encouraged (Dold 2005: 41; Gupta 2005; Urban 2003: 134-164). The more conservative Śākta devotionalism tinged with philanthropic and universalistic aims satisfies the religious taste of those who promote the exotericisation and institutionalisation of the cult. This responds to a well-known dialectic process commonly at work in the history of both “Eastern” and “Western” esoteric movements: as a strategy of repression of esotericism, apart from the more explicit attempts at persecution, ostracism, scorn or reprisal enacted by a dominant culture, the esoteric word is “misrepresented, reinterpreted, modernized, reconstructed: its secret and sacred aspects are emptied and finally abandoned. Instead of denying, or accusing esotericism, [...] it is simply not discussed at all” (Riffard 1996: 39).

- The functionality of esoteric teachings: modernization and effacing practices.

Functionalist studies on folklore argue that when some elements of a tradition stop being functional, typically they are not perpetuated for the sake of habit and custom: they simply cease to be preserved and disappear (Herskovitz 1946: 97; Bascom 1954; Nenola-Kallio 1981: 139-145). The fact that the esoteric interpretation of song texts is marginally preserved and, supposedly, decreasingly transmitted, may be read as a symptom that the esoteric practices are no more functional for a broad part of the society of adepts, because of social and economical changes. The progressive diminution of semantic understanding may have its historical reasons in the diffusion of modern science and education (Lee 2008: 200-201) and, consequently, of new behaviours and beliefs on the body, its health and vitality. Esoteric practices like those transmitted in the Bengali songs about *sāḍhanā* have a functional role in the field of folk-medicine and sexual education. For instance, the gurus of the tradition we examined are regarded as “masters of conception and contraception” who explain the mysteries of creation in rural areas and transmit effective methods of family-planning among villagers (Openshaw 2004: 207; Fakir 2005: 70 and 80; Knight 2011: 40 and 153). With the diffusion of governmental healthcare, allopathic medicine and modern contraceptives, the pragmatic aims of the esoteric *sāḍhanā* may have lost their crucial importance; accordingly, the metaphorical language that accompanies the transmission of *deha-sāḍhanā* is understood and taught by a progressively little

percentage of adepts. It is important to remind that the practice of *coitus reservatus* can be discussed as both a contraceptive technique and simply as a different idea of lovemaking, i.e. not necessarily as an instrumental stratagem to stop childbirth. If we apply cultural relativism to the social constructions around sexuality, uninterrupted heterosexual coitus is only one possible form of sexual activity, but this form was made paramount and all others repressed (McLaren 1990: 7). The *sādhakas'* society represents, in this view, a sexual counterculture, which accords a primary importance to the gratification and satisfaction of women, in the context of a patriarchal society.

- Technology, new media and loss of interpretations.

Changes in the modalities of transmission and understanding of the texts may also have to do with the “technologizing of the word” (Ong 2012). With the diffusion of new audio-visual technologies for songs reproduction, such as radio, cassettes, CD and DVD players, voice recorders on mobile and smart phones, the listeners and performers of esoteric songs, traditionally taught orally by a guru, may learn new song texts by simply playing a track. In this way, performers just learn the songs and the melody by heart without learning the veiled meaning discussed through the metaphoric language (Lorea 2014a: 69-73). The parallel and simultaneous transmission of both form and content of a song pertains to the role of a guru, but this may have been partially substituted by new technologies of audio reproduction, with a consequent risk of homologation of both song melodies, song texts (Manuel 1993: 55 and 169), and their interpretation.

This was but a short overview of the factors that can explain the variety and fluidity of interpretations, which I have discussed at length in the study of Bhaba Pagla's *sādhana saṅgīt* presented as my doctoral dissertation<sup>42</sup>. Here I briefly demonstrated that the study of meaning and interpretation involves an all-round and comprehensive insight into a culture. Analysing local interpretations on “oral traditions and verbal arts” (Finnegan 1992), we can embrace wider phenomena of social transformation, intercultural conflicts, and diachronic change within a sociocultural constellation. As the words of Wade have anticipated in the first section, the study of conflicting interpretations of folk songs can inform us about the functionality of a folkloric repertoire within a society; furthermore, it gives us an insight into the conflictual relation among different functions of a folk genre as they are distributed among different social strata and religious milieus. Additionally, as Frank Korom suggests (see first section), the focus on oral exegesis brings to light

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<sup>42</sup> “Learning to swim in the river of desire: the songs of Bhaba Pagla in their performative context”, PhD diss., Institute of Oriental Studies, La Sapienza Università di Roma, April 2015.

issues of religious change that take place in short spans of time, and powerfully serves as an instrument of inquiry into religious developments and social change.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of local voices about esoteric songs surely gives us a different point of view on the semantic theories about interpretation and meaning, it poses new questions and requires different investigative methods. At the end of the day, is there anything like *the* correct interpretation of a Bāul song? Is every interpretation equally correct, in an unlimited semiosis and an uncontrollable proliferation of meanings? Is the text a “picnic in which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning?” (Iser 1979: 19).

In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Umberto Eco discussed at length the problems involved in the esoteric reading of texts, and he stated that his goal was not to legitimise ‘good interpretations’ but to delegitimise bad ones (1990: 35). I hope I made it clear enough that my intention, instead, is neither to legitimise good interpretations nor to delegitimise bad ones, but rather to ask why all of these interpretations arise, and what function they fulfill.

Is there any formal criterion to establish reasonable limits to the range of legitimate interpretations? Possibly not (Eco 2004: 22-23), and in the lack of it, on one hand I have relied on local criteria and “oral literary criticism” in order to understand what is perceived as a “good interpretation”; on the other hand, I looked through the lens of the functions of folklore and tried to discover the mechanisms at work in what Eco calls the “cultural Darwinism” of interpretations (2004: 23): in the course of time, certain interpretations establish themselves as more satisfying for the larger part of the community (or, I would add, for the most powerful part of the community of interpreters), while others progressively disappear. Far from adhering to a *devolutionary* view on folklore (Dundes 1969), I remind the reader that we do not have any proof of the fact that, in the course of history, the more profound level of interpretation is slowly disappearing due to pressure from the superstructure, though this is the feeling of local interpreters who have a role as esoteric teachers.

Looking at the case of Bhaba Pagla’s songs-in-context, I showed how a tradition that is esoteric in its substratum can present itself as a devotional cult for successful proselytism and the progressive institutionalisation sought by some of its followers. The study of Bhaba Pagla’s lineage reveals much on how an esoteric cult presents itself in the twenty-first century and which are its strategies of transmission and self-protection from social disapproval; at the same time I remarked how a particular branch of followers tried to convert the “secret society” into a mass cult. This was made

possible by emphasising the ethical message of fraternity, equality and devotional love, and by getting rid of the hidden signifieds of Bhaba Pagla's metaphors – those pertaining to a socially reproachable and scandalous body-centred *sādhanā* – for the creation of a religious cult that has Bhaba Pagla as a divinised, supernatural founder. This institutionalised cult is engaged in charitable actions and public inter-religious discourse and it is closely associated, spatially as well as iconographically, to Ramakrishna Paramhansa and to Swami Vivekananda's institutions.

Finally, from the perspective of function-oriented folkloristics, I have proposed some ways to contextualise the meaning of Bhaba Pagla's lyrics and to explain the lamented disappearance of disciples well-versed in the esoteric deciphering of the songs by inserting their significance in the broader sociocultural reality. I found that to be the most effective way to discover why some metaphors of Bāul songs' *sandhyā bhāṣā* are becoming standardized *topoi* of a 'Bāul canon', while in different performative contexts the same metaphors, far from being de-semanticised images, are still productive semantic realities in their reception, understanding and interpretation. My hypothesis is that it is the belonging to a certain social group that inspires a religious orientation and, accordingly, a certain line on songs' exegesis. That esoteric exegeses are shared by a marginal minority of adepts is well expressed in the story told by the old Gosain Amulya Ratan:

...It's like the story of the market: the shopkeepers, at the end of the working days, take the account book and see how many kilos they sold. The potato-seller and the flour-seller of course sold more than everybody else, kilos and kilos. But the gold seller sold only a little bit. The most precious things are not sold to everybody.<sup>43</sup>

For an ethnography of metaphorical speech, we went to ask the potato-buyer what is a potato, and to the gold-buyer what is gold. But at the end we know that both goods are needed in a society and both are extant, in different quantities and differently distributed among social groups, to satisfy different functions. The eclectic words of Bāul and Fakir composers show the intrinsic capacity of being read as potatoes, flowers or gold according to the needs of the interpreters; paradox and contradiction is their *alamkār*, and the playfulness of their infinite reservoir of metaphors allows them to be continuously negotiated and actualized as a mirror of Bengali culture and society.

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<sup>43</sup> Interview dated 02/02/2013, in Jugpur ("Dhaka Colony", Nadia district).



Fig.1. The singer and disciple Narayan Singh Ray performs at the annual *mahāpūjā* in Jugpur (Nadia district)  
(photo: Carola E. Lorea).



Fig. 2. Amulya Ratan Sarkar, a *kabigān* artist and guru of the lineage of Bhaba Pagla, performs at the annual *mahāpūjā* in Kalna (photo: Carola E. Lorea).

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## Item Girls and Objects of Dreams:

### Why Indian Censors Agree to Bold Scenes in Bollywood Films

Tatiana Szurlej

The article presents the social background, which helped Bollywood film industry to develop the so-called “item numbers”, replace them by “dream sequences”, and come back to the “item number” formula again. The songs performed by the film vamp or the character, who takes no part in the story, the musical interludes, which replaced the first way to show on the screen all elements which are theoretically banned, and the guest appearances of film stars on the screen are a very clever ways to fight all the prohibitions imposed by Indian censors.

Censors found that film censorship was necessary, because the film as a medium is much more popular than literature or theater, and therefore has an impact on all people. Indeed, the viewers perceive the screen story as the world around them, so it becomes easy for them to accept the screen reality and move it to everyday life. That’s why the movie, despite the fact that even the very process of its creation is much more conventional than, for example, the theater performance, seems to be much more “real” to the audience than any story shown on the stage. Therefore, despite the fact that one of the most dangerous elements on which Indian censorship seems to be extremely sensitive is eroticism, this is also the most desired part of cinema. Moreover, filmmakers, who are tightly constrained, need at the same time to provide pleasure to the audience to get the invested money back, so they invented various tricks by which they manage to bypass censorship. The most widely used ways to trick the censors are movie songs, so often underestimated, especially in the West, which however are not, as some would like to see them, only an unnecessary addition.

Bollywood films are often called musicals, but the examples show that all the songs, not only *item numbers* and *dream sequences*, play quite a different role in Indian movies than in the classic Hollywood musicals. There is a very deep logic lying behind film production, and popular Indian cinema uses its songs to show everything that is impossible to show in the story. Filmmakers know very well that songs are the element of fantasy, which when used in a story about everyday life, can show things that are impossible in natural experience.

One of the most significant element, usually appearing with descriptions of Bollywood cinema, is its association with strong subordination to censorship, which seems to accompany it from almost the

beginning, causing many problems to filmmakers<sup>1</sup>. Of course it is not an Indian invention, but the governmental certificate, shown at the beginning of every movie, makes the work of the censors from Subcontinent more visible than those from other places. At the same time, as rightly observed by Mira Nair, whose film *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996) met many difficulties, before it finally got permission to be shown to Indian audience, the situation in the Subcontinent is very much hypocritical, because the same censors, who ban some elements in one film, seem not to see them in another and often allow to depict rampant vulgarity, especially in so called romantic songs (Mohammed 1997, 34). Indeed, the censorship office in India is a really powerful institution, which appeared early, with first Cinematograph Bill introduced already by colonial administration in 1917. Then, with no objections of the Indian members of the Legislative Council, the colonial state created the first Cinematograph Act in 1918, which was then implemented in the biggest Indian cities two years later. The Indian government changed it after Independence, in 1949 by adding two categories of certificates: films labeled as “A” (for adults, above 18 only), and those with “U” certificate, which could be watched without any restrictions<sup>2</sup>. The next step was the decision to set up one, central board, which would replace the provincial ones, and then in 1951 the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting established the Central Board of Film Censors. However it is 1952 that is considered to be the year of birth of Indian censorship in the form it is known today, when the consolidate statute called the Cinematograph Act of 1952 was created (Mehta 2012, 28–34). The Act established the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) by claiming that film censorship is necessary, because the film is a medium much more popular than literature or theater, and therefore has an impact on all people, often, or maybe foremost, the uneducated masses, who may sometimes become very easily confused by what is reality and what belongs to the screen fiction. Therefore, even if the majority of audience watched and still watches films just for entertainment, the members of the government thought that the things seen on the screen might have a big impact on the tastes of the viewers and their outlook on life (Mehta 2012, 33). It seems that this, rather controversial record, which treats the majority of habitants of the Subcontinent as very naive people, with not much understanding of the nature of the cinematic spectacle, has in fact some deeper meaning, and it was not caused by just the

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed history of CBF in India see: Bhowmik 2012, 33-65.

<sup>2</sup> The other two are: “U/A” label, which means: universal with adult supervision, and “S” for specialized films, created for doctors, etc. with some elements of scientific purpose (Ganti 2009, 91). There are of course similar limitations in other countries as well, but in India they seem to be more confined, especially against nudity and sex.

popularity of the medium and its easy accessibility. CBFC simply discovered<sup>3</sup> that in fact it is much easier to believe in the truth of what is seen in the cinema hall, than in case of, for example, the theater. Today's film experience has changed a lot since the first show, but even if nobody runs away, seeing an arriving train on the screen, cinematic stories are still treated as factual by many spectators. The perception of the film world is obviously constrained by the frame of the screen, but, because of the natural aspect of photography, the viewer perceives the presented story as the world around him, so it's easy for him to accept the screen reality and move it to everyday life. That's why, despite the fact that montage, close ups, other elements of the cinematic language, and even the very process of creation of the movie is much more conventional than, for example, the theater performance, film is the medium, which still seems to be much more "real" to the audience than any story shown on the stage, and, as such, had always big impact on its viewers. Of course today the situation changes again, and cinema is slowly beginning to lose its "truth" upon the television, which seems to have better methods of manipulation with its *reality show* formula or documentary series about co called everyday life, but that is a topic for another discussion.

The most important issues for the Indian film censors are: sex, violence and politics<sup>4</sup>. However, as Monika Mehta rightly observes, sexuality was, and still may be seen as the key element of the

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<sup>3</sup> Some film theorist, especially from France, has also noticed this interesting fact from almost the beginning of scientific reflection on the film. For more information see: Ervin Panofsky, *Style and Medium in the Motion Picture* (1934), Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay* (1916), Rudolf Arnheim, *Film als Kunst* (1933), Henri Wallon, *De quelques problèmes psychosociologiques que pose le cinéma* (1947), Jean Jacques Rinieri, *L'impression de réalité et les phénomènes de croyance* (1953), Albert Michotte van den Berck, *Le caractère de "réalité" des projections cinématographiques* (1948), Cesare Musatti, *Les phénomènes stéréocinétiques et les effets stéréoscopiques du cinéma normal* (1957), Emile Schaub-Koch, *Supervie du cinéma* (1947), René Zazzo, *Espace, mouvement et cinémascope* (1954), R.C. Oldfield, *Perception visuelle des images animées* (1947), Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963), Christian Metz, *A propos de l'impression de réalité au cinéma* (1965), *Le film de fiction et son spectateur* (1975), Jean Louis Baudry, *Cinéma effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil du base* (1970), Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire* (1958), Michel Marie, *Impression de réalité* (1979), Stephen Heath, *Questions of cinema* (1981).

<sup>4</sup> The whole list includes: (1) anti-social activities such as violence; (2) the modus operandi of criminals; (3) scenes showing: involvement of children in violence as victims or as perpetrators or as forced witness to violence, children as being subjected to any form of child abuse, abuse or ridicule of physically and mentally handicapped persons, needless cruelty to animals; (4) pointless or avoidable scenes of violence; (5) scenes which have the effect of justifying or glorifying drinking; (6) scenes tending to encourage or justify drug addiction and consumption of tobacco; (7) vulgarity, obscenity or depravity; (8) dual meaning words as obviously cater to baser instincts; (9) scenes degrading or denigrating women in any manner; (10) scenes involving sexual violence against women like attempt to rape, rape or any form of molestation or scenes of a similar nature, and if any such incidence is germane to the theme, they shall be reduced to the minimum and no details are shown; (11) scenes showing sexual perversions and if such matters are germane to the theme they shall be reduced to the minimum with no details; (12) visuals or words contemptuous of racial, religious or other groups; (13)

disputes about censorship in Indian cinema, and it seems to be the worst “enemy” of moral values. The distinction between elements being part of Indian and other traditions may be then the reason why sometimes Indian censors use double standards for Indian and Western films, and let the foreign movies show much more than Indian ones can, but in any explanations of censors about their decision of banning some scenes it is always clear that it is the women’s body, which is marked as the sexual one, and it has become both, the symbol of so called “Indian tradition”, and the threat to it (Mehta 2012, 16–17). The observation of Mehta may be not much surprising in the context of female body, the most interesting elements of many definitions, used by Indian censors, are however those, which seem to imply that some of the citizens of India need to be cared of, just like children and that the “Indian tradition” started to be used as a very wide, and comfortable term because of being in fact very hard to define. The mentioned Mira Nair’s film was also inspired by the text of Vātsyāyana, which is part of Indian tradition, but it seems that the cinema and censors from the Subcontinent entangled themselves in a rather difficult situation, which makes them both: willingly referring to the tradition or glorious old times, and showing it on the screen, but at the same time making a very clear choice of material, which considers to be this tradition. In effect, although the majority of laymen from every part of the world sees India primarily as the birthplace of the *Kāmasūtra*, India itself tries to push this element to the margins of its culture, especially when it comes to cinema, and often uses a very Victorian method to decide what is proper and what is not. This schizophrenic situation, in which colonial values suddenly became more important, than some elements of old tradition, the one which should be preserved, causes many difficulties to film directors.

The struggle with the Central Board of Film Certification is usually a very hard task. Some artists try to sue censors, while others seem to have much better idea by inventing all sorts of ways to get around censorship, and show on the screen exactly what they intend. They don’t have to do it all the time, because, what is also very common behavior, being probably the most frustrating thing for many filmmakers, is the fact that the work of many censors usually miss any rules, and most of their opinions are dependent on their personal whims. For example, no one had cut the famous waterfall scene from the film *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (Raj Kapoor 1985), in which the breast of actress Mandakini is

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visuals or words which promote communal, obscurantist, anti-scientific and anti-national attitude; (14) calling in question the sovereignty and integrity of India; (15) jeopardy or endanger of the security of the State; (16) strain of friendly relations with foreign States; (17) endanger of public order; (18) scenes that tend to create scorn, disgrace or disregard of rules or undermine the dignity of court; (19) showing national symbols and emblems in accordance with the provisions of the Emblems and Names (Prevention of Improper Use) Act, 1950 (Bose 2005, VII–X).



visible, while at the same time the work of much more innocent directors have been treated harshly. The truth is also, however, that established artists, such as Raj Kapoor, were often left alone by censors, because of their status and international stardom, but not only them; on the other hand low-budget films, in which there are no stars, and therefore those that would not attract large crowds to theaters, are also usually considered slightly more leniently (Mehta 2012, 19). It is also worth noticing here that violence in Indian cinema is treated much more comfortably than sex, especially the domestic one, which seems not to be problematic for censors at all.

However, as already mentioned, one of the most dangerous elements about which Indian censorship seems to be extremely sensitive is eroticism, and the reason of this strong alert may lie in the fact that it is also the most desired part of the cinema itself. The uniqueness of communicating with film lies in the fact that it allows the viewer to enjoy the great pleasure of voyeurism<sup>5</sup>. The audience lost in the darkness of movie theaters sees only part of the picture, as if they spied through binoculars and there is nothing more thrilling than watching private and forbidden things. This is a big problem for filmmakers who are tightly constrained by the rules of censorship and, after spending so much money for making the film, they need to provide pleasure to the audience to get their invested money back. So they have invented various tricks by which they manage to bypass censorship.

The most widely used ways to trick the censors are movie songs, so often held in no esteem, especially in the West. The inclusion of six or more songs in Bollywood films may make them similar to the genre of Hollywood musicals, but while both film music and film songs are diegetic, only songs are the product for sale, used in promotional videos. Additionally the songs from Bollywood films are often shot in exotic locations and can present many festivals, which allows them, as Jayson Beaster-Jones observes, to be the dominant element in the field of Indian popular music. They are also very often associated not only with the singers and music directors but with actors as well and, although viewers know that actors don't sing in the film, they would find in many music stores not only compilation albums of the "songs of R.D. Burman" who was a music composer or the "song of Kishore Kumar", a famous singer, but also "songs of Raj Kapoor" or the "songs of Sridevi" who being actors never sang anything themselves (Beaster-Jones 2009, 427-429).

The first sound films, not only in India were very much intoxicated with music and the possibilities offered by the presentation of dance on screen. Classic Hollywood scheme, by which most musicals of the thirties and forties were made, was to tell the story of a group of people trying

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<sup>5</sup> See Mulvey 2009, 14-27.

to put a show on a stage, who after some initial failures, achieved great success. Indian filmmakers, even if, especially in later years, they were inspired by the American achievements in this area, were never interested in these types of stories. They focused mainly on love affairs, mixed with a few songs to entertain their audience. The inspiration for these rich musical interludes became, as emphasized by historians of cinema, home theater, which also began to provide themes for the stories to filmmakers. What is however unique in Indian cinema is the fact, rightly observed by Sangita Shresthova, that dance sequences, accompanying film songs, have been one of the most important part of mainstream cinema in India for a long time, and there are even some examples of silent films showing that many rhythmically choreographed scenes existed already in those screen stories (Shresthova 2011: 12), which may sound a little bit strange but was probable in the time when live music was played in cinema theatres during shows.

At the same time it is necessary to remember also that being an actor and especially an actress was a very problematic thing in the first years of Indian cinema and this situation had also an impact, not only on the form of the Indian film, but also on the censors' concern about the new medium. There are many anecdotes about not only famous courtesans, but even common prostitutes refusing to play in first films, which is beautifully shown for example in the *Harishchandrachi Factory* (Paresh Mokashi 2009), the film about Dadasaheb Phalke, the pioneer of Indian cinema. In this difficult situation, as Neepa Majumdar notes, the first women, who played in Indian movies, were actresses of English background, because at that time cinema was perceived as a moral taint, and only after the appearance of the first Muslim and then Hindu women it came to be seen as a more respectable thing (Majumdar 2010, 6). Cinema in the twenties was thus dominated by such girls as: Patience Cooper, Ermeline, Madhuri (Beryl Klaison), Sita Devi (Irene Gasper), Sulochana (Ruby Meyers)<sup>6</sup>, and others. The female sex appeal in the twenties was never again equaled or surpassed in the next fifty years; there were passionate kisses and revealing dresses, which started to vanish slowly with the appearance of the sound and other heroines (foreign actresses couldn't speak Indian languages). However, it is important to note that even in the times of the Anglo Indian women's domination on the screen, there were also some exceptions, like: Gauhar, Sultana, Zubeida, Shehzadi, Fatima, Sharifa, Tara, Dulari and Nalini, who were actresses of Indian origin, but still Muslim, not Hindu. The entry of Hindu girls, especially those from upper classes and castes like: Durga Khote (first Brahmin actress), Devika Rani and Leela Chitnis toned down the previous, open approach in films. They still did kiss in

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<sup>6</sup> Sulochana, awarded the 1973 Dada Saheb Phalke Award – India's highest cinema award for lifetime achievement, was a real star of silent era, earning 5000 rupees as monthly salary, which was a fortune that time (Sharma 1992, 3).

movies, but exposure of the body was limited. The talkies also brought soft, sexy and suggestive voice, which became another aspect of sex appeal. At that time playback was not established yet and singing actresses were the norm. It was the only period then, when physical appearance played second role to singing skills, that's why Nurjehan for instance could achieve unmatched stardom in spite of her obesity (Sharma 1992, 3).

With the Independence and accomplished playback singers the situation changed and cinema started to emphasize "Indian" values with new codes to express sexual tension (Somaaya, Kothari, Madangarli 2012, 11). Filmmakers began to learn from other traditions, referring especially to the work of the courtesans, who were great performers of that time and, like some big stars of the screen today, were often subject of both: admiration and resentment. Therefore, as rightly observed by Ira Bhaskar, one of the most common types of conventional screen songs started to be *mujra*, performed primarily by courtesans, being used mainly in films about them. Of course, courtesans and *mujra* shown in films are not necessarily related with Islam, however, since the Muslim aristocracy and Lucknow have such a huge impact on Bollywood cinema, dance numbers performed by a courtesan were usually immediately connected with Islam in the minds of creators and audience. Exceptions did occur, already before Independence, for example in *Nartaki* (Debaki Bose 1940), *Chitrlekha* (Kidar Sharma 1941), *Raj Nartaki* (Madhu Bose 1941), and later, in the sixties (for instance: *Chitrlekha* repeated by Kidar Sharma in 1964, and *Amrapali* by Leh Tandon made in 1966) embedded in pre-Islamic times, which refer rather to the tradition of courtly and temple dancers (*rāja nartakī*, *devadāsī*) in their presentation of courtesan figures (Bhaskar, Allen 2009, 45), and which were used in different purposes. It is however impossible to show public women only, so, in spite of some exceptions like shocking appearance of Begum Para wearing trousers and T-shirt or Nalini Jayant in a one-piece swimming suit, shown in films of that time, new, restrained Bollywood cinema has developed the so-called *item number*, wishing to provide a little thrill to the audience.

*Item number* or *item song* is a song that does not have any connection with an action of the film or may just have a little correlation with the story. It is used primarily to attract a larger audience to the cinema or to help promote the musical blockbuster. *Item number* is usually a song combined with a sensual dance, performed by a character, who is quite unrelated to the storyline. This could be, for example, a cabaret dancer, who appears just at the time, when the hero looks into the night sanctuary, as is shown in the film *Barsaat* (Raj Kapoor 1949), a beautiful Gypsy girl entertaining a group of outlaws as it is in the later *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy 1975) or a woman, who plans to impair alertness of a dangerous criminal while waiting for the police, an example of which is the famous *item number* from the movie *Don* (Chandra Barot 1978) performed by Helen and repeated by Kareena

Kapoor 28 years later in the remake of *Don* made by Farhan Akhtar. The additional role of *item number*, being first of all connected with vamps, and the reason why it usually passes censorship, is its role in emphasizing the difference between a Hindu “morality” and Western “evilness”, which is not so simple because cinema itself mixes national elements with Western incorporations. As Neepa Majumdar notes, post independence Hindi films usually show West as a place, where there is no space for traditional values, and where culture is corrupted by decadence, signified by whisky, bikinis and prominently an uncontrolled sexuality, but at the same time all these elements have big visual potential, which is desired and then exploited in song and dance sequences (Majumdar 2010, 191). That’s why many *item numbers* show cabaret dancers or other women, with strong associations with the West. It is also not coincidental that the most famous *item girls* of Indian screen were Cuckoo and Helen, both of mixed origins: the first was an Anglo-Indian actress, the second of Franco-Burmese descent. As Jerry Pinto remarks in his biography of the most famous *item girl*, Helen appeared in times when memsahibs were not distant memory in Subcontinent, and while they were never real white goddesses to all Indian men, as some Britons wanted to see them, there was still an old colonial hangover of the woman, whom you could not touch, because she belonged to the ruling class. And, according to Pinto, it was not simply the fascination of white skin, but it had a deeper root in the situation where forbidden becomes so attractive simply because of its being forbidden, and if the heroine of the film was the ethereally unavailable Hindu woman, there had to be also an object of male lust, which made *item girls* the ideal vamps. Even if other dancers like Azoori and Kuldeep Kaur were less “foreign” than Helen or Cuckoo, they were still not Hindu women, and it took many years since Independence before a Hindu vamp became accepted in the form of Bindu in late 1960s (Pinto 2006, 47–49).

The vamp remains popular in sixties, having sometimes even more screen space than heroine and providing the sexuality that the heroine was not allowed to show. As the authors of *Mother, Maiden, Mistress* observe, the fact, that the country was ruled by the powerful figure of Indira Gandhi was not a reflection of the status of women in Indian cinema (Somaaya, Kothari, Madangarli 2012, 45). At that time however some professional dancers, like Padmini, Vyjayanthimala or Waheeda Rahman, become popular, which pushes filmmakers to look for new themes, connected with classical era. Even if heroines, played by those actresses, wear sometimes a very daring outfit, like for example Amrapali in mentioned Leh Tandon’s film, their dance, being “classical”, seems to be less vulgar and as such, appropriate for the protagonist (Shankar 1966, 25). The introduction of colour infused interest in costumes and beautiful sets. The sari remained dominant, but with the new way of double-wrapping. It was bound twice tightly above the knees, with the pleats opening like a fan below, causing

difficulties in walking. The heroine could take only short steps, but the sway of her hips widely increased. The vamp's dresses were similar to the cabaret or Latin American carnival costumes, and despite of the daring scene from *An Evening in Paris* (Shakti Samanta 1967), in which Sharmila Tagore wears bikini, the division between "good" girls and vamps persists. The heroine of that time is glamorous and there is not much place for the girl-next-door, which disappears for some times (Somaaya, Kothari, Madangarli 2012, 59–62).

The sexual revolution of 1970s influenced popular cinema, in which there was no need for vamp any more. In this period the female protagonist started to be exposed like never before, thanks to miniskirts and short frocks, because at that time "good" women could often wear western clothes without punishment. Of course some stories, like *Purab aur Paschim* (Manoj Kumar 1970) show the transformation of the heroine, who wears short skirts on the beginning and then turn to "decent women" preferring sari, but her past behavior (which included drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes), and costumes do not spoil her reputation, which is a new element. In other stories however, like *Hare Rama, Hare Krishna* (Dev Anand 1971), the heroine commits suicide after spending some time with Hippies, so we cannot say that at that time, and in any other decade, there was only one way of presenting heroines, although there was some standard. *Item numbers*, previously performed mostly by vamps, remain after their disappearance, but they can't be identified with negative characters any more. The new *item girls* are the mentioned dancers, who are not related with the story, like the Gypsy girl from *Sholay*. The most important is however the fact, that the viewer recognizes actresses specializing in such dances, and when he sees their name on film poster, he knows that there will be a "hot scene" in the movie. *Item number* takes also a new form since some authors manages to weave this kind of entertainment into the film narrative, which provides additional pleasure, being performed by the main character of the story, the girl already known to the audience. Such a procedure is not an easy task, requiring some favorable circumstances, and one of them is a situation, in which the character is used as bait, and forced to pretend to be a dancer to gain the trust of the villain. The motives of the girl are usually good, so no one can accuse her of misconduct, even if the situation requires her to wear a skimpy outfit. An excellent example of such use of *item number* is the *Khalnayak* made by Subhash Ghai in 1993, a later, but also legendary movie thanks to its *item song Choli Ke Peechhe Kya Hai* (What is under the blouse?), which became a huge hit after the censors ordered it to be cut from the film. Despite all objections *Khalnayak* finally passed by the censors, who conceded that the song could be controversial, but only at the time when it is taken out of context. Another, quite untoward way to trick the censors, and to introduce the *item song* in the film was always the use of Holi, popular mostly in older films. Incorporation of the rituals associated

with this festival is a very good excuse to show romance between main characters, and by the way let the hero touch his beloved with impunity, while sprinkling her with colored powder. Spraying water, which accompanies the fun, additionally emphasizes the shapes of the heroine, dressed of course in white, as tradition dictates, and since Holi is the festival, during which any prohibition and social conduct are forgotten for one day, film characters resort to a variety of activities that are commonly banned by the censors, such as the treatment of longitudinal sprinklers as phallic symbol, or the full text undertones. One of the best examples of that strategy is *Silsila*, made by Yash Chopra in 1981, a story about a married man (Amitabh Bachchan), who is in love with another woman (Rekha). During the festival the hero shows great affection toward the girl he loves, which helps his wife to understand that he may be involved in relationship with the other woman. The film story may be not so daring as it looks, since viewers know that the hero met his beloved before he got married with the other girl, his dead friend's fiancée, just because she was pregnant, but the Holi sequence became very famous because of the out screen romance between Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha, and the fact, that Jaya Bachchan, the real wife of the actor, plays his wife in the film.

The only problem with the *item number*, however, seems to be its usual association with a particular place and time, by being played for both: the eyes of the hero of the film, and the audience gathered in the cinema. It is always a particular performance unfolding in here and now, which does not give filmmakers so much freedom as in the making of its famous successors, which is the *dream sequence*. The difference between an *item number* and a *dream sequence* is often very much blurred, because both shows have exactly the same objective, which is to provide voyeuristic pleasure to the viewer. However, it seems that a *dream sequence*, at least for a time, was a much spicier element than an *item number*. The heyday of the *dream sequence* occurred in the 1990s, but dreams of film characters naturally appeared in some movies before. It is hard to say when the first *dream sequence* was shown, because we can find some examples already in classical movies, like *Awaara* (Raj Kapoor 1951) with one of the most famous dreams of the Indian screen, presented in the form of an eight minutes long song, or *Jagte Raho* (Amit Maitra, Sombhu Mitra 1956), the story about a poor villager, who comes to a big city, wanders in the night looking for water, and then is lost in a big building. Accused of being a thief, he tries to hide, enters different apartments and meets different people. One of them is a drunken husband, who has just come home after visiting a brothel. He asks his wife to sing for him and, being bored by her sad, traditional song, plays more cheerful, modern tunes. The villager tries to escape while the drunken husband sees his wife in him, dressed as a courtesan and performing a seductive dance. This scene explains exactly what the *dream sequence* is; the drunk man sees things, which are not part of the reality, but the spectator sees them both, which gives him additional

pleasure with no harm to the female character, who is shown in a courtesan outfit, but in fact she hasn't done anything immoral.

The 1980s were not a very favorable period in the film history, not just in India. During this time, through the development of video technology, the audience stopped going to the cinema, preferring domestic screenings. The new situation caused the development of the production of cheaper-made movies, shot only for the video. The films that henceforth began to appear in the cinemas significantly changed its structure as well. Most of the Indian cinemagoers in the 1980s was an audience originating from the lowest casts, whose tastes differed very much from other viewers. Of course, they used to watch the movies before, but only now they become the majority. Not wanting to discourage their new audience, the filmmakers have begun to adjust their work to the plebeian tastes, which caused the huge popularity of the violent stories, or mad, senseless comedies (Lipka-Chudzik 2009, 253–254). The films made at that time show physical violence against women, which then slowly vanish thanks to new chapter in Bollywood film history with family sagas and virtuous heroines appearing in 1990s. The popularity of *dream sequence* at that time was first of all the result of social changes caused by enormous popularity of willingly watched music videos on MTV. From the mid 1980s there was slow development of commercial media with colour television, home videos and then the Internet. At the same time this is this period, especially from 1992 to 1995, that was characterized by a huge number of letters to CBFC describing the potential danger of violence and vulgarity in Hindi cinema. Filmmakers were the people often blamed for many violent crimes, sexual harassment and any other degenerations of Indian society, and this situation was cleverly used by some political parties like BJP to mobilize public outrage and panic regarding any sexual elements in films (Bose 2010, 69–76). In those circumstances it is not hard to imagine the influence of that political situation on cinema. The attempt of producing only “moral” films caused the development of the *dream sequence* which is a show performed by the characters of films, and though it remains as detached from the story as the *item number*, usually confirms the viewer's belief that the characters have great affection to each other. In the 1990s the image of a modest and pious virgin became again very important for every film heroine, which did not leave too much space for any thrilling elements. However, because the spectator, as already stated, is always very eager towards deeper excitement, which doesn't change in any political situation, the *dream sequence* became a perfect godsend, because with it a girl-next-door could suddenly afford to freely express her erotic potentiality<sup>7</sup>. In the 1990s

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<sup>7</sup> Censorship is often contradictory, since the fact that the hero has such dreams means that he is prone to sexual excitement, which is not a bad thing, but should be, if one wants to say that movies cause sexual violence and the like.

screen vamps and villains were already dead and since there was no need for vamp for a long time already, nobody seemed to remember that in 1970s many film heroines could do many things which were forbidden before, like drinking, smoking or having sexual relationship with the hero before marriage. Suddenly however there was no place for this kind of freedom, and not even for any anarchic potential of love, which was always a strong part of any Hindi film. Now every hero was of course able to win the fight with many bad characters but still he could marry his beloved only after the permission of her father. As Thessa Mooij notes, anarchy is a luxury only few people can afford in real life, which makes it so vulnerable for cinema themes (Mooij 2006, 32); still in that time Bollywood cinema forgot about its old vamps, great heroines and scary villains and chose to present family dramas with not much space for sex appeal. In those films the *dream sequence* was a projection of the fantasy of a hero, who dreams about his loved one. He sees her, therefore, in not necessarily modest circumstances, but everything is all right and there is nothing against the girl's morality, because the whole scene is only a dream. This way of presentation is evident in the song *Suraj Hua Madham* from the movie *Kabhi Khushi, Kabhie Gham* (Karan Johar 2001), in which the characters suddenly move from Delhi to Egypt and perform the passionate dance over there. These *dream sequences* were one of the performances that brought a bad name to Bollywood and its songs, which are often believed to have come on suddenly and completely without any logic, taking heroes to the farthest corners of the world (Gopal, Sen 2008, 147). The detachment from reality, also in geographical terms, is very important, created simply to highlight the fact that this is now a dream and just because of that the characters behave so freely. The new type of presentation allows also for dynamic montage, and frequent changes of costume, which was impossible in the previous *item number*, because anything is possible in one's dream.

Both film songs formulas, the *item number* and the *dream sequence* are so rooted in the consciousness of filmmakers and viewers, that sometimes they appear even in the works that criticize them. Perhaps this is why even censorship often quite unconsciously turns a blind eye to certain things, because those elements are so heavily inscribed in the entertainment, being the key determinant of successful production since 1970's. A good example of evidence of this phenomenon is the story shown in *The Dirty Picture*, a movie made in 2011 by Milan Luthria showing the life of the famous South Indian *item girl*. The film quite clearly criticizes all the film tricks showing woman's body and providing cheap entertainment for a crowd, but at the same time it also shows what is criticized, which is a very intelligent procedure, similar to the one used in *Jagte Raho*, that allows filmmakers to provide the same entertainment they find at fault, because, as already mentioned, this is the best way to attract the audience. In telling the story of their infamous character filmmakers



show her outrageous behavior in snippets of hot scenes of the movies where the actress plays, which has of course an explanation in the story and cannot be treated as a vulgar exposure of the body. At some point, however, the film protagonist and another character, a movie director, fell in love, and he dreams of her dancing in a rather boldly-cut gown, which is exactly the same cheap entertainment against which the film is about, this time however incorporated quite uncritically. This situation reminds of another one, described by Shoma A. Chatterji, who shares a very interesting observation in her book about women in cinema, when she writes about the famous or infamous *Bandit Queen* (Shekhar Kapur 1994), the story of Phoolan Devi. One of many controversies about this film was showing the stripped heroine forced to bring water from the well, which was of course a very important part of the story, being one of the reasons of the later Behmai massacre, committed next to the same well by previously tortured and perpetually raped Phoolan, but at the same time in Chatterji's opinion this scene can be seen as another assault of real Phoolan Devi, who was alive at the time when the film was made (Chatterji 1998 150). More than that, since this scene was the only reason to see the film for many spectators and *Bandit Queen* is often being advertised as the first Indian film showing a naked woman<sup>8</sup>, it can also be seen as a kind of cheap entertainment that turned the attention of the audience from other important elements of the story. Of course, it was probably no intention of Shekhar Kapur to make this kind of entertainment from his story, but this example shows very well that popular movies, or those that, as *Bandit Queen*, became popular among the masses, are always first of all considered to be such entertainment, no matter what the intention of filmmakers is. Probably this is the reason why the reaction of censors is sometimes too much hysterical and other times they don't react at all being fooled by skillfully added *item number* or *dream sequence*.

Currently, cinema seems to again move away from the *dream sequence* to the *item number*, which is becoming more and more popular due to the guest appearances of stars and their special way of performance, being first of all a presentation of the perfect body, especially of the female stars. This new kind of entertainment is a result of the fact that most Indian actresses today are subjected to numerous plastic surgeries as contemporary cinema favors the type of beauty assimilating screen stars to Barbie dolls. In the 1950s and 1960s, the situation was quite different, and despite the existence of real beauties, onscreen personality was much more important than the appearance of the actresses. Considered one of the finest contemporary women, Madhubala had a little crooked,

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<sup>8</sup> The scene showing full frontal nudity appears already in English version of Girish Karnad's *Utsav* (1984), which could be however unnoticed, because the Hindi version of the film, which was showed in India, is devoid of this element.

ironic smile, but her perfectly oval face and expressive eyes were enough for the audience. Nargis, in turn, had gaps between her teeth, boyish figure and short hair, but she was the goddess of the screen due to her acting skills. The dance itself also changed a lot from moving the necks and eyes in 1950s and adding some small movements of hands in 1960s and 1970s. In 1980s there came the disco era, but as Sangita Shresthova notes people were still not much glamorous or at least not that much as in Hollywood at that time. The Bollywood dancers were not really fit and there were often mistakes in the chorus line. The change came with the film *Dil To Pagal Hai* (Yash Chopra 1997) where for the first time in Bollywood film history professional dancers were used. Since then nobody wants imperfect bodies any more (Shresthova 2011, 46–47), which has an impact not only on film stars, but very often also on the acting quality. Of course it doesn't mean that good-looking people cannot be good actors and actresses, but this kind of emphasis changed the whole film formula, which started to be more kind of a show than a screen story. Interestingly, in spite of being a quite new way of entertainment, for many spectators this and only this is real Bollywood, and they are really surprised when they see old films and find out that there were Indian movies in which the story was the most important element.

The look for glamorous heroes and heroines changed also the way of thinking in the middle and upper class in India. The first changes in body consciousness started in early 1980s and were at least in part motivated by the discussion around India's hosting of the Asian Games in 1982. During the preparations it became evident that many Indians are in a very bad shape, in danger to be overweight, which may sound strange in the country where there is such big percentage of malnourishment. Then, in early 1990s beauty contests appeared as one more factor which helped Indian people to think more about the physical beauty and when in 1994 Sushmita Sen won the international Miss Universe contest and then Aishwarya Rai Bachchan the Miss World competition, this double victory lead Indian women to think that their beauty is their asset (Shresthova 2011, 56–59). The film characters of that times helped to create this way of thinking and may have long-lasting effects on on-screen image of the ideal, passive Indian heroine who had little opportunity to show anything than her beautiful face. Indian cinema in 1990s glorifies Sati and Savitri<sup>9</sup> as ideal heroines and all differences between them are based on their relations with men; they can appear as good daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. No matter of their role, those characters rather appear than act (Kabir 2001, 56). In effect since a long time (twenty years is quite a long time for the medium

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<sup>9</sup> Some scholars add Sita to that list as well.

which is a hundred years old<sup>10</sup>) the film heroine was required only to look nice, a lot of actresses made the look their greatest asset, which of course does not mean that there are no talented women in Indian cinema, although it is actually hard to meet them too often. The pursuit of the perfect look is reflected in the mentioned extremely popular guest star appearances, which can be recently found in many mainstream productions. It is a new type of *item number*, which like its predecessor is not related to the action of the movie, but which, however shows viewers the well-known figure seen not only in other films, but also in the popular magazines.

The good examples of such performances are the guest appearances of: Deepika Padukone in the film *Dum Maaro Dum* (Rohan Sippy 2011), Shilpa Shetty in *Dostana* (Tarun Mansukhani 2008), Aishwarya Rai Bachchan in *Bunty aur Babli* (Shaad Ali 2005) or Urmila Matondkar in *Ram Gopal Varma Ki Aag* (Ram Gopal Varma 2007), which is indeed a repetition of the famous *item number* from the film *Sholay* performed by Helen in 1975. On the occasion of the last show, however, it is easy to see the difference between the old and the current *item number*. It is not a dress that is as stingy as before or voluptuous movements in former and current performers; the main difference lies in the fact that the modern temptress from *item songs* seems to be in some way similar to the women from *dream sequence*, for which dancing skills were not so important as the name and face. In the previous *item number*, performed in *Sholay* there is a Gypsy girl dancing next to the fire in the forest, in front of dangerous criminals. The scene is ascetic, with a very static montage and not much instruments used in the song to make it more natural, and the only motion is the girl's sensual dance. The new version of the song shows again dangerous criminals who go to the forest, but this time they suddenly become part of some video clip with many instruments, lights like in a nightclub and girls in the waterfall. This time there are more dancers swaying in the water and Urmila Matodkar prefers to rather stay in different sexy poses than to really dance. There is a dynamic montage with extreme close-ups showing different parts of the dancer's body and perfect make up, which tries to mask the lack of dancing skills, and probably that's why the filmmakers decided that their Gypsy girl will not only dance but also sing, which might explain her rather static performance. The guest appearance of Urmila Matodkar was probably not enough for filmmakers, who decided to put another one, Abhishek Bachchan, in the song. Moreover, in one moment the villain himself also starts to dance, which makes the scene more ridiculous than actually sexy, especially after comparing it with the original one. The special appearance may be similar to the *item number*, even if the difference lays in the fact that guest stars are not permanent *item persons*, but they become ones when they are guests. *Item girls* were

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<sup>10</sup> India celebrated 100 years of cinema in 2013.

famous, and when they appeared on the screen, audience knew exactly that there is a sexy dance break now. There is a similar way of presenting guest stars; they are not part of the screen story, they are recognizable, but this time there are also Indians, known as pious heroines from other films, and even if they, as guests, come to the film just as bodies, these bodies must be treated in a little different way. With the development of the media and the growing number of celebrities, who are famous simply because they are, the sexiest part of modern Indian stars seems to be their name. Thanks to the development of Indian star-system, most of newcomers are children of stars or film directors. Some of them are well known, being shown in film magazines already as children, and thus much more open to media than their parents. In this situation, censorship is not even too much of the fight, not only due to the fact that Bollywood moves away from popular, especially in the 1990s false portraying of women as incarnations of Sita (Chatterji 1998, 31), but also because censorship itself seems to be obsolete in the Internet age, where only one click is enough to have access to everything, against which the censors are.

*Item number* and *dream sequence*, as already shown, usually present women's performance but interestingly, as Charu Gupta notes, recently there are also some films which offer visual pleasure to the female spectators by presenting sexualized male bodies in the form of nude images of Shah Rukh Khan in *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan 2007) and Ranbir Raj Kapoor in *Saawariya* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali 2007) (Gupta 2007, 19), but this, quite marginal erotic spectacle is slightly different from the one presented by the female characters and being rather a kind of playing with the cinematic conventions. Both films, *Saawariya* and *Om Shanti Om* appeared at almost the same time and both show a man's naked body. It is however hard to agree with Charu Gupta's opinion about erotic spectacle for female viewer in case of the performance of Ranbir Raj Kapoor who stays in front of the big window wearing only a towel and then suddenly takes it off. This is more a little surprising moment than a real delight, maybe because this performance is a song, not a dance and in spite of showing naked body, Ranbir Kapoor slightly moves, and the montage is too static to treat this song as a real *item number*, which requires some motion. The dance of Shah Rukh Khan is different, being a typical *dream sequence*, similar to the mentioned one of Urmila Matodkar, with many changes of clothes, close-ups and sexy poses. The actor, who is not a very good dancer, rather presents his newly made muscles, created especially for the film, than really dances, but apparently he moves more than the hero of *Saawariya*.

As already mentioned, first heroines of Indian screen were Western women, who were not ashamed of working in the films and doing the job, which was refused even by Indian prostitutes as something too shameful. At that time also there were more Western films shown in India than Indian

ones, but in 1920s Britons from England and India started to protest against screening foreign movies in the Subcontinent because of sexualized presentation of white women at that time. This kind of presentation would, in their opinion, undermine the moral authority of England, and by showing white women as an object sexually available they could be cause of molestation of Western women by “wild, brown men”. That was, as Neepa Majumdar notes, probably the only time when the protestor asked for censorship not because of the content of the films but because of the audience (Majumdar 2010, 29). Today the situation changed and maybe no one really needs to watch Western films in India so much, and India is one of those rare countries in which, as rightly described by Chowskey, “the all-conquering *ashwamedh* [*aśvamedha*] of Hollywood was successfully stopped” (Chowskey 2012, 44), but there is still a strong need to watch Western bodies. This need always existed and was the reason why, as already mentioned, the most famous *item girls* were of foreign origin. The most interesting thing however is the fact that today this tendency didn’t disappear, and, as observed by Sangita Shresthova the Indian audience still wants to see “half-naked skimpy-clad white women”. There is then no coincidence that Western dancers wear much smaller costumes than Indian ones, but their frequent appearance on the screen however may be also the effect of Indian preference for fair skin, which connotes higher caste and status. But of course the colour of the skin is not the only explanation and even if in today India fair skin is still perceived to be a great asset for woman with all the market selling special cosmetics for fairness, fair doesn’t mean white. “White” is the term reserved historically for the British colonizers and contemporary for Caucasian foreigners. There is a big difference between “fair” which is synonym to beauty and “white” which is evidently foreign, reserved for chorus lines in songs (Shresthova 2011, 68–69). The female body however remains the female body, no matter of nationality and thus the colour of the skin, so this kind of presentation is then another way to trick the censors who may be not as restricted with foreign dancers as they would be with the Indian ones. As it can be seen from this aspect, some things haven’t changed in Bollywood much since when the Western actresses, who played in the films in the beginning, were replaced by Indian ones. Of course, as Priti Ramamurthy observes, there were also pragmatic reasons of those changes in old times; better light replacing the earlier, eye-level one reflected off whiter skin more effectively, or coming of sound which caused the need of actors who could speak Indian languages, but in spite of them the most important factor was still the appearance of mentioned Durga Khote, Devika Rani and Shanta Hublikar, all Brahmin girls, who, despite of their status were not ashamed to enter the profession (Ramamurthy 2006, 209). Indian cinema chose its own actresses then, but even now in some scenes there is still a need for other bodies, which are easier to trick censors with, and dance numbers are the best methods to provide this kind of

entertainment mainly because the dancing body doesn't have to be part of the story. As we can then see Indian film songs are a very important part of movies, mainly because they are the best way to blind the censorship thanks to a special status of film song itself. Songs in Bollywood films are not only an unnecessary, annoying addition and even if sometimes, but not often, they appear without any logic, they are so connected with the film story that nobody sees them as an additional, unimportant element. A very interesting example of the perception of Bollywood songs is shown in the short letter written by a reader of "Filmfare", one of the most popular Indian film magazines. There is a column there, which allows the readers to share their observations about mistakes made by filmmakers or other illogical elements, which they found particularly funny. In one of those remarks, written about the film *Salaam Namaste* (Siddhart Anand 2005) we read:

Preity Zinta [who plays the heroine] is more than eight months pregnant in the song *What's going on*, yet she is shown dancing and prancing about ever so nimbly throughout the song. Ask any eight-month pregnant woman if she can believe this! (Sinha 2005, 143).

The author of the remark is absolutely right, but at the same time she doesn't seem to be aware of the fact that dancing on the street is as much illogical as dancing being pregnant, so if the viewer accepts one of those elements, he has to do the same with the other one. Still the author of the letter accepts only the presence of song on the screen and doesn't find impossible the situation in which a couple looking for a shop in the middle of the night decides suddenly to sing and dance. Why? Because this is the primary role of dancing numbers in the contemporary Bollywood cinema. Many people who see Bollywood films for the first time often say that they don't like the idea of songs appearing suddenly and without any logic. They don't seem to realize that there is a very deep logic lying beyond film production and popular Indian cinema uses its songs to show everything that is impossible to show in the story. Filmmakers know very well that songs are the element of fantasy, which when used in a story about everyday life, can show things that are impossible in natural experience<sup>11</sup>. The person who criticized a pregnant girl dancing on the screen accepts of course the typical Bollywood film formula but at the same time probably doesn't understand the need of this kind of performance. She became then also a kind of victim of the cinema who is not aware of the fact that film has taught its viewers so much of its language and iconography that they unconsciously started to expect some things to be repeated. This may be therefore a reason why some Indian censors, so restrictive sometimes, are very often keen to allow showing many shocking scenes only

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<sup>11</sup> Lars von Trier applied a similar formal solution in his *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Despite of being compared with *Dil Se* (Mani Ratnam 1998), this film however refers to the rich tradition of musicals in Czechoslovakia.

because they appear in form of a song and their decisions help them to build new stereotypes and prejudices.

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- Dil Se* (Mani Ratnam, 1998).
- Dil To Pagal Hai* (Yash Chopra, 1997).
- Don* (Farhan Akhtar, 2006).
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- Dum Maaro Dum* (Rohan Sippy, 2011).
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- Harishchandrachi Factory* (Paresh Mokashi, 2009).
- Jagte Raho* (Amit Maitra, Sombhu Mitra, 1956).
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- Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (Mira Nair, 1996).
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- Nartaki* (Debaki Bose, 1940).
- Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007).



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Part 2:  
There in only ‘Philosophy:’  
The case of Testimony

editor:  
*Elisa Freschi*



# There is only “Philosophy”

## The case of testimony

Elisa Freschi

The present introduction summarises the debate on the epistemological value of testimony, with a special focus on the reductionism vs. antireductionism polemics, and situates Indian philosophers within it. One thus sees that some Indian philosophical schools (especially Vaiśeṣika and Buddhist epistemology) attempted to reduce testimony to another, more fundamental, instrument of knowledge, typically to inference, whereas others (especially Mīmāṃṣā and Nyāya) emphasised the independent nature of testimony. The study then moves to the problem of the criteria for a reliable speaker and discusses border-line cases, such as that of speaking instruments (computers, clocks and the like). Finally, it looks at some promising and open-ended topics evoked by the Indian-European dialogue on testimony.

### 1. General introduction to the series<sup>1</sup>

Ideally, the panel which lies at the basis of the present collection is the first of a series of panels dedicated to the purpose of doing “Just philosophy”. I chose the topic of the epistemology of testimony because it is one of the fields where a comparison can be fruitful and where the way for this interaction has already been paved (see next section). A further step within the same enterprise is the series of articles edited by myself and Malcolm Keating which is appearing at regular intervals on *Journal of World Philosophies*.

### 2. A short prehistory of the current debate

The field of the epistemology of testimony is both ancient and new in European and Anglo-American philosophy. Given that testimony is unavoidable (we acquire from testimony most of our cognitions, starting with our name until what most of us know about the Higgs boson), one can find scattered remarks about it all over the history of philosophy, especially in the contexts of the philosophy of language, of hermeneutics and of epistemology, not to speak about its treatment in the legal theory.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Roy Tzohar for his comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

However, until relatively recent there was little specialised literature about it. Apart from the “classical” opposition between David Hume (1711–1776) and Thomas Reid (1710–1796), only a few authors such as Elizabeth Fricker (apart from her PhD thesis, Fricker 1986, one might read Fricker and Cooper 1987 and Fricker 1982) and Antony Coady (see most of all his ground-breaking and thought-provoking Coady 1992) wrote about the epistemology of testimony before the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup>

What worked as a catalyser for the launch of the epistemology of testimony was, in my reconstruction, the volume edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Bimal Krishna Matilal (who died before the volume could be finished) in 1994 with the title *Knowing from words* (Matilal and Chakrabarti 1994)<sup>3</sup>. Matilal and Chakrabarti managed to gather some of the most interesting Analytical philosophers and to have them reflect on a topic which is central in Indian philosophy but was less so in European and Anglo-American philosophy. Ideally, the volume was meant as a dialogue of Indian and Anglo-American analytical philosophers, along the lines of a previous attempt, namely the volume *Analytical Philosophy in Comparative Perspective* (edited by Bimal Krishna Matilal and Jaysankar Lal Shaw in the same prestigious Synthese Library, in 1985). The volume contributed to the establishment of the epistemology of testimony as a separate field of epistemology. For instance, Elizabeth Fricker’s essay in the volume, programmatically entitled *Against Gullibility* has been quoted in the great part of the subsequent articles on testimony<sup>4</sup> as the paradigmatic instantiation of local (or ‘minimal’) reductionism (about which, see *infra*, section 3). Further, it has contributed to the attempts to establish a dialogic contact between Indian and Anglo-American epistemologies (see, e.g., Arnold 2001, reworked into the part two of Arnold 2005, where Kumārila’s and Alston’s views are discussed side-by-side). Nonetheless, it cannot be said that it really launched a long-lasting new way of looking at epistemology.

Among reasons for the partial failure of the 1994 volume to establish a dialogue about the topic one might mention the traditional closure of Classical Indian philosophy (as it is practised until now), the symmetrical closure of Analytical philosophy to whatever comes from distant times (and languages), but perhaps also the fact that a corpus of Indian philosophical texts accessible to non-

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<sup>2</sup> A longer list should include also articles dealing with related subjects, such as Lackey 1999, Welbourne 1979 (transmission of knowledge); Hardwig 1991, Ross 1986, Webb 1993 (trust); Burge 1993 (communication).

<sup>3</sup> Note that Matilal and Chakrabarti managed to gather contributions from Coady, Fricker, Welbourne and from other authors who had not yet written specifically on the topic of testimony but kept on doing it after 1994, such as K. Lehrer, J. McDowell and J.N. Mohanty. Furthermore, they persuaded already influential philosophers such as G.G. Brittan, M. Dummett, P.F. Strawson and S. Bhattacharya, to deal specifically with the issue.

<sup>4</sup> And this in many different languages and philosophical contexts. See, only *exempli gratia*, Böhm 2006, 23–25, 31; Origgi 2006; Lackey 2008, chapter 5; Schindler-Wunderlich 2008, 92 and chapter 2.4.7; Brito 2012, chapter 2; Kornblith 2013, 214.

Sanskritists (or non-Tibetologists, non-Pālists, etc.) is still lacking. Thus, when, e.g., a European philosopher after having read Sibajiban Bhattacharya's fascinating essay wants to dwell further in the topic of Indian Logic, she has little to refer to.

The present working group, consequently, aims at working further in the direction of creating a philosophical dialogue on the topic of the epistemology of testimony, with some special focuses:

- We are doing “just Philosophy”, i.e., the philosophical questions should be on the foreground, whereas the historical context, the textual material and other philological issues are discussed insofar as they are functional to a deeper philosophical understanding

- Our work must be soundly grounded in texts and in their history, so that readers can verify what we say and continue our research

- We are committed to highlight points of contact but also differences, so that the dialogue can be a really enriching experience and not a chance for European and Anglo-American philosophers to see that Indian philosophy was “almost as good” as their own one (cf. the concern of the Indian philosophers writing in English and never being “good enough” for Westerners to be considered as their peers, Bhushan and Garfield 2011, xiv)

- The Philosophical enterprise is not limited to the European and Anglo-American world, but the inclusion of Classical Indian philosophy should also not be enough to content us (in other words: we are not lobbying for *Indian* philosophy to be admitted within philosophy, but for *philosophy* to be enriched through new questions and perspectives, wherever they come from).

### 3. Introducing the debate

#### 3.1. Reductionism and Anti-reductionism

The topic of testimony is of central importance in several domains. In Europe, it has been dealt with – well before it became a distinct philosophical topic – within Legal thought, History (since in both cases the role of the witness is central) and Bible exegesis. In India, it is noteworthy that before it crystallised into a certain pattern, the topic of testimony had already a long history (in the dharmaśāstra context, in the Mīmāṃsā exegesis, etc.). For instance, before the main exponents of the Buddhist epistemological school ruled out testimony from the number of epistemological instruments (on this topic see Krasser 2012) the value of the Buddha's word had already been the object of a complex exegesis (see, on this topic, Tzohar's contribution to this volume). This early history of the reflection on the topic of testimony left long-lasting traces on its later development (for instance, in Europe the centrality of the role of the witness, in India the importance of exegesis, see Eltschinger 2013).

However, after a certain point, the debate on testimony started being dominated, both in Indian and in European philosophy, by some basic dichotomies. First comes the dichotomy between reductionism and anti-reductionism. The first aims at reducing testimony to other instruments of knowledge. In India, this has meant trying to reduce it to inference, whereas in Europe “reductionists argue that the epistemic status of testimony is ultimately reducible to sense perception, memory and inductive inference” (Lackey 2008, 141). The difference is less broad than one might think, given that the role of perception (of the heard words) and of memory is not denied in Indian philosophy but just thought to be not problematic (like the fact that smoke is perceived in the case of the inference of fire from smoke does not invalidate its inferential status).

In Europe, David Hume has been considered the herald of “global reductionism”,<sup>5</sup> whereas Elizabeth Fricker is, among others, credited to have introduced “local reductionism” into the debate. In India, Buddhist Pramāṇavāda authors and Vaiśeṣika champion the view that testimony is a subset of inference but both try to reduce particular instances of testimony to particular inferences and never attempt the global reductionism endorsed by Hume (i.e., since we have seen again and again instances of testimony matching with reality, we can globally trust testimony because of inductive reasons, see Hume 1977, 74). Buddhist Pramāṇavādas and Vaiśeṣikas (and Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā authors, who only accept the Veda as an autonomous source of knowledge and reduce ordinary communication to inference) have different ways to reduce testimony to inference. As will be discussed below by Alessandro Graheli, part of the problem relies in the difficulty of construing a valid syllogism in the case of testimony. If, as one might be inclined to do and as the Vaiśeṣikas tried to do, one construes linguistic expressions (*śabda*) as *probans* for the *probandum*, i.e., their meaning (*artha*), then what would be the locus (*pakṣa*)? An alternative route would be the following chain of syllogisms:

X says that p

if X says that p, then X wants to express (*vivakṣā*) p, because he uttered it (from language to thought)

if X wants to express p, then p exists in the world, because X is a reliable speaker (*āpta*) (from thought to ontology)

thus, p

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<sup>5</sup> However, Alex Gelfert noticed that Hume’s reductionism is in fact far from being global and that such reconstructions are chiefly based on his critique of miracles and not on his assessment of everyday communication, see Gelfert (2010).



In this case, one needs to have already secured the information that X is a reliable speaker, due to previous instances of her reliability.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, Thomas Reid is probably the best known pre-modern anti-reductionist in Europe. In his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764, the only critical edition is Reid 1997) he explained that we do not have to construe inferences in order to believe what we are said. By contrast, God has instilled in us two principles, the Principle of Veracity, which inclines us to tell the truth, and the Principle of Credulity, which inclines us to believe what we are told. The success of testimony as instrument of knowledge depends on these two and not on any inferential process. In India, the Mīmāṃsā school is radically anti-reductionist, whereas the case of Nyāya is more complex and will lead me to highlight some fundamental differences between the European and Anglo-American epistemological debates and the Indian one.

### 3.2. At mid-way: the case of Nyāya

In India, the epistemological debate necessarily includes the question as for the source of the validity (*prāmāṇya*) of a cognition. Is this extrinsic (*parataḥ*) or intrinsic (*svataḥ*)? If the former, a cognition depends on something else in order to become knowledge. If the latter, every cognition is by itself and by default entitled to be called knowledge, unless and until the opposite is proved. In Western terms one might say that this last position is akin to falsificationism.

It is easy to see that Mīmāṃsā, being an upholder of intrinsic validity, can neatly maintain that testimony does not need anything else to be considered valid. The situation is slightly more complicated in the case of Nyāya, which upholds the extrinsicity of validity in the case of all cognitions. Thus, all cognitions need an additional reason to be considered valid, be it the validation through another instrument of knowledge (e.g., X through sight sees his father speaking, then the validity of this visual perception is confirmed by the auditory perception of his voice) or through the awareness of some additional qualities of the source (e.g., X knows that his eyes are in excellent conditions because of a recent sight-test and his father is not too far nor in bad light). Testimony is

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<sup>6</sup> The topic of the complex task to be faced by Indian reductionism is admirably dealt with by John Taber, see Taber 1996. Its critical review (Siderits 1998) does not deal with Taber's reconstruction of the reductionist's strategies.

not an exception to this and stands in need of a further validation, typically through the additional quality of having been uttered by a reliable speaker (*āpta*).<sup>7</sup>

What differentiates the Nyāya position from the chain of syllogisms described above in the previous section? According to Nyāya, the reliability of the speaker is an additional quality of the source, it is not the *probans* of an inference. By contrast, Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā authors maintain that, whenever one hears someone uttering “p” the natural power of language to communicate a meaning (a natural power which remain undisturbed in the case of the Veda) is interrupted by one’s suspicions concerning the reliability of the speaker, so that one needs to rapidly go through the syllogistic sequence described above. By the time the natural communicative power of language is finally restored, one already knows that p and, hence, the linguistic communication only repeats something already known and does not deliver any new information independently of inference. In Anglo-American terms, the Reductionist Thesis requires that there “wouldn’t be any difference between the epistemic status of the *testimonial belief being reduced* and the *positive reasons doing the reducing*” (Lackey 2008, 151), but this is exactly the case with Nyāya, where the reasons for believing that X is a reliable speaker are not the same for believing the content of what X says.

#### 4. The reliability-problems

##### 4.1. Valid testimony grounded on the author or on language itself

This leads me to a further dichotomy, the one concerning, among anti-reductionists, the justification of testimony. In India, this basic dichotomy can be summarised through the positions, once again, of Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā. The former makes the validity of testimony dependent on the validity of its source (which should be a reliable speaker).<sup>8</sup> The latter, by contrast, considers testimony per se valid, due to the natural communicative power of language itself.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, what Mīmāṃsā speaks about can be hardly described as “testimony”, since the role of the witness (*testis* in Latin) is not at all needed. The Sanskrit term, shared by all philosophical schools of Classical Indian philosophy, namely

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<sup>7</sup> Thus, of the two questions Lackey uses to identify reductionists and antireductionists, Nyāya authors answer yes to the first and no to the second: “[F]irst, are positive reasons necessary for acquiring testimonially based knowledge and, second, are the epistemic properties of such knowledge —such as justification and warrant— ultimately reducible to the epistemic properties of purportedly more basic sources, such as sense perception, memory, and inductive inference? Reductionists answer affirmatively, while nonreductionists respond negatively, to both of these questions” (Lackey 2008, 141).

<sup>8</sup> This scheme includes also the position of Buddhist Pramāṇavādins, who can accept testimony as a valid testimony only if uttered by a reliable speaker, and of many other Buddhist authors, see Tzohar’s contribution in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> A somehow related position is Bhartṛhari’s one, see Ferrante’s contribution in this volume.

*śabdapramāṇa* ‘language as an instrument of knowledge’, is more neutral and made me prefer the somehow longer paraphrase “Linguistic Communication as an instrument of knowledge”, which is more neutral than “testimony” as for the role of the speaker. Thus, in the following I will shift to this term.

Coming back to the dichotomy just exposed, many Medieval Islamic authors explicitly endorsed the former view, although the dominant Sunni views regarded (Qur’ānic) language as an eternal attribute of God, thus in some way considering it as pre-existing any human communicative act. This principle was particularly important to the Zāhirī school, leading the Zāhiriyya to a strict textual interpretation of the Qur’ān, one which presupposed that God had expressed Himself completely and perfectly in the text and that one needed not to look for His intentions beyond it – a position which interestingly enough resembles the Mīmāṃsā approach to Vedic exegesis.<sup>10</sup> In European and Anglo-American philosophy, contemporary authors like Michael Dummett (Dummett 1994), Józef Maria Bocheński (Bocheński 1974, see Rostalska’s contribution in the present volume), Jennifer Lackey (e.g., Lackey 2009) and Sanford Goldberg (e.g., Goldberg 2013) uphold the former view, whereas authors such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer have highlighted the priority of language over the speaker and can thus be considered closer to the latter scheme.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.2. Linguistic Communication grounding the other instruments of knowledge?

A step further is that of Bhartṛhari, who criticises inference, deemed not to be a valid source of knowledge in the case of non perceptible items (see the next chapter concerning the opposition among fields of knowledge) and presents language as an all-pervasive reality. Going in this direction, one might even hypothesise that the very direct perception depends on linguistic communication, since there is no non-discursive direct perception and our perception is always a perception of something we can recognise/think of/describe linguistically. Consequently, Linguistic Communication as an instrument of knowledge can evolve in an underlying *prasiddhi*, the discursive knowledge which everyone shares, so that no precise source can be pinpointed. How do we know,

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Marco Lauri for interesting discussions on this topic. Mistakes remain entirely mine.

<sup>11</sup> This is partly an oversimplification since it neglects the distinction (about which see the Introduction in Matilal and Chakrabarti 1994) between *śabda* ‘language’ and *śabdapramāṇa* ‘language as an instrument of knowledge.’ In other words, the fact that an author emphasises the independence of language from a speaker does not automatically mean that she would subscribe to the idea that also language as an instrument of knowledge is independent of a speaker. However, for historical reasons (see above, beginning of section 3.1.), the debate about testimony in Europe has the witness as its centre and in this sense Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s positions are already strikingly audacious.

e.g., that we need to eat in order not to die out of starvation? Not through specific scientific studies (which at most can be used to *justify* such notion) and not even through specific directives. Rather, according to *prasiddhi*, explains Abhinavagupta in the XXIV chapter of his *Tantrāloka*. In this way, Bhartṛhari and later Abhinavagupta revert the (European?) idea of “instinct:” it is not a (mysterious) non-conceptual instinct which enables us to do things we have not explicitly been taught to do, but rather a conceptual knowledge which is so common that we are not aware of how we acquired it (perhaps in a previous life, adds Abhinavagupta).

#### 4.3. Criteria for a valid speaker (and listener)

Embracing the Nyāya scheme leads to a further question, namely, what are the criteria to identify a reliable source? Typically, Nyāya authors say that she must be competent (she must have had direct experience of what she speaks about), honest and moved by the desire to speak. All three criteria may be debated. The former because, as it is formulated in Nyāya, it rules out the possibility of a chain of transmission of testimony (which is, by contrast, accepted and praised in Islamic thought, see Lauri’s contribution in the present volume). Why should not one accept a chain of witnesses? In the case of Indian philosophy, and especially of Nyāya, the problem might have to do with the fact that in this case the role of memory would become unavoidable. And memory as an active faculty (i.e., not as a sheer repository of notions) cannot be admitted among instruments of knowledge, since it is often unreliable.<sup>12</sup>

Beside that, what else is implied by the requisite of competence? A possible output of this requisite is the idea (explicit in Bocheński) that one’s linguistic communication can be a valid instrument of knowledge only in the case that the linguistic communication’s field overlaps with the field on which we have a specific epistemological competence. In other words, being a world-expert of nuclear biology does not mean that one is a world-expert of science in general. More interestingly, the field of what is does not overlap with that of what has to be done (see below, end of this section), so that an expert able to describe what has happened (e.g., a historian who has been able to reconstruct all stages of a certain recent war) will not necessarily be also able to prescribe what

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<sup>12</sup> A further argument (suggested during the final round table of this panel by Artemij Keidan) is that through history linguistic expressions see their meanings changed so that a chain of transmitters testifying that “X is p” would end up testifying something else due to the fact that “X ” and “p” may have acquired a new meaning. But such considerations cannot play a role in the a-temporal perspective of Mīmāṃsā and I do not know of any such discussion in Nyāya or Buddhist Pramāṇavāda either.

should happen next. This opposition is of fundamental importance in Mīmāṃsā (for which only the Veda can be an independent source of knowledge regarding what has to be done), whereas Nyāya authors do not see an a priori irreducible distinction between the two fields. The author of the Veda, for instance, is described by Nyāya authors as being necessarily omniscient since he has uttered also the Āyurveda, whose validity is extrinsically tested.<sup>13</sup>

The second criterion, that of the sincerity of the speaker, may also be debated, because it leads to the problem one might label as “the misled liar”, i.e., to cases in which someone wants to lie but happens to say the truth by mistake. Is the cognition one acquires in this case valid? Since it lacks one of the criteria for validity, one should be forced to say that it is not, although it is in itself identical with a genuine piece of information (about the problem of justification in Nyāya, see Sibajiban Bhattacharyya’s contributions). Further, how is one to judge of sincerity? If it is defined as conformity to one’s beliefs, this can lead to further problems. In fact, even if one does not want to renounce to justification and is ready to reject the misled liar’s testimony as a case of knowledge-communication, one might still be puzzled by the case of a speaker who erroneously believes that p, but has good reasons for conveying s and does so (e.g., he believes that the Eiffel Tower is left from his standpoint, but after looking at his map he decides to tell to the questioning tourist that it is at his right, and rightly so). This second speaker is a reliable speaker, although he does not believe what he is saying. Within contemporary epistemology, also Jennifer Lackey has discussed interesting examples of people who do not believe what they are saying and are nonetheless reliable witnesses (in her case: a biology teacher who teaches evolution although she believes in creationism) and has, accordingly, stated that “the proper focus in the epistemology of testimony should be on what speakers say, not on what they believe” (Lackey 2008, 141).

The latter criterion is particularly intriguing to me because I have only found it in Indian philosophy and in Bocheński 1974 (see Rostalska’s contribution in the present volume).

Until now I have briefly outlined the requisites of the speaker. A related problem might be that of the requisites of the hearer (see Sudipta Munsī’s contribution in the present volume).

Further, how would such criteria fit in the case of non-descriptive statements? In which sense is one’s “competence” involved when uttering a valid command? Bocheński’s distinction between an

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<sup>13</sup> For the Nyāya-Mīmāṃsā debate about this topic see Freschi and Graheli 2005. Franco 1997 explains that Buddhist Pramāṇavādins adopt the Nyāya approach.

epistemic and a deontic authority (which independently repeats the *sādhya-siddha* opposition typical of classical Indian debates) might be of help here.

Similarly, also instances of non-informative statements should be separately dealt with. When, for instance, Jennifer Lackey lists among cases of “testimony” “reports about the time of the day, what one had for breakfast, the achievements of one’s children, whether one’s loved one looks attractive in a certain outfit, the character of one’s political opponents, one’s age and weight, one’s criminal record and so on” (Lackey 2008, 147), she is in fact listing many cases of speech acts which are not meant to be primarily informative but have rather different purposes. For instance, speaking about how attractive one’s husband looks might be meant to convey that one is in love with him to a flirting colleague, talking about one’s children could be a way to bond with other parents and so on. Therefore, such speech acts should not be subsumed in the set of testimonially conveyed *knowledge*.

## 5. The hermeneutical problems

By contrast, if one assumes, as Mīmāṃsā authors do, that language by itself communicates, unless and until this communication is blocked by external factors (such as unreliable speakers), one is confronted with a different set of problems. First of all, does the fact that the text (oral or written) is in itself communicative legitimate any possible reading of it? Few philosophers have embraced this position in Europe and no one –as far as my knowledge reaches– in pre-contemporary India. Thus, in both scenarios the acknowledgement of the communicative power of the text has rather led to an inquiry into the exegetical rules needed to uncover the *right* meaning(s) of the text. In some cases, exegesis has been used also by thinkers upholding the idea of a reliable author as the foundation of Linguistic Communication, in cases where such an author was too remote to speak for himself and one needed to reconstruct his intent out of the text only (see Tzohar’s contribution for the case of the Buddha).

## 6. Further problems and applications

Ideally, the trans-philosophical debate should be able to creatively approach also new topics, which are not part of each tradition’s background. Among such problems there is the following one:

- Can one speak of linguistic communication as an instrument of knowledge also in the case of non-conscious communicators?

Indian authors tend to be consistent in maintaining that linguistic communication needs to happen through spoken language. Writing is, by contrast, a case of inference since one infers out of

the written signs their spoken form. This idea can be historically explained also through the fact that silent readings was not used in Classical India and that one, indeed, used to pronounce aloud what one was reading. Given the changed historical conditions, one might hold nowadays a different opinion about writing, even more so since also in the case of writing one can usually identify a source and discuss its reliability. The case of non-conscious sources is more complex. I suspect that Classical Indian authors would believe clocks and thermometers to deliver information just like gestures do, i.e., by delivering inferential signs of something else. In other words, if I am not wrong, we know that it is 8 am after having seen our watch because we infer this information from the position of the hour hand.<sup>14</sup> But what about the case of a voiced clock actually pronouncing the words “It is 8 o’clock”? If one were to refute to it the status of being an instance of linguistic communication, then, what would be the difference between this case and the case (described by a well-known anti-reductionist, A. Coady) of a unknown voice in a call centre who informs us about how much we need to pay for our phone bill? The person who is communicating it to us is just reading the information from a computer monitor and is hardly performing anything more than an automatic answering machine would have been able to do.

The working group whose results are published here convened within the forth Coffee Break Conference (and then again in Athens in 2015), but the topic of Linguistic Communication has been discussed also within the previous one (CBC 3). This has led me to consider the use of linguistic communication as an instrument of knowledge in extra-philosophical fields, such as the usage of witnesses in anthropology, development studies, history, statistics, law and the like. It is my hope that a thorough reflection about it will take place in a close future, in order to investigate the basis of disciplines dealing with so-called “empirical” data which, in fact, often depend strictly on linguistic accounts.

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<sup>14</sup> However, another scholar of Indian epistemology, Matthew Dasti, maintains that clocks and the like are instances of Linguistic Communication, see Dasti 2008. Dasti accepted that his position might be a partly departure from Nyāya in the online discussion of his article: <http://elisafreschi.blogspot.co.at/2013/04/testimony-and-requisites-of-witness.html> and <http://elisafreschi.blogspot.co.at/2013/05/requisites-of-listener.html>

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## Reliability of a Speaker and Recognition of a Listener: Bocheński and Nyāya on the Relation of Authority

Agnieszka Rostalska

In the *Nyāyasūtras* (NS), the fundamental text of the Nyāya tradition, testimony is defined as a statement of a reliable speaker (*āpta*). According to the NS, such a speaker should possess three qualities: competence, honesty and desire to speak. The content of a discourse, including the prescriptions, is also considered reliable due to the status of a given author and the person that communicated it.

The Polish philosopher J.M. Bocheński similarly stresses the role of a speaker; he holds that an authoritative source (whose discourse is called testimony) should be competent and truthful. The conditions of trust and superiority also apply. According to Bocheński, being an authority entails a special relation—it has a subject, object and field. Notably, Bocheński develops his own typology of testimony by distinguishing between what he calls epistemic and deontic authority. He asks questions such as: Who can be the subject of an authoritative statement? Which features should the speaker possess? How is authority recognised? Is there a universal or an absolute authority? What is the field of authority? Moreover, which qualities should the listener possess?

The Nyāya philosophers, both the ancient ones, like Akṣapāda Gautama, Vātsyāyana, Vācaspati Miśra, and the contemporary scholars of Nyāya, such as B. K. Matilal and J. Ganeri, were also concerned with these issues.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the above points in a comparative manner. I will argue that both Bocheński's and the Nyāya accounts share very similar perspectives and encounter analogous problems.

*Just like in every science, authority is the weakest argument in philosophy.*

*Hence, the following advice: be distrustful towards assertions of others,*

*in particular of popular philosophers;*

*verify them for yourself before admitting them.*

Bocheński, "Advice of the old philosopher"

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Joseph (Józef) Maria Bocheński (1902–1995)<sup>2</sup> was a Polish philosopher, historian of philosophy and logician. He was a ‘renaissance man’, who studied law (Lvov/Lviv) and economics (Poznań), and also received doctorate degrees in both philosophy (Freiburg) and theology (Rome). He joined the Dominican Order and during World War II served as a chaplain in England, France and Poland, and fought as a soldier at Monte Cassino.<sup>3</sup> After the war he lectured in logic in Rome and soon became the Chair of the history of twentieth century philosophy at Freiburg University, where he was Rector between 1964 and 1966. He also founded the *Institute of Eastern Europe* and published the journal *Studies in Soviet Thought*. He was regarded as a charismatic and inspiring teacher. Even after he retired in 1972 (being almost 70) he received a pilot licence and would often pilot planes to academic conferences. In 1990 he was honoured *Doctor Honoris Causa* from the Jagiellonian University for his broad accomplishments in philosophy.

Among his many writings, Bocheński’s books were devoted mostly to logic, Thomism, analytical philosophy, communism and patriotism.<sup>4</sup> To a great extent his work focused on the epistemology of religion. He was an analytical writer, well-known for his precision and clarity as well as a style of writing that was intelligible to non-specialist readers. It is interesting to note that Bocheński did not restrict himself solely to Western thought. In his book *A History of Formal Logic* (1961) he included a chapter entitled *Indian variety of logic*, where he discussed the theories of Nyāya logicians and their debates with Buddhist, Jain and Mīmāṃsaka philosophers.<sup>5</sup> In the selection of the basic sources, he referred to logical arguments from the *Nyāyasūtras* and quoted the two key passages on testimony:<sup>6</sup>

- Word (verbal testimony) is the instructive assertion of a reliable person.

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<sup>2</sup> In most cases he published as Joseph Maria but also, at times, under his Dominican name: Innocent Maria Bocheński. His birth name was Joseph Francis Emanuel Bocheński.

<sup>3</sup> The Italian campaign of the II Corps in 1944. He is the author of the book *De virtute militari. Zarys etyki wojskowej* [An outline of military ethics] (1993).

<sup>4</sup> The most valued are: *ABC tomizmu* (1950) [ABC of Thomism], *Ancient formal logic* (1951), *The problem of universals: A symposium* I. M. Bochenski, A. Church, N. Goodman (1956), *Formale Logik* (1956) [English translation: *A History of Formal Logic* (1961)], *The logic of religion* (1965), *Was ist Autorität?* (1974), *Contemporary European philosophy* (1974), *Sto zabobonów. Krótki filozoficzny słownik zabobonów* [One hundred superstitions. A short philosophical dictionary of superstitions] (1987), *Logika i filozofia* [Logic and philosophy] (1993), and *Między logiką a wiarą* [Between logic and faith] (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Also, being Christian himself, in *The logic of religion* (Bocheński 1965: 21-22) he referred to religions other than Christianity and stressed the application of logic to religion as a natural and legitimate move in Brahmanical traditions (Nyāya and Vedānta) and Buddhism. He mentioned by name Dignāga as the great Mahāyāna Buddhist and creative logician.

<sup>6</sup> He relies on Vidyābhūṣana’s translation of the sūtras: *āpta-upadeśaḥ “śabdaḥ”* (NS 1.1.7); “*sa dvididhaḥ” dṛṣṭā’drṣārthatvāt* (NS 1.1.8). Later, he cites Jha’s translation of the *Nyāyasūtras* and the *Tarkasaṃgraha* of Annambhāṭṭa, a logical textbook from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

- It is of two kinds, viz., that which refers to matter which is seen and that which refers to matter which is not seen (Bocheński 1961: 427, after Vidyāhūṣaṇa 1913: 4).

Bocheński was, in that way, familiar with Indian philosophy (especially with Nyāya and Buddhism) when he wrote his later text on authority.<sup>7</sup> Although I do not argue here that Bocheński was principally inspired by the tradition of Indian logic there are striking parallels between his philosophy and Nyāya on the issue of authority. It is this fruitful convergence of ideas that I take up in this paper.

## 2. General remarks on authority

Bocheński devotes the essay *Was ist Autorität?* (1974) to the issue of authority. He reminds the reader that ‘authority’ is a term derived from the Latin *auctoritas*. If we think about it, this term is used to signify the authority, dignity (prestige) and respect of a person in a society (and many times it is connected with being influential). According to the dictionary definition, *auctoritas* denotes a particular relationship wherein a person can potentially affect the other; it implies power or leadership. Authorities provide advice, instigation or sanction, where they are bound by certain responsibilities.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, the term authority also has political, juridical or administrative connotations of power and control (e.g., of a government or of the police), but it also indicates a person that is considered an expert in a certain field or discipline.

The notion of authority is examined by Bocheński from the point of view of an analytic philosopher<sup>9</sup> who is particularly interested in its social applications. He stresses that the main problem of the usage of the term ‘authority’ lies in its ambiguity and vagueness. In consideration of its various connotations and usages, the notion of ‘authority’ requires clarification (Bocheński 1993: 198-9). To begin with, in ordinary usage, the term authority is equivocal. For example, it may denote a relation, such as the respect held by students for a professor. It may also indicate a personal characteristic, such as cases where a person is considered an authority because they are famous (e.g.,

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<sup>7</sup> It may also be noted that Bocheński was one of the invited speakers at the conference “The Development of Logic: East and West” hosted by the Department of Philosophy of the University of Hawaii in Honolulu (25-27. 06. 1973) as part of its East-West Philosophers' Conference program. His paper “Logic and Ontology” was published in the “Philosophy East and West” journal. During the conference he must have met and discussed with scholars of Indian Philosophy, like: Sibajiban Bhattacharyya, Karl Harrington Potter and Bimal Krishna Matilal who were the other invited speakers at the same conference.

<sup>8</sup> The remaining meanings of the term suggest an origin, where it may indicate the source or origination of something.

<sup>9</sup> In other words, Bocheński is using the method of linguistic analysis to develop his own scrupulously discussed theses.

actors, singers, sportsmen) or when authority is a personal feature (e.g., when a godfather wields authority within a certain family or a chieftain in a certain tribe).

However for Bocheński a personal characteristic is not of great importance. He supports this view by giving an example of a flight controller (Bocheński 1993: 199-200), who provides data to a pilot. In this case, the pilot has not met the controller personally and does not know if the controller has any personal characteristics befitting of authority. Regardless of that, the pilot will accept the data given by the controller.

Bocheński is primarily interested in the philosophical dimension of authority, which he considers as a relation. As such, it is wider and more fundamental. Accordingly, when the expression 'authority' is used in this paper, it is with this meaning of authority as a relation.

Bocheński (1993: 200-204) defines authority in terms of the classical definition introduced by Aristotle. According to Aristotle, a definition comprises two parts: *genus* (kind) and *differentia* (specific difference). Bocheński (1993: 195) gives the example of a cow, which may be defined as a large animal (*genus*) that produces milk and has horns (*differentia*; Bocheński 1993: 195). He is trying to determine to which category does authority belong? He distinguishes three categories: a. things (e.g., a person is an independent, autonomous thing), b. features (a property of a thing which inheres in something, e.g., a personal feature) and c. relations (names and expressions which denote features and are the signs of a relation; e.g., being a father, loving someone etc.)

Bocheński proposes the following theses:

- Authority is a relation (Bocheński 1993: 200).
- Authority is a ternary relation between the subject, object and the field of authority (Bocheński 1993: 202-203).
- P is an authority for S in the field D if and only if S acknowledges in principle all that P announces as long as it belongs to the field D (Bocheński 1993: 204).

The subject is the individual recognised as an expert; the object is the individual that recognises her or him as an expert; and the field represents all the sentences written or uttered by the subject in a specific area, i.e., the communicated content. The ternary relation occurs between the subject and the object, the subject and the field and between the object and the field.

He then further characterises the mechanism of authority as a special type of relation wherein the subject wants to communicate something to the object: to give an instruction or share certain knowledge. The subject, i.e., the speaker announces something through the use of signs, which Bocheński calls 'the bearers of thoughts', and through which the object, i.e., the listener must

acknowledge what has been asserted (by, e.g., hearing a sound or seeing a poster) and decode the information (Bocheński 1993: 206-207).

I am first going to examine the above mentioned features of authority namely, authority as a linguistic communication mechanism, authority as a relation between conscious individuals, the distinction between epistemic and deontic authority, authority as a relation between subject, object and field, and the further attributes of the speaker and the listener. Then, I will tackle the problem of the establishment of authority. Whenever I find parallels, I will refer to the Nyāya conception of authority in comparative perspective.

### 3. Authority as a linguistic communication mechanism

As I have briefly mentioned, Bocheński considers authority as a relational process during which what is at stake is the transmission of a linguistic content transmitted by means of signs. This relation is peculiar, because the object does not only understands the signs given by an authority, but also acknowledges, recognises and approves of what is being announced. The interesting question remains: what causes the inclination towards this special recognition? I will leave this question as an open one and come back to it in the section 8, which tackles the question of the recognition of authority.

The above mechanism of authority may evoke the causal mechanism of linguistic utterance as identified by Bimal Krishna Matilal (Matilal 1992: 49-50). He refers to the Nyāya tradition, where *śabda* (often translated as ‘verbal testimony’) is recognised as an important source of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) which is considered distinct from perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*) and analogy (*upamāna*).

In this mechanism, both the roles of the speaker and the listener are emphasised: the sound, or, to be exact, the linguistic utterance – which is a sentence consisting of words – is used to communicate certain knowledge or information. The important condition here is that the listener must be linguistically competent. When a person hears a sentence, he or she recalls the meanings, objects or things associated with each word (Matilal 1990: 49). One understands the meaning of the sentence and the speaker’s intention; namely, what one wants the listener to be informed about. Matilal explains:

The hearer’s knowledge of the word-meanings from the utterance of the words is generated according to the following psychological rule of association and memory. The hearer is a competent language-user, and he is acquainted with the connection between word and meaning (Matilal 1990: 52).

Later on he adds:

An awareness of the speaker's intention is necessary, and this is called *tātparyā-jñāna*. If somebody asks for a pen while writing, it may be assumed that he intends (to get) a writing pen, not a play-pen or ox-pen (Matilal 1990: 54).

In conclusion, both Bocheński and Matilal agree that authority is a relation, which involves a linguistic communication mechanism. The speaker has an intention to communicate instruction or share certain knowledge by the use of linguistic utterances. The listener must not only be linguistically competent but also acknowledge, recognise and approve of what has been asserted.

#### 4. Authority as a relation between conscious individuals

Yet, the linguistic form of the authoritative discourse is not what defines the ternary relation of authority. Indeed Bocheński further notices that the field of authority is often understood as:

- a set of real events or actions (e.g., operations of the soldiers as belonging to the field of a captain) or
- warrants and orders related to certain activities (e.g., orders communicated by the captain to the soldiers; (Bocheński 1993: 207-208).

He disagrees with the first one, claiming that things, events and real objects cannot form the field of authority. As in the case of a captain, whose field of authority does not consist of warfare itself, i.e., the set of techniques and actions used to conduct war, but rather of the set of communicated orders. What is said about events is the communicated content, i.e., the content of thoughts, which is an ideal object (Bocheński 1993: 208). We do not express the thoughts themselves but the content of thoughts. Consequently, the information which is provided is also an ideal object (Bocheński 1993: 209). To illustrate, when two people convey information about a certain thing or an event in two different languages, they express the same content of thought only in different words.

Moreover, Bocheński states that the field of authority consists of a set of ideal objects: directives or propositions. He emphasises that the field of authority consists of a set of sentences and not of a single sentence (Bocheński 1993: 210–212), like propositions in the field of geography if the subject of authority is a geographer. What is more, in this kind of relation, both the subject (i.e., the speaker) and the object (i.e., the listener) are real living individuals—they are conscious persons.

Could a group of people be considered a subject of authority? Bocheński answers negatively because a group does not possess an individual consciousness in the same way a single person does.



Bocheński, following Aristotle, and disagreeing with Hegel, holds that in a society the individual is the final subject of authority (Bocheński 1993: 213–215). However, the society is not a fictitious concept, because it includes humans and real relations, therefore it must be something more than simply the sum of individuals. A group is a sum of individuals, such as doctors, government officials, lawyers, etc. (Bocheński 1993: 213). Therefore it cannot be treated as a subject of authority. Bocheński wants to discuss only the relation between one subject, one object and the field. He explains that it is possible to dismantle the group authority to conscious individual subjects and define this relation by referring to them.<sup>10</sup>

Bocheński also inquires about the authority of computers. Is a computer not making decisions instead of a person, and as such could it not be considered a subject of authority? In Bocheński's view computers merely find the best solutions in actual cases, they do not make decisions. More precisely, it is a singular person who makes decisions and at times those decisions are based on information from computers. That makes a person and not a computer the subject of authority. Bocheński stops here and does not elaborate on this point further.

It is worth noticing that since Bocheński wrote his text in the early 1970s the technological advancements and the “computerisation of life” has significantly increased. Would we nowadays consider computers as subjects of authority? How many people turn to an internet search engine such as Google while looking for information? Accessing information through computers is simple, efficient and fast and given today's common internet presence, such as through smartphones, tablets, etc., many people no longer turn to books, dictionaries and expert opinions as they did 40 years ago. Also, there are many e-books and publications which can be found through searching machines or databases. In many instances it is through computers that literature is suggested and obtained. In this case, are computers authorities?

I argue that this contemporary situation entails a more complicated relation than the one Bocheński had in mind. First, it is a group of intelligent people, and big corporations, who engineer the virtual world, import the data and improve services. In that sense, the group, and not the computers, is considered as subject of authority. This inclines one to argue against Bocheński and to assert that groups do, in fact, constitute an authority. Indeed, if we ‘trust’ Google then, by extension, we trust the group of people who created the software. In fact, this would fall under the problem of group authority (discussed above) which Bocheński dismisses on the ground that this is not the type

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<sup>10</sup> The analysis of group authority touches upon the issue of the indirect authority exerted by society on individuals, however for the point being made this issue is irrelevant, therefore I am going to ignore it.

of relation which he had in mind—that is, a relation between a single subject, an object and a concrete field.

Nevertheless, nowadays computers are being used as tools for expertise and analysis. Additionally, the issue gets even more complex due to the algorithmic personalised filters<sup>11</sup> introduced not only by Google but by many searching engines, social networks, electronic retailers etc.<sup>12</sup> Every search made by a single user narrows down the scope of the subsequent searches, until she gets search results tailored to her usual browsing behaviour. This technical aspect gives rise to epistemological and social implications because the information that one reaches is partially chosen by external filters or edited out, and the user might be unaware of it. For Bocheński only individuals count ultimately as subjects of authority, because of their ability to make decisions. However, personalisation influences our decisions, choices and may suggest certain solutions in a limited way. One finds it difficult to deny that changes in media and technology are not having an impact on how authority functions in society. I argue, therefore, that the relation of authority, in this case, is more complex than Bocheński allows for.

### 5. The typology of authority: epistemic and deontic

As I have already noted, Bocheński distinguishes authority as a special type of relation. He specifies that the field of authority consists of a set of propositions (words, sounds and their meanings) or a set of directives (instructions). The former indicate what there is and the later instruct of what should be done. Accordingly, he divides authority into two exhaustive types:

- epistemic: the authority of a person who knows the field better, i.e. the knower, expert, specialist (e.g., the authority of a teacher, a scientist, etc.);
- deontic: the authority of a person in charge who has the right to give orders, i.e. a superior (e.g., a boss, a manager, a director, a commander, etc.; Bocheński 1993: 235-236).

This typology is similar to the Nyāya tradition's division into Vedic prescriptions and statements of a reliable speaker, roughly corresponding to the deontic and epistemic authority, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I owe this remark to Camillo Formigatti.

<sup>12</sup> On this topic see Pariser (2011).

<sup>13</sup> “However, Nyāya authors claim that both ordinary language and the Vedas convey descriptive statements (*siddhārtha*). By contrast, B's distinction more closely resembles the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā distinction between ordinary linguistic communication (conveying descriptive statements, *siddhārtha*) and the Veda (conveying commands, *sādhārtha*). It is in this

Although, as stated in the *Nyāyasūtra*, verbal testimony (*śabda*) applies to perceptible and imperceptible objects, the imperceptible ones can also be known through inferential reasoning (NBh ad 1.1.8.).

Matilal (1986: 34) emphasised that for Naiyāyika philosophers, knowledge derived from scriptures must have an empirical foundation and it would be untenable to assume that they are authorless or without a speaker. The veracity of any statement is dependent on its author's infallibility and this criterion applies also to scriptures.<sup>14</sup>

According to Bocheński, the same person may have the status of being both an epistemic and deontic authority towards the same object and in the same field.<sup>15</sup> Also, it would be desired for the epistemic authority to also correspond to the deontic one, although they are mutually independent. For example, an expert in court is only an epistemic authority but never a deontic one—he provides expertise but cannot punish (Bocheński 1993: 237-238). Many misuses happen when the subject of authority of one type is confused with another, such as in a situation where a deontic authoritative speaker thinks that he is also an expert in the field.

The epistemic authoritative speaker should provide (communicate) propositions that are taken as true (or probable) by the listener. Bocheński calls this requirement a “relation between the proposition and the state of knowledge”.<sup>16</sup> This means that in the moment when the authoritative speaker communicates a proposition, the (subjective) probability that this proposition is true raises (Bocheński 1993: 242). One must be convinced about the authority's competence; namely, that she really knows the field and is more competent than the person who recognises her expertise.

## 6. Properties of the relation of authority

Bocheński characterises the relation between the subject and the object of authority as threefold: a) irreflexive, b) asymmetric, and c) transitive (Bocheński 1993: 223). He formulates the following theses:<sup>17</sup>

- In any field no one can be an authority for himself.

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connection interesting that also Mīmāṃsā authors conceived of deontic authority (*pravartanā*) as a relation between speaker and hearer (although no field is discussed)". Footnote by Elisa Freschi.

<sup>14</sup> This position was developed against the Mīmāṃsā view that the Vedas are authorless.

<sup>15</sup> However, in this case the field is not the same but only closely related. The field of deontic authority consists of a set of directives whereas the field of epistemic authority consist of practical propositions.

<sup>16</sup> The state of knowledge is defined as the class of all sentences that are taken to be true by the intended epistemic agent.

<sup>17</sup> The translation of the theses is from Bocheński (1993: 219-223).

- It is logically possible that when A is the subject and B is the object of authority in a given field, simultaneously B is the subject and A is the object in another field.
- If P is an authority for S in the field D, then S is not an authority for P in the field D.
- When A is an authority for B in a field D, and B is an authority for C in the same field, then at the same time A is an authority for C in a field D.

He justifies the above claims by providing selected examples. Unfortunately, not all of them appear to be conclusive. To start with, in support of the irreflexivity condition (claim 1) he gives the following example: suppose he would like to know where and what he was doing on a specific date in 1962. In his agenda of 1962 it is written that at that moment he was attending a congress in Chicago; in this case, it appears that he is an authority for himself (while turning to his own handwriting in that agenda). Bocheński, however, admits that this is not the case because he is no longer exactly the same person as then because, at that time, he knew that he was in Chicago and now he does not. He states that from a logical point of view, it is impossible that a person could simultaneously know and not know something and therefore he concludes that a person cannot be an authority for oneself.

Bocheński's example is not very convincing because it touches the problem of personal identity. If I do not remember something I knew before, does it follow that I am not the same person? How does one make such a distinction? Can personal identity be based on knowledge? Bocheński, in that way, presupposes a certain theory of personal identity. However, every day I forget many important facts while, on the other hand, I know things that I have learned, seen or experienced. Also, there are cases when information is 'in the back of my mind' and only when it becomes important is it recollected. We also take stands based on some intuition and only when prompted for the motivation behind the choice we do recall the exact data.

Can, then, one speak of oneself as an authority for oneself? In the above case, a person ends up remembering something she was not aware of. In the Indian framework these two means of knowledge are clearly distinguished: by using her own memory, she knows something by the way of recollection (*smṛti*), not by authority or word (*śabda*). Therefore, this example gives a certain picture but does not address the problem of being an authority for oneself. Therefore, the irreflexive property is a problematic one.

Mutual authority is possible only in two different disciplines, not in the same one (claim 2 and 3). Bocheński justifies this assertion saying that if he is an authority in the field of logic for L., L. cannot be an authority for him in logic. Similarly, the colonel cannot be an authority for the general in the same military matter because he would be a superior of his superior, which he is not

(Bocheński (1993: 221). This suggests, then, that there is a hierarchy. Moreover, as in the case of the irreflexive property, there is always a difference in the set of epistemic conditions defining the subject and the object of an authority relation, i.e., they do not share exactly the same set of epistemic conditions.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is always possible to define a sub-field of expertise in which one is an expert and the other one is not.

However, is this argument convincing? After all, one might argue that two experts in the same field can be authorities for each other. Why would not two biologists value each other as authorities, if they are both experts in snails? Should we say that biologist A values biologist B as an authority concerning snails of the type D, which B knows better, but not about the ones (type E) which A knows better? Bocheński mentions the case of PhD students who know very little but if hard-working and gifted they can surpass their supervisor and become experts in their field. Is this example appropriate? Are the students beginning in a general, wider discipline (which is common to them and the supervisor) and then, through a course of specialisation, becoming experts in a different ‘field’? Or could we not simply say that they are becoming experts in a single discipline—in philosophy or biology? The problem here is that it is difficult to establish independently of the issue of authority what a field contains and where its borders are. The notion of a field is purely abstract and a field may contain many sub-fields, e.g. when we say that someone is an expert in philosophy, he or she is an expert in a particular field of philosophy, such as philosophy of mind, formal epistemology or ancient philosophy. Thus, the definition of the impossibility of mutual authority lies also in the sociology of epistemological processes, just like the impossibility of an irreflexive authority depended on psychology.<sup>19</sup>

Besides, the examples mentioned above refer to different kinds of authorities—the first instance refers to the authority of an academic supervisor and the second to the authority of an expert (i.e., the two biologists). In such cases, it would be more appropriate to claim that mutual authority is only impossible in the case of epistemic authority (scientists and experts) but not in the case of deontic authority (supervisors, etc.). It seems that even Bocheński would acknowledge this claim, because in another paragraph he admits that authority may be reversed (i.e. the roles may change), such as in the example of a pilot who is steering on one route while the co-pilot takes over and steers on the next route.

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<sup>18</sup> I owe this remark to Marie-Hélène Gorisse.

<sup>19</sup> I owe this remark to Elisa Freschi.

Is the relation of authority transitive in the sense that if person A is an authority for person B, who is an authority for person C, A is also an authority for C (claim 4)? Although this appears ideal it does not necessarily work in real life. One's choice of a particular authority may depend on various factors, e.g. personal preferences, recommendations of friends or family. Also, the choice of authority may vary from another person's choice in the same field. For example, I may consider my general doctor a better expert than my colleague's preferred general doctor. Moreover, what if somebody does not perceive himself or herself as an authority in a certain field; such as due to the lack of self-esteem, but others regard him or her as the authority in the field?<sup>20</sup>

From the above discussion it follows that a person cannot be an authority for oneself and that there is no mutual authority of subjects in the same field. There might be cases where a mutual relation of authority seems plausible, but this applies merely to the deontic type of authority. The relation of authority is also transitive when restricted to experts in the same area, however the recognition of authority might be subjective.

What is more, Bocheński admits that even an authority may sometimes be mistaken, all in all, he or she is still a person. This leads to an important question: is there an absolute epistemic authoritative speaker? Or a universal one? For instance, some people believe in the absolute authority of their teachers (also spiritual teachers, priests, gurus) and leaders. There are also people who play the role of an absolute authority in a religious context, such as in the case of the pontiff of a monastery or an ashram.

Bocheński's position is that such epistemological claims would be *a priori* impossible and would, as such, invalidate the authority of the individuals that make them. It could still be said, that a guru, etc., has an absolute deontic authority over his disciples, which is a different matter. In this case another point of Bocheński becomes relevant, i.e. the need to distinguish between deontic and epistemic authority. According to Bocheński, the ones who have the former may not have the latter.

Further, Bocheński warns against the misuse of authority, which is of two types:

- When a person tries to extend the authority over a field that he or she is not competent in, e.g. a professor of geography is not an expert in politics,
- When there is no relation of authority, e.g. an officer is an authority for soldiers but not for civilians (Bocheński (1993: 227)).

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<sup>20</sup> I owe this remark to Camillo Formigatti.

Authorities may be falsely recognised on the basis of unjustified generalisations, such is the case when an expert in one area is assumed to be an expert in another. Bocheński explains that this results from habit: if a person is looked at as an authority in a particular area, she or he is sometimes uncritically considered an expert also in other areas. In contrast, for Bocheński a relation of authority does not automatically transfer across fields but needs to be justified for every particular field.

### 7. Attributes of the speaker and the listener

Bocheński's emphasis on the author resembles the Nyāya stress on the reliable speaker (*āpta*) as a source of valid knowledge.<sup>21</sup> The question here is: which attributes should an authority possess? For Naiyāyika philosophers, the reliable speaker should possess three qualities (*Nyāyabhaṣya* ad 1.1.7):<sup>22</sup>

- honesty, sincerity,
- direct experience of the essence of things (*dharma*), i.e., competence,
- desire to speak of things for what they are or what they are not, i.e., intention to communicate.

Vācaspati Mīśra (ca. 9<sup>th</sup> century) in his commentary on the NS adds that the direct experience of the essence of things or, in other words, gaining the direct knowledge of an object, is ascertained through any source of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) i.e. perception, inference, analogy or testimony. Therefore, the authoritative speaker is by definition giving access to a direct experience of the essence of things.<sup>23</sup>

Bocheński would agree with the requirement pertaining to the speaker's qualities. As noted, he argues that the subject of authority should be competent, that is, more competent than the listener and must tell the truth (Bocheński 1993: 243). Trust and superiority are, therefore, the necessary conditions in this relation. Moreover, the speaker is considered reliable due to his or her previous reliability.

Who could become an authoritative speaker? According to Bocheński, a conscious individual. Each person is authoritative in at least one field—his or her personal experiences, feelings, impressions and sensations. However, no living person can be an absolute authority in all fields excluding God. Ascribing such an authoritative character to some mythological figures, dictators, or even celebrities is, on Bocheński's account, a serious misunderstanding.

<sup>21</sup> As distinguished from the Mīmāṃsā's concept of language's validity as being independent of any author.

<sup>22</sup> *āptaḥ khalu sāksātkṛtadharmā yathādr̥ṣṭasyārthasya cikhyāpayiṣayā prayukta upadeṣṭā [...]* ṛṣyāryamlecchānām samānaṃ lakṣaṇam (Thakur's ed.: 14).

<sup>23</sup> *Nyāyavārtika-tātparyaṭikā* ad NS 1.1.7. (comment in *The Nyāya-Sūtras of Gautama* vol.1 Jha's ed.: 201)

The Nyāya tradition agrees that every person can become an expert: a noble person, a barbarian or a seer (NBh *ad* 1.1.7).<sup>24</sup> Also the authoritative character of the Veda is recognised out of the fact that the Veda has a reliable source, its speaker, and its validity is due to the speaker's worthiness. Matilal (1986: 34) adds that for the Naiyāyika its author is God—a being with perfect knowledge.

Is there a universal authoritative teacher? Bocheński states clearly that no person can be an authority in all fields. Similarly, the Nyāya philosopher Vātsyāyana's (ca 5<sup>th</sup> century CE) division of authority—into the categories of sage, noble and barbarian—also suggests that there is no universal authority. Indeed each of the aforementioned types of speakers could have a distinct role and place in the society and, consequently, an appropriate area of expertise.

Thus, since the reliable speaker is only identified through the three qualities mentioned above, it is important to recognise them. In the next section, I will turn to the question of how they are established.

## 8. The recognition of authority

How is authority recognised? Both Bocheński and Nyāya philosophers emphasise that authority is established mainly through inference. For Nyāya a statement of a reliable person may concern both perceivable and unperceivable objects. In the *Nyāyasūtra*, Akṣapāda Gautama (ca. 200 BC) states that the statement of a reliable person is valid not only for objects perceived through sense perception but also for unperceivable objects that are known through inference. This means that the validity of a statement of a reliable person can be verified by means of inference when it concerns an unperceivable object and by other means (e.g. perception) if it concerns a perceivable one. Vātsyāyana adds further that this partition was made on account of the difference between the common language and the language of seers (NBh *ad* 1.1.8),<sup>25</sup> for the seers (ṛṣi) possess the ability to directly perceive objects that are not directly perceived by the common person. Vācaspati emphasises that inference is the root source for verifying the speaker's reliability—it accounts for the reliability of common speakers (Freschi and Graheli 2005: 301). Jonardon Ganeri underscores the importance of Vātsyāyana's position because:

...it implies that the scriptures do not have any special claim to our assent, but are to be believed for precisely the same reasons as any other piece of testimony, namely because the transmitter is credible. A credible person is one who is knowledgeable about the

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<sup>24</sup> See *supra* fn. 22.

<sup>25</sup> *evam ṛṣilaukikavākyaṅāṅ vibhāga iti* (NS *ad* 1.1.8).



subject matter, and who has a sincere desire to communicate that knowledge, and can come from any walk of life or branch of society (Ganeri 2001: 35).

What is in need of an establishment is the authoritative character of a given speaker and not the correctness of a given speech.

In *The Logic of Religion* Bocheński emphasises that the asserted statement must belong to the field of competence:

We may now ask ourselves: What is the structure of a justification by authority? At least two premises must be assumed in order that it may work at all. The first states that a certain person is an authority in a given field; the second, that a certain sentence has been asserted by this person and that it belongs to the field in question (Bocheński 1965: 122).

Bocheński provides the following schema of the recognition of authority:

- without justification,
- with justification:
  - through direct insight,
  - through inference from the experience of:
    - the subject of authority,
    - the group to which a subject of authority belongs (Bocheński 1996: 244).

According to Bocheński, the recognition of authority without justification should be avoided; rather, recognising authority should be based on a reasonable justification which usually is of two types: direct insight, i.e. seeing directly the truth of the statement (e.g. that it is raining) or inference (e.g. the ground is wet, so it is inferred that it must have been raining). The most common way in which an authority is recognised is inference. Bocheński adds that in the case of epistemic authority inferential reasoning consists of generalisation based on two types of experiences:

- the truth of the proposition is inferred from previous experience—e.g. when an authority was telling the truth many times, then he or she is expected to always be right in a particular field.
- inferred from what is known about the group to which an authority belongs—e.g. previous experiences with people belonging to the same discipline, such as with doctors.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In both cases this inference is based on inductive reasoning, therefore it does not warrant its truth (Bocheński 1996: 248).

Bocheński holds that previous experience with a speaker, or a speaker belonging to the same discipline, is important for the recognition of authority. However, is authority established only through our positive experience with a speaker who previously has been sincere, so that, as a consequence, we assume that she is always telling the truth?

While discussing the issue of testimony in the Nyāya tradition, Ganeri inquires whether the hearer must establish that the speaker is competent, sincere and compassionate before the hearer is entitled to believe the speaker. He answers that to believe in any utterance while hoping that the speaker has such qualities seems improbable because “that would be an epistemic charter for the gullible” (see Fricker 1994). Ganeri refers to the Nyāya position where one ‘monitors’ the speaker through an internal ‘lie-detector’. The hearer subconsciously registers if she is blushing, nervous, irritated or fidgety and therefore does not need to form beliefs about the speaker’s truthfulness and competence:

Assent is made rational in a negative way, by the absence of evidence that the speaker is deceitful, rather than by positive evidence that she is sincere. It is rational in the same way that it is rational for one to believe that one has not just trodden on a nail. One need have no positive reason for so believing (a visual inspection of the foot, for example) for one knows that, if one had just trodden on a nail, one would have come to know about it. The ‘reasoning’ is *ad ignorantiam* and not inductive (Ganeri 2001: 36).

Would Bocheński agree with the establishment of an authority in a negative way, i.e. by the absence of any evidence that a speaker is deceitful? In the example used to support the thesis that authority is established through the medium of direct insight he states:

[S]omeone who is charged with a crime comes to me, looks me in the eyes and says: “I was not at the crime scene”. It can happen that I will believe him, but it means that I had some insight in his personality and it convinced me that he knows of what he is telling and he is telling the truth. But those are, everyone will admit, the very peculiar cases which in practice have a very little meaning. The normal way to the recognition of authority is inference (Bocheński 1996: 247).

However, is it convincing that we should include this kind of test under an additional category, namely, direct insight? Does not the belief in a person’s truthfulness or deceitfulness come from past experiences linked with the current case through inference? Or, perhaps, following contemporary Naiyāyikas, we should rather speak of the internal ‘lie-detector’ mechanism? Still, the example provided by Bocheński does not exactly parallel (as he would like) the justification of the claim that it is raining provided through the fact that one sees it directly.

## 9. Concluding remarks

Both Bocheński and Nyāya philosophers agree that authority is a linguistic communication mechanism where the speaker has an intention to communicate instruction or share certain knowledge by the use of linguistic utterances. The hearer is required to be linguistically competent and to acknowledge, recognise and approve of what has been asserted. The speaker should be reliable and have an intention or desire to instruct or share knowledge.

Indeed, authority is a relation between living individuals. Bocheński emphasises that it is a particular relation between the subject and object in a specific field. The relation is irreflexive, asymmetric and transitive. Bocheński warns against misuses which can occur when an expert in a particular field is erroneously considered an expert in another field or when there is no relation of authority at all.

Bocheński develops his own typology of authority distinguishing epistemic and deontic authority. The former applies to the authority of a person who knows the field better and provides statements. Epistemic authority, therefore, entails a knower or an expert. The latter, deontic, entails a person who is in charge; that is, one who gives orders or prescriptions such as a supervisor.

For Nyāya philosophers, testimony is defined as a statement of a reliable speaker. The knowledge coming from scriptures is also credible owing to the reliability of an author or a person who transmitted them. An authority may be a noble person, a barbarian or a seer. Naiyāyikas would agree with Bocheński that it is important that a speaker possesses three qualities: competence, honesty and desire to speak. However, no one is an absolute authority excluding God—a being who possesses perfect knowledge.

With that being said, how is authority recognised? Bocheński and Naiyāyikas answer that it is established mainly through inference. With regard to epistemic authority, Bocheński states that it is inferred from a previous experience with a specific person or with people belonging to the same discipline as the person in question. Such an inference happens through positive evidence (that the speaker is sincere) or absence of negative evidence (that one is deceitful). And, in case of doubt, one may have an 'insight' into the speaker's personality or use an internal 'lie-detector' mechanism, two methods which function in a comparable way for Naiyāyikas and Bocheński.

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## Bhaṭṭa Jayanta:

### Comprehension, Knowledge, and the Reduction of Testimony to Inference<sup>1</sup>

Alessandro Graheli

The present paper is an analysis of the defense of the epistemological autonomy of verbal testimony (*śabda*), against its reduction to inference, as found in Bhaṭṭa Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī*. The article identifies the Vaiśeṣika, Buddhist and Sāṅkhya positions hinted at in the *Nyāyamañjarī*, and it analyses the reuse by Jayanta of the arguments conceived by the Mīmāṃsā philosopher Kumāṛila. Unlike for Mīmāṃsakas, according to Jayanta the relation between language and reality is established by convention, but in its day-to-day usage it is clear that an a priori connection is a necessary condition for linguistic communication, so that the distinction between a fixed connection and a conventional one weakens. The analysis of Jayanta leads to two general conclusions: 1. In ancient Nyāya as attested by Jayanta there is no distinction between non-committal understanding and committal knowledge from words. Consequently, 2. in ancient Nyāya as attested by Jayanta the language is primarily examined from an epistemological viewpoint, as the conveyer of true statements. There are no "neutral" statements, and false statements are in fact inappropriate uses of language.

## 1. Introduction

*The reasons why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connexion, which we perceive a priori, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them*

(D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*)

### 1.1. The reduction of *śabda* to inference

The present paper is an analysis of the defense of the epistemological autonomy of verbal testimony (*śabda*), against its reduction to inference, as found in Bhaṭṭa Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī*. This study has

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is in part based on the copies of manuscripts gathered during projects G1160-M15, P17244, P19328 and P24388, granted by the FWF (Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung), and archived at the ISTB, University of Vienna. I am grateful to Karin Preisendanz, who allowed me to use such material. Elisa Freschi read an early draft of this paper and suggested valuable improvements. She also found useful parallels from Mīmāṃsā sources, thus enhancing the scope of this research.

been inspired by pioneering papers on the same passages of the NM, notably Matilal 1994 and Taber 1996. The present effort is more textually-oriented and aims at a contribution in the following respects:

- A more complete presentation of Jayanta’s perspective on the issue.
- A deeper analysis of the relation of Jayanta’s arguments with Kumārila’s.
- A systematic identification and clarification of the Vaiśeṣika, Buddhist and Sāṅkhya positions on the issue, as found in the NM.

Jayanta, an exponent of old Nyāya, stages a debate that integrates arguments from Mīmāṃsaka, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya and Buddhist sources.<sup>2</sup> Like Kumārila, by whom he is undoubtedly inspired, Jayanta does not explicitly label the various schools and positions, although these are more tidily arranged in Jayanta’s presentation. In short, the Vaiśeṣika arguments in favor of a reduction of *śabda* to inference concern the necessary relation among the instrument of knowledge and the object of knowledge (*artha*),<sup>3</sup> on which both inference and *śabda* are based, as well as the unperceived *artha* which distinguishes both inference and *śabda* from direct perception. Quite differently, the Buddhist reduction mainly hinges on the inference of the intention of the speaker and on his authoritativeness. The Sāṅkhya defense of an independent epistemological status of *śabda* is based on the peculiarity of the need of a speaker, of his intention, and of specific processes on the side of the hearer, peculiarities not found in inference; the Sāṅkhya arguments, however, are considered inconclusive by Kumārila and Jayanta.

Some of the pre-Kumārila arguments and objections are summed up by Taber (1996: 22-23). In the present paper further more parallels from Nyāya, Buddhism, Vaiśeṣika, and Mīmāṃsā sources are provided, although an exhausting collection of Jayanta’s sources goes beyond the scope of this paper and needs to be carried on elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> As a general indication for non-specialists, the Nyāya tradition largely deals with problems of epistemology, dialectics and logic; Mīmāṃsā is mostly concerned with the interpretation of the Veda and defense of its authority; and Sāṅkhya is mostly known as a system of metaphysics. These three accept *śabda* as an instrument of knowledge, independent from inference. In Vaiśeṣika, also a system of metaphysics, and in Buddhism, which in the present debate refers to the epistemology of Dīnāga and Dharmakīrti, *śabda* is reduced to inference. For further details, see the introduction of the present volume.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, rendering *śabda* with “verbal testimony”, “linguistic expression”, etc., and *artha* with “object of knowledge”, “meaning”, etc., would be a potentially misleading choice. Since the discussion always revolves around *śabda* and *artha*, they will be left untranslated, in the hope that the context will help to understand their import better than an arbitrary English equivalent.



### 1.2. Understanding words and knowing from words

Upon hearing a linguistic expression, the epistemic reaction of the hearer could be considered committal, non-committal, or both. The issue is eloquently put by Matilal (1994: 348) as follows:

It is frequently heard “I understand what you mean” and along with it comes the disclaimer “but I do not accept it”. As knowledge or belief is based upon total acceptance, such an understanding of what the speaker means can hardly amount to knowledge on the part of the auditor. [...] then understanding (and the attendant interpretation) can be the intermediate stage in providing us with the final knowledge or belief that we may possibly derive from the testimony of [...] any [...] knowledgeable person.

According to Matilal (1994: 355) this scenario is not endorsed in Nyāya: “The Naiyāyikas were against the deployment of such a basic attitude prior to the belief-claim or knowledge claim that arises in the hearer”.

Taber (1996: 20), while studying arguments in favour and against the reduction of verbal testimony to inference, noticed that this claim of an absence of distinction between committal and non-committal knowledge from words may not be applicable to Nyāya *tout court*:

[...] I would like to suggest a minor qualification of Matilal’s interpretation of the Nyāya position. While it is indeed the case that Nyāya, especially later Nyāya, rejects an initial grasp of the meaning of a statement as *the author’s thought or intention*, it nevertheless does make a distinction between apprehending the meaning of a statement and apprehending its truth.

Taber cautions that his criticism of Matilal’s characterisation of Nyāya is specifically based on the point of view of Jayanta, who flourished at the end of the 9th century. Taber, however, also thinks that this point of view can be extended to other Nyāya sources (Taber 1996: 20).

### 1.3. Jayanta and Mīmāṃsā

As in other sections of the NM, also in the passage studied here Jayanta extensively quotes and draws ideas from Mīmāṃsā works, and most often from Kumārila Bhaṭṭa’s *Ślokavārttika*. But he also distances himself from Mīmāṃsā tenets not acceptable by Naiyāyikas. More specifically, for the present purposes, the assumption of the *artha* of individual words as a qualified individual (*tadvat*) is an essential aspect in which Jayanta differs from Kumārila and other Mīmāṃsakas, according to whom the *artha* is primarily a universal. Jayanta’s reuses of Kumārila’s statements should thus be

read, *mutatis mutandis*, with such distinctions in mind, for even when Kumāriḷa’s words are cited verbatim it is quite possible that terms denote radically different concepts in the two schools and are thus diversely intended by Jayanta, in the flow of his argumentation.

## 2. The context

### 2.1. The Nyāyamañjarī

Bhaṭṭa Jayanta’s *Nyāyamañjarī* is a treatise on the tenets of Nyāya, the system of epistemology, dialectics and logic traditionally rooted in the *Nyāyasūtra* of Akṣapāda Gotama (c. 200–400 CE). The NM was composed at the end of the 9th c. CE and it unfolds in 12 parts, called *āhnikā*-s (“daily lessons”).<sup>4</sup>

From NM 3 to NM 6, almost half of the whole NM, Jayanta debates issues related to the acquisition of knowledge from *śabda*. A crucial passage, the topic of this paper, concerns the status of *śabda* as an autonomous instrument of knowledge, or whether it should rather be reduced to inference. The issue of the reduction of *śabda* to inference has already engaged scholars such as Matilal, Chakrabarti, Taber and Ganeri, so there is not much scope to say something new. The goal of this paper is to present again the gist of their arguments in the flow of Jayanta’s own treatment, to give them some new perspective, just like “flowers from previous chaplets may generate a new interest when rearranged on a new string.”<sup>5</sup>

Jayanta’s eloquence in representing views that oppose his own Nyāya tradition, to the extent that scholars often turn to the NM to figure out the original views, is well known.<sup>6</sup> The reason behind the popularity of the NM in modern studies, however, can be traced back not only to Jayanta’s lucid and natural style of Sanskrit, but also to his strategically arranged questions and answers. The efficacy of philosophical arguments staged in a dialogical form is brilliantly captured by Gadamer (2000, II, 3, c: 746):

The essence of the question is that it has a sense. A sense, however, is a direction. The sense of a question is thus the direction in which the answer must result, if it expects to

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<sup>4</sup> An overview of the textual transmission and of the contents of the NM, as well as details on Jayanta’s time and life, can be found in Graheli (2015, chapter 1).

<sup>5</sup> *vacovinyāsavaicitryamātram atra vicāryatām // tair eva kusumaiḥ pūrvam asakṛt kṛtaśekharāḥ / apūrvavaracane dāmnī dadhaty eva kutūhalam //* (NMVa, I 3, 5–6).

<sup>6</sup> E. g., see Kataoka (2008: 3): “Jayanta explains Kumāriḷa’s discussions in a lucid manner [...] Jayanta’s *Nyāyamañjarī* can be used as a kind of commentary on or introduction to the *Mīmāṃsāslokaṽrttika*”.

be a meaningful, significant answer. The question puts the object of inquiry into a specific perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Jayanta's style of debate is thus a point of strength of his writings. The subject matter appears in full clarity exactly because of the well-structured and increasingly subtler objections and counter-objections. Hence, to render full justice to Jayanta's point of view, it is important to present the complete debate on a given issue.<sup>8</sup> The present attempt is to transmit the flavour of the debate found in the NM as exhaustively as possible.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Jayanta tends to mirror, in his syntheses, the concatenation of the points raised by the staged opponents in the antitheses, so the philosophical import of a full section is significantly influenced by the very position of its various subsections, which will thus be presented in Jayanta's own sequence.

As mentioned above, in this paper the terms *śabda* and *artha* are not translated. The latter term, particularly, requires some explanation, since Jayanta is known for its peculiar views about it.

## 2.2. Bhaṭṭa Jayanta on the *artha* of words

In tune with the realist, empiricist approach of mainstream Nyāya, Jayanta tends to assume the external reality of objects of knowledge,<sup>10</sup> which is true also for objects known by verbal testimony. Such denoted objects, according to *Nyāyasūtra* 2.2.66, (NBhTha 132), *vyaktyākṛtijātayas tu padārthaḥ*, can be individuals, shapes, or universals. Referring to this *sūtra*, Jayanta asks (NMVa, II 47, 5-6):

*evaṃ siddhe bāhye 'rthe [...] adhunā  
vivicyate<sup>11</sup> gośabdaḥ kim ākṛter vācakaḥ*

Having thus established the external  
*artha* [...], now the word "cow" is going

<sup>7</sup> *In Wesen der Frage liegt, daß sie einen Sinn hat. Sinn aber is Richtungssinn. Der Sinn der Frage is mithin die Richtung, in der die Antwort allein erfolgen kann, wenn sie sinnvolle, sinngemäße Antwort sein will. Mit der Frage wird das Befragte in eine bestimmte Hinsicht gerückt.*

<sup>8</sup> In this sense Kei Kataoka has set the benchmark of NM studies, by his editions, translations and studies of thematic sections of the NM, each inclusive of all the objections and counter-objections.

<sup>9</sup> The text of NMVa has been checked and occasionally emended with the variants found in P and K, as well as GBhSha, according to the editorial principles explained in Graheli (2012) and Graheli (2015, chapter 5). A summary of the passage examined in this paper can be found in Potter (1977: 365).

<sup>10</sup> See also NMVa, II 540, 16, where Jayanta distinguishes the teleological from the ontological use of the word (*arthaḥ arthyamānaḥ ucyate, na vasturūpa eva, abhāvasyāpi prayojanatvasaṃbhavāt /*)

<sup>11</sup> *vivicyate] vicāryate* NMVa

*uta vyakteḥ atha jāter iti.*

to be examined. Is it the signifier of the shape, of the individual, or of the universal?

Before Jayanta, the topic of this *sūtra* had been an object of dispute among Buddhists, Mīmāṃsakas and Naiyāyikas. Dīnnāga rejected the theory that common nouns refer to universals and saw usages in apposition (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*) as a problem in this theory: “If the word ‘*sat*’ denotes the universal *sattā*, then it would not be co-referential with the words denoting particulars, such as ‘*dravya*’, etc., and there would not be such expressions as ‘*sad dravyam*’, ‘*saṅ guṇaḥ*’ and the like” (Hattori 1996, 387).

Dīnnāga also mentioned with disapproval the notion that the *artha* of words is a *tadvat*, the “possessor of that”: “[A *jāti-śabda* is not [a denoter] of a [particular] possessing that [universal] (*tadvat* = *jātimat*), because [it is] not independent [in denoting that object].”<sup>12</sup>

The concept of *tadvat* as the *artha* of words is already introduced by Uddyotakāra in the *Nyāyavārttika*, though it is often associated to Jayanta and the NM, where it is discussed in depth. Merits and flaws of this theory have been discussed in Ganeri 1996 and Ganeri (1999, § 4.1, 4.2). Since for the purpose of the present paper it is important to understand Jayanta’s position as clearly as possible, the relevant passages of the NM will be again presented and discussed here.

The *tadvat*, the ‘possessor-of-that’, would be the *artha* of common nouns denoting substances, such as “cow” — i. e., excluding nouns denoting unique individuals without extension, such as *ākāśa* (“ether”), which do not have a correlative universal (NMVa, II 59,4-60, 7):

*anyeṣu tu prayogeṣu gāṃ dehīty*<sup>13</sup>  
*evamādiṣu / tadvato ’rthakriyāyogāt*  
*tasyaivāhuḥ padārthatām // padaṃ*  
*tadvantam*<sup>14</sup> *evārtham*  
*āñjasyenābhijalpati*<sup>15</sup> / *na ca vyavahitā*  
*buddhir na ca bhārasya gauravam //*  
*sāmānādhikaraṇyādīvyavahāraś ca*<sup>16</sup>

In other usages, such as [the injunction] “donate a cow!”, they said that the *artha* of a word is the “possessor-of-that” (*tadvat*), because of pragmatic reasons (*arthakriyāyogāt*). The word directly expresses (*āñjasyenābhijalpati*) the *artha*, i. e., the

<sup>12</sup> Tr. Hattori 2000, 142. The Sanskrit version of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* passage has been reconstructed in Muni Jambuvijaya 1976, 607, as *tadvato nāsvatantratvād upacārād asamभवāt / bhinnatvād buddhirūpasya rājñi bhṛtyopacāravat*. It is also quoted in GBhSha, 137–138, albeit with *vṛttirūpasya bhinnatvād* in *c*.

<sup>13</sup> *dehīty*] *dogdhīty* K

<sup>14</sup> *padaṃ tadvantam*] *padatadvantam* P

<sup>15</sup> *-bhijalpati*] *-bhijalpanti* P

<sup>16</sup> *ca*] *pi* NMVa

*mukhyayā / vṛtṭyopapadyamānaḥ<sup>17</sup> san  
nānyathā yojayīṣyate // tasmāt tadvān  
eva padārthaḥ<sup>18</sup> //*

“possessor-of-that”,<sup>19</sup> without interruptions in the cognitive process or anti-economical assumptions.<sup>20</sup> The practical usage, for instance in cases of apposition (*sāmānādhikarāṇya*), can be explained by direct signification, and not otherwise. Therefore only the “possessor-of-that” is the *artha* of the word.

Ganeri renders Jayanta’s views on the *tadvat* as follows, translating NMShu, 295:

‘*Tadvān*’ literally means ‘this has that’ (*tad asyāsti*), so what is meant is that a particular is the owner of a property. But if it is the particular which is the designatum, then the infinity and discrepancy faults recur, [especially] since the property is not [considered by you to be] an undesignated indicator (*upalakṣaṇa*). And if both [particular and property] are designated, then the word has an excessive [semantic] burden (Ganeri 1999: 103).

It may help to have a closer look to the text of the NM (NMVa II 59,13-16), which can also be translated as follows:<sup>21</sup>

*nanu ko ’yaṃ tadvān nāma.  
tad asyāstīti tadvān iti viśeṣa eva  
sāmānyavān ucyate. viśeṣavācyatve  
cānantyavyabhicārau tadavasthau.  
sāmānyam tu śabdenānucyamānaṃ  
nopalakṣaṇam<sup>22</sup> bhavati. ubhayābhidhāne  
ca śabdasyātībhāra ity uktam.*

[Objection:] What exactly is this  
“possessor-of-that”?

[Reply:] “Possessor-of-that”, literally  
“this has that”, is exactly a particular  
(*viśeṣa*) which possesses the universal  
(*sāmānyā*). If the [mere] particular  
(*viśeṣa*) is assumed to be expressed,  
fallacies of endlessness and ambiguity  
ensue. And the universal (*sāmānyā*),

<sup>17</sup> *vṛtṭyopapadyamānaḥ*] *vṛtṭyopapādyamānaḥ* NMVa

<sup>18</sup> *padārthaḥ*] *śabdārthā* K

<sup>19</sup> In the P reading, “they unhesitatingly assert that the *artha* is exactly the ‘possessor-of-that’, i. e., of the word”.

<sup>20</sup> The “interruption in the cognitive process” refers to objections about a possible overlapping of cognitive processes such as perception, mnemonic dispositions, memory, and prior knowledge of the relation among words and *artha*-s. The “anti-economical assumptions” are theories which involve the postulation of multiple unseen forces, such as the theory of the *sphoṭa*, in the view of Jayanta and the Mīmāṃsakas. Such problems are discussed in NM 6. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ganeri’s text of reference is NMShu. In this paper, however, the more reliable text of NMVa is adopted and, wherever necessary, emended on the basis of the two best manuscripts, P and K.

<sup>22</sup> *nopalakṣaṇam*] *nopalakṣyamānaṃ* NMShu NMVa

which is not expressed by a word, cannot be an accidental characteristic (*upalakṣaṇa*)<sup>23</sup> [of a particular]. And in the hypothesis that both [particular and universal] are designated [by a same word], there is an excessive burden on the word.

If common nouns such as “cow” are taken to designate particulars, indeed, major issues arise. By “endlessness” (*ānantya*) it is meant that, since potentially there are endless referents of a common noun, it is absurd to claim that it designates an individual thing. The “ambiguity” (*vyabhicāra*) is that a common noun may then refer to heterogeneous entities such as substances, qualities, etc., as in the case of the word *sat* (“existent”, “real thing”), which may refer to a quality as well as to a substance (Hattori 1996, 337; 2000, 141).

A problem in Ganeri’s interpretation of the passage is his use of the equivalent “property” for *sāmānya*. In the present context the Sanskrit term is clearly used, as a synonym of *jāti*, “universal”. While Ganeri’s use may suit the flow of his argumentation, it does not reflect the status of the universals in Jayanta’s ontology.

Ganeri further explains Jayanta’s position as follows, translating NMS<sub>hu</sub>, 296:

[Jayanta replies]: What is meant is this. The ‘property-possessor’ (*tadvān*) is not a particular individual, such as Śābaleya, which is indicated by the word ‘this’ [in ‘this has that’], and it is not the collection of all the individual [cows, say] in the world. It is the substratum of a universal. The aforementioned particular Śābaleya is said to be the ‘*tadvān*’ because it is the substratum of the universal [cowhood], and so neither infinity nor discrepancy are relevant [objections]. Nor do we admit that a word designates the qualificant [i.e. the particular] without designating the qualifier [i.e. the property]. Since [someone who understands the word] knows a relation [between it] and a property-substratum, [the word] just means a *tadvān*. So where is the word’s excessive [semantic] burden? (Ganeri 1999, 103).

An alternative translation, and an improved NM text, run as follows (NMVa, II 63,14-64, 6):

*ucyate. nedantānirdīśyamānaḥ  
śābaleyādiviśeṣas tadvān, na ca sarvas*

[Jayanta’s synthesis:] We say: the  
“possessor-of-that” is not a particular

<sup>23</sup> According to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, a universal inheres in a particular, it is not an accidental aspect of a particular.

trailokyavartī vyaktivrātas tadvān. kintu  
 sāmānyāśrayaḥ<sup>24</sup> kaścid  
 anullikhitaśābaleyādiviśeṣaḥ tadvān ity  
 ucyate. sāmānyāśrayatvān<sup>25</sup>  
 nānantyavyabhicārayos tatrāvasaraḥ. na  
 ca viśeṣaṇam abhidhāya<sup>26</sup> viśeṣyam  
 abhivadati<sup>27</sup> śabda ity upagacchāmaḥ,<sup>28</sup>  
 yenainam atibhāreṇa pīḍayema.<sup>29</sup>  
 sāmānyāśrayamātre saṅketagrahaṇāt  
 tāvanmātraṃ vadataḥ śabdasya ko<sup>30</sup>  
 'tibhāraḥ. evaṃ ca<sup>31</sup> tadvato<sup>32</sup>  
 nāsvatantratvād ityādidūṣaṇaṃ  
 parihrtaṃ bhavati.

such as Śābaleya indicated by an ostensive individuation (*idantā*). Nor is the “possessor-of-that” the collection of all the individuals of the world. Rather, it is called “possessor-of-that” any unspecified (*anullikhita*) particular, such as Śābaleya, which is the substratum of a universal. Since it is the substratum of a universal, there is no scope for endlessness and ambiguity. And we do not endorse the idea that *śabda* designates an attribute and then it conveys the possessor of the attribute, so that we would cause the problem of overburdening this [*śabda*]. Since the conventional relation [between word and *artha*] is grasped exclusively in relation to this substratum of the universal, what would be the excessive burden of a *śabda* that expresses that from the very beginning? In this way, objections such as *tadvato nāsvatantratvād* are refuted.

The *tadvat*, in Jayanta’s system, seems to have an external reality, rather than being a mental construct. The individual (e.g., ‘cow’) is the substratum of the correlative universal (e.g., ‘cowness’). This individual-qualified-by-universal (e.g., cow-qualified-by-cowness), or possessor-of-

<sup>24</sup> sāmānyāśrayaḥ [...] pīḍayema] om. K

<sup>25</sup> sāmānyāśrayatvān] sāmānyāśrayatvāc ca NMSHu NMVa

<sup>26</sup> abhidhāya] anabhidhāya NMVa

<sup>27</sup> abhivadati] abhidadhāti NMSHu NMVa

<sup>28</sup> upagacchāmaḥ] abhyupagacchāmaḥ NMSHu NMVa

<sup>29</sup> pīḍayema] pīḍayemahi NMSHu NMVa

<sup>30</sup> ko] kataro NMSHu

<sup>31</sup> ca] om. NMSHu NMVa

<sup>32</sup> tadvato] tadvator NMSHu

that, is the *artha* designated by a common noun (e.g., “cow”). In this way the objections of endlessness and ambiguity, caused by particularism, are neutralized. Since the very thing ontologically is an individual qualified by a universal, the operation occurs at once, by direct designation, and not in two separate instants, so also the charge of semantic burden does not stand anymore.

Jayanta seems to accept some degree of flexibility in the application of the *tadvat* concept, according to the context, in terms of the predominance of the particular, of the universal and the shape in given circumstances. This would also somewhat explain the formulation in *Nyāyasūtra* 2.2.66. If this is the case, for Jayanta *tadvat* is not necessary synonym of *jātimat*, though it may be its most frequent application, because it can also be *ākṛtimat*:

*tuśabdo viśeṣaṅārthaḥ. kiṃ viśeṣyate.  
guṇapradhānabhāvānyānyamena  
śabdārthatvam. sthite 'pi tadvato  
vācyatve kvacit prayoge jāteḥ  
prādhānyaṃ vyakter aṅgabhāvaḥ yathā  
gaur na padā spraṣṭavyā iti sarvagaviṣu  
pratiśedho 'vagamyate. kvacid vyakteḥ  
prādhānyaṃ jāter aṅgabhāvaḥ yathā  
gāṃ muṃca gāṃ badhāna iti niyatāṃ  
kāṃcid vyaktim uddiśya prayujyate.  
kvacid ākrteḥ prādhānyaṃ vyakter  
aṅgabhāvaḥ jātis tu<sup>33</sup> nāsty eva yathā  
piṣṭamayyo gāvah kriyantām iti.*

In the *Nyāyasūtra*, the word *tu* indicates a specification. What is specified? That the property of being the *artha* of a *śabda* implies, unrestrictedly, a primary-secondary relation. [To explain:] Once established that what is expressed is the possessor-of-that (*tadvat*), (1) in some cases the universal is primary and the individual secondary, as in the injunction “a cow should not be touched with one's feet”. (2) in others, the individual is primary and the universal is secondary, as in “release this cow”, “tie this cow” [...] (3) and in others, again, the shape is primary and the individual is secondary, while the universal is not there at all, as in “cows made of flour should be modelled” [...].

Ganeri (1999: 104-105) thinks that Jayanta's *tadvat* theory is logically flawed, because he “clearly cannot take ‘property-possessor’, the direct object in his meaning specification, as standing for a certain particular”, and because “if this phrase is *mentioned*”, it becomes tautological, because “the meaning clause becomes a mere restatement of the fact that ‘A-hood-possessor’ (A-*tvavān*) and ‘A’ are

<sup>33</sup> tu] om. NMVa



synonyms, which is a consequence of the fact that the abstraction and possession affixes are inverses of one another”.<sup>34</sup>

An issue in Ganeri’s interpretation seems to be whether it is legitimate to assume that the *tat* in *tadvat* is meant as a “property”, i.e., as the *dharma* in the Nyāya theory of inference. If Jayanta believed in the ontological, external existence of particulars-qualified-by-universals, in his system a particular cannot but be a universal-possessor. The distinction between a *tadvat* and a *dharmin*, discussed in § 5.1 below, may help to draw the distinction between *sāmānya* and *dharma*: while the former is a universal, a *dharma*, at least in the context of inference, does not need to be so.<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, in the economy of this paper, it is important to stress that the *tadvat* concerns the *artha* of words, not that of sentences, as it will be explained below.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.3. About inference

In the following discussion on the reduction of *śabda* to inference, Jayanta analyzes formal aspects of possible versions of the inference from words to their objects. Since it is important to precisely present such inferential structures, a brief clarification on the simplified presentation of inferences adopted in this paper is in order. The formalization originally proposed by Schayer 2001, 106 and clarified by Ganeri 2001, 16 has been here adopted and simplified. The attempt is to render the gist of the Nyāya theory of inference as known at Jayanta’s time, that is, without taking into consideration the developments of Navyanyāya.<sup>37</sup> Using Schayer’s formalization, the complete smoke-fire argument, the stock example of inference in Nyāya, would run thus:

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<sup>34</sup> Here Ganeri seems to invoke the *tadvatvam tad eva* rule of inference, which is an expression of  $x + vat + tva = x + tva + vat = x$ , because “the abstraction operator ‘-ness’ and the concretization operator ‘-possessing’ denote inverse operations” (Bhattacharyya 2001, 175; see also Matilal 2001, 212–213).

<sup>35</sup> As discussed next, in § 2.3.

<sup>36</sup> On Jayanta and his theory of sentence signification, see Graheli 2016 and Freschi and Keidan forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> Thus some improvements in the formalization of Nyāya inferences, found in Bhattacharyya 2001 and Matilal 2001, have been here ignored. The central role of *paramārśa*, as described in Bhattacharyya 2001, 178, and on pervasion (*vyāpti*) (Bhattacharyya 2001, 178; Matilal 2001, 206), come to mind. For Jayanta’s discussion of inference theory, see NMVa, I 311, 8–11, 375, 3–4, and II 582, 15–23.

(1) <i>ayam parvato vahnimān</i>	This hill possesses fire	Sp
(2) <i>dhūmavattvāt</i>	Because it possesses smoke	Hp
(3) <i>yo yo dhūmavān,</i> <i>sa sa vahnimān</i>	For every x, if x possesses smoke, then x possesses fire	(x)(Hx $\supset$ Sx)
(4) <i>tathā cāyam</i>	This mountain possesses smoke	Hp
(5) <i>tasmāt tathā</i>	Therefore this mountain possesses fire	$\therefore$ Sp

The (1) (*pratijñā*) can be subsumed in (5) (*nigamana*), and (2) (*hetu*) in (4) (*upanaya*), so that it is easier to focus on the *modus ponens*, implicit in the inference:

(x)(Hx $\supset$ Sx)	If x possesses smoke, x possesses fire
Hp	This hill possesses smoke
$\therefore$ Sp	This hill possesses fire

That this is a formally valid inference is proven as follows:

1. (x)(Hx  $\supset$  Sx)
2. Hp
- $\therefore$  Sp
3. Hp  $\supset$  Sp      1, Universal Instantiation
4. Sp              3, 2, Modus Ponens

The relation of “possession” between terms has the technical sense of a “occurrence-exacting” relation (*vṛttiniyamaka*), i.e., it specifies the ontological presence of a property (*dharma*) on or in another thing, this thing being the possessor (*pakṣa*) of the property. “Property”, again, does not need to be a quality as the English term suggests, and indeed in many Nyāya inferences it is a substance:<sup>38</sup>

Navya-Nyāya logicians define the term ‘property’ (*dharma*) as the second member (*pratiyogin*) of occurrence-exacting relations which alone are to be denoted by the technical term ‘possess’ used in inferences. Thus the table *possesses* the book when the book is on the table, and the book is the *property* of the table (Bhattacharyya 2001, 174).

For simplicity’s sake, however, I will use the term “property” to render *dharma* in inferential contexts and I will keep track of inferential arguments by means of a simple representation of the

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<sup>38</sup> Matilal (2001, 209) proposes a relation of “location” of a “locus” and “locatee” as a solution of the ambiguity generated by the use of the term “property”.

*modus ponens*. The purpose is to precisely identify the main components of each inferential argument—namely the probandum (*sādhya*), the locus (*pakṣa*) and the probans (*sādhana*, *liṅga*, or *hetu*)— and to keep track of the relation of concomitance between probans and probandum:

If something possesses smoke, then it possesses fire

This hill possesses smoke

Therefore this hill possesses fire

### 3. Thesis: *śabda* is an autonomous instrument of knowledge

Jayanta's discussion of *śabda* starts with its definition found in the roots of his tradition *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.7: “*śabda* is the instruction of an authoritative source” (*āptopadeśaḥ śabdaḥ*). This definition is expected to flawlessly and unambiguously justify the inclusion of *śabda* in the list of the four instruments of knowledge (*pramāṇā-s*) accepted in the *Nyāyasūtra*: perception, inference, analogy, and *śabda*.

Since there are also forms of pseudo-*śabda* that are not epistemically productive, Jayanta (NMVa, I 396,6-12) suggests that the expression “instrument to realize something” (*sādhyaśādhana*) should be supplied from *sūtra* 1.1.6 (*akārake śabdāmātre prāmāṇyaprasaktir iti tadvinivṛttaye pūrvasūtrāt sādhyaśādhanapadam ākṛṣyate*). Moreover, the words “knowledge” (*jñāna*), *artha*, “certain” (*vyavasāyātmika*),<sup>39</sup> and “undeviating” (*avyabhicārin*) should be supplied from *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.5, in order to exclude from the definition invalid cognitions such as recollections, doubts and errors (*jñānapadasya smṛtijanakasya vyavacchedāya cārthagrahaṇasya saṁśayaviparyayanakanirākaraṇāya ca vyavasāyātmakāvyabhicāripadayor anuvṛtṭiḥ*).<sup>40</sup> The full definition would thus read: “*śabda* is the instruction of an authoritative source and is an instrument to achieve undeviating and certain knowledge of the *artha*” (*avyabhicārādiviśeṣaṇārthapratīṭijanaka upadeśaḥ śabda ity uktaṃ bhavati*).

Jayanta also reports an alternative interpretation of the *sūtra*, according to which the possibility of confusing cases of doubts and errors is already excluded by the presence of the words “instruction” and “authoritative source”, in which case there is no need to supply words from previous *sūtra*-s.

<sup>39</sup> Potter (1977, 167) renders it as “well-defined”. Although in other contexts *vyavasāya* indicates apperception or introspection (e. g., see NK, s. v.), in this context, at least in the interpretation of the *sūtra* found in the *Nyāyabhāṣya* and in the NM, the introspective element does not seem predominant.

<sup>40</sup> Here Jayanta applies the technique of integrating elliptical aphorisms with words used in previous aphorisms, a technique called *anuvṛtṭi* and most famously used in Pāṇini's grammar.

In either way, it is clear that *śabda* is understood as enjoying the same epistemological status of perception, inference and analogy, since it can generate true knowledge of the *artha*.

The word “instruction” (*upadeśa*) in 1.1.7 is glossed by Jayanta (NMVa, I 398,2-3) as “act of designation” (*abhidhānakriyā*). This gloss is further specified (NMVa, I 399, 2), as “an act of designation which produces knowledge of its *artha* caused by the perception of an audible entity” (*śrotragrāhyavastukaraṇikā tadarthapratītir abhidhānakriyā*).

A common feature of perception, inference, analogy and *śabda* is that the knowledge produced by them also involves the knower’s awareness that he is knowing something. Jayanta justifies the distinction among perception, inference and *śabda* on the basis of the instrumental cause used to obtain them, i.e. sense-organs, inferential marks, and an audible instruction, respectively, and on the basis of the different terminology commonly used to denote these distinct epistemic acts (NMVa, I 399,12-13). Here Jayanta argues that *śabda* may have other applications, for instance as an inferential mark to prove the existence of ether (*ākāśa*),<sup>41</sup> which however do not disprove its distinct epistemic role in verbal testimony:

*nanu pratīteḥ saṃvidātmakatvāt  
nābhidhānakriyā nāma kācid apūrvā  
saṃvid anyā vidyate. tatkarāṇasya  
copadeśatāyām atiprasaṅga ity uktam.  
satyam, saṃvidātmaiva sarvatra pratītiḥ.  
sā cakṣurādikaraṇikā pratyakṣaphalam  
liṅgākaraṇikā ’numānaphalam  
śrotragrāhyakaraṇikā śabdaphalam. na hi  
dṛśyate anumīyate abhidhīyata iti  
paryāyaśabdāḥ. tatpratītivīśeṣajanane ca  
śabdasyopadeśatvam ucyate.  
ākāśānumānavivakṣādau tu tasya  
liṅgatvam eveti.*

[Objection] A cognition is constituted of awareness (*saṃvit*),<sup>42</sup> therefore there is no [need of] such a new awareness called “act of designation”. And there is a fallacy of over-application when one says that its instrument [i.e., *śabda*] has the nature of instruction.

[Reply] True, a cognition is invariably made of awareness, but it is still the outcome of perception when caused by the senses, of inference when caused by an inferential mark, of verbal testimony when it is caused by what is grasped by the hearing organ. In fact, “perceived”, “inferred”, and “denoted” are not synonyms. One says that [*śabda*] has the character of instruction when there is the production of a

<sup>41</sup> See VD, 308, where the inference is explained *tatra śabdāḥ [...] na sparśavad viśeṣaguṇaḥ. bāhyendriyapratyakṣād [...] nātma-guṇaḥ. śrotragrāhyatvād viśeṣaguṇabhāvāc ca na dikkālamanaśā. pāriśeṣyād guṇo bhūtvā ākāśasyādhihigame liṅgam*. Incidentally, in the *Nyāyikalikā* (Kataoka 2013, 20, 5–6), Jayanta shows an argument to infer that *śabda* is a quality as an example of *pa-riśeṣānumāna*.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. GBhSha, 213, 27: *samyag vettīti saṃvit*.

specific cognition. In other applications [of *śabda*] such as the inference of ether, however, one specifically refers to its character of inferential mark.

The idea that any conceptual knowledge is necessarily linguistic, regardless of its derivation from perception or inference, is debated and refuted by Jayanta from the viewpoints of several Nyāya authorities in NMVa, I 209-225 (NM 2), and from his own perspective in NMVa, II 476-485, where he maintains that the theory that every cognition is linguistic is a consequence of the erroneous assumption of a metaphysical unity of *śabda* and of a misguided denial of the reality of differences. This happens because language is used to describe any kind of knowledge:

*kas tvayā dr̥ṣṭo 'rthaḥ iti pr̥ṣṭo vakti gaur  
iti. kīdṛśaṃ te jñānam utpannam gaur iti.  
kaṃ<sup>43</sup> śabdaṃ prayuktavān<sup>44</sup> gaur iti. tata  
eṣā bhrantiḥ. vastutas tu viviktā evaite  
śabdajñānārthāḥ (NMVa, II 480,12-15).*

When asked “what *artha* did you see?”, one may answer “Cow”. And, “which type of knowledge did you get?” “Cow”. And “which *śabda* did you use?” “Cow”. This error [of thinking that there are no differences] is caused by such usages. But actually these *śabda*, knowledge and *artha* are distinct entities.

An authoritative source is characterized in NBhTha ad 1.1.7 as “an instructor who (1) has directly experienced the true essence of the *artha* and (2) is moved by the desire to describe it as it is or it is not” (*āptaḥ khalu sākṣātkṛtadharmā yathādr̥ṣṭasyārthasya cikhyāpayiṣayā prayukta upadeṣṭā sākṣātkaraṇam arthasyāptiḥ tayā pravartata ity āptaḥ*). Jayanta (NMVa, I 399,12-13) enlarges the scope of (1), by writing that there is no restriction to things directly perceived by the instructor, because the authoritativeness is not undermined if the true nature of the *artha* is ascertained by the instructor through inference, etc. (*na tu pratyakṣeṇaiva grahaṇam iti niyamaḥ, anumānādiñcītārthopadeśino 'py āptatvānapāyāt*). Here the *ādi* of *anumānādi* suggests even the possibility of a chain of *śabda*-s.

If these two criteria are met, the source is authoritative regardless of the social or moral status. Echoing NBhTha ad 1.1.7, Jayanta (NMVa, I 400, 11) writes that the authoritativeness is possible in

<sup>43</sup> *kaṃ*] P K; *kīdṛśaṃ* NMVa

<sup>44</sup> *prayuktavān*] P K; *prayuktavān asi* NMVa

seers, cultivated people and barbarians (*ṛṣyāryamlecchasāmānyaṃ vaktavyaṃ cāptalakṣaṇam*).<sup>45</sup> Thus the authoritativeness of the source applies to both common and Vedic language. Unlike in Mīmāṃsā, indeed, even the authority of the Veda is based on the reliability of their author. The foundation of the epistemic validity of language on a trustworthy author also implies that language is not considered permanent, since any instructor's utterance must necessarily occur at some point in time; furthermore, it means that the relation between *śabda* and *artha* needs to be considered conventional, rather than natural.

Jayanta claims, therefore, that *śabda* is a separate instrument of knowledge, quite distinct from direct perception and inferential processes.

#### 4. Antithesis: *śabda* is inference

Reductionists maintain that knowledge produced by *śabda* is nothing but inferential knowledge (NMVa, I 401,9-10):

*śabdasya khalu paśyāmo nānumānād  
vibhinnaṭām / atas tallakṣaṇākṣepāt na  
vācyam lakṣaṇāntaram //*

We do not see a distinction of *śabda* from inference. Since [the proposal of] its specific character stands refuted, no separate definition needs to be formulated.

#### 4.1. The Vaiśeṣika arguments

##### 4.1.1. Analogy of content and relation

It is clear that both *śabda* and inference can convey knowledge of unperceived objects and are as such distinct from perception.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, they are both based on a necessary relation,<sup>47</sup> which is a general law that can be applied to any given instance and is not confined to individual cases, unlike with perception. A relation among particulars, indeed, would not be productive, because one would need

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<sup>45</sup> In this connection, see also Chakrabarti 1994, 103, who makes the vivid example of a thief or a murderer confessing in court.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 55ab: *viṣayo 'nyādṛśas tāvad dṛśyate liṅgaśabdayoḥ //*

<sup>47</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 25: *na cāpy ajñātasambandham padaṃ kiṃ cit prakāśakam / sambandhānanubhūtyāto na syād ananumānatā //*

to know an infinite number of relationships conforming to the infinite number of particulars (NMVa, I 401,11-14):<sup>48</sup>

*parokṣaviṣayavatvaṃ hi tulyaṃ tāvad dvayor  
api / sāmānyaviṣayavatvaṃ ca  
sambandhāpekṣaṇādvayoḥ // agrhīte 'pi  
sambandhe naikasyāpi pravartanam /  
sambandhas ca viśeṣāṇām ānantyād  
atidurgamaḥ //*

To begin with, they both have an unperceived object, which must also be a generic one, since both *śabda* and inference depend on a [necessarily generic] relation: when the relation is not grasped neither *śabda* nor inference can function. A relation among particulars is inconceivable because of endlessness [of particulars and thus of their possible relations].

This is the basic Vaiśeṣika argument, in which *śabda* is reduced to inference because of its unperceived *artha* and because it is grounded, like inference, on a prior knowledge of a relation between the sign and the signified. The argument is developed in the commentaries ad *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* 9.1.3, “By this [exposition of inference] knowledge deriving from *śabda* has [also] been explained” (*etena śābdaṃ vyākhyātam*).<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, since the epistemic content has the same characteristics (i.e., it is an unperceived and generic object), and since knowledge of the sign-signified relation is a necessary condition, *śabda* is not distinct from inference.

Prima facie, the alleged relation of concomitance between *śabda* and *artha* can be formulated as follows, since the locus is not clarified:

If x possesses *śabda*, x possesses *artha*

<sup>48</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, *śabda*, 35–37: *śabdānumānayo aikyaṃ dhūmād agnyānumānavat // anvayavyatirekābhyām ekapratyakṣadarśanāt / sambandhapūrvakatvāc ca pratipattir ito yataḥ // pratyakṣānyapramāṇatvāt tadadṛṣṭārthabodhanāt / sāmānyaviṣayavatvāc ca traikalyaviṣayāśrayāt //*

<sup>49</sup> Praśastapāda explains it as follows (VD, Bhāṣya, 576): *śabdādīnām apy anumāne 'ntarbhāvaḥ, samānavidhitvāt. yathā prasiddhasamayāsāndigdhalingadarśanaprasiddhyanusmaraṇābhyām atīndriye 'rthe bhavaty anumānam evam śabdādibhyo 'pīti. śrutismṛtilakṣaṇo 'py āmnāyo vaktṛprāmāṇyāpekṣaḥ, tadvacanād āmnāyaprāmāṇyam. Vyomaśiva glosses (VD, Vyomavāṇī, 577): tathā śabdādeḥ kārajātasyānumānasāmagryām antarbhāve tatphalasyāpi phale 'ntarbhāvo jñāta eva. [...] samānavidhitvāt samānalakṣaṇayogitvād iti [...]. And Candrānanda (CVṛ, ad 9. 20): yathā kāryādismṛtisavyapekṣam anumānaṃ trikālavaiṣayam atīndriyārthaṃ ca tathaiva śābdaṃ saṅketasmṛtyapekṣam trikālavaiṣayam atīndriyārthaṃ ca.*

## 4.1.2. Analogy of sign

Just like inference, *śabda* works by means of a *sign* which, once directly perceived, can cause knowledge of an object (NMVa, I 402,1-2):<sup>50</sup>

*yathā pratyakṣato dhūmaṃ dr̥ṣṭvāgnir  
anumīyate / tathaiva śabdāṃ ākarṇya  
tadārtho 'py avagamyate //*

Just like fire is inferred after the perception of smoke, after hearing a *śabda* its object is known.

Hence, insofar as the sign, there is no distinction between inference and *śabda*.

If x possesses *śabda*, x possesses *artha*

This x possesses *śabda*

Therefore this x possesses *artha*

## 4.1.3. Analogy of relation

Moreover, *śabda* is grounded on a relation of agreement and difference (*anvayavyatireka*), just like inferential processes (NMVa, I 402,3-4):<sup>51</sup>

*anvayavyatirekau ca bhavato 'trāpi  
liṅgavat / yo yatra dr̥śyate śabdaḥ sa  
tasyārthasya vācakaḥ //*

Agreement and difference apply also here, just as with an inferential sign. [The relation of agreement is:] The *śabda* perceived in a given [*artha*] (*yatra*) is the signifier of that very *artha*.

Hence, even from the point of view of the peculiar type of relation among the sign and the signified, which must be known in advance, no distinction can be made. Inferences for which there are examples both in agreement and difference — i.e., for which both a positive example (*sapakṣa*) and a negative one (*vipakṣa*) can be stated — are the most common ones. The theory, then, is that the *śabda* inference is of the *anvayavyatirekin* sort.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> This text passage seems to be related to ŚVRa, śabda, 36b: *ekapratyakṣadarśanāt*.

<sup>51</sup> This passage seems to be related to ŚVRa, śabda, 36a: *anvayavyatirekābhyām*.

<sup>52</sup> The *anvayavyatirekin* inference is the one explicitly endorsed by Buddhist logicians. While there is scope to accommodate the *kevalānvayin* inference, the *kevalavyatirekin* one is explicitly rejected, unlike in Nyāya from Uddyotakara onwards (Matilal 1998, 117). On the similarity with Mill's method of agreement and difference used to build inductive reasonings, as well as on rendering *anvaya* and *vyatireka* in such terms, see Matilal 2001, 200.



If x possesses *śabda*, x possesses *artha*

If x does not possess *artha*, x does not possess *śabda*

#### 4.1.4. Analogy of property-possession

Both *śabda* and inference are based on knowledge of *pakṣadharmatā*, the possession of a property by a locus (NMVa, I 402,5-6):<sup>53</sup>

*pakṣadharmatvam apy asti śabda eva yato  
'rthavān / prakalpayiṣyate pakṣo dhūmo  
dahanavān iva //*

There is also [in both] the characteristic of being the property possessed by a locus, because *śabda* possesses the *artha* and is thus accepted as a locus, just like smoke possesses the property “fire”.

The objector, here, seems to argue that the *śabda* epistemic process is an inference like the one in which fire is inferred with smoke as the locus and smoke-ness as the probans:

If smoke possesses *smoke-ness*, it possesses *fire*

This smoke possesses *smoke-ness*

Therefore this smoke possesses *fire*

#### 4.1.5. Analogy of universal sign

Furthermore, the sign is a universal, and not a particular, just like in inference (NMVa, I 402,7-8):<sup>54</sup>

*tatra dhūmatvasāmānyaṃ yathā vahati  
hetutām<sup>55</sup> / gatvādi<sup>56</sup> śabdāsāmānyaṃ  
tadvad atrāpi vakṣyati //*

Just like there (in the fire inference) the universal “smoke-ness” has the property of being the inferential reason,<sup>57</sup> so even here (in *śabda*) the universal of *śabda*, e.g., *gatva*, etc., can have it.

<sup>53</sup> This text passage seems to be related to ŚVRa, śabda, 36c: *sambandhapūrvakatvāc ca*.

<sup>54</sup> This text passage seems to be related to ŚVRa, śabda 37b: *adṛṣṭārthabodhanāt*.

<sup>55</sup> *yathā vahati hetutām*] P NMVa; *yathāvagatihetutaḥ* K

<sup>56</sup> *gatvādi*] P K; *gotvādi* NMVa

<sup>57</sup> The *tas* suffix in *avagatihetutaḥ* may be explained by means of a metaphorical application of sūtra 5.4.48 of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, *ṣaṣṭhyā vyāśraye*.

The inferential sign is *gatvādi*, i.e., the universal of the phonemes *g*, *au* and *h*, which is possessed by the locus, i.e. the word *gauḥ* (“cow”), and by which the *artha* ‘cow’ is inferred, since it is also possessed by the locus *gauḥ*:

If *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*, then it possesses ‘cow’

This *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*

Therefore this *śabda* possesses ‘cow’

Therefore no distinction should be made, because there is an analogy insofar as the universality of the sign.

The Vaiśeṣika reduction, based on the reason stated in VD, *Praśastapādabhāṣya*, 576, “because [*śabda*] has the same rules [as inference]” (*samānavidhitvāt*), is thus completed. Jayanta next mentions some Sāṅkhya arguments in defense of the autonomy of *śabda* from inference.

#### 4.2. The Sāṅkhya defense of *śabda* is inconclusive

On the strength of the evidence presented above, *śabda* should not be considered as different from inference, because of their analogous epistemic content (*viśaya*) and formal components (*sāmagrī*).<sup>58</sup> There are some minor differences between *śabda* and inference, but these are not decisive and do not require a distinct categorization. Specifically, there are three aspects that can be found in *śabda* but not in inference (NMVa, I 402,9-14):

*evaṃ viśayasāmagrīsāmyād ekatvaniścaye*  
*/ na vilakṣaṇatāmātraṃ kiñcid*  
*anyatvakāraṇam //*  
*pūrvavarṇakramodbhūtasamśkārasahakār*  
*itā / puruṣāpekṣavṛttitvaṃ*  
*vivakṣānusṛti<sup>59</sup>kramaḥ // ityādinā viśeṣeṇa*  
*na pramāṇāntaraṃ bhavet /*  
*kāryakāraṇadharmādiviśeṣo ’trāpi nāsti*  
*kim //*

In this way, since the unity has been ascertained due to a similarity of epistemic content and formal components (*sāmagrī*), a discrepancy of characters by itself should not be a reason for otherness. The peculiarities [of *śabda*] are (1) the assistance of mental dispositions (*saṃskāra*), generated by [the perception of] past phonemes uttered in sequence, (2) the requirement of a person [in the form of the speaker], (3) a sequence of sounds conforming to the intention [of the

<sup>58</sup> On the use of the term *sāmagrī*, cf. VD, Vyomavāṇī, 577: *tathā śabdādeḥ kārakajātasyānumānasāmagryām antarbhāve tatphalasyāpi phale ’ntarbhāvo jñāta eva*.

<sup>59</sup> -sṛti] P NMVa; smṛtiḥ K

speaker]. By means of such specificities *śabda* ought not to be considered a separate instrument of knowledge, because there is nothing special in its effect, cause, property, etc.

These three requirements correspond to the arguments listed in the *Śloka-vārttika* as inconclusive reasons for the independency of *śabda*, at least in part attributed to Sāṅkhya sources and not considered by Kumāriḷa a valid defense of the autonomy of *śabda*.<sup>60</sup>

The two reasons are not effective to prove a distinction. In the first reason, although the role of mental dispositions and phonemes is indeed a peculiarity of *śabda*, this concerns the psychological acquisition of linguistic sounds, not the acquisition of knowledge of the *artha*. As for the second reason, although the speaker's intention to designate something is indeed a necessary condition and might be considered a distinction from inferential processes, it is not an exclusive character of *śabda*, since it is observed also in non-verbal situations. As such, it cannot be used as a peculiar characteristic of *śabda* (NMVa, I 402,15-17).<sup>61</sup>

*yatheṣṭaviniyojyatvam api  
nānyatvakāraṇam / hastasaṃjñādiliṅge 'pi  
tathābhāvasya darśanāt //*

Even the application according to an intention is not a cause for otherness, because an intention is observed also in the cases of ostensive indications by hand, gesture, etc. [which are not verbalized and thus they are no instances of *śabda*].

One may argue that while in inferences a clear awareness of the relation and of an illustration is necessary, this does not happen in verbal knowledge. This apparent dissimilarity, however, relates to the peculiarities of unfamiliar and familiar objects of knowledge: in the former case an illustration

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 15cd-17: *bhedaḥ sāṅkhyādibhis tv iṣṭo na tūktaṃ bhedakāraṇam // pūrvasaṃskārayuktāntyavaraṇavākyādikalpanā / vivakṣādi ca dhūmādaḥ nāstīty etena bhinnatā // yair uktā tatra vaidharmyavikalpasamajātītā / dhūmānityaviṣānyādiviṣeṣān na hi bhinnatā //*

<sup>61</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 19-20: *yatheṣṭaviniyogena pratītir yāpi śabdataḥ / na dhūmāder itihāpi vyabhicāro 'ṅavṛttibhiḥ // hasta-saṃjñādayo ye 'pi yadarthapratipādane / bhavyeḥ kṛtasāṅketās te talliṅgam iti sthitiḥ //*

and a relation must be explicitly stated, while in the latter one the process is automated and the illustration does not need to be recollected (NMVa, I 403,1-2):<sup>62</sup>

*dr̥ṣṭāntanirapekṣatvam abhyaste viṣaye  
samam / anabhyaste tu  
sambandhasmṛtisāpekṣatā dvayoḥ //*

Inference and *śabda* are analogous also because in cases of a frequently recurring object a specific illustration (*dr̥ṣṭānta*) [which corroborates the relation] is not anymore required, while when the object is not recurrent, they both require the recollection of the relation [corroborated by a specific illustration].

Furthermore, one may consider the existence of polysemous expressions as a reason to see *śabda* as an independent instrument of knowledge, but the ambiguity generated by such expressions occurs also in the epistemic results of perception and inference (NMVa, I 403,3-6):<sup>63</sup>

*anekapratibhodbhūti<sup>64</sup>hetutvam api  
dr̥śyate<sup>65</sup> / aspaṣṭaliṅge kasmim̐ścid aśva  
ityādiśabdavat // sphuṭārthānavasāyāc  
ca<sup>66</sup> pramāṇābhāsaṭo yathā / liṅge tathaiva  
śabde 'pi nānārthabhramakāriṇi //*

When the inferential sign is unclear multiple impressions can be generated, like [multiple meanings can be generated] by the word *aśva*. And just like in the case of an inferential sign there can be no determination of a distinct *artha* due to a faulty instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇābhāsa*), so [it can happen] in the case of a *śabda* producing the erroneous knowledge of multiple *artha*-s.

Here Jayanta exemplifies polysemy by means of the word *aśva*, which can mean both “horse” and “you grow” (see GBhSha, 71). He also uses the term “pseudo-instrument of knowledge” (*pramāṇābhāsa*), as done elsewhere in the NM (NMVa, II 630, 3), where he explains that a genuine instrument of knowledge cannot be falsified (*bādhyabādhakabhāvānupapatteḥ*), and that when a

<sup>62</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 33–34: *dr̥ṣṭāntānabhidhānaṃ ca dhūmāḍau vyabhicāritam / prasiddhatvād dhi tatrāpi na dr̥ṣṭānto 'bhidhīyate // anabhyaste tv apekṣante śabde sambandhinaḥ smṛtim / atra prayukta ity evaṃ budhyate hi cirāt kvacit //*

<sup>63</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 24cd, *na cehāśvādiśabdebhyo bhedas teṣāṃ pratiyate*, as well as ŚVRa, śabda 32, *yas tv anirdhāritārthanām anekapratibhodbhavaḥ / sa liṅge 'py asphuṭe dr̥ṣṭas tasmān naitena bhidyate //*

<sup>64</sup> *pratibhodbhūti*] P K; *pratibhotpatti* NMVa

<sup>65</sup> *dr̥śyate*] P K; *vadyate* NMVa

<sup>66</sup> *navasāyāc ca*] P K; *navasāyās ca* NMVa

falsification occurs it is because a pseudo-instrument of knowledge was used. This principle may be applied to any instrument of knowledge, be it perception, inference, or *śabda*.

### 4.3. The Buddhist arguments

#### 4.3.1. The universal of trustworthiness

Even when *śabda* generates only an impression the epistemic value of the deriving knowledge is guaranteed by the authoritativeness of the statement. According to an often quoted passage originally ascribed to Diñnāga, *śabda*-derived knowledge can be explained as an inference based on the universal “authoritativeness” as the inferential sign (NMVa, I 403,7-11):<sup>67</sup>

*api ca pratibhāmātre śabdāj jāte 'pi  
kutracit / āptavādatvaliṅgena janyate*<sup>68</sup>  
*niścītā matiḥ // ata eva hi manyante  
śabdasyāpi vipāścitaḥ /  
āptavādāvisaṃvādasāmānyād anumānatā //*

Moreover, in some cases even if by *śabda* itself only an impression is produced, a certain knowledge can be generated by means of the inferential sign of authoritativeness. Therefore learned people think that *śabda* has the character of inference because of the undisputedness of a trustworthy statement.

This seems to suggest, again, a separation between comprehension, or a vague impression of the *artha* generated by *śabda*, and knowledge, which is actually produced by an inference from the inferential sign “authoritativeness of the statement”.

The passage *āptavādāvisaṃvādasāmānyād* may also be interpreted as “because of the undisputedness common to (*sāmānya*) authoritative statements (*āptavāda*) [and inference]”, though this may not be what Jayanta has in mind here, if the interpretation of Cakradhara reflects his intention. In the GBhSha, 72, indeed, there are two alternative interpretations of the argument:

*āptavādāvisaṃvādasāmānyād iti yathā  
dhūmasāmānyād agnisāmānyaniścaya  
evam āptavādasāmānyād*

Just like from the universal of smoke the universal of fire is ascertained, so from the universal of an authoritative

<sup>67</sup> The argument is found in the *Pramāṇavārttika*, svārthānumāna, 216ab; Taber (1996: 22) also quotes the *Tātparyāṭikā* ad *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.7 (Thakur 1996), “The theory probably originated with Diñnāga; Vācaspati attributes it to him”. Vācaspati introduces the argument with *yathoktaṃ bhadantena*. See also *āptavādāvisaṃvādasāmānyād anumānatā* (ŚVRa, śabda 23cd).

<sup>68</sup> *janyate*] P NMVa; *jayate* K

*avisamvādāditvasāmānyaniścaya ity  
arthaḥ. āptavādānām vāvisamvādaḥ  
sāmānyam rūpam, yo ya āptavādaḥ sa so  
'visamvādīty arthaḥ.*

statement the universal of  
undisputedness is ascertained.  
Alternatively, the undisputedness of  
authoritative statements is the same  
[as that of inferences]: whatever is  
authoritative, is undisputed.

In the first interpretation the term *sāmānyam* denotes a universal, while in the second it indicates the similarity of *śabda* and inference. The first interpretation can be expressed as follows, perhaps with the *artha* as a locus, though this is not clarified in the GBh:

If an *artha* possesses authoritative-statement-ness, then it possesses undisputedness  
This *artha* possesses authoritative-statement-ness  
Therefore this *artha* possesses undisputedness

In the second *śabda* may be the locus:

If a *śabda* possesses authoritativeness, then it possesses undisputedness  
This *śabda* possesses authoritativeness  
Therefore this *śabda* possesses undisputedness

#### 4.3.2. The inference of the speaker's intention

Going back to the notion of *śabda* as a locus that possesses an external object, this does not make sense, because there cannot be a relation of possession between an ephemeral *śabda* and a stable object. A better reductionist formulation is to say that the probandum of the *śabda* inference is the speaker's intended signification, rather than the *artha* (NMVa, I 404,1-2):<sup>69</sup>

*kiñ ca śabdo vivakṣāyām eva prāmāṇyam  
aśnute / na bāhye vyabhicāritvāt tasyām  
caitasya līngatā //*

Rather, *śabda* can have epistemic  
validity only in relation to an intention  
to speak, and not to an external object,  
because [such an inferential mark]  
would be flawed by ambiguity. The  
status of inferential sign of that (*śabda*)  
is only in [proving] that [intention of  
the speaker].

The flaw of ambiguity is that the same *śabda* may refer to different things according to the speaker's intention, so one necessarily needs to first determine the intention. The allegation is that a

<sup>69</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda, 39cd: [PP:] *pratyayaḥ kiṃnimitto 'rthe* [UP:] *vaktṛbuddheḥ*.

*śabda* proves nothing but the speaker's intention, in an inference in which the locus must necessarily be the speaker, although this is not explicitly stated by Jayanta:

If a speaker possesses *śabda*, then it possesses an intention to speak  
 This speaker possesses *śabda*  
 Therefore this speaker possesses an intention to speak

## 5. Synthesis: *śabda* is not inference

### 5.1. Refutation of the Vaiśeṣika arguments

#### 5.1.1. Disanalogy of content and relation

Jayanta begins his rebuttal by a deconstruction of his opponent's position (§ 4.1.1) into a dilemma (*vikalpa*): are we referring to *śabda* in its form of sentence or single word? The *artha* of a sentence cannot depend on a pre-established relation and thus it cannot be known by an inferential process, because if that were the case it would be impossible to explain the knowledge produced by newly composed sentences (NMVa, I 404,3-7):<sup>70</sup>

*atrābhīdhīyate*.<sup>71</sup> *dvidvidhaḥ śabdah*  
*padātmā vākyātmākāś ca*<sup>72</sup> / *tatra vākyam*  
*anavagatasambandham eva vākyārtham*  
*avabodhayitum*<sup>73</sup> *alam,*  
*abhinavakavi*<sup>74</sup> *viracitaślokaśravaṇe sati*  
*padapadārtha*<sup>75</sup> *saṃskṛtamātīnām*  
*tadarthāvagamadarsānāt. ataḥ*  
*sambandhādhipigama*<sup>76</sup> *mūlapravṛttinā*  
*'numānena tasya kaiva*  
*sāmya*<sup>77</sup> *saṃbhāvanā.*

There are two kinds of *śabda*, words and sentences. Of these, a sentence is capable of conveying its *artha* without knowledge of a relation, since it is observed that competent people (*saṃskṛtamati*) can know the *artha* upon hearing a newly composed verse. Being this the case, how can a similarity with inference occur, since it (inference) operates on the basis of the knowledge of a relation?

<sup>70</sup> Cf. ŚVDva, Pārthasārathi's *Nyāyaratnamālā* ad *śabda* 54: *īdṛśasya śabdasyānumānād bhedaṃ pratijānāti "anumāneneti". dvidhā śabdaṃ, padaṃ vākyam ca. tatra padam abhyadhikābhāvād apramāṇam.*

<sup>71</sup> *atrābhīdhīyate*] P K; *tatrābhīdhīyate* NMVa

<sup>72</sup> *vākyātmākāś ca*] P K; *vākyātmā ceti* NMVa

<sup>73</sup> *avabodhayitum*] K; *avagamayitum* NMVa ; P n.a.

<sup>74</sup> *-kavi-*] K; om. NMVa ; P n.a.

<sup>75</sup> *padārtha*] K; om. NMVa P n.a.

<sup>76</sup> *sambandhādhipigama*] P NMVa; *sambandhāvagama* K

<sup>77</sup> *tasya kaiva sāmya*] P; *tasyaikaikarūpatva* K; *tasya katham sāmya* NMVa

Notably, Jayanta's theory of sentence signification is a modification of the Bhaṭṭa one, *abhihitānvaya*, according to which the meaning of a sentence is produced indirectly, by a combination of the designated meanings. Jayanta adds to the picture a contextual factor which he calls *tātparya* (see Graheli 2016). The capacity of competent speakers to compose and understand new sentences is one of the main arguments in favour of the *abhihitānvaya* theory and against the *anvitābhidhāna* one.

The case of an analogy of relation may still stand, however, if the signification of single words is meant (NMVa, I 404,8-9):<sup>78</sup>

*padasya tu sambandhādhiḡamasāpekṣatve  
saty api sāmāgrībhedād viṣayabhedāc  
cānumānād bhinnatvam /*

Single words, however, do require knowledge of a relation. There is still a difference from inference, because of a difference in content and formal components (*sāmāgrī*).

Having thus discarded the possibility that the *artha* of a sentence, in the epistemological process of *śabda*, is inferential, in the following sections the discussion pertains to single words.

### 5.1.1.1. The epistemic object of single words cannot be inferential

As explained above (see § 2.2), Jayanta maintains that the referent of words is the possessor-of-that (*tadvat*), thus the content of knowledge derived from single words is quite unlike that of inferential knowledge (NMVa, I 404,10-12):<sup>79</sup>

*viṣayas tāvad visadrśā<sup>80</sup> eva padaliṅgayoḥ.  
tadvanmātraṃ padasyārtha iti ca<sup>81</sup>  
sthāpayiṣyate. anumānaṃ tu  
vākyārthaviṣayam, atrāgniḥ, agnimān  
parvata iti tataḥ<sup>82</sup> pratīpatteḥ. uktaṃ ca  
tatra dharmaviśiṣṭo dharmī sādhyā iti.*

As far as their epistemic content, a word and an inferential mark are dissimilar. It will be established how the *artha* of the word is a “possessor-of-that” (*tadvat*). Inference, instead, has the *artha* of a sentence as its object,

<sup>78</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda, 55–56, viṣayo 'nyādrśas tāvad drśyate liṅgaśabdayoḥ / sāmānyaviṣayatvaṃ ca padasya sthāpayiṣyati // dharmī dharmaviśiṣṭas ca liṅgīty etac ca sādhitam / na tāvad anumānaṃ hi yāvat tadviṣayaṃ na tat, and ŚVRa, śabda 109, vākyārthe hi padārthebhyaḥ sambandhānubhavād rte / buddhir utpadyate tena bhinnā sāpy akṣabuddhivat.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda, 56–57ab: dharmī dharmaviśiṣṭas ca liṅgīty etac ca sādhitam / na tāvad anumānaṃ hi yāvat tadviṣayaṃ na tat // sāmānyād atiriktaṃ tu śābde vākyasya gocaraḥ

<sup>80</sup> visadrśa] P NMVa; dhisadrśa K

<sup>81</sup> ca] P NMVa; hi K

<sup>82</sup> tataḥ] P NMVa; om. K



because from an inference a knowledge in the form of “here [there is] fire; [there is] a fire-possessing hill” derives. And there<sup>83</sup> it was stated that the probandum of an inference is a property-possessor (*dharmīn*) qualified by a property.

The content of an inference involves a *dharmaviśiṣṭo dharmī*, an unperceived property possessed by a perceived locus (*pakṣa* or *dharmīn*) qualified by a perceived property.<sup>84</sup> The content of knowledge is thus the already perceived locus qualified by a previously unknown property (e.g., the hill qualified by fire); this is the *artha* of a sentence, not of a single word. One may argue that this is not a sentence, but rather a complex word: why do we need to say that “fire-qualified hill” is a sentence? The answer is that a necessary condition of a sentence is the satisfaction of expectancy (*ākāṅkṣā*), which occurs in the case of a well formed inference (NMVa, I 405,1-5):<sup>85</sup>

*nanu padāny api vākyārthavṛttīni  
saṃsanti<sup>86</sup> gomān aupagavaḥ kumbhakāra  
iti.  
satyam, kintu teṣv api sākāṅkṣatāsty eva,  
padāntaram antareṇa  
nirākāṅkṣapratyayānutpādāt. gomān ka  
ity ākāṅkṣāyā anivṛtteḥ.<sup>87</sup>*

[Objection] There are also words with the function of the *vākyārtha*, such as “owner of cattle, descendant of Upagu, maker of pots”.

[Counter-objection] True, but in those there is still expectancy, because without other words the fulfilment of expectancy is not achieved, since the question “which owner of cattle?” is not satisfied [until the sentence is completed].

<sup>83</sup> In ŚVRa, anumāna 47cd, *tasmād dharmaviśiṣṭasya dharmiṇaḥ syāt prameyatā*; or in the NM section on inference, see NMVa, I 309, 10.

<sup>84</sup> In NBhTha, ad 1.1.35 the probandum of an inference is said to be either the property qualified by the property-possessor or the property-possessor qualified by the property (*sādhyam ca dvidham dharmiviśiṣṭo vā dharmāḥ śabdasyānityatvaṃ dharmaviśiṣṭo vā dharmy anityaḥ śabda iti*). In NMVa, I 310, 5, however, the latter option is not accepted.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda, 59cd: *vākyārthe 'pi padaṃ yatra gomadādi prayujyate*.

<sup>86</sup> *saṃsanti*] *saṃsati* K; *santi* NMVa

<sup>87</sup> *ākāṅkṣāyā anivṛtteḥ*] *ākāṅkṣān ativṛtteḥ* K

### 5.1.1.2. The content of word-derived knowledge is the property-possessor, not the possessed property

A further difference is that in inferences the qualifier of a qualified, i.e., the property of a locus, is the object of discovery, while in words-derived knowledge it is the qualified, i.e. the that-possessor (NMVa, I 405,6-7):

*api ca parvatādiviśeṣyapratipattipūrvikā  
pāvakādiviśeṣaṇāvagatir liṅgād udeti.  
padāt tu viśeṣaṇāvagatipūrvikā  
viśeṣyāvagatir iti viśayabhedaḥ.*

Moreover, from an inferential sign knowledge of a qualifier such as “fire”, arises, based upon [perceptual] knowledge of the qualified, such as “hill”. From a word, instead, knowledge of the qualified arises, based on knowledge of the qualifier.<sup>88</sup> Thus there is a different epistemic content.

In inferential knowledge, the previously unknown entity, i.e., the probandum, is the qualifier (e.g., fire), which is known on the basis of the perception of a qualified entity (e.g., the hill). On the contrary, in word-derived knowledge the unknown entity that is revealed by the word “cow” is an individual ‘cow’ qualified by a generic ‘cowness’. In fact,

smoke-possessing hill ⊃ **fire**-possessing hill  
is quite different from  
“cow” → cowness-possessing **cow**

Even in the case of a complex word such as “cow-possessor”, the *artha* would still be an individual ‘cow-possessor’ qualified by a generic ‘cow-possessoriness’.

### 5.1.2. Disanalogy of sign

If *śabda* were the inferential sign and the *artha* the probandum, there would still be the need to explain the locus of such an inference. Obviously, if *śabda* is the sign, it cannot simultaneously be the locus (NMVa, I 405,8-10), as alleged in § 4.1.2 above:<sup>89</sup>

*nanu uktaṃ yathā ’numāne dharmaviśiṣṭo*

[Objection] It has been said that in

<sup>88</sup> GBhSha, 72: “because from the word “cow” comes knowledge of an individual object qualified by cowness” (*gośabdād got-vaviśiṣṭapañḍāvagateḥ*).

<sup>89</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda, 62cd–63ab: *atha śabdo ’rthavattvena pakṣaḥ kasmān na kalpyate // pratijñārthaikadeśo hi hetus tatra prasajyate /*

*dharmī sādhyah, evam ihārthaviśiṣṭah  
śabdaḥ sādhyo bhavatu.  
maivam, śabdasya hetutvāt. na ca hetur  
eva pakṣo bhavitum arhatīti.*

inference the object to be known is a property-possessor qualified by the property. Here [in the case of *śabda*], similarly, the probandum is a *śabda* qualified by an *artha*.  
[Counter-objection] It cannot be so, because in your inference *śabda* was supposed to be the inferential sign, and a sign cannot be the locus as well.

An inference in which the locus and the probans are the very same entity, in fact, would be absurd:

If *śabda* possesses *śabda*, *śabda* possesses *artha*  
This *śabda* possesses *śabda*  
Therefore this *śabda* possesses *artha*

The objector may than argue (see § 4.1.5) that the *śabda* inference is analogous to that in which the probandum ‘fire’ is inferred as a property possessed by the locus ‘smoke’, from the probans ‘smoke-ness’ (NMVa, I 405,11-406, 3):<sup>90</sup>

*nanu*<sup>91</sup> *yathāgnimān ayaṃ dhūmah,  
dhūmatvāt, mahānasadhūmavad, ity  
uktaṃ*<sup>92</sup> “*sā deśasyāgniyuktasya  
dhūmasyānyaiś ca kalpitā*” *ity evaṃ  
gośabda evārthavattvena sādhyatām.  
gatvādi*<sup>93</sup> *sāmānyaṃ ca hetūkriyatām iti.*

[Objection] “This smoke possesses fire, because of smoke-ness, like the smoke in the kitchen”. It is said “others postulate that this [object to be known, *prameyatā*] is the locus (*deśa*, here synonym of *pakṣa*) “smoke” endowed with fire”. Similarly, the very word *gauḥ*, possessing the property of its *artha*, is the thing to be inferred, and the universal [of the phonemes] *gatva*, etc., is the sign.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, anumāna 47cd–48ab: *tasmād dharmaviśiṣṭasya dharmiṇaḥ syāt prameyatā // sā deśasyāgniyuktasya dhūmasyānyaiś ca kalpitā*, where the proposal that *deśa* is smoke is attempted. Cf. also GBhSha, 72: *sā deśasyeti prameyatā, pūrvasminn ardhe “tasmād dharmaviśiṣṭasya dharmiṇaḥ syāt prameyatā”*. Moreover, cf. ŚVRa, śabda, 63cd: *pakṣe dhūmaviśeṣe hi sāmānyaṃ hetur iṣyate //*

<sup>91</sup> *nanu*] *atha* K

<sup>92</sup> *uktaṃ*] *uktañ* ca K

<sup>93</sup> *gatvādi*] *gośabdatvād ityādi* NMVa

If smoke possesses smoke-ness, then it possesses fire  
 This smoke possesses smoke-ness  
 Therefore this smoke possesses fire

Such an inference would be analogous to

If *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*, then it possesses ‘cow’  
 This *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*  
 Therefore this *śabda* possesses ‘cow’

The problem, here, is that if *śabdatva* (e.g., *gatvādi*) were the probans and *śabda* (e.g., *gauḥ*) the locus, what exactly would the probandum be? Jayanta here opens a trilemma (NMVa, I 406,3-5):<sup>94</sup>

*kiṃ arthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ*<sup>95</sup> *sādhyate*  
*artha*<sup>96</sup> *pratyāyanaśaktiviśiṣṭatvaṃ vā*  
*arthapratītiviśiṣṭatvaṃ vā*<sup>97</sup>.

[Counter-objection] What would then be the object of knowledge [of such an inference]? Would it be [the locus *śabda*] qualified by (1) the *artha*, (2) by the capacity to cause knowledge of the *artha*, or (3) by the cognition of the *artha*?

### 5.1.2.1. An *artha* cannot be possessed by a *śabda*

The first, most obvious option is that the probandum is the *artha* possessed by the *śabda* (NMVa, I 406,6-12):<sup>98</sup>

*na tāvad arthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ sādhyam,*  
*śailajvalanayor iva śabdārthayoḥ*  
*dharmadharmibhāvābhāvāt.*  
*athārthaviśayatvāc*  
*chabdasyārthaviśiṣṭatety*<sup>99</sup> *ucyate, tad apy*  
*ayuktam, tatpratītijanānam antareṇa*  
*tadviśayatvānupapatteḥ. pratītau tu*

To begin with, the probandum cannot be the qualification by the *artha*, because between *śabda* and *artha* there is no property-possessor relation such as the one between fire and hill. An *artha* such as ‘cow’ is not ontologically resting on the word “cow”. If one were

<sup>94</sup> The following passage summarizes the options discussed in ŚVRa, śabda 66–77.

<sup>95</sup> *arthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ*] *arthaviśiṣṭatvatvaṃ* Ppc; *arthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ vā* NMVa

<sup>96</sup> *artha*] om. NMVa

<sup>97</sup> *arthapratītiviśiṣṭatvaṃ vā*] *arthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ* K

<sup>98</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 65cd–66ab: *katham cārthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ na tāvad deśakālataḥ // tatpratītiviśiṣṭaś cet paraṃ kim anumīyate /*

<sup>99</sup> *-viśiṣṭatety*] *-viśiṣṭas sa ity* K

*siddhāyāṃ kiṃ tadviśayatva*<sup>100</sup> *dvārakeṇa*  
*taddharmatvena. yadi tu*  
*tadviśayatvamūlā*<sup>101</sup>  
*taddharmatvapūrvikārthapratītiḥ*<sup>102</sup>,  
*arthapratītimūlaṃ ca*<sup>103</sup> *tadviśayatvam*,  
*tad itaretarāśrayam. tasmān*  
*nārthaviśiṣṭaḥ śabdaḥ sādhyah.*

to argue that *śabda* is qualified by the *artha* because *artha* is the content of the cognition generated by it, this would be improper, because until its cognition is generated, the (*artha*) cannot possibly be the content of the cognition. And once the cognition has been generated, what is then the purpose of being the property by being the content? If the cognition of the *artha*, caused by being a property [of *śabda*], is based on being the content [of the cognition], and if being the content of the cognition needs to be preceded by the existence of the cognition of the *artha*, then there is a circular argument. Therefore the probandum cannot be the *śabda* qualified by the *artha*.

The reductionist tries to requalify the relation of possession in terms of “being the content of”. This may be legitimate, because, as explained in Bhattacharyya 2001, 177, in Indian inferences the occurrence-exacting (*vṛttiniyamaka*) relation between probans and locus, the “relation of possession”, does not need to be the same of the one between probandum and locus, in other words it can be asymmetric. Jayanta, however, argues that the result of the inference, namely that ‘cow’ is the content of the cognition generated by *gauḥ*, needs to be known before the inference is performed, which leads to a *petitio principii*. Even if accepted, the inference would thus be trivial, if not superfluous. The problem of explaining the acquisition of the general law of concomitance would remain, although a well-formed inference could be formulated:

If *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*, then it possesses (i.e., its content is) ‘cow’  
 This *śabda* possesses (i.e., in it the universal *gatvādi* inheres) *gatvādi*  
 Therefore this *śabda* possesses (i.e., its content is) ‘cow’

<sup>100</sup> *viśayatva*] *viśaya* K

<sup>101</sup> *mūlā*] *mūla* P; *mūlatvaṃ* K

<sup>102</sup> *-pūrvikārthapratītiḥ*] *-pūrvakā* K

<sup>103</sup> *ca*] om. NMVa

### 5.1.2.2. The capacity of making the *artha* known cannot be possessed by the *śabda*

The second alternative is that the probandum is that *śabda* possesses the capacity to generate knowledge of the *artha* (NMVa, I 406,13-15):<sup>104</sup>

*nāpy arthapratyāyanaśaktiviśiṣṭaḥ,  
tadarthitayā śabdaprayogābhāvāt. na  
śaktisiddhaye śabdah kathyate śrūyate 'pi  
vā. arthagatyartham evāmuṃ śṛṇvanti ca  
vadanti ca.*

Nor is *śabda* qualified by the capacity to cause knowledge of the *artha*, because it is not used for this purpose (*tadarthitayā*): *śabda* is not uttered and heard for the sake of proving a capacity; rather, [people] hear and utter a *śabda* only with the purpose of knowing the *artha*".

Using a word to cause knowledge of the *capacity* of generating knowledge of the *artha* is obviously not the common use of language. The inference is in itself valid, but it cannot be the inferential process of learning from words, i.e., of knowing an *artha*, though it may be used to describe the process of learning from words:

If *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*, then it possesses the capacity of generating knowledge of 'cow'  
This *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*  
Therefore this *śabda* possesses the capacity of generating knowledge of 'cow'

### 5.1.2.3. The knowledge of the *artha* known cannot be possessed by the word

The third alternative is that the probandum is "knowledge of the *artha*" possessed by *śabda* (NMVa, I 406,16-19):<sup>105</sup>

*nāpy arthapratīviśiṣṭāḥ śabdah pakṣatām  
anubhavitum arhati  
siddhyasiddhivikalpānupapatteḥ. asiddhayā 'pi<sup>106</sup>  
tadvattvaṃ śabdasyārthadhiyā katham.  
siddhāyāṃ tat<sup>107</sup>pratītau vā kim anyad  
anumīyate.*

Nor can a *śabda*, when qualified by knowledge of the *artha*, enjoy the status of locus, because of the impossibility to solve the dilemma: has [the cognition of the *artha*] been accomplished or not [before the inference takes place]? If knowledge of the *artha* has

<sup>104</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 66cd: *na pratyāyakaśaktiś ca viśeṣasyānumīyate.*

<sup>105</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 75–77: *tasmād utthāpayaty eṣa yato 'rthaviśayāṃ matim / tatas tadviśayaḥ śabda iti dharmatvakalpanā // tatra vācakatāyāṃ vaḥ siddhāyāṃ pakṣadharmatā / na pratītyaṅgatām gacchen na caivam anumānatā // gamakatvāc ca dharmatvaṃ dharmatvād gamako yadi / syād anyonyāśrayatvaṃ tu tasmān naiṣāpi kalpanā //*

<sup>106</sup> *pi*] hi K

<sup>107</sup> *tat*] ca K

not yet occurred, how could *śabda* possess that [knowledge of the *artha*] (*tadvattvam*, i.e. *arthapratīvatvam*)? And if such knowledge has already occurred, what is then left to be inferred?

As in § 5.1.2, the inference would be trivial, because “knowledge of ‘cow’ ” would already be present before the inferential process begins:

If *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*, then it possesses (i.e., it generates) knowledge of ‘cow’

This *śabda* possesses *gatvādi*

Therefore this *śabda* possesses knowledge of ‘cow’

The defect of tautology in the inference, however, could be charged also to common inferences such as the smoke-fire one, because prior knowledge of the invariable concomitance is a feature of any inference (NMVa, I 407,1-4):<sup>108</sup>

*jvalanādāv api tulyo vikalpa iti cet, na hi  
tatrāgnir dhūmena janyate, api tu  
gamyate. iyaṃ tv arthapratītir janyate  
śabdenety asyām eva  
siddhāsiddha<sup>109</sup> vikalpāvasaraḥ. tasmāt  
tridhāpi na śabdasya pakṣatvam*

[Objection] The same argument could be raised in the case of ‘fire’, etc.

[Counter-objection] No, because the property ‘fire’ is not generated by smoke, but rather known [by it]. ‘Knowledge of the *artha*’, instead, is generated by *śabda*, so there is scope for the dilemma of accomplishment or non accomplishment, if it is considered the property of the locus *śabda*. Therefore, in any of the alternatives of the trilemma, *śabda* cannot have the status of locus.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 80–82: *dhūmavān ayam ity evam apūrvasyāpi jāyate / pakṣadharmamatis tena bhidyetottarakṣaṇāt // na tv atra pūrvasambandhād adhikā pakṣadharmatā / na cārthapratyayāt pūrvam ity anaṅgam itaṃ bhavet // na ca dharmī grhīto ’tra yena taddharmatā bhavet / parvatādir yathā deśaḥ prāg dharmatvāvadhāraṇāt //*

<sup>109</sup> *siddhāsiddha*] *siddhāsiddhatva* NMVa

There is a further inconsistency in the status of locus of *śabda*: according to Nyāya, *śabda* is ephemeral by nature and as such cannot possibly be the locus of something that lasts in time (NMVa, I 407,5-9):<sup>110</sup>

*api ca gośabde dharmiṇi*<sup>111</sup>  
*gatvādisāmānyātmakasya hetor grahaṇam*  
*tato vyāptismaraṇam tataḥ parāmarśaḥ*  
*tato 'rthapratipattir*<sup>112</sup> *iti*  
*kāladrāghīyastvād dharmī tirohito bhavet.*  
*na parvatavad avasthitis tasyāsti,*<sup>113</sup>  
*uccaritaḥpradhvaṃsitvāc*<sup>114</sup> *chabdasya.*

Moreover, if the word *gauḥ* were the property-possessor (i.e. the locus possessing the property to be inferred), due to the span of time elapsed, the property-possessor would have disappeared: the inferential sign constituted by the universal *gatvādi* is grasped; then the necessary concomitance (between *gatvādi* and *artha*) is remembered; then there is the inferential reasoning (*parāmarśa*); then there is knowledge of the *artha*. That [locus, i.e. the word *gauḥ*] has no stability through time, unlike a hill, because *śabda* disappears right after having been uttered.

Even common sense speaks against the notion of *śabda* as the locus of the *artha* (NMVa, I 407,9-11):

*na ca śabdām arthavattvena lokaḥ*  
*pratipadyate. kintu śabdāt pṛthag*  
*evārtham iti na sarvathā śabdaḥ pakṣaḥ.*  
*ato dharmaviśiṣṭasya dharmiṇaḥ*  
*sādhyasyehāsaṃbhavāc chabdaliṅgayor*  
*mahān viṣayabhedāḥ.*

People do not conceive *śabda* in terms of possessing the *artha*, but they rather regard *artha* as something quite distinct from *śabda*; hence a *śabda* cannot possibly be a locus. Therefore, since here the object of knowledge cannot be a property-possessor qualified by a property, there is a huge difference in the epistemic content of *śabda* and inferential signs.

<sup>110</sup> This reason is not found in Kumārila, who, as a Mīmāṃsaka, conceived *śabda* as permanent and not ephemeral (cf. the Nyāya-Mīmāṃsā debate in the commentaries on Mīmāṃsā Sūtra 1.1.6-23). Kumārila discussed the undesired consequences arising from *śabda* as a permanent *liṅga* in ŚVRa, *śabda* 87-89.

<sup>111</sup> *dharmiṇi*] *dharmiṇi sādhye* K

<sup>112</sup> *-pratipattir*] *pratītir* K

<sup>113</sup> *tasya asty*] *tasya / api tu* NMVa ; om. K

<sup>114</sup> *-pradhvaṃsitvāc*] *pradhvaṃsitvaṃ* NMVa



The opponent claimed (see § 4.2) that there is also a similarity of causal components in the inferential and verbal processes. Jayanta points to the substantial differences in this respect (NMVa, I 407,12-408, 2):<sup>115</sup>

*sāmagrībhedaḥ khalv api.  
pakṣadharmānvayādirūpasāpekṣam  
anumānaṃ vyākhyātam. śabde tu na<sup>116</sup>  
tāni santi<sup>117</sup> rūpāṇi. tathā ca śabdasya  
pakṣatvapratikṣepān na taddharmatayā  
gatvādisāmānyasya liṅgatā. na cārthasya  
dharmitvam<sup>118</sup>  
siddhyasiddhivikalpānupapatteḥ.*

There is certainly a difference also in its components (*sāmagrī*). Inference has been explained as something that requires formal aspects (*rūpa*)<sup>119</sup> such as a property of the locus, a relation of agreement (*anvaya*), and so on. These characteristics, however, are not found in *śabda*. And similarly, since the notion that *śabda* is the locus has been discarded, the universal *gatvādi*, etc., cannot be the inferential sign that is a property of that *śabda*. Nor can the *artha* be a property-possessor (*dharmin*, i.e. the locus), because the two hypotheses of completeness and uncompleteness are both untenable.

### 5.1.3. Disanalogy of property-possessorship

In § 4.1.5. it was argued that *śabda* possesses both a *śabdatva*, intended as phonemic sound, and the corresponding *artha*. Yet, *śabda* cannot be the locus, as shown above. The reverse, the possibility of the *artha* being the locus, is absurd, because an *artha* cannot possibly be the substratum of the *śabda* (NMVa, I 408,2-408, 3):<sup>120</sup>

*na ca taddharmatvaṃ śabdasya śakyate*

Nor can *śabda* have the character of

<sup>115</sup> Cf., for the first part, ŚVRa, śabda 98: *tasmād ananumānatvaṃ śābde pratyakṣavad bhavet / trairūpyarahitatvena tādṛgviṣayavarjanāt*. For the second part, cf. ŚVRa, śabda 68–69ab, *tasmād arthaviśiṣṭasya na śabdasyānumeyatā / kathaṃ ca pakṣadharmatvaṃ śabdasyeha nirūpyate // na kriyākartṛsambandhād ṛte sambandhaṃ kvacit*, and ŚVRa, śabda 72cd, [...] *tasmān na pakṣadharmo 'yam iti śakyā nirūpanā //*

<sup>116</sup> *na*] P NMVa; om. K

<sup>117</sup> *santi*] P NMVa; om. K

<sup>118</sup> *dharmitvam*] P NMVa; *dharmatvam* K

<sup>119</sup> Here *rūpa* may recall Dignāga's *trairūpya* rule, the three conditions of a valid inference.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 74cd: *na taddeśādisadbhāvo nābhimukhyādi tasya vā //*

vaktum, tatra vṛttyabhāvāt

being the property of the locus,  
because it (*śabda*) does not reside in it  
(in *artha*).

One could then argue that although the *artha* is not in a spatial relation with the *śabda*, it has a causal relation with ‘knowledge of itself’ and could thus be the locus of ‘knowledge of the *artha*’ (NMVa, I 408,3-408, 5):<sup>121</sup>

tat<sup>122</sup>pratījanakatvena tu<sup>123</sup>  
taddharmatāyām ucyamānāyām pūrvavad  
itaretarāśrayam.<sup>124</sup>  
pakṣadharmādi<sup>125</sup>balena pratītiḥ.  
pratītau<sup>126</sup> ca satyām  
pakṣadharmādi<sup>127</sup>rūpalābhaḥ.

If the status of being its (of the *artha*)  
property is explained has the causation  
of its [own] cognition, then there is  
again the same circular argument as  
before: the cognition [of the *artha*] is  
there on the strength of being the  
property of the locus; the property of  
the locus is known [only] once the  
cognition [of the *artha*] is already  
there.

As before, there would be a *petitio principii*:

If an *artha* possesses *gauḥ*, then it possesses cognition-of-‘cow’

This *artha* possesses *gauḥ*

Therefore this *artha* possesses cognition-of-‘cow’

Even common sense dictates that an *artha* does not have a natural relation with a *śabda*, unlike the smoke-fire relation, so that by mere observation one could grasp the relation of signification (NMVa, I 408,6-408, 9):<sup>128</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 75–77: *tasmād utthāpaty eṣa yato ’rthaviṣayām matim tatas tadviṣayaḥ śabda iti dharmatvakaḷpanā // tatra vāca-  
katāyām vaḥ siddhāyām pakṣadharmatā / na pratītyaṅgatām gacchen na caivam anumānatā // gamakatvāc ca dharmatvaṃ dharmat-  
vād gamako yadi / syād anyonyāśrayatvaṃ hi tasmān naiṣāpi kaḷpanā //*

<sup>122</sup> *tat*] P K; om. NMVa

<sup>123</sup> *tu*] P K; om. NMVa

<sup>124</sup> *itaretarāśrayam*] P; *itarāśrayam* K; *itaretarāśrayaḥ* NMVa

<sup>125</sup> *-dharmādi*] P NMVa; *-dharmatādi* K

<sup>126</sup> *pratītau*] P NMVa; *tatpratītau* K

<sup>127</sup> *-dharmādi*] P NMVa; *-dharmatādi* K

<sup>128</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 78: *na cāgrhītasambandhāḥ svarūpavyatirekataḥ / śabdaṃ jānanti yenātra pakṣadharmamatir bhavet //*

api ca yady arthadharmatayā śabdasya  
 pakṣadharmatvaṃ bhavet, tadā<sup>129</sup>  
 anavagatadhūmāgnisambandho 'pi yathā  
 dhūmasya parvatadharmatām grhṇāty  
 eva<sup>130</sup> tathā  
 'navagataśabdārtha<sup>131</sup>sambandho 'py  
 arthadharmatām śabdasya grhṇīyāt. na ca  
 grhṇātī<sup>132</sup> ato nāsti pakṣadharmatvaṃ  
 śabdasyeti.

Moreover, if śabda were the property of the locus, i.e. of the artha, then, just like someone perceives smoke as a property of the hill, even if he does not know the smoke-fire relation [and thus cannot perform the inference], in the same way someone could grasp śabda as a property of the artha, even without knowing the śabda-artha relation. But this does not happen, so śabda cannot be the property of the locus.

#### 5.1.4. Disanalogy of relation

The relation of concomitance between a śabda and its artha, taken for granted by the opponent (§ 4.1.3), is not warranted. In actuality there is no concomitance, neither spatial, nor chronological (NMVa, I 408,10-15):<sup>133</sup>

anvayavyatirekāv api tasya durupapādaḥ,  
 deśe kāle ca<sup>134</sup> śabdārthayor  
 anugamābhāvāt. na hi yatra deśe śabdaḥ  
 tatrārthaḥ. yathoktaṃ<sup>135</sup> śrotriyaiḥ,  
 “mukhe hi śabdam upalabhāmahe bhūmāv  
 artham” iti. vyaṃ tu karṇākāśe<sup>136</sup>  
 śabdam<sup>137</sup> upalabhāmahe ity āstām etat.  
 nāpi yatra kāle śabdaḥ tatrārthaḥ, idanīm

Also the relation of agreement and difference is hardly tenable, since there is no co-existence of śabda and artha, neither in time nor in space. For, it is not that wherever there is a śabda, there is also its [corresponding] object. As said by the ritualists (śrotriyas): “[...] because we perceive śabda in the

<sup>129</sup> tadā] NMVa; tad K; P n.a.

<sup>130</sup> eva] P NMVa; om. K

<sup>131</sup> śabdārtha] P NMVa; om. K

<sup>132</sup> grhṇātī] P NMVa; grhṇāty K

<sup>133</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 86: yatra dhūmo 'sti tatrāgner astitvenānvayaḥ sphuṭaḥ / na tv evaṃ yatra śabdo 'sti tatrārtho 'stīti niścayaḥ // Cf. also ŚVRa, śabda 65cd, katham cārthaviśiṣṭatvaṃ na tāvad deśakālatāḥ, as well as Pārthasārathi's Nyāyaratnamālā thereon, where the Yudhiṣṭhira example is found: kena sambandhenārthaḥ śabdaṃ viśiṣṭi. na tāvad ekadeśakālatayā, yudhiṣṭhiraśabda-deśakālayor yudhiṣṭhirasyābhāvād ity āha —katham iti. The quote attributed to the śrotriya-s is found, verbatim, also in ŚBh, ad 1.1.5 (See Frauwallner 1968, 36, 23).

<sup>134</sup> ca] P NMVa; pi K

<sup>135</sup> yathoktaṃ] P NMVa; tathoktas K

<sup>136</sup> karṇākāśe] P NMVa; karṇāvākāśe K

<sup>137</sup> śabdam] P K; śrotram NMVa

yudhiṣṭhirārthābhāve 'pi  
yudhiṣṭhiraśabdāsadbhāvāt<sup>138</sup>

mouth and the object on the ground”, though we [Naiyāyikas] know that śabda resides in the ear’s ether; so that [possibility of a concomitance in space] is ruled out. And it is not that whenever there is a śabda also the object is present: even if in this moment the object ‘Yudhiṣṭhira’ is not extant, the śabda Yudhiṣṭhira can actually be there.

Naiyāyikas hold an externalist view of reference. It is clear that when one speaks of past objects these cannot be present while the corresponding words are uttered. The opponent, however, argues in favour of an internal concomitance between the mental image of śabda and its artha. In reply, Jayanta raises a dilemma and the argument of the superfluosness of such an inference (NMVa, I 408,16-409, 3):<sup>139</sup>

atha<sup>140</sup> śabdārthayoḥ anvayābhāve 'pi  
tadbuddhyor anvayo grahīsyata ity  
ucyate.<sup>141</sup>  
tarhi vaktavyam. kiṃ arthabuddhāv  
utpannāyām anvayo grhyate  
anutpannāyāṃ vā. anutpannāyāṃ<sup>142</sup> tāvat  
svārūpāsattvāt kuto 'nvayagrahaṇam.  
utpannāyāṃ tv arthabuddhau kim  
anvayagrahaṇeneti naiṣṭhalyam.  
tatpūrvakatve tu pūrvavad  
itaretarāśrayam. etena vyatirekagrahaṇam  
api vyākhyātam.

[Objection] Even when the [spatial or chronological] concomitance of śabda and artha is not there [as in the Yudhiṣṭhira example], the concomitance between their mental representations can still be grasped. [Counter-objection] Then the following should be clarified: is the relation of agreement (anvaya) grasped when the cognition of the artha is already effected, or when it is not yet effected? When it [the cognition of the artha] is not yet effected, since its very existence is not there, how could the agreement be grasped? If the cognition

<sup>138</sup> sadbhāvāt] P NMVa; sambhāvāt K

<sup>139</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 93–96: nāṅgam arthadhiyām eṣā bhaved anvayakalpanā / anvayādhiṅganmatvam anumānasya ca sthitam // jñāte pratīṣṭhāmarthyā tadvaśād eva jāyate / paścād anvaya ity eṣa kāraṇaṃ katham ucyate // tasmāt tannirapekṣaiva śabdaśaktiḥ pratiyate / na ca dhūmānvayāt pūrvam śaktatvam avagamyate // vyatireko 'py avijñātād arthāc chabdadhito yadi / so 'pi paścāt sthitatvena nārthapratyayasādhanam //

<sup>140</sup> atha] P K; artha NMVa

<sup>141</sup> grahīsyata ity ucyate] P NMVa; grahīsyeta ity cet K

<sup>142</sup> anutpannāyāṃ] P NMVa; anutpannāṃ K

of the *artha* is effected, instead, there would be superfluity [of the inferential process]: what would be the use of grasping a relation of agreement? And if it (grasping the agreement) is based on that [prior existence of the cognition of the *artha*], then, as before, there is a *petitio principii*. The same applies to the relation of difference (*vyatireka*).

The opponent argues that the relation of agreement and difference is normally applied in the common process of language acquisition, by subtraction and addition, so in that context the process of induction has indeed a role. Jayanta answers that in that context the function of agreement and difference is used to acquire the conventional relation between a *śabda* and its *artha* while learning a linguistic usage, and not to generate knowledge of the *artha* in a subsequent application of that linguistic usage (NMVa, I 409,4-409, 9):

*nanu āvāpodvāpadvāreṇa  
śabdarthasambandhe niścīyamāne  
upayujyete evānvayavyatirekau.  
yathoktam “tatra<sup>143</sup> yo ’nveti yaṃ śabdām  
arthas tasya bhaved asau” iti  
satyam etat. kintu samayabalena  
siddhāyām arthabuddhau  
samayaniyamārthānvayavyatirekau.  
śabde na<sup>144</sup> anvayavyatirekakṛtaiva<sup>145</sup>  
dhūmāder iva<sup>146</sup> tato ’rthabuddhiḥ.*

[Objection] When the *śabda-artha* relation is ascertained on the basis of the phenomenon of addition and subtraction, agreement and difference are indeed used. As it was said, “there (in the operation of addition and subtraction) some *śabda* (i.e., an ending) is put in relation with another *śabda* (i.e. the stem); the *artha* shall be of that [*śabda*]” (ŚVDva, vākya 160ab).

[Counter-objection] This is true. Yet, while the cognition of an *artha* is achieved on the strength of a convention, a concomitance by agreement and difference has the purpose of fixing (*niyamārtha*) that

<sup>143</sup> *tatra*] Pac K; *yatra* Ppc NMVa

<sup>144</sup> *śabde na*] P NMVa; om. K

<sup>145</sup> *-kṛtaiva*] P K; *-kṛtā ca* NMVa

<sup>146</sup> *iva*] P K; *ivāgneḥ* NMVa

convention (*samaya*). In *śabda*, knowledge of the *artha* does not derive directly from a concomitance by agreement and difference, as it instead happens with smoke etc.

Thus Jayanta seems to concede that in the process of language acquisition there is an inferential process at play.

There is a further difference between *śabda* and inference. Unlike the knower who infers fire from smoke, the hearer of the word *gauḥ* knows the *artha* ‘cow’ because he has been trained in this linguistic usage (NMVa, I 409,10-410, 5. See also GBhSha,72-73):<sup>147</sup>

*api ca / dhūmādibhyaḥ pratītiś ca  
naivāvagatipūrvikā / ihāvagatipūrvaiva  
śabdād utpadyate matiḥ //  
sthaviravyavahāre hi bālah<sup>148</sup> śabdāt  
kutaścana / dṛṣṭvārtham<sup>149</sup> avagacchan  
taṃ svayam apy avagacchati // yatrāpy  
evaṃ samayaḥ kriyate, “etasmāc chabdād  
ayam arthas tvayā pratipattavya” iti,  
tatrāpi pratītir eva kāraṇatvena nirdiṣṭā  
draṣṭavyā //*

Moreover, knowledge [of the probandum] originated from [inferential marks such as] smoke, etc., is not based on a previous learning (*avagati*). Here, instead, the knowledge [of an *artha*] originated from *śabda* is certainly preceded by learning [the language]. For, a learner, having observed and learnt the designation of an *artha* from a given *śabda* by observing the usage of competent speakers, knows that [*artha*] later on”. Even when the conventional relation is taught [ostensively] in the form of “from this *śabda* you ought to know this *artha*”, knowledge [of the *artha*] should be regarded as caused [by *śabda*].

The point here is that while inferential processes can be initiated independently by a rational knower, verbal knowledge requires a competence acquired either from the ostensive teaching of competent speakers or, more indirectly, from the observation of their linguistic usages (see GBhSha,73).

<sup>147</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 90: *naivam apy asti dṛṣṭo hi vināpy arthadhiyā kvacit / vācakapratyayo ’smābhir avyutpannarān prati //*

<sup>148</sup> *bālah*] P NMVa; *dṛṣṭvā* K

<sup>149</sup> *dṛṣṭvārtham*] P NMVa; *bālo ’rtham* K

This closes the rebuttal of the reductionist’s attempt of construing a *śabda-artha* inference (NMVa, I 410,5-8):<sup>150</sup>

*tasmād anyo liṅgaliṅginor avinābhāvo  
nāma sambandhaḥ, anyas ca śabdārthayoḥ  
samayāparanāmā vācyavācakabhāvaḥ  
sambandhaḥ pratītyaṅgam. evaṃ*<sup>151</sup>  
*viśayabhedāt sāmāgrībhedaḥ ca  
pratyakṣavad anumānād anyas śabda iti  
siddham //*

Therefore, one thing is the relation among inferential signs and inferential objects, called “invariable concomitance”, another is the relation between signified and signifier, called “conventional relation” between *śabda* and *artha*, as a factor of knowledge. Thus it has been proven that, because of their different object of knowledge and of their different components (*sāmāgrī*), *śabda*, like perception, is distinct from inference.

## 5.2. The Sāṅkhya defense of *śabda* is inconclusive

As for the Sāṅkhya defense of *āptavacana* mentioned in § 4.2, Jayanta agrees (with Kumārila) about their inconclusiveness and bluntly dismisses them (NMVa, I 410,9-10):<sup>152</sup>

*yat tu  
pūrvavarṇa*<sup>153</sup>*kramāpekṣaṇādivailakṣāṇya  
m āśaṅkya dūṣitam, kas tatra phalguprāye  
nirbandhaḥ*

As for the points raised after noticing a difference [between *śabda* and inference] on the basis of the requirement of the sequence of previous phonemes etc., what is the use of writing about that superfluous issue?

<sup>150</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 97–98: *sambandhaṃ yaṃ tu vakṣyāmas tasya nirṇayakāraṇam / syād anvayo ’tirekaś ca na tv arthādhigamasya tau // tasmād ananumānatvaṃ śabde pratyakṣava bhavet / trairūpyarahitatvena tādṛgviśayavarjanāt //*

<sup>151</sup> *evaṃ*] P K; *evaṃvidha-* NMVa

<sup>152</sup> Kumārila’s dismissal is even harsher: *bhedaḥ sāṅkhyādibhis tv iṣṭo na tūktam bheda-kāraṇam* (ŚVRa, śabda, 15cd), and *paroktā hetuvaś cātra [=sāṅkhyadarśane] nābhedasya nivāritāḥ* (ŚVRa, śabda, 35ab).

<sup>153</sup> *-varṇa*] P NMVa; om. K

### 5.3. Refutation of the Buddhist arguments

#### 5.3.1. The universal of trustworthiness

As for the Buddhist argument (§ 4.3.1), in which authoritativeness was proposed as the inferential sign in the alleged inferential process of *śabda*, Jayanta replies (NMVa, I 411,1-411, 10):<sup>154</sup>

yat punarabhihitam,  
 “āptavādāvisaṃvādasāmānyād  
 anumānatā” iti, tad atīva subhāṣitam,  
 viṣayabhedāt. āptavādatvahetunā hi  
 śabdārthabuddheḥ prāmāṇyaṃ sādhyate,  
 na tu saiva janyate. yathāha.<sup>155</sup> anyad eva  
 hi satyatvam āptavādatvahetukam /  
 vākyārthas cānya eveha jñātaḥ  
 pūrvataraṃ hi<sup>156</sup> saḥ // tatra<sup>157</sup> ced  
 āptavādena<sup>158</sup> satyatvam anumīyate /  
 vākyārthapratyayasātra kathaṃ syād  
 anumānatā // janma tulyaṃ hi buddhīnām  
 āptānāptaḡirāṃ śrutau /  
 janmādhikopayogī ca nānumāyāṃ  
 trilakṣaṇaḥ iti //

It was said, that “[*śabda* has] the character of inference because of the undisputedness of an authoritative statement”, this was very well said, because of the difference of epistemic content. In fact, by the probans “authoritativeness of the statement” the validity of the knowledge of the *artha* of *śabda* is proven; it is not so that such knowledge is generated [by this probans]. As it was said (ŚVDva, vākya 244-246): “One thing is truth, which is inferred through the authoritativeness of the statement, another thing is the *artha* of the sentence, which is known before [its truth]. In this context, if what is inferred through the authoritativeness is truth, how can knowledge of the *artha* of the sentence have an inferential nature? Because, cognitions produced from authoritative or unauthoritative statements arise in the same way; in this inference even [a probans] satisfying the three required criteria (*trilakṣaṇa*) is not useful to explain anything more than the origin [of knowledge from *śabda*, i.e., the acquisition of linguistic competence, or

<sup>154</sup> Cf. ŚVRa, śabda 47: āptavādāvisaṃvādasāmānyān nṛvacassu hi / lakṣaṇenānumānatvāt prāmāṇyaṃ siddhim ṛcchati //

<sup>155</sup> yathāha] Pac K; yad āha Ppc NMVa

<sup>156</sup> hi] Pac K; ca Ppc NMVa

<sup>157</sup> tatra] P K; tataś NMVa

<sup>158</sup> ced āptavādena] P NMVa; vedāptavādena K



the intention of the speaker]”.<sup>159</sup>

The inference proposed by this reductionist runs as follows:

If an *artha* possesses (i.e., is caused by) authoritative-statement-ness, then it possesses undisputedness

This *artha* possesses authoritative-statement-ness

Therefore this *artha* possesses undisputedness

It is clear that since the *artha* is the locus it must be known in advance, to make the inference possible.

Here Taber (1996: 26) renders ŚVDva, 244 slightly differently: “The truth [of a sentence], based on the trustworthiness of the author, is one thing, the meaning of the sentence, which is known prior [to its truth], another”. It is important to ponder how this verse would be read, respectively, from a (Mīmāṃsaka) viewpoint of intrinsic validation and from a (Naiyāyika) one of extrinsic validation. Taber (1996: 26-27), indeed, anchors the core of his argument about an acceptance of two levels of knowledge from *śabda* –non-committal and committal– to this principle of extrinsic validation, while discussing this quotation of the ŚV by Jayanta:

Nyāya considers the truth of a cognition to be known extrinsically, that is, after the cognition has arisen by means of confirmation by other cognitions. *Thus, Jayanta would appear to have the notion of an initial belief evoked by language itself that things are a certain way followed by an explicit awareness that one’s belief is indeed true* [A.G.: emphasis by Taber].

Elsewhere, Jayanta explicitly writes that the principle of extrinsic validation applies also to testimony (NMVa, I 420). As for the application to perceivable *artha*-s, Jayanta seems to suspend his judgement on whether such knowledge is intrinsically or extrinsically validated, while he states that in the case of non-perceivable *artha*-s knowledge is extrinsically validated (NMVa, I 436).

After quoting the three ŚV verses, however, Jayanta continues by saying that verbal knowledge is not simply an impression, but rather a definite cognition, as evident from common experience (NMVa, I 411,11-12):

*na ca prāmāṇyaniścayād vinā  
pratibhāmātram tad iti vaktavyam, śabdād*

One cannot say that without the  
ascertainment of the validity of

<sup>159</sup> On *janmādhikopayogī*, see GBhSha,73.

*artha*<sup>160</sup> *saṃ*<sup>161</sup> *pratyayasyānubhavasiddhat*  
*vāt.*

knowledge there is only an impression (*pratibhā*), because the full knowledge of the *artha* caused by *śabda* is proven by experience.

This dichotomy between “impression” and “firm knowledge”, and the assertion that the latter, and not the former, is experienced upon hearing a statement, seems to confirm that “The Naiyāyikas were against the deployment of such a basic attitude [of non-committal understanding of words] prior to the belief-claim or knowledge claim that arises in the hearer” (Matilal 1994: 355), and that “When Nyāya uses that expression [A.G.: *śabdabodha*] it simply means *knowledge from words* which is the standard case, i.e., knowledge that *p* gathered from someone’s asserting that *p*” (Chakrabarti 1994: 121). Taber (1996: 27), too, concedes this, “for Jayanta himself insists that the initial awareness evoked by a sentence is not a “mere intuition” (*pratibhāmātra*) but a “definite cognition” (*sampratyaya*)”.

By reading the passage in context, therefore, Taber’s argument is not strengthened, especially with the addition of this last sentence; it thus seems that also for Jayanta knowledge of *śabdārtha*, i.e., *śabdabodha*,

simply means *knowledge from words* which is the standard case, i.e., knowledge that *p* gathered from someone’s asserting that *p*. The distinction is not drawn in terms of truth or falsity or correctness or incorrectness. There is no tendency in Nyāya to hold that word-generated awareness is always knowledge. We can have false belief generated by believably comprehended false sentences (Chakrabarti 1994: 121).

### 5.3.2. The inference of the speaker’s intention

Lastly, the Buddhist inference of the intention of the speaker (§ 4.3.2) was presented. Such an inference, however, does not lead to the knowledge of the *artha* (NMV<sup>a</sup>, I 412,1-8):

*etena vivakṣāviśayatvam api pratyuktam.*  
*na hi vivakṣā nāma śabdasya vācya*  
*viśayaḥ kintv artha eva tathā.*<sup>162</sup>  
*vivakṣāyām hi*<sup>163</sup> *śabdasya liṅgatvam iha*  
*drśyate / ākāśa iva kāryatvāt na*  
*vācakatayā punaḥ // śabdād uccarītāc ca*

By this [last argument, that knowing the truth of a statement and knowing the *artha* are two distinct processes], also the possibility that the speaker’s intention is the probandum [of an inference having *śabda* as its probans]

<sup>160</sup> *śabdād artha*] Ppc K; *śabdārtha* Pac NMV<sup>a</sup>

<sup>161</sup> *saṃ*] P NMV<sup>a</sup>; om. K

<sup>162</sup> *tathā*] P NMV<sup>a</sup>; om. K

<sup>163</sup> *hi*] P NMV<sup>a</sup>; tu K

vācyaviṣayā tāvat samutpadyate saṃvittis  
 tadanantaraṃ tu gamayet kāmam  
 vivakṣām asau / arthopagrahavarjitā ca<sup>164</sup>  
 niyamāt siddhaiva sā jīvatām<sup>165</sup>  
 tadvācyārthaviśeṣitā tv avidite naiṣā  
 tadarthe bhavet.

is refuted. For, the content of the signification of *śabda* is not the speaker's intention, but rather the *artha*. Here *śabda* is the inferential sign of the speaker's intention, because it is an effect [of the speaker's intention], like in the case of ether, not because it is a signifier [of the speaker's intention]. From an uttered *śabda*, at first the full knowledge of a signified *artha* is generated; then, that [*śabda*] may well convey [through an inference] also the intention of the speaker, [yielding knowledge of the fact] that this [intention] is related to living beings, without the grasp of a [specific] *artha*.<sup>166</sup> The [intention] which is specifically related to the signified *artha*, however, cannot be there before the *artha* is known.

The example of ether is related to Vaiśeṣika ontology: like one infers the imperceptible ether from the perception of *śabda*, because *śabda* must rest in ether, so one infers that the imperceptible intention of the speaker from the perception of *śabda*.<sup>167</sup> The inference from *śabda* to the intention of the speaker, however, is based on a cause-effect relation, not a signifier-signified one. And in any case such an inference leads to the knowledge that behind the *śabda* there is a sentient being with an intention.

If a speaker possesses *śabda*, then it possesses an intention to speak

This speaker possesses *śabda*

Therefore this speaker possesses an intention to speak

<sup>164</sup> -varjjitā ca] P K; -varjitat tu NMVa

<sup>165</sup> siddhaiva sā jīvatām] Pac; siddhaiva sā jīvatā K; siddhaiva sā jīvitā Ppc; siddhaivam ājīvatā NMVa

<sup>166</sup> See GBhSha,73.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. (VD, Vyomavāṇī, 578): na ca śabdasyānumānatvam eva niṣidhyate, vivakṣākāśādhigame liṅgātvāt. yathā hy ākāśādhigame sarvaḥ śabdo'numānaṃ vivakṣākāryas tu vivakṣādhigame 'pīti.

Without knowledge of the *artha*, however, the inference cannot prove that the speaker intends to signify that specific *artha*.

Taber (1996: 21-23) proposes a refinement of the Buddhist argument, as a chain of inferences, qualified as “roughly that of Śrīdhara in his *Nyāyakandālī*”:

Śrīdhara sought to interpret Praśastapāda as propounding the more sophisticated Buddhist theory: from a word or linguistic sign one does not directly infer its meaning but rather the state of mind of the speaker who employs it, and from that – given that the speaker is reliable – one infers its meaning.

Taber’s representation can be summed up in the following two inferences:

If a speaker possesses *śabda*, then he possesses an intention to speak (*vivakṣā*)

This speaker possesses *śabda*

Therefore this speaker possesses an intention to speak

If an authoritative speaker possesses an intention to speak, then he possesses knowledge of the *artha*

This authoritative speaker possesses an intention to speak

Therefore this authoritative speaker possesses knowledge of the *artha*

“Finally, from this knowledge on the part of the trustworthy speaker one is able to infer the existence of the state of affairs that he knows” (Taber 1996: 21). Taber (1996: 24) sees in the inference of the intention an awareness of the “basic idea that thoughts are somehow instrumental in meaning; words indicate primarily, or in the first instance, what we are thinking and do not directly refer to things”.

This chain of inferences, however, is not found in the NM and seems to be a post-Jayanta development.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1. Jayanta and Mīmāṃsā

Most of the arguments presented by Jayanta in this section, both the reductionist and the anti-reductionist ones, are already found in the *Ślokavārtika*. Jayanta, however, rearranges and discusses them in a very clear sequence. Moreover, he adapts them to the Naiyāyika *siddhānta* by some strategic correctives:

- The *artha* of individual words is not a universal, as in Mīmāṃsā, but rather a qualified particular

(*tadvat*).

- This different understanding of what is the *artha* of words has an unavoidable impact on the analysis of the *artha* of sentences and of complex words such as *gomat* (“cow-possessor”) as well.
- Since in Nyāya the Veda has an author and as such its passages are standard cases of trustworthy statements, a specific discussion on the Veda is absent in the NM, while it takes about twenty verses in Kumārila’s defense of *śabda*.
- In Nyāya, *śabda* is ephemeral by nature, thus it cannot have stable relations with permanent entities and it is not suited as a probans or a locus in Indian inferences. This argument cannot be used in Mīmāṃsā, where *śabda* is considered permanent.
- Jayanta concedes that inference is used during the process of language acquisition to establish the conventional relation. This argument is only hinted at by Kumārila, since the *śabda-artha* relation is not considered conventional in Mīmāṃsā.
- Linguistic competence is a necessary condition to “know from words” and it is used by Jayanta to mark the difference between *śabda* and inference. This argument is not used by Kumārila.

## 6. 2. Understanding words and knowing from words

Taber’s argument for an acceptance on Jayanta’s side of a non-committal understanding from words is mainly built on the arguments presented here in § 5.3.2 and § 5.3.1. Unlike him, I did not find a distinction between *understanding* and *knowing* from words in Jayanta’s presentation. Therefore, in this respect, I’d rather endorse Matilal’s and Chakrabarti’s opinions. A Sanskrit expression for non-committal understanding is *śabdabodha* ‘understanding from words’. Yet I did not encounter this expression in old, pre-Jayanta Nyāya sources.

In general, from the debate analysed in this paper it emerges that *śabda* was for Jayanta an epistemological, rather than a linguistic, phenomenon, and that its *artha* was an epistemic object. The issue of distinguishing linguistic comprehension and testimonial knowledge might have been a pseudo-problem in Jayanta’s view of the world, and he would perhaps have agreed with Coady (1994: 245) in that “if the ability to use language meaningfully is connected with the making of true reports then it is surely the *consistent* making of true reports that matters”. In other words, if the appropriate use of language is to communicate truth, there are in principle no “neutral” statements, and false statements can be explained in terms of the inappropriate use of language.

### 6.3. The reduction of *śabda* to inference

Jayanta starts from the assumption that *śabda* is an autonomous means of knowledge. Unlike for Mīmāṃsakas, for him the relation between language and reality is established by convention, but in its day-to-day usage it is clear that this *a priori* connection is a necessary condition for linguistic communication. At least within the limits of the theory of inference available to him, there were no convincing arguments that could have explained a reduction of *śabda* to perception or inference. He was thus justified in thinking *śabda* as a *sui generis* epistemic tool.

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## Bhartṛhari and verbal testimony: a ‘hyper-antireductionist’ approach?

Marco Ferrante

The grammarian and philosopher Bhartṛhari (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE) developed a philosophy that is essentially characterized by the prominent role language has in structuring humans’ efforts to cope with reality. Within this broader picture, he adopted an epistemological standpoint that was somehow at odds with the standard view of other South Asian thinkers, usually founded on a careful and systematic distinction of the means able to lead to a reliable cognitive event (technically called *pramāṇas*). Bhartṛhari claimed that such an interpretation is rather artificial, and that a cognition is actually a multifaceted process, whose single components are almost always hard to pinpoint. His main theoretical contribution consists of affirming that such a multifaceted cognitive act is informed and shaped by language.

The article deals with Bhartṛhari’s epistemology by discussing the author’s opinion on the nature of testimony. Furthermore, it addresses the question whether pure inference should always be regarded as an accurate way of acquiring knowledge.

In a comprehensive evaluation of Indian philosophy, the role played by the grammarian Bhartṛhari (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE)<sup>1</sup> is hard to understate. Although he formally took no part in the trends which mostly contributed to the classical phase of Indian thought – namely that process of mutual interaction between Brahmanical schools, mainly Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā, and their principal opponents, in particular the so called logical-epistemological school of Buddhism – his influence was widespread and his views carefully assessed by both supporters and opponents. Scholars have revealed the presence of his ideas in many facets of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions (Bronkhorst 1992, 1993, 1999, 2012; Dwivedi 1991; Lindtner 1993; Torella 2008; Timalsina 2009). Yet, Bhartṛhari’s masterpiece, the *Vākyapadīya* (henceforth VP) can hardly be regarded as a conventional philosophical text (Aklujkar 2002: 209). It is indeed an extensive treatise meant to analyze all aspects of language by combining perspectives which can be categorized, depending on the circumstances, as typical of the indigenous grammatical tradition (*vyākaraṇa*), as proximate to general linguistics, or as close to the

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<sup>1</sup> On Bhartṛhari’s date see Frauwallner 1961. But if one were to accept an earlier date for the Buddhist Pramāṇavādins, as proposed by Krasser, Bhartṛhari’s date should be pushed back to the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE (Krasser 2012).

philosophy of language. A sign of the peculiarity of the VP as a philosophical text is the absence of a detailed analysis of the means (*pramāṇas*) leading to correct knowledge (*pramiti*), a topic which usually received much attention in the works of classical philosophers (Iyer 1969: 83). This was probably due both to the status of the VP and to the purposes of the author: although Bhartrhari was probably aware that his work would lead grammar well beyond the limits set by his predecessors, he nonetheless chose not to adopt the conventions of the philosophical genre,<sup>2</sup> thus giving to the work that hybrid flavor that is probably one of its most distinctive features.

All this does not imply that the VP is silent on epistemology. The philosophical views expounded in the text are so pervasive that no area of philosophy remains unaffected, and knowledge is no exception. The scholarly discussion on Bhartrhari's epistemology is not abundant. Its general features have been investigated by Subramania Iyer and Ashok Aklujkar (Iyer 1969: 83–97; Aklujkar 1970, 1989a, 1989b and 2002) and valuable studies are available on more specific questions (Dragonetti–Tola 1990, Akamatsu 1993 and 1999, Vergiani 2012, Todeschini 2010, Torella 2013). In the following I will offer an interpretation of Bhartrhari's epistemological standpoint by highlighting its internal consistency as well as its being in harmony with other aspects of his thought. Furthermore, in section 3, I will try to glean Bhartrhari's ideas on 'verbal testimony' and to conjecture which position he would have assumed if he had known the Western contemporary debate on the issue.

### 1. Bhartrhari's epistemological stance

Bhartrhari's main theoretical stance is characterized by a strong, recurrent idea, namely that the whole prevails over the parts so that the very idea of parts is eventually unreal. The fact is stated very clearly from an ontological standpoint, but it is also true as far as epistemology and analysis of meaning are concerned. These three aspects are bound together and molded by the same theoretical pattern operating on different levels of analysis. The most crucial affirmation the VP makes on epistemology is a clear example of this attitude: Bhartrhari explicitly holds that any cognition is language-based and that conceiving knowledge without the medium of language is untenable.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Or, simply, the conventions of the philosophical genre were not fully established yet. It seems that within the Brahmanical milieu – without considering mentions of and quotations from lost works – a commentarial tradition did not arise before the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE (the earliest extant commentaries being possibly Vātsyāyana's *Nyāyabhāṣya* and Śabara's *Bhāṣya* on the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, the dates of which are also uncertain).

<sup>3</sup> VP 1.131: *na so 'sti pratyayo loka yaḥ śabdānugamād r̥te /  
anuviddham iva jñānaṃ sarvaṃ śabdeṇa bhāṣate //*

statement is subtle and has an impact on ontology: Bhartṛhari is defending the idea that in order to have cognitions, a cognized object, in technical terms a *prameya*, must necessarily have something in common with the knower (*pramātr*).<sup>4</sup> Both in fact share the same basic feature, that is, the capability of being expressed through language. The affirmation implies that it is too simple to limit language to its phenomenal and audible state. Language is more than that: it is the principle which permeates all knowable entities, including inert ones. This strong position is by itself an explicit critique of alternative theories of cognition (in which language is instead seen as an epistemological impediment),<sup>5</sup> and constitutes the framework within which the entire epistemological standpoint of the VP must be assessed.

First, although there is scholarly consensus on the fact that Bhartṛhari generally deals with three means of knowledge – perception, inference and verbal testimony – (Aklujkar 1989a; Todeschini 2010) it is clear that for him the common systematization of the process of knowledge in terms of *pramāṇas* is merely conventional (Aklujkar 1989a: 151–152). If knowledge is always imbued with language, splitting it into perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), verbal testimony (*śabda*), and so on, may be practically convenient but it is ultimately misleading.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he seems

“In the world there is no cognition without the implication of language.

All knowledge is manifested as if permeated by language”.

<sup>4</sup> The linguistic nature of the *prameya* is evincible from the very first stanza of the VP in which *śabdabrahman* is said to manifest itself as *artha*, that is, as object/meaning. As for the *pramātr*, we are dealing with a context in which the differentiation between subject (*pramātr*) and object (*prameya*), although apparently manifested, is held to be unreal. The *Vṛtti* on VP 1.54 is a typical example in which the capacity of a word (that is to say of a cognition, every act of knowledge being dependent on words) to illuminate and that of being illuminated are clearly equated: *te cāsya pratipādyapratipādakaśakti nityām ātmabhūte pṛthaktveneve pratyavabhāsete*. Moreover, other passages in the *Vṛtti* (for example the one on VP 1.1: *tasyaikam api caitanyaṃ bahudhā pravibhajyate*) clearly identify Brahman, hence language, with the individual consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> I am referring to the position of the Buddhist *Pramāṇavādins*. According to the founder of the school, Dignāga, possibly a younger contemporary of Bhartṛhari, the only real entities are the instantaneous and non-extended particulars (called *svalakṣaṇas*), which are linguistically inexpressible. *Pramāṇavādins*' position is in a sense opposed to Bhartṛhari's: for them, language is crucial in providing the illusory awareness of entities extended in time and space, thus giving shape to a conceptualized kind of knowledge which is ultimately false. In this regard, Dharmakīrti's statement that “conceptual elaboration is nescience” (*vikalpa eva hy avidyā*) is quite indicative. See *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1.98-1.99 ab.

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to note that Abhinavagupta (11<sup>th</sup> c. CE), the well-known Kashmiri polymath, whose philosophy was deeply indebted to Bhartṛhari, assumed a similar stance:

*prakāśo nāma yaś cāyaṃ sarvatraiva prakāśate/*

*anapahnavanīyāt kiṃ tasmin mānakalpanaiḥ// Tantrāloka 1.54*

*apahnutau sādhanē vā vastūnām ādyam idṛśam/*

*yat tatra ke pramāṇānām upapattiyupayogite// Tantrāloka 1.57*

ambiguous on the role human reason plays in the epistemological process. Such ambiguity is particularly displayed in a specific section of the VP (1.30 to 1.43) in which language is mostly identified with the notion of ‘tradition’ (*āgama*, see below for further details). This section contains a critique of the reliability of reason, alongside an explicit affirmation of the supremacy of traditional teaching over other means to gaining knowledge. The syllogism apparently followed in that section runs somewhat as follows: if language is identical to traditional teaching and is the common trait of any valid cognition, any valid cognition will be necessarily bound to tradition and, therefore, reasoning will play a minor role in human knowledge. Scholars have tried to temper Bhartrhari’s critique by pointing out that this section explicitly deals with matters concerning *dharma*.<sup>7</sup> According to this interpretation the author would maintain the supremacy of traditional knowledge *only* regarding actions having ‘non-visible purposes’,<sup>8</sup> whereas in all other cases the use of reason is not only admitted but also helpful. Although there is little doubt that in parts of this context Bhartrhari is explicitly speaking of dharmic matters, I believe that limiting the import of the criticism of reasoning only to actions having supra-sensorial purposes would imply a misunderstanding of his epistemology. I will try to show below how Bhartrhari’s approach can be better understood by expanding the import of the concept of ‘traditional knowledge’ without downplaying the role of reason in human cognitions.

The stanzas I mentioned above (VP 1.30 to 1.43) give a fair account of the way the author understands the cognitive process. The section starts with a clear acknowledgment of the role traditional knowledge (*āgama*) plays in establishing the results of actions with non-visible effects. In determining such results the *Vṛtti* affirms that “in establishing the results of actions which have non visible purposes the knowledge of the proper nature of things is strictly bound to traditional knowledge”.<sup>9</sup> The text then goes on asking bluntly: “For, how can one trust human reasoning, which

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“This light in question shines everywhere,  
and being impossible to deny it, what is the use of the means of knowledge?

Both in negating and establishing things, since there is always that original [reality], what are the reason and the use of the means of knowledge?”

<sup>7</sup> A. Aklujkar maintains that: “(Bhartrhari) nowhere declares *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* to be unacceptable or always unreliable” (Aklujkar 1989a: 153). Todeschini too seems to endorse the position (Todeschini 2010: 107).

<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, actions which have implications within the sphere of *dharma* and whose effects are not perceived because they ripen in the future. The *Vṛtti* on VP 1.7 offers a short list of these actions: *adṛṣṭaprayojanā bhakṣyābhakṣyagamyāgamyavācyāvācyaviṣayāḥ*. “actions which have an invisible purpose are the ones regarding what can be eaten and what cannot, with whom one can have an intercourse and with whom not, what can be said and what not”.

<sup>9</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.30: *adṛṣṭānām ca karmāṇām phalāniyame svabhāvasaṃvid āgamaṃpratibaddhā*.

never reaches any conclusion and whose [judgments of] identity and difference are not established?”<sup>10</sup> Soon after, as in a musical *crescendo*, the criticism is directed at logical reasoning *par excellence*, inference (*anumāna*): “Due to the difference of condition, space and time in the various powers, the attainment of things on the basis of inference is extremely difficult”.<sup>11</sup> The gist of the argument is given in the *Vṛtti*: establishing an inference is hard because a proper invariable concomitance (*vyāpti*) between *probans* (*vyāpya*) and *probandum* (*vyāpaka*) is observed very rarely. In fact, ordinary things are liable to modify their properties according to space (“The contact with mountain water is extremely cold, whereas the contact with the same water in a pot or in a thundercloud is extremely hot”),<sup>12</sup> time (“Contact and so on with water in a well and so forth is perceived very differently in summer, winter etc.”),<sup>13</sup> condition (“a deviant behavior of potentialities is observed even for external [things] such as seeds and plants etc., because of different conditions”).<sup>14</sup> The criticism proceeds considering another typical element of an inference, the cause-effect relationship. Also in this case a proper inference can hardly be drawn because “the capacity of fire to produce a modification of wood and similar substances, that very capacity is stopped in case of substances such as a heap of clouds etc.”<sup>15</sup> The cause-effect relationship is thus rarely permanent, for “the powers of substances whose efficacy is observed in a thing are difficult to ascertain in other things”.<sup>16</sup> Then follows what is possibly Bhartṛhari’s most famous remark on the point; differently from the previous ones it does not focus on inference itself, but rather on the person who makes it: “One thing, even if inferred with effort by clever thinkers, is established in another way by cleverer ones”.<sup>17</sup> Finally he rounds the question off by exploiting a similitude: “Similarly to a blind man groping his way across a rugged path, it is by no means difficult to fall if inference is the primary [means of knowledge]”.<sup>18</sup> Now, if Bhartṛhari deems inference unreliable, how can one get a valid piece

<sup>10</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.30: *ko hy anavasthitasādharmyavaidharmyeṣu nityam alabdhanīścayeṣu puruṣatarkeṣu viśvāsaḥ.*

<sup>11</sup> VP 1.32: *avasthādeśakālānām bhedād bhinnāsu śaktiṣu | bhāvānām anumānena prasiddhir atidurlabhā ||*

<sup>12</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *atiśīto haimavatīnām apām sparśaḥ. saḥ tu balāhakāgnikuṇḍādiṣu tadrūpānām evātyuṣṇa upalabhyate.*

<sup>13</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *grīṣmāhemantādiṣu kūpajalādīnām atyantabhinnāḥ sparśādayaḥ dṛśyante.*

<sup>14</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *bāhyānām api bijauśadhiprabhṛtīnām avasthābedhād upalabhyate śaktivyabhicaraḥ.*

<sup>15</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.33: *agnyādinām kāṣṭhādivikārotpādane dṛṣṭasāmarthyānām abhrapaṭalādiṣu dravyeṣu tathāvidham sāmartyam pratibadhyate.*

<sup>16</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.33: *tatraikasmin viṣaye dṛṣṭasāmartyānām punar viṣayāntareṣu dravyānām duravasānāḥ śaktayaḥ.*

<sup>17</sup> VP 1.34: *yatnenānumito 'py arthaḥ kuśalair anumātr̥bhiḥ | abhiyuktatarair anyair anyathaivopapadyate ||*

<sup>18</sup> VP 1.42: *hastasparsād ivāndhena viṣame pathi dhāvātā |*

of knowledge? In the end, is valid knowledge possible at all? One may try to find an answer by drawing on the clues scattered throughout the section considered so far.

A first thing to point out is that Bhartrhari accepts the existence of a special kind of knowledge which is typical of non-ordinary beings; these beings are characterized by having an intellect free from impurities and a vision similar to that of the Vedic Seers. Their cognitive capacities lie well beyond the domain of logical reason: their knowledge is not erroneous and has the same vividness of perception.<sup>19</sup> Still, this kind of knowledge is by no means spontaneous or taken for granted: “It is affirmed that the visionary (*ārṣam*) knowledge of the Seers is manifested once their selves have been purified, through the merit [which derives] from traditional knowledge only”.<sup>20</sup> Despite the acknowledgment of the existence of extraordinary beings, their special powers are not regarded as innate, but rather seen as the results of and restrained by the authority of traditional knowledge.

The term I render here with ‘traditional knowledge’ is *āgama*. A. Aklujkar (Aklujkar 1989b: 17) has shown that in the VP this word can assume three basic connotations. It may mean:

- An inherited lore which is acquired by being born in a specific community.
- A traditional mass of knowledge which is preserved in authoritative texts.
- The Vedic revelation, embracing both the *Śruti* and the *Smṛti*.

I believe that a further connotation can be added to the above scheme. In order to describe it I will refer to three different discussions contained in the stanzas under scrutiny.

First, let us go back to the way Bhartrhari conceives the cognitive process of the seers. This process seems to move between two extremes: on the one hand, the seers’ cognitions are instantaneous and immediate; on the other hand, they are not regarded as a light in the darkness, for they heavily rely on a mass of traditional knowledge whereby they are underpinned, nourished and

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*anumānapradhānena vinipāto na durlabhaḥ ||*

<sup>19</sup> VP 1.37: *āvīrbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetasām |*

*atītānāgatajñānaṃ pratyakṣān na viśisyate ||*

“The knowledge of the past and future of those whose minds are not afflicted, and whose insights are manifested, is not different from perception”.

VP 1.38: *atīndriyān asaṃvedyān paśyanty ārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā | ye bhāvān vacanaṃ teṣāṃ nānumānena bādhyate||*

“The word of those who, with the vision of the Seer, see what is not perceivable and is beyond the senses is not invalidated by inference”.

<sup>20</sup> Vṛtti on VP 1.30: *tad arthajñānaṃ ārṣaṃ ṛṣīnām āgamikenaiva dharmeṇa saṃskṛtātmanām āvirbhavatīty ākhyāyate*. In his commentary on the first chapter of the VP named *Sphuṭākṣarā*, Vṛṣabhadeva interprets the apparently redundant word *ārṣam* as indicating ‘a special kind of knowledge’: *ārṣam iti jñānaviśeṣasya saṃjñā*.



eventually made possible. I think that the same paradigm informs the cognitive process of ordinary people, too. In their case a cognition is an act of instantaneous awareness which is achieved through a body of notions the knower acquires in many ways in the course of life and even beyond. This is why an act of cognition cannot simply be regarded as a form of perception, inference and so on: each *pramāṇa* is always tinted by the others, and all together, simultaneously, contribute to the realization of a valid piece of knowledge (*pramiti*). Obviously, in each and every case, a single *pramāṇa* might be predominant but it never works in isolation. Bhartṛhari describes such an approach in VP 1.35 where the action of knowing is compared to the cognitive process of the experts of jewelry, who are capable of identifying the genuineness of a precious stone. This ability is not (only) a matter of inference. He says: “The knowledge of the experts of precious stones, coins and so forth is not inferential. It derives from practice (*abhyāsa*) and is incommunicable to others”. It is worth noting the stress on the non-inferential nature of this *pramiti*, which in order to be an inference should be objective and communicable to others (in technical terms a *parāṛthānumāna*), and that is not the case. Furthermore, this knowledge has another crucial connotation: it derives from practice. And practice is somehow once again connected to the key concept of traditional knowledge (especially if one keeps in mind that the word *abhyāsa* expresses not only the ideas of “repetition, exercise”, but also those of “use, custom”). In other words, the expert of stones manages to recognize the goodness of a jewel instantaneously, but this *pramiti* is only the final result of a longer process in which many ways of acquiring knowledge are involved.<sup>21</sup> All of them can be classified under the umbrella term of ‘practice’ or ‘traditional knowledge’ (*āgama*).

The second point concerns the meaning of *āgama* in the stanzas in question with their corresponding *Vṛtti*.<sup>22</sup> The section employs the expression nine times. Most occurrences (7 out of 9) come within the first three *kārikās* (VP 1.30, 1.31, 1.32), the remaining ones towards the end of the section (VP 1.42). The first four occurrences are clearly related to the typical meaning of the term. *Āgama* means lore; it is that which has been handed down to us from immemorial time, and hence it is

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<sup>21</sup> Consider how similar to Bhartṛhari’s is Abhinavagupta’s conception:

*ratnatattvam avidvān prāñ niścayopāyacarcanaṭ/  
anupāyāvikalpāptaau ratnajña it bhāṇyate// Tantrāloka 1.229.*

“It is called a connoisseur of jewels somebody who, without knowing before the real essence of a stone, through a series of means and determinations acquires a knowledge of that [essence] which is eventually devoid of means and conceptual representations”.

<sup>22</sup> The use of the same word to indicate slightly different concepts is not limited to *āgama*; other crucial terms in Bhartṛhari’s theory have some degree of ambiguity. For instance, A. Aklujkar noticed it for *pratibhā* and *śabdatattva* (Aklujkar 1970: 11-12).

used here as a plain synonym of the Veda.<sup>23</sup> The argument developed in these first stanzas is based on the idea that in order to understand *dharma* one cannot rely on logical reasoning, but has to trust the traditional teachings embodied in the Vedic corpus: after all, even the seers are bounded to the *Śruti*. On the contrary, the two occurrences in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1. 32 show a slightly different connotation. The context is different: the stanza is devoted to criticizing inference by showing that an invariable concomitance between two objects is almost always disrupted by a mutation of condition, space and time of the objects under discussion. Concerning this, the *Vṛtti* affirms that an ordinary man is unable to know something which is inherently difficult to perceive without the help of *āgama*.<sup>24</sup> In this case *āgama* does not seem to refer to any of the senses pointed out by Aklujkar but rather to some other way of acquiring knowledge.

The third and final point regards VP 1.31 which, although explicitly it treats dharmic matters, seems to hint at a type of knowledge that is informed by the Vedic teaching but that is not totally identical with it. This kind of knowledge is not defined in detail but its presence is suggested by the existence of ‘ways of understanding what is good for humans which are universal and well-known’.<sup>25</sup> To act without taking them into proper account conflicts with ordinary usage. Such ways of understanding are never set aside by logical reasoning.<sup>26</sup> As remarked by the *Vṛtti*, these ‘ways of understanding’, which are evidently based on tradition, can be strong enough to cast aside some interpretations of the Vedic text. The point is not explicit but in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31 Bhartrhari contends that wrong interpretations of the Veda are possible, and he seems to imply that only such ‘ways of understanding’ can keep them at bay: “Some people, just by resorting at will to the teachings of Tradition, display a behavior which is reproachable and in opposition with the one [accepted] in the world”.<sup>27</sup> The idea is that even what is stated in the Vedic text must comply with a set of values which is shared by the members of the Brahmanical society (“accepted in the world”) and deemed

<sup>23</sup> Aklujkar has thoroughly discussed the meaning of Vedic revelation in Bhartrhari’s thought in Aklujkar 2009.

<sup>24</sup> See *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *tatra sūkṣmam avasthānaviśeṣaṃ prākṛtam aprākṛtagamyam āgamacakṣurantarenāpratyakṣam anumānamātreṇāniścitaṃ kaḥ sādhyatūm asaṃmudhāḥ prayatate.*

“Which wise man would make an effort to establish that peculiarity of condition which is innate, which in such an original state is not knowable, which is not perceivable without the eye of tradition, and not determinable through inference alone?”

Vṛṣabhadeva explains the expression *aprākṛtagamyam* as *pratyakṣadharmabhir gamyam*. That is to say that the subtle condition is knowable only when its properties are manifested, e.g. when it has abandoned its contracted form thanks to the activity of time.

<sup>25</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31: *santi sādharanāḥ prasiddhāḥ puruṣahitapratipattimargāḥ.*

<sup>26</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31: *yeṣv anyathā pravṛttir lokavirasā, na ca tarkeṇa kādadid api vyudastapūrvāḥ.*

<sup>27</sup> *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31: *kāmam āgamoddeśaniśrayenaiva kecid vininditam api lokasamācāraviruddhācaraṇam pratipadyante.*

fundamental to its correct functioning. Such standards of conduct are clearly drawn from the Vedic lore but they are eventually sanctioned by a group of individuals (*śiṣṭas*) whose interpretations are regarded as authoritative.<sup>28</sup> The presence of these ‘ways of understanding’ seems thus to allude to a kind of knowledge which everybody shares, which seems to include common sense but that is not restricted to that. This knowledge, being eventually ‘social’, cannot be but linguistic.<sup>29</sup>

What can we gather from these three examples? I think Bhartṛhari is using *āgama* to indicate a further way of gaining knowledge having the following characteristics:

- it is a kind of knowledge in which *abhyāsa* – exercise, custom or simply experience – plays a role; it can be communicated to others but not in every case.
- it is a kind of knowledge which differs from *anumāna*.
- it is a kind of knowledge which not always coincides with the Vedic scripture.

*Āgama* certainly embraces the three senses already specified by Aklujkar, being related to the inherited lore, to the culture acquired in the social dimension, to the teaching of a religious tradition. Yet, I think there is actually something more: in the end, *āgama* seems to indicate a kind of multifaceted knowledge that is not exclusively based on the perceptual and logical skills of the knower, but that differs also, and this is crucial, from ‘pure’ verbal testimony. Such a kind of knowledge is language-based and seems to be at the very core of any cognition. Are we forced on this basis to challenge the scholarly agreement on Bhartṛhari’s conventional acceptance of just three *pramāṇas*? I do not believe so. As far as I can see, by using *āgama* Bhartṛhari is not adding a further *pramāṇa*, he is rather expanding the epistemological significance of *śabda* by going beyond its connotation as ‘verbal testimony’.

Thus, to sum up, Bhartṛhari seems to conceive the cognitive act as a multifaceted process based on different means of acquiring knowledge: some of those are founded on reasoning only (such as inference), some on traditional lore, some lie somewhere between the two. None of them is applied in isolation and, most importantly, all are linguistically informed.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The role of the *śiṣṭas* in the VP is discussed in Deshpande 1993, Aklujkar 2004, Ferrante 2016.

<sup>29</sup> For a comparable, but non-Indian, perspective on the link between linguistic communication as a means of knowledge and society, see Lauri’s contribution to this volume.

<sup>30</sup> J. Bronkhorst has claimed that Bhartṛhari believed that a particular class of cognitions, namely the insights leading to the knowledge of the highest reality (Brahman), are not linguistically informed (Bronkhorst 1995). I have discussed this position in Ferrante 2014.

## 2. On the validity of inferential reasoning outside the dharmic sphere

Let us now go back to the problem I touched upon before, and clarify why Bhartrhari's criticism of reasoning (*tarka*) is not to be limited to dharmic matters only. As far as the 'non-worldly' (*alaukika*) sphere is concerned – a sphere that broadly speaking includes ethic and metaphysical judgments – there is no doubt that *āgama* prevails over any other *pramāṇas*. Yet, as we have seen in the texts quoted above, Bhartrhari recommends that *anumāna* should be handled with care also in ordinary situations. Much of the problem in accepting this conclusion lies in the ambiguity of the term *āgama*. When Bhartrhari maintains that in ordinary transactions logical reasoning is subsidiary to *āgama* I claim that he is not necessarily referring to the Veda or to some form of 'verbal or traditional authority', but he is indeed alluding to that kind of multifaceted epistemological process I tried to outline above.

Let us check whether the texts support this interpretation. The idea whereby the criticism of reasoning is narrowed down to the *alaukika* sphere heavily draws on the first stanzas under analysis (VP 1.30 and VP 1.31, together with the corresponding *Vṛtti*), which explicitly mention *dharma*. Since they come first in a cluster largely devoted to epistemological questions it is tempting to conclude that all the ensuing considerations on the validity of *tarka* are limited to the *alaukika* sphere. But is it really the case? First, *dharma* is actually mentioned only in the first two *kārikās*, with no occurrence either in the stanzas or in the *Vṛtti* after VP 1.31. The absence is even more significant if one considers the three stanzas in which the criticism of inference is fully carried out (1.32, 1.33, 1.34). Second, a careful look at these three stanzas reveals that all the examples given in the *Vṛtti* to illustrate why *anumāna* is unreliable discuss ordinary cases: Bhartrhari is not at all concerned with the sphere of *dharma* (the list given in fn. 15, from VP 1.7, remains a good example), but he rather refers to ordinary cognitions such as the perception of cold and warm things (VP 1.32) or the capacity of fire to burn (VP 1.33). Third, and most importantly, there are passages in the *Vṛtti* which question the validity of *anumāna* also in the case of ordinary cognitions. The first relevant one belongs to the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32:

*ihāvyabharitābhīmatasāhacaryasya dr̥ṣṭasya saṃbandhinaḥ tatsadr̥śasya vā darśanād adr̥ṣṭe saṃbandhini yaj jñānaṃ utpadyate tenāpratyakṣasyārthasya prasiddhir duravasanā. tathā hi avasthāntareṣu viniścītabalasattvādīnām puruṣagamyēṣu apuruṣagamyēṣu vā dr̥śyante svabhāvā vyabharinaḥ.*

'When the inferred object is not visible, it is really difficult to know [that] non-perceived object through a cognition arising from the perception of a visible one, either connected with or similar to the former, and whose concomitance has been conceived as non-deviant. For example, it is observed that the proper natures of entities, the capacity of

which have been established [under certain circumstances], change under others, either accessible to human knowledge or not.’

Here Bhartṛhari is explaining that inferential knowledge is unstable because, as remarked above, the conditions characterizing it in a particular instance will never be exactly the same in another. In this regard, the last sentence is the most relevant to us: “the proper natures of entities etc., the validity of which have been established under certain circumstances, change under others, either accessible to human knowledge or not”. The point is to understand the import of the last expression: “accessible to human knowledge or not” (*puruṣagamyēṣu/apuruṣagamyēṣu*). The translation above somehow follows the gloss given in Vṛṣabhadeva’s *Sphuṭākṣarā* where it is clearly affirmed that *puruṣagamyēṣu/ apuruṣagamyēṣu* stands for “accessible/inaccessible to perception” (*pratyakṣeṣu/apratyakṣeṣu*).<sup>31</sup> If that is true – and there is no reason to reject Vṛṣabhadeva’s reading – one must conclude that *anumāna* is not totally reliable also when it is about things accessible to perception.

Furthermore, in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.42, Bhartṛhari explicitly says that inference is always rickety, no matter whether it concerns *prameyas* accessible to perception (which frequently happens with ordinary cognitions) or not (which always happens with cognitions concerning dharmic matters or, using the VP’s phrasing, “actions the purposes of which are invisible”).

*yasya hi sthālīpulākanyāyenaikadeśam dṛṣṭvā śiṣṭe ‘rthe pratipattiḥ so ‘ndha iva viṣame girimarge cakṣuṣmantam netāram antareṇa tvarayā paripatan kaṃcid eva mārgaikadeśam hastasparśenāvagamya samatīkrāntas tatpratyayād aparam api tathaiva pratipadyamano yathā vināśam labhate, tadvad āgamacakṣuṣā vinā tārkanupatī kevelenānumānena kvacid āhitapratyayo dṛṣṭādṛṣṭaphaleṣu karmasv āgamam utkrāmya pravartamano niyataṃ mahatā pratyavāyena saṃyujyate.*

‘Somebody who — on the basis of the maxim of the rice in the pot —<sup>32</sup> having seen a part [pretends to] know the rest (*śiṣṭe ‘rthe*), is like a blind man who, without a guide endowed with sight, proceeds fast on a rugged mountain path. He goes on, having discerned one part of the track by the touch of the hand, and by knowing it (*tatpratyayād*), he believes that another part is like [the former], thus ruining himself (*vināśam labhate*). In the same way, somebody who follows reason without the ‘eye’ of the tradition, whose knowledge of things is based on inferential thought only, who acts passing over traditional

<sup>31</sup> See VP p. 89, l. 8-9.

<sup>32</sup> The maxim affirms that one should not check all the grains in a pot to determine whether the rice is cooked or not, one grain is enough. According to Bhartṛhari, the principle—indeed a typical case of induction—is epistemologically unreliable.

knowledge concerning actions having both visible and invisible purposes, that somebody is necessarily bound to great disaster (*niyataṃ mahatā pratyavāyena saṃyujyate*).’

A final, collateral point seems to corroborate this interpretation. Often the Pratyabhijñā school ends up being a lucid interpreter of Bhartrhari’s thought. Concerning this point R. Torella (Torella 2013) has convincingly shown that the Pratyabhijñā philosophers developed the idea of *prasiddhi* (a critical term in the epistemology of the school indicating a background knowledge common to every human being) drawing on Bhartrhari’s tenets of *pratibhā* and *āgama*. Incidentally, this seems to confirm that the latter term has a significance that is not limited to the realm of *dharma*.<sup>33</sup>

This interpretation of *āgama* as indicating a particular, multifaceted type of knowledge, instead of mere ‘sacred tradition’, has a clear advantage: it allows us to account for Bhartrhari’s affirmations on the superiority of tradition over other *pramāṇas*, without regarding him as an enemy of human rationality.

That said, although Bhartrhari’s defense of *āgama* can be fully justified on purely epistemological grounds, this does not exclude that it can also be connected to his historical context and intellectual agenda.<sup>34</sup> There is little doubt that one of the main goals of the VP is to revive the pāṇinian school of grammar, whose prestige had been progressively waning after the period of the *munitraya* (Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, Patañjali) and the very existence of which was supposedly jeopardized by a deeply changed socio-religious context.<sup>35</sup> Much of the innovations of the VP, such as the stress on questions which are hardly discussed in the works of the previous *vaiyākaraṇas*, are probably rooted in the new historical environment, where several intellectual movements, both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical, were competing for their own affirmation (and probably for patronage, too). Hence, it does not seem out of place to suppose that Bhartrhari followed the trend going on in his days. Indeed, upon a closer examination, the first part of the first chapter of the VP (from the beginning to 1.43) is entirely dedicated to giving a theoretical foundation to the science of grammar, a foundation that in

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<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that in his *Īśvaraṃpratyabhijñāvimarśinī* Abhinavagupta explicitly confirms the idea that for Bhartrhari *āgama* (and obviously *pratyakṣa* too) is more reliable than inference: *pratyakṣāgamau bādhakau anumānasya iti tatrābhavad-bhartrharinyāyabhāṣyakṛtprabhṛtayaḥ* (‘According to the venerable Bhartrhari, to the author of the *Nyāyābhāṣya* and to others, both *āgama* and direct perception invalidate inference’). See *ĪPV* on 2.3.1-2. Iyer-Pandey edition: 89-90.

<sup>34</sup> Todeschini had the merit to draw attention to the VP’s apologetic side, a topic that so far has unfortunately received very little attention. Yet, in this particular case, I am not convinced that Bhartrhari’s aim ‘is [to secure] his own tradition from possible criticism leveled through reason’ [...] ‘by securing the words and the perceptions of *śiṣṭas/āptas* from inference’ (Todeschini 2010: 103).

<sup>35</sup> See Bhartrhari’s account of the history of *vyākaraṇa* contained in VP 2. 481-2.487. In particular, VP 2. 485 deals with the decay of grammar after Patañjali.

the ‘new world’ cannot be limited anymore to the old five ‘purposes’ put forth by Patañjali at the beginning of his *Mahābhāṣya* (*rakṣa*, *ūha*, *āgama*, *laghu*, *asaṃdeha*, namely protection of the Vedic text, adaptation of the Vedic mantras to the rituals, complying with the Vedic tradition, economy of expression, removal of doubt). The strategy Bhartṛhari implemented was deeply connected with the intellectual setting he lived in. In order to be effective, and possibly in order to appeal to a potential audience, any intellectual proposal should have a soteriological drive and should be able to say something about ‘spiritual’ questions. Bhartṛhari addressed the problem by elaborating on the causal link, established by his predecessors, between the grammatical science and the knowledge of the Veda. But he went further by adding another step: drawing on proto-Vedāntic ideas (the historical contours of which are obscure but which were probably lively at his time)<sup>36</sup> he gives to the Veda–Language–Grammar relation an ontological status, by identifying the sacred text with the metaphysical principle that permeates all aspects of reality, Brahman. Once the pervasiveness of language is accepted, it must be maintained at every level of analysis, otherwise the grounds on which the authority of grammar is built would crumble. Epistemology is no exception and the criticism of inference must be understood within the picture that has emerged so far. Having in mind the authoritativeness of grammar as the final goal, Bhartṛhari thus defends the idea that every cognition is linguistically determined and that all cognitions are conceptual representations (in technical jargon *savikalpakajñāna*). If it is relatively easy to maintain, in the given cultural context, that dharmic questions can be addressed only via *āgama–śabda–Veda*, it is certainly harder to establish it for ordinary cognitions, for which perception and inference seem to be reliable ways of gaining knowledge. A possible solution is to conjecture that Bhartṛhari developed his multifaceted way to conceive ordinary knowledge (which, it is useful to repeat it, is permeated by *savikalpaka* cognitions such as verbal testimony, memory, inherited lore, religious scriptures, common notions etc.) precisely in order to overcome this difficulty. But the inevitable consequence of this strategy is the demotion of inference to a *pramāṇa* unable to produce correct knowledge *independently* from other factors.

### 3. Bhartṛhari’s approach to verbal testimony

Given these premises, one may conjecture which position Bhartṛhari would take in the philosophical debate on the role of verbal testimony. Following the path paved by E. Freschi in her

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<sup>36</sup> The most reliable studies on the early history of Vedānta remain those by H. Nakamura (Nakamura 1983 and Nakamura 2004). On Bhartṛhari as a *vedāntin* thinker, see Nakamura (2004: 457 ff.) and Ferrante 2015.

introductory essay, one may wonder in which category Bhartrhari's ideas on testimony fall. Does he regard verbal testimony as an independent means of knowledge (thus being an anti-reductionist) or not (hence a reductionist)? If the former is the case, where would the authority of language come from? Would it come from language itself (as argued by Mīmāṃsakas) or from some other source external to language itself (simply put, the position of Naiyāyikas)? As it will be clear below the answer is not as straightforward as it seems.

First, one can doubt the validity of the questions, and with reason: as remarked above, Bhartrhari is explicit in denying any differentiation between *pramāṇas* and seems to endorse an integrated view of the act of knowledge. Notwithstanding this, it seems to me that such questions remain legitimate. After all, the core element of a verbal testimony consists of its being 'verbal', hence 'linguistic'.<sup>37</sup> I think that in order to better appreciate Bhartrhari's position one has to keep in mind that he seems to adopt the perspective of the two different points of view:<sup>38</sup> the one of ordinary reality, which in the VP is often indicated with the term *vyāvahārika*, and the one of true reality, which we may call for the sake of convenience *pāramārthika*, even if the term is rarely used in the VP (Ferrante 2015, 78). This approach is not unusual in the scholastic phase of Indian thought, but actually not that common if we limit our considerations to the Brahmanical milieu up to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE. Probably the idea occurred for the first time within Buddhist Mādhyamika circles and was systematically adopted by Brahmanical thinkers only much later.<sup>39</sup> By analyzing the issue of 'verbal testimony' from Bhartrhari's *vyāvahārika* standpoint one may be let down. As I noted above, Bhartrhari does not indulge in analyzing epistemological questions. Moreover, there are no clues to understand which position he would assume in the debate on testimony, even if the discussion was presumably going on among his contemporaries. Such an attitude might have two reasons. On the one hand, Bhartrhari acknowledges that the description of the process of knowledge elaborated by fellow Brahmanical thinkers (such as Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas) is totally acceptable as far as ordinary reality is concerned, and hence there is no need to expand it or to discuss it thoroughly. But, on the other hand, this lack of discussion can be read as a sign that the epistemology of *pramāṇas* is ultimately not so crucial for Bhartrhari's purposes. I suspect that this attitude is related to the

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<sup>37</sup> In Indian philosophical jargon the word most commonly employed to indicate verbal testimony is *śabda*, simply language. In the VP the term is evidently crucial, still it is rarely used with the epistemological connotation so frequent elsewhere.

<sup>38</sup> Actually, perhaps even more (Aklujkar 2002: 217-218).

<sup>39</sup> The oldest occurrence of the concept seems to be found in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.10, roughly 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. In Brahmanical philosophy the earliest systematic use of the two degrees of reality is that of Advaita Vedānta (approximately from 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE onwards).



acceptance of various levels of reality. By adopting this approach, the analysis of the lower level, no matter how conceived, is never performed to provide a picture of how things really are, since it will be sooner or later superseded by a higher, more refined, explanation. The analysis of the lower degree is thus always carried out for explicative purposes (and also because, one may fancy, if there were no lower reality there would not be anything to discuss at all). This sometimes causes a sense of bewilderment in the interpreter. When one is expecting from a text a thorough analysis of a certain question the actual discussion often ends up being minimal. In other cases, the opposite happens. In a sense there is always a rationale: the most debated aspects of lower reality are usually the ones who are deemed crucial for obtaining the higher one.<sup>40</sup> Bhartṛhari might be one of these cases. Even if his ontology does not presuppose that ordinary phenomena are unreal, he nonetheless grants Brahman, the highest reality, more ontological vividness. This might imply that every question belonging to the lower realm can be ignored because eventually it becomes irrelevant. Still, there are problems, which can be easily dismissed as unimportant from the highest perspective, which are minutely discussed from the *vyāvahārika* perspective. The VP offers a gigantic example of this stance. In accordance with the principle that the whole is more real than the parts, Bhartṛhari maintains that the sentence and its meaning are indivisible units and constitute the basis of linguistic communication. On that point his final position is that the meaning of a sentence is not understood by simply putting together the meanings of the individual words. Yet, it is a matter of fact that most of the VP is dedicated to the analysis of units smaller than the sentence, thus devoted to something that is, from the *pāramārthika* perspective, non-existent. Why? Simply because Bhartṛhari is a grammarian and he has to adopt this stance for practical reasons. As nicely put by S. Iyer: “To agree that the indivisible sentence has to be divided for practical purposes is a kind of climb down for the grammarian but he has to do it because he cannot perform his task unless the sentence is analyzed”. (Iyer 1969: 220). In VP 2.233 Bhartṛhari is much more explicit than Iyer: “In scientific treatises, that which is described through the distinction of grammatical categories is nescience”.<sup>41</sup> Evidently, questions such as the epistemological ones do not raise the same interest in the grammarian and thus remain in the dark, reaching their full sense only in the higher perspective. Within this higher perspective the role of language is amplified to the extent that it becomes the underlying logical structure of reality (in the VP’s jargon *paśyantī vāc* or

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<sup>40</sup> The argument is typically used, for instance, in the case of the philosophy of Dharmakīrti (Dunne 2004: 65).

<sup>41</sup> VP 2.233a: *śāstreṣu prakriyābhedair avidyopavarṇyate*.

*parapaśyantī vāc*).<sup>42</sup> If one puts oneself in this perspective, language is everything and molds everything. By endorsing this view, and therefore by endorsing the process of knowledge implied in it, a discussion on testimony becomes possible and Bhartrhari can be considered an anti-reductionist thinker claiming that the authoritativeness of language lies in language itself. But, in a sense, he would be even more than that: if in the end all cognitive processes are to be reduced to language, and if language is the core trait of verbal testimony, then it would not be out of place to regard Bhartrhari as a hyper-antireductionist; at least, as far as the *pāramārthika* dimension is concerned.

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### Appendix: The VP stanzas from 1.30 to 1.43

VP 1.30 *na cāgamād ṛte dharmas tarkeṇa vyavatiṣṭhate/  
ṛṣiṇāṃ api yaj jñānaṃ tad apy āgamapūrvakam//*

VP 1.31 *dharmasya cāvvyavacchinnāḥ panthāno ye vyavasthitāḥ /  
na tāṃl lokaprasiddhatvāt kaścit tarkeṇa bādhatate//*

VP 1.32 *avasthādeśakālāṇāṃ bhedād bhinnāsu śaktiṣu /*

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<sup>42</sup> In VP 1.159 Bhartrhari holds that language is manifested in three forms: the audible and articulated language (*vaikhārī vāc*), the mental, inaudible one (*madhyamā vāc*), the unitary and inner one in which every kind of differentiation is lost (*paśyantī vāc*). Some scholars have argued that Bhartrhari envisioned a fourth stage, often called *parā paśyantī*, corresponding to pure consciousness (*cit*). Aklujkar has hinted at the possibility (Aklujkar 1970: 77-81), but nonetheless stressed that the *parā paśyantī* level should be regarded as a further articulation of *paśyantī* or, simplifying, a different way to look at *paśyantī*. M. Biardeau (Biardeau 1964: 6) tried to trace the presence of *parā paśyantī* also in VP 1.14, without, in my opinion, much success.

*bhāvānām anumānena prasiddhir atidurlabhā //*

*VP 1.33 nirjñātaśakter dravyasya tāṃ tām arthakriyām prati /  
viśiṣṭadravyasaṃbandhe sā śaktiḥ pratibadhyate //*

*VP 1.34 yatnenānumito 'py arthaḥ kuśalair anumātr̥bhiḥ /  
abhiyuktatarair anyair anyathaivopapādyate //*

*VP 1.35 pareṣām asamākhyeyam abhyāsād eva jāyate /  
mañirūpyādivijñānaṃ tadvidāṃ nānumānikam //*

*VP 1.36 pratyakṣam anumānaṃ ca vyatikramya vyavasthitāḥ /  
pitṛrakṣaḥpiśācānāṃ karmajā eva siddhayaḥ //*

*VP 1. 37 āvirbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetāsām /  
atītānāgatajñānaṃ pratyakṣān na viśiṣyate //*

*VP 1.38 atīndriyān asaṃvedyān paśyanty ārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā /  
ye bhāvān vacanaṃ teṣāṃ nānumānena bādhyate //*

*VP 1.39 yo yasya svam iva jñānaṃ darśanaṃ nātīsaṅkate /  
sthitaṃ pratyakṣapakṣe taṃ katham anyo nivartayet //*

*VP 1.40 idaṃ puṇyam idaṃ pāpam ity etasmin padadvaye /  
ācaṇḍālamanusyāṇām alpam śāstraprayojanam //*

*VP 1.41 caitanyam iva yaś cāyam avicchedena vartate /  
āgamas tam upāsīno hetuvādair na bādhyate //*

*VP 1.42 hastasparśād ivāndhena viṣame pathi dhāvatā /  
anumānapradhānena vinipāto na durlabhaḥ //*

*VP 1.43 tasmād akṛtakaṃ śāstraṃ smṛtiṃ ca sanibandhanām /  
āsrityārabhyate śiṣṭaiḥ sādhutvaviṣayā smṛtiḥ //*

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## Śrīharṣa Mīśra's critique of Trustworthiness

Sudipta Munsī

This paper aims at discussing the critique of the classical (*prācīna*) Nyāya theory of trustworthiness (*āptatva*) as found in the *Śabdalaṅkāra* section of the first chapter from the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* of the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Advaita Vedāntin, Śrīharṣa Mīśra. Śrīharṣa submitted the Nyāya definition to a full-fledged critique ranging from smaller details to main issues, thus showing that 1. *āptatva* cannot be a reliable criterion for deciding the validity of a cognition, 2. even if it were so, no such speaker could ever be found. The author further extends Śrīharṣa's criticism by noting also that 3. even if such a speaker could be found, the information she delivered could consciously or inadvertently be distorted by the listener. He then concludes by noting further possible applications of Śrīharṣa's skeptical attacks to testimony as an instrument of knowledge.

This paper aims at discussing the critique of the classical (*prācīna*) Nyāya (henceforth only Nyāya) theory of trustworthiness (*āptatva*) as found in the *Śabdalaṅkāra* section of the first chapter from the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* (henceforth only *KKh*) of the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Advaita Vedāntin, Śrīharṣa Mīśra (henceforth only Śrīharṣa).

### 1. Background

As a background, a general discussion of the Advaita Vedānta (henceforth only AV) philosophy and the Nyāya theory of trustworthiness is required.

To begin with, AV authors generally accept a basic classification of existence into absolute or *pāramārthika*, functional or *vyavahārika* and momentary or *prātibhāsika*. According to Advaita Vedānta philosophers, no trace of duality is imaginable with regard to the absolute realm. This absolute reality is also said to transcend time<sup>1</sup>, whereas the second variety, viz. the functional, accounts for all multiplicity pertaining to the phenomena. However, all this multiplicity is only illusory and due to a beginningless and inexplicable nescience called *avidyā*, leading to a superimposition of the unreal (i.e. the multiform world) on the real (the single Brahman). This superimposition is sublated when the

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<sup>1</sup> *kālatraye 'pi yat tiṣṭhati tat sat* (Tattvabodha ad 28). See Hall (1852: 5). The authorship of the Tattvabodha is controversial. Karl Potter's Bibliography attributes it to Mukunda Muni (floruit 1640). The idea was any way current in AV even before the 17th century.

knowledge of the one absolute truth, Brahman, dawns. The last variety, viz. momentary or *prātibhāsika* deals with dream-objects and erroneous perceptions such as the perception of silver in a mother of pearl, a snake in a piece of rope, etc. which exist only as long as they are perceived<sup>2</sup> (*pratītikālamātra sattā*). The difference between the *vyavahārika* and *prātibhāsika* levels consists in the fact that the knowledge of the former invalidates the latter, like the correct knowledge of a rope invalidates the former illusion of a snake. By contrast, the *vyavahārika* level ceases to exist only after the dawning of the knowledge of one's essential identity with Brahman and the liberation (*mokṣa*) of the individual soul or *jīva* consequent upon it.

For Advaita Vedānta philosophers, the various means of knowledge play their proper role only within the framework of the functional world, pervaded by multiplicity, but they cannot reach out to the Brahman, which transcends all traces of duality. Thus, these various means of knowledge or *pramāṇas* have relevance for the individual soul or *jīva*, which tries to discover its identity with the Brahman, hidden and misrepresented due to the effect of the twin powers of covering (*āvaraṇa śakti*) and distortion (*vikṣepa śakti*) of this beginningless nescience or *avidyā*, but these cease to function for such an individual soul when the latter realises its identity with the Brahman or the Absolute.<sup>3</sup> Now, how can one know about the Brahman? It is ultimately through one's own experience of the Brahman that one knows it, but until then through the Upaniṣadic statements describing it. Nevertheless, this instance of reliance on linguistic testimony in the form of Upaniṣadic statements is only provisional. It is in this sense that even linguistic testimony in the form of the Vedic and

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<sup>2</sup> *pratītikāla evaite sthitatvāt prātibhāsike/*

*na hi svapnaprabuddhasya punas-svapne sthityoh//* “These two objects (namely, the perceiving self and the perceived world) are illusory on account of their having existed only during the period of (dream) experience. It is because no one after waking up from dream sees those objects when one dreams again.” – *Ḍṛgḍṛśyaviveka*; see Nikhilananda 1931, 55. About the authorship of *Ḍṛgḍṛśyaviveka*, Nikhilananda (1931: xiv) says: “Three names are generally associated with the authorship of the book. Brahmānanda Bhārati, one of the commenatators, acknowledges Bhārati Tirtha as its author. In some manuscripts it is found that Ānanda Jnāna, another commentator, salutes in the colophon Sankarāchārya as its author. Nischaladāsa, in his *Vṛtti Prabhākara*, ascribes the book to Vidyāranya, the celebrated author of *Panchadaśī*.”

<sup>3</sup> *sarvavyavahāranam eva prāg brahmātmāvijñānāt satyatvopapatteḥ svapnavyavahārasyeva prāk prabodhāt. yāvad hi na satyātmaikatvapratīpattiḥ tāvat pramāṇaprameyaphalalakṣaṇeṣu vikāreṣu anṛtatvabuddhiḥ na kasyacid upapadyate* [Brahmasūtrabhāṣya (henceforth BSB only) ad Brahmasūtra (henceforth BS only) BS 2.1.14 (Shastri 1988: 377)] – “earlier than the realization of the Self with the Brahman, all activities can justly be true like the activities in dream before waking up. So long as the oneness of the true Self is not realized, nobody entertains the idea of unreality when dealing with the means of knowledge, objects of knowledge, and the results;” Gambhirananda (2009: 330).



Upaniṣadic statements cease to be valid for one who realises his identity with Brahman.<sup>4</sup> Says Śaṅkarācārya in the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*:

Since a man without self-identification with the body, mind, sense, etc., cannot become a cognizer, and as such, the means of knowledge cannot function for him; since perception and other activities (of a man) are not possible without accepting the senses etc. (as his own); since the senses cannot function without (the body as) a basis; since nobody engages in an activity with a body that has not the idea of the Self superimposed on it; since the unrelated Self cannot become a cognizer unless there are all these (mutual superimposition); and since the means of knowledge cannot function unless there is a cognizership; therefore it follows that the means of knowledge, such as direct perception as well as the scriptures, must have a man as their locus who is subject to nescience.<sup>5</sup>

Coming to Nyāya, its idea of linguistic testimony (*śabdapramāṇa*) is encapsulated in the following aphorism<sup>6</sup> of Gautama from the *Nyāyasūtras*: *aptopadeśaḥ śabdaḥ*. Prabal Kumar Sen<sup>7</sup> explains the aphorism according to the *bhāṣya* of Vātsyāyana<sup>8</sup> as follows:

According to Vātsyāyana, a person can be regarded as a reliable speaker if he satisfies the following conditions:

- he must have first-hand knowledge of the thing(s) that he is speaking about,
- he must have the desire to communicate this knowledge to others without any distortion,
- such a desire on his part must result in an effort that makes him utter the required sentence(s),
- he must be capable of speaking properly.<sup>9</sup>

Sen further explains the above four conditions in the light of Vācaspati Miśra's *Nyāyavārtikatātparyāṭikā*<sup>10</sup> (henceforth NVTT) as follows:

<sup>4</sup> Thus reads the following verse (no. 24) of the *Vedāntaṭīṇḍima*, a Vedānta manual by Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī (see Thankaswami (1980: 136 and 360-361): *alam vedair alam śāstrair alam smṛtipurāṇakaiḥ/ paramātmani vijñāta iti vedāntaṭīṇḍimah//* – “After knowing the Supreme Self, there is no use of the Vedas, scriptures, *Smṛtis*, *Purāṇas* (etc.) – such is the proclamation of Vedānta.” (My translation.) See Sarasvatī (1991: 25-26).

<sup>5</sup> Gambhirananda 2009, 4. The original Sanskrit reads as follows: *dehendriyādiṣu ahaṁmamābhīmānarahitasya pramāṭṛtvānupapattau pramāṇapravṛtṭyanupapatteḥ. na hīndriyāṇi anupādāya pratyakṣādivyavahāraḥ sambhavati. na cādhiṣṭhānam antareṇa indriyāṇām vyavahāraḥ sambhavati. na cānadyastātmabhāvena dehena kaścid vyāpriyate. na ca etasmin sarvasmin asati asaṅgasya ātmanaḥ pramāṭṛtvam upapadyate. na ca pramāṭṛtvam antareṇa pramāṇapravṛtṭir asti. tasmād avidyāvadvaiṣayānyeva pratyakṣādīni pramāṇāni śāstrāṇi ca.* [BSB ad BS 1.1.1 (Shastri 1988: 20-21)].

<sup>6</sup> *Nyāyasūtra* (henceforth NS) 1.1.7. See Thakur (1997: 14).

<sup>7</sup> Sen (2006: 56).

<sup>8</sup> Ad NS 1.1.7. *āptaḥ khalu sāksātkṛtadharmā yathādr̥ṣṭasya arthasya cikhyāpayiṣayā prayukta upadeṣṭā*. See Thakur (1997: 14).

<sup>9</sup> The last point is not explicitly present in Vātsyāyana's *bhāṣya*, rather based on Vācaspati Miśra's elucidation of the *bhāṣya* text as quoted in the following footnote.

If a person has to satisfy all these conditions, then he should also be free from some defects. First, he must be free from ignorance (*ajñātā*) and wrong notions (*bhrama*) regarding the thing(s) that he is speaking about. This would satisfy the first condition mentioned above. He should also be free from lack of compassion (*akṛpā*), utter selfishness (*svārthakāmatva*) and desire for misleading others (*vipralipsā*). This would satisfy the second condition. He should likewise be free from laziness or idleness (*ālasya*) that prevents one from communicating something. This would satisfy the third condition. Finally, he should be free from carelessness (*pramāda*) and any defect of speech-organ (*vāgindriyavaikalya*). This would satisfy the fourth condition.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Śrīharṣa's Criticism of Trustworthiness

Continuing the Advaita Vedānta tradition, Śrīharṣa also maintained that it is the self-luminous Brahman that is the only reality. In the same vein, he attempted “to refute all definitions of the Nyāya system intended to justify the reality of the categories of experience and tries to show that the world and all world-experiences are purely phenomenal and have no reality behind them.”<sup>12</sup> Further, Śrīharṣa

undertakes to show that all definitions of things or categories put forward by the Nyāya writers are absolutely hollow and faulty even according to the canons of logical discussion and definitions accepted by the Naiyāyika; and, if no definition can stand or be supported, it necessarily follows that there can be no definitions, or, in other words, that no definitions of the phenomenal world are possible and that the world of phenomena and all our so-called experiences of it are indefinable.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, “Śrīharṣa's main point is to prove that all that is known is indefinable and unreal, being only of a phenomenal nature and having only a relative existence based on practical modes of acceptance, customs and conventions.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it should not be lost sight of, that

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<sup>10</sup> *tattvaṃ vidvān akāruṇikatayā vā alasatayā vā anupadiśan, matsaritayā vā viparītam upadiśan nāptaḥ syād iti ata āha yathādr̥ṣṭasyārthasya cikhyāpayiṣayā prayuktaḥ. yathādr̥ṣṭasyeti matsaritayā viparītopadeśo nivāritaḥ. cikhyāpayiṣayeti akṛpāsvārthakāmatve nirākṛte. prayuktaḥ utpāditaprayatna iti alasatvam. tathāpi sthānakaraṇapāṭavābhāvena varṇaniṣpādanāsāmarthyenāptaḥ prasajyeta, iti ata āha - upadeṣṭā sthānakaraṇapāṭavavān iti.* (NVTT). See Thakur (1996: 166-167).

<sup>11</sup> Sen (2006: 56).

<sup>12</sup> Dasgupta (1922: 126).

<sup>13</sup> Dasgupta (1922: 127-128).

<sup>14</sup> Dasgupta (1922: 127).

those who criticize with the object of establishing positive definitions would object only to certain definitions or views of other schools; but both Śrīharṣa and the nihilists [Nāgārjuna's school, SM] are interested in the refutation of all definitions as such, and therefore his dialectic would be valid against all views and definitions of other systems.<sup>15</sup>

This gives him the background to refute the definitions of the various means of veridical knowledge like perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), linguistic testimony (*śabda*), etc. and through it trustworthiness (*āptatva*), which forms the core part of the Nyāya view of linguistic testimony as the sentence uttered by a trustworthy person (*āpta*). Against the time-honoured custom of accepting the validity of something with the help of definition (*lakṣaṇa*) and means of veridical knowledge (*pramāṇa*) at least since the time of Vātsyāyana, the commentator on the NS,<sup>16</sup> Śrīharṣa argues to show that validity of linguistic testimony cannot be established. To begin with, he asks, what is this linguistic testimony?<sup>17</sup> In answer, the Naiyāyika opponent presents the following three alternatives with their respective corollaries:

- Linguistic testimony is the sentence uttered by an *āpta*;<sup>18</sup>
- Linguistic testimony is the sentence of someone, who is free from defect(s);<sup>19</sup>
- Linguistic testimony is valid<sup>20</sup> sentence.<sup>21</sup>

Of the above three alternatives and their respective corollaries, we are concerned here with the first two, as the last calls for separate and much detailed treatment.

- Linguistic Testimony is the sentence uttered by an *āpta*.

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<sup>15</sup> Dasgupta (1922: 127). Dasgupta, in a footnote to this passage quotes the following lines from Śrīharṣa to show that “Śrīharṣa himself admits the similarity of his criticism to those of Nāgārjuna”: *tathā hi yadi darśaneṣu śūnyavādānirvacanīyapakṣayor āśrayāṇāṃ tadā tāvad amūṣāṃ nirbādhaiva sārvaṣāṭhātā*. [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraḥ – (Yogīndrānanda 2010, 122)] “If the (various) philosophical systems take refuge in (the arguments of) *śūnyavāda* and *anirvacanīyavāda*, then these arguments attain unhindered universal applicability.” (My translation.)

<sup>16</sup> NSBh ad 1.1.3.

<sup>17</sup> *śabdo 'pi ka ucyate?* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraḥ (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>18</sup> *āptavākyaṃ hi śabdaḥ pramāṇam* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraḥ (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>19</sup> *atha nirdoṣasya vākyaṃ hi tathā* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraḥ (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

<sup>20</sup> *yathārtha*, which literally means “like the object” or “corresponding to the object” and which I here translate as “valid” is a complex and virtually untranslatable term in the context of the KKh. Like all other definitions of Nyāya, Śrīharṣa shows that any precise definition or meaning of the term is ultimately impossible. Accordingly my translation of it is deliberately weak. For a brilliant summary of Śrīharṣa's critique of the Nyāya concept of the term *yathārtha* see Dasgupta (1922: 133-134).

<sup>21</sup> *yathārthavākyaṃ śabdapramāṇam* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraḥ (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 439)].

Śrīharṣa says that such a definition of linguistic testimony (*śabdapramāṇa*) as the sentence uttered by an *āpta* is not right, since the alternatives as to who is an *āpta* do not stand the test of reason.<sup>22</sup> In fact, in answer to the question as to who is an *āpta*,<sup>23</sup> the following alternatives and their rebuttals by Śrīharṣa are presented:

a. An *āpta* is someone who speaks of things as he has seen them<sup>24</sup>

Śrīharṣa says that such a statement overextends to such cases where a sentence is uttered by a speaker, who is endowed with an erroneous knowledge of the object he speaks of.<sup>25</sup> The case of a mother of pearl being mistaken for silver and the statement, “This is silver”, made to that effect is an example in point. For, in such cases the speaker only refers to things as he or she has seen them but due to a mistaken perception his/her statement does not convey knowledge.

In view of this, the opponent revises his definition and says:

b. An *āpta* is someone who speaks of things seen through means of veridical knowledge<sup>26</sup>

To this it is replied that even such a definition would overextend to cases where the speaker, though he has the real knowledge of the thing he speaks of, presents the thing differently.<sup>27</sup> Thus, if A despite knowing a shell as it is through means of veridical knowledge somehow (may be due to a mere slip of the tongue or with wrong intention) describes it as silver to B, the current definition would overextend to it.

This leads the opponent to revise his definition further and say:

c. An *āpta* is someone who speaks of things exactly as he has seen them through means of veridical knowledge<sup>28</sup>

Śrīharṣa rejects this definition since it would apply even to such cases where one part of the sentence uttered by the speaker speaks of the thing exactly as it is perceived through means of

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<sup>22</sup> *āptavākyaṃ hi śabdaḥ pramāṇam iti na yuktam, vikalpānupapatteḥ* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>23</sup> *tathā hi - ko 'yam āpto nāma* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>24</sup> *yathādr̥ṣṭavādīti cet* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>25</sup> *na, bhrāntipratipannavādivākyaḥ 'pi prasaṅgāt* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)]. The Sanskrit text of the objection to which this text passage is a reply can be read in the immediately preceding footnote.

<sup>26</sup> *pramāṇadr̥ṣṭeti viśeṣaṇe ca* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>27</sup> *tathābhūtasānyathāvādavyāpanāt* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

<sup>28</sup> *yathā pramāṇeti* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraśāstra (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437)].

veridical knowledge, while another part speaks of it in an incorrect manner.<sup>29</sup> To explain: in the sentence, ‘the lake is full of water and (full of) fire’,<sup>30</sup> uttered by someone who has known through means of veridical knowledge the lake to be full of water, the first part as describing the lake full of water is veridical, while the other part describing it as full of fire is non-veridical. Thus the current definition, though successfully applying to the first part of the sentence (i.e. the lake is full of water), overextends to the second part (i.e. the lake is full of fire), and is thus faulty.

The Naiyāyika opponent again revises the definition and says:

d. An *āpta* is someone who speaks exactly of as many things as he has seen through means of veridical knowledge<sup>31</sup>

To this Śrīharṣa says, the current definition suffers from under-extension as it is often seen that the number of objects defined (*lakṣya*) by one’s sentence are not exactly the same as are cognised.<sup>32</sup> Thus, there may be many things on the ground like a jar, a piece of cloth, a building, etc. but it is only one or the other of them, that is spoken of while describing the ground in the form of ‘the ground possesses a jar’, ‘the ground possesses a piece of cloth’, etc.<sup>33</sup> Śrīharṣa condenses his reply into a very succinct statement: the whole range of things cognised through the means of veridical knowledge, is not reproduced in entirety.<sup>34</sup>

The opponent goes on to formulate this new definition:

e. The statement of a speaker who speaks of only such things as are perceived through means of veridical knowledge is linguistic testimony<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *karāṇe cāmsē tathābhūtavādivākyasyāyathārthasyāpi vyāpanāt* [KKh, śabdalaṣṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 437-438)].

<sup>30</sup> This example is taken over from Śāstrī (2010: 196-197).

<sup>31</sup> *yāvad yathāpramāṇadr̥ṣṭāniruktau ca* [KKh, śabdalaṣṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

<sup>32</sup> *prāyeṇātathābhūtavād eva lakṣyāṇām tadavyāpteḥ* [KKh, śabdalaṣṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

<sup>33</sup> This elucidation is based on the following Hindi explanation of Śāstrī (2010: 197-198): “*arthāt jin-jin rūpoṃ se jo-jo padārth pramāṇ dr̥ṣṭ hote haiṃ un-un rūpoṃ se sabhī padārth kathan ke viṣay nahīṃ ho pāte haiṃ prāyaḥ aisā dekhā jātā hai. Jaise bhūtal par ghaṭpaṭmathādi anek padārtha pratyakṣpramāṇ se dr̥ṣṭ hote haiṃ kintu bhūtalāḥ ghaṭavat is vākya ke dvārā keval ghaṭmātra kā bodh hotā hai tathā ca ghaṭavatbhūtalām etāvanmātra vākya prayoktā āpta na hogā, aur na vah (bhūtalāḥ ghaṭavat) pramāṇ śabd hogā, arthāt us vākya meṃ śabd pramāṇ lakṣaṇ kī avyāpti ho jāyegī. kāraṇ ki yah āvaśyak nahīṃ hai ki jitney padārth pramit (pramāṇoṃ se dr̥ṣṭa) ho utne sabhī padārth sarvatra vākya ke dvārā abhihit ho.*”

<sup>34</sup> *na hi yāvat pramitam tāvad abhidhīyate* [KKh, śabdalaṣṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

<sup>35</sup> *yathāpramitasyaiva ca vaktur vākyaṃ iti vyākāre ca* [KKh, śabdalaṣṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

In other words, it may be said that a trustworthy person or *āpta* never speaks of such things as are not sanctioned by means of veridical knowledge. Śrīharṣa rejects this definition on the ground that it suffers from under-extension since even the statement<sup>36</sup> of Yudhiṣṭhira contained elements that were not attested by means of veridical knowledge.<sup>37</sup> To explain: Yudhiṣṭhira, who was considered as the yardstick of veridicality, sometime spoke untruth in the form of “Aśvatthāmā – the man or the elephant – has been killed”, when he knew it very well that it was Aśvatthāmā, the elephant that was killed, and that he ought to have said, “Aśvatthāmā, the elephant, has been killed.” Underlying such a critique is the suggestion that there exists no speaker who speaks only of such things as are perceived through means of veridical knowledge, and thus the current definition fails to reach its desired target and suffers from under-extension.<sup>38</sup> If even Yudhiṣṭhira, due to a single untruth, no longer qualifies as *āpta*, what to say of normal speakers?

Thus criticised, the opponent now says:

f. A person describing a thing just as it is perceived through means of veridical knowledge is trustworthy or *āpta* in that matter.<sup>39</sup>

In reply, Śrīharṣa says, this statement is under-extensive on the ground that it would lead to the extraordinariness<sup>40</sup> of the subject-matter concerned.<sup>41</sup> To explain: this extraordinariness will be tantamount to too much restriction of the current definition of *āpta* to the subject-matter concerned. Under such circumstances, only the person describing the particular subject-matter taken up for consideration, will be the trustworthy person (*āpta*) and no one else; and the particular sentence that he uses in that connection will be treated as linguistic testimony, and no other sentence uttered by him. Thus there will be no general rule, and there will be under-extension with regard to the

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<sup>36</sup> In the form of: *aśvatthāmā hato naro vā kuñjaro vā*.

<sup>37</sup> *yudhiṣṭhiravākyasyāpyanevambhūtatvenāvyaṅgyāpatteḥ* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraṅgana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

<sup>38</sup> This elucidation is based on the following Hindi explanation of Śāstrī (2010, 198): *tātparya yah hai ki āptatayā prasiddh yudhiṣṭhir ne bhi yathā pramit kā hī kathan nahīn kiyā, apitu kadācit “aśvatthāmā hato naro vā kuñjaro” ityādi rūp se mṛṣābhūt kā bhī kathan kiyā thā. ataḥ yudhiṣṭhir meṁ āpta kā lakṣaṇ tathā yudhiṣṭhir ke vākya meṁ śabd pramāṇ kā lakṣaṇ avyāpt hai*.

<sup>39</sup> *tatra viśaya iti viśeṣaṇe ca* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraṅgana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

<sup>40</sup> Grimes (1996: 57), translating *asādhāraṇa* variously as “special; uncommon; strange; extraordinary; too restricted”, explains it as “A type of fallacious reasoning in which the reason is fallacious due to its being present only in the subject and not present in any example; e.g., ‘Sound is eternal because it is sound.’”

<sup>41</sup> *viśeṣarūpasya viśayasyāsādhāraṇyenāvyaṅgyāpakatvāpātāt* [KKh, śabdalaṅkāraṅgana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438)].

sentences spoken, as stressed by Sudhāmśúsekharā Śāstrī in his Hindī elucidation of *KKh*.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, one might add that the same problem applies to the speaker, insofar as only the *speaker* of a given sentence, treating a particular subject-matter, could be said to be an *āpta* and not any other person listening to him or her and sharing the same expertise.<sup>43</sup>

- Now Śrīharṣa turns his attention to the Sāmkhya-Nyāya<sup>44</sup> definition of linguistic testimony as the sentence of someone who is free from defects, and criticises it on the ground that

- a. It fails to extend to such cases where one, endowed with defects<sup>45</sup> and desirous of saying, “there is no jar”, accidentally makes the actual statement: “there is a jar”.<sup>46</sup> It cannot be said that the sentence is not valid,<sup>47</sup> because it has already been said<sup>48</sup> that though this statement is made by someone, endowed with defect(s), yet since the cognition ensuing thence displays the same attributes as its object actually possesses and is not contradicted by any other means of valid knowledge, the sentence which acts as an instrument in the generation of the said cognition, is also valid.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, its validity is ascertained on account of its generating successful undertaking of activities,

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<sup>42</sup> *aisī sthiti meṁ lakṣaṅghaṭak viśayśabd se jis vyakti kā grahaṅ kareṅge us viśayviśeṣ vyakti kā kathankartā āpt hogā, anya nahīn, evaṁ usī viśayviśeṣ vyakti kā vācak śabd pramāṅ śabd hogā anya vākya nahīn, is prakār ananugam hogā aur paraspar vākya meṁ avyāpti bhī hogī* (Śāstrī 2010: 199).

<sup>43</sup> In this regard, see also Section 3.iii of this paper.

<sup>44</sup> Yogīndrānanda (2010: 438-439) traces this view to the following two verses quoted in the *Māṭharavṛtti* on *Sāmkhya-kārikā* 5, and their reuse in *Nyāyabhūṣaṇa*, *Nyāyamañjarī* and *Nyāyavārtikatātparyāṭikā*:

*āgamo hi āptavacanam āptaṁ doṣakṣayād viduḥ/  
kṣīṇadoṣo 'nṛtavākyaṁ na brūyād hetvasambhavāt//  
svakarmani abhiyukto yo rāgadveṣavivarjitah/  
pūjitatadvidhair nityam āpto jñeyah sa tādrśah//*

<sup>45</sup> The *Śāradā* commentary (see Śāstrī 2010: 200) mentions the following four defects: error (*bhrama*), carelessness (*pramāda*), intention of deceiving (*vipralipsā*) and defect of sense organs (*karaṅāpāṭava*). The Sanskrit text of the *Śāradā* reads *karaṅāpāṭatva* or ‘ability of the sense organs’, but that this is an obvious misprint is confirmed by the Hindi translation of the editor, which reads *karaṅāpāṭava* or ‘defect of sense organs’. Accordingly I have emended it as *karaṅāpāṭava*.

<sup>46</sup> *atha nirdoṣasya vākyaṁ tatheti cen, na, sadoṣasya 'nāsti ghaṭah' ityabhidhatsataḥ 'asti ghaṭah' iti daivān nirgatayathārthavākyaṁvyāpteḥ* [*KKh*, śabdalaṅkāṣaṅkhaṅḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 438-439)].

<sup>47</sup> *tat pramāṅaṁ na bhavati eveti cen, na* [*KKh*, śabdalaṅkāṣaṅkhaṅḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 439)].

<sup>48</sup> *pūrvam uktottaratvāt* [*KKh*, śabdalaṅkāṣaṅkhaṅḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 439)].

<sup>49</sup> The elucidation of Śrīharṣa’s rebuttal is based on the following Hindi explanation of Śāstrī (2010: 200): “*ukta vākya ke doṣ prayojya hone par bhī tajjanya jñān tadvati tatprakārak hone mātra se evaṁ abādhit hone se pramātmak hai ataḥ us pramā kā karaṅ yah vākya bhī pramāṅ hī hai.*”

and despite initial doubt as to whether the knowledge, “there is a jar”, is to be treated as valid or invalid, its actual validity cannot be refuted.<sup>5051</sup>

b. Moreover, the state of being free from errors in general is impossible even with regard to Yudhiṣṭhira,<sup>52</sup> since despite his widespread fame as a speaker of truth, he at some point of time spoke untruth purportedly in the form of “Aśvatthāmā – the man or the elephant – has been killed.”

c. Lastly, it cannot be said that it is the absence of any particular defect (like intention of deceiving) that is the intended meaning of the expression, ‘absence of error’ (*nirdoṣatva*), as it would lead to extraordinariness.<sup>53</sup> To explain: If it is so accepted, then it would fail to account for other defects such as error, carelessness, etc. and thus the definition would be under-extensive. That is, if, for example, the current definition aims at covering the defect of the intention of deceiving, then it will apply only to the sentence spoken by such a person, who has an absence of the defect of intention of deceiving, but it will fail to apply to the sentences, spoken by such a person, who has absence of other defects like error, carelessness, etc.

### 3. Observations and further directions for research

In course of exploring the underlying suggestions of Śrīharṣa's critique of trustworthiness further, it may be objected that the claim that testimony does not help us arrive at absolute and incontrovertible truth, does not negate the fact that it is still the only option left for such cases where we have no other source of verifying the claim made. This objection becomes especially pertinent in such cases where one is trying to communicate his/her own feelings as also in case of religious [mystic?] experiences.

However the above objection does not take the following points into account:

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<sup>50</sup> *pravṛttisāmarthyena prāmāṇyāvadhāraṇasambhavād āpātataḥ sandehe 'pi adoṣāt* [KKh, śabdakṣaṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 439)] The *Śāradā* explains “*pravṛttisāmarthyena*” as *saphalapravṛttijanakatvena*, “*āpātataḥ*” as *saṁvādāt purā tādrśavākyaṁ pramāṇaṁ na veti sandehe 'pi*, and “*adoṣāt*” as *vāstavikapramāṇyanirāsāsambhavāt, sati api vastuni viśeṣadarśanaṁ vinā tatsandehasya tadanapaghātakatvāt*. See Śāstrī (2010: 201).

<sup>51</sup> Point (a) is especially interesting, since it suggests that Śrīharṣa would not subscribe to the standard Western definition of knowledge as “justified true belief” and would rather admit also true beliefs within the precincts of knowledge. That this is a widespread position in Indian philosophy is discussed by Sibajiban Bhattacharyya (in Matilal and Shaw 1985). [Note by Elisa Freschi].

<sup>52</sup> *sāmānyato nirdoṣatvasya bhīmāgraje 'pi asambhavāt* [KKh, śabdakṣaṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 439)].

<sup>53</sup> *viśeṣatas tathātvasya asādhāraṇyaparyavasāyitvāt* [KKh, śabdakṣaṇakhaṇḍana (Yogīndrānanda 2010: 439)].



- Testimony is not the only source of information about one's inner state: as for one, who is trying to communicate his pangs to his companion, the latter becomes aware of it through such marks as pale face, tearful eyes, etc. apart from the statement of the narrator. Thus, one might argue that there are indeed objective indicators and that one could rely on them instead of on testimony, even in the case of one's inner state.
- Provided that we have no other way to test the validity of what the narrator says it becomes difficult to differentiate the real case from the fraudulent one. After all, actors also have the ability to portray such feelings, often in a more convincing manner.
- Even a trustworthy person (*āpta*) is hardly able to lead us to an epistemologically better situation, since the success of an act of testimony also depends on the trustworthiness of the recipient. For example, hearing the statement, 'the sun has gone down',<sup>54</sup> made by someone in the village, a courtesan thinks, it is time for her to return to her business, while a thief deems it as an indication for the time for his going out for theft, and a staunch follower of the Vedas thinks it to be a signal for his becoming attentive to his daily religious duties. Thus it is one's personal disposition that plays a crucial role here in determining the meaning and validity of the contents of a testimonial. Thus not only the need for a competent speaker, but also a competent listener is here called for.
- Though the question of trustworthiness (*āptatva*) is a very crucial one, yet it may be argued that trustworthiness (*āptatva*) itself does not enjoy immunity from suspicion – this is because the Nyāya criteria of honesty and willingness<sup>55</sup> to tell truth are arbitrary as they do not hold good for a thief, who nothing but honestly and willingly bears witness to a theft committed by a second thief.
- As for the criterion of *sākṣātkṛtadharmatva*,<sup>56</sup> i.e. one's having first-hand knowledge of the thing he is speaking about, it may be said that only one *sākṣātkṛtadharmā* or the person who has such first-hand knowledge of the thing he is speaking about can verify the *sākṣātkṛtadharmatva* of another. But even this can be doubted. To explain: Suppose A knows only 300 German words, while B knows 3000 German words. Now coincidentally B asks A about a few German words (which come within the range of the 300 words which A knows) to test the latter's knowledge of the German language.

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<sup>54</sup> This example is borrowed from the chapter on Buddhist philosophy, from the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, a 14<sup>th</sup> century compendium of Indian philosophical schools, authored by Sāyaṇa-Mādhava. See Śāstrī (1924: 19).

<sup>55</sup> See Thakur (1997: 14).

<sup>56</sup> See Thakur (1997: 14).

A passes the test successfully and on that score if A is thought by B as well-versed in German, a sheer mistake is committed.

These points, if further explored, might open up new vistas of research, and go a long way in underlining the utility of Advaita Vedānta philosophy in general and that of Śrīharṣa in particular in critically dealing with problems concerning trustworthiness, etc.

#### 4. Conclusions

The foregoing discussion shows that so far as even our work-a-daily life is concerned, trustworthiness is not an altogether indubitable option to resort to, not to speak of its decisive role in ascertaining absolute truth. This is because, as Śrīharṣa shows, any definition of trustworthiness and a trustworthy speaker is ultimately impossible. Thus, as on one hand, it suffers from various overextensions such as in case of erroneous knowledge, partially veridical and partially non-veridical knowledge, etc., on the other hand, it is under extensive in the sense that it fails to reach such ideal targets where no trace of non-veridicality is imaginable. Moreover, in connection with the ascertainment of a trustworthy speaker, Śrīharṣa and his commentators suggest the virtual unavailability of one such, who is free from all defects, always speaks of nothing but truth arrived at through means of veridical knowledge, and never resorts to untruth. No special definition of 'trustworthiness' or 'absence of error' is admissible on the ground that it would be case-specific, and fail to account for other similar cases. Lastly, by saying that "the whole range of things cognised through the means of veridical knowledge, is not reproduced in entirety", Śrīharṣa suggests that the content of such a cognition undergoes a process of edition in the cogniser in accordance with his / her preferences, thus discounting the possibility of a frame-to-frame reproduction of the things cognised.

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## Thoughts on the Early Indian Yogācāra Understanding of Āgama- Pramāṇa

Roy Tzohar

The Buddhist approach to testimony (*āptavāda*, *āptāgama*) as a valid means of cognition (*pramāṇa*) is far from univocal and involves an intricate and often also ambivalent attitude toward scriptural authority. The paper focuses on several early Yogācāra Buddhist thinkers who accepted testimony as a reliable epistemic warrant, and offers an account of the sophisticated and highly reflective manner in which they approached the issue of scriptural meaning and authority. For this purpose, the paper first outlines the theoretical framework for considering scripture presented by the early Yogācāra philosopher Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti*, focusing especially on his discussion of the criteria for canonicity and its implications for a system of hermeneutics based on the uncovering of authorial intent. The paper then examines in turn the way in which this framework and its internal tensions were worked out in the writings of Sthiramati (circa 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) and especially in his *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya-ṭīkā*, focusing on his definition of "treatise" (*śāstra*) and his implied understanding of textual authority.

The Buddhist approach to testimony (*āptavāda*, *āptāgama*) as a valid means of cognition (*pramāṇa*) is far from univocal – it varies across times, schools and sometime even within the thought of a single thinker<sup>1</sup> – and involves an intricate and often also ambivalent attitude toward scriptural authority. Hence, for instance, we find on the one hand such Buddhist thinkers as the early Yogācāra philosophers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, whose acceptance of testimony as a *pramāṇa* went hand in glove with a rather wary approach to the authority of scripture, and on the other, thinkers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, who, while rejecting testimony as a *pramāṇa*, still held scripture to have a certain epistemic purchase.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in his *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, Asaṅga takes testimony (*āptāgama*) to be subservient to direct perception and inference, while in some sections of the *Yogācārabhūmi* corpus (the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, and the section on the *Hetuvidyā* in the *śrutamāyibhūmi*) also traditionally ascribed to him, he seems to present it as independent of these two. See, respectively: Nathmal Tatia (1976: 253, section iih); Dutt (1978: 25, line 17-19); Wayman (1999: 23).

<sup>2</sup> While the epistemological school of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti did not accept testimony as valid cognition (*pramāṇa*), it allowed for a type of inference that was based on scriptural sources, over and above the "ordinary" kind of inference (the latter defined as *vastubalapravṛttānumāna*, literally – an inference that functions by the force of [real] entities, i.e., an inference that is evaluated on the basis of facts and states of affairs). These two types of inference were differentiated by a division of epistemic labor according to which ordinary "objective inference" (to follow Tillemans' phrase) deals with imperceptible (*parokṣa*) things, i.e., things that are inaccessible to direct perception but can be accessed through inference (for example, the "impermanence" of sound), while the latter kind of inference is limited to cases that involve extremely

In this essay I focus on several Yogācāra Buddhist thinkers who accepted testimony as a reliable epistemic warrant, and offer an account of the sophisticated and highly reflexive manner in which they approached the issue of scriptural meaning and authority. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of this vast and complicated topic but to highlight in broad strokes some of the basic presuppositions and tensions that underlie these thinkers' conception of scriptural exegesis and authority. For this purpose I first outline the theoretical framework for considering scripture presented by the early Yogācāra philosopher Vasubandhu's (est. 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century, CE) as laid out in his *Principles of Proper Exegesis* (*Vyākhyāyukti*, henceforth VY; Lee 2001). My focus in this first part is mostly on Vasubandhu's analysis and discussion of the criteria for canonicity and its implications for a system of hermeneutics based on the uncovering of authorial intent.

In the second part of the paper I turn to examine the way in which this framework and its internal tensions were worked out in the writings of Sthiramati (Circ. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE), a later Yogācāra thinker renowned mostly for his commentarial work on Asaṅga and Vasubandhu's treatises. Here I focus on Sthiramati's intriguing remarks on what constitutes a treatise (*śāstra*) and his implied understanding of textual authority, as presented in several key sections of his sub-commentary to Vasubandhu's own commentary on *Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes* (*Madhyānta Vibhāga-bhāṣya-ṭīkā*, *MVBhT*; Yamaguchi and Lévi 1934).

### 1. Vasubandhu on the interpretation of scripture

The locus classicus of Vasubandhu's understanding of scriptural exegesis is his VY, a work that belongs to the uncommon genre of manuals for the proper interpretation of scripture and composition of commentary. The work is not just prescriptive, however, but also demonstrates the application of its lessons by interpreting some one hundred sutra passages assembled in an appendix to the work (the *Vyākhyāyuktisūtrakaṇḍhaśata*), and as such, it is at once a commentary on Mahāyāna scripture and a valuable source of knowledge on the way in which the Buddhist scholastic tradition conceived of its role, aims, and limitations.<sup>3</sup> In the work, Vasubandhu states that one of the characteristics of a good commentary is its ability to respond to various objections regarding particular interpretations of scriptural passages, and then demonstrates how this should be done in a

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inaccessible (*atyantaparokṣa*) objects, such as the detailed workings of karma, which are both beyond direct perception and syllogisms of the first kind. See Tillemans (1999: 27-30).

<sup>3</sup> Despite the works' significance for both Indo and Tibetan Buddhist traditions (attested by its citation by various prominent commentaries), it has received relatively little scholarly attention to date, and has yet to be fully explored. For a survey of secondary literature on the work, see Tzohar (2013).

section titled “Objections and Responses” (*’gal len, \*codyaparihāra*). Here I would like to focus on a subsection in which Vasubandhu deals with “objections to meaning,”<sup>4</sup> that is, cases in which Mahāyāna scriptural claims appear to be inconsistent or incompatible with other claims, primarily with what is normally regarded as authoritative speech (*yid ches pa’i gsung, āptavāda*), in this case, the canonical works of early Buddhism.

Vasubandhu begins by attending to the phenomenon of interpretative difficulty posed by internal contradictions within a given Buddhist scriptural corpus – for example, the Buddha’s various and seemingly inconsistent claims about “truths.” This is settled by an appeal to a common Buddhist hermeneutical device, namely treating all the claims as true insofar as they express different implicit intents (*abhiprāya*) of the Buddha in different contexts (Nance 2012: 257-258). For our purpose it should be noted that according to this account, the meaning of scripture is not always self-evident but requires hermeneutical mediation to maintain consistency and coherency. Moreover, meaning is understood here in terms of the speakers’ (implicit) meaning, which can however be made explicit by an interpretative reconstruction. So, while scripture is capable of serving as an authoritative source for knowledge, this ability depends on its reliance on a ‘pre-textual’ authorial intent, which can be successfully reconstructed through interpretative efforts.

The second kind of “objections to meaning” presented by Vasubandhu are cases in which scriptural statement stand in contradiction with reason (*rigs, yukti*), and by extension, with one of the three means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*), namely perception, inference, and authoritative speech (*yid ches pa’i gsung, āptavāda*). Below I focus solely on the latter case, which Vasubandhu presents through the following objection placed in the mouth of a hypothetical Śrāvaka opponent, translated by Richard Nance:

‘The *Vaipulya* group [of texts] is Mahāyāna’ is a statement that is in contradiction with scripture (*lung, āgama*). Some say that books of sūtra containing lengthy expositions are *Vaipulya*, but not Mahāyāna. Why? [Because] that [class of texts] is not the speech of a Buddha. Why is it not the speech of a Buddha? Because of contradiction — [i.e.] it contradicts what all groups acknowledge to be the speech of a Buddha (Nance 2012: 120).

Here the opponent undermines the canonical status of the Mahāyāna scriptures because they are allegedly contradictory to what is already canonically accepted as the word of the Buddha and hence considered to be authoritative speech and a source for knowledge. The opponent then

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<sup>4</sup> This section was analyzed at length in Cabezón (1992), Nance (2004) and Nance (2012). The following analysis draws from both authors.

proceeds to point out various features of the Mahāyāna scriptures that undermine their authority and canonicity, for instance, their manifestation of internal contradictions, their incompatibility with fundamental Buddhist tenants, etc. (Cabezón 1992: 226-33; Verhagen 2005: 587-93).

Vasubandhu's line of defense is rather exceptional insofar as it does not seek to buttress this or other Mahāyāna claims but, rather, to undermine the opponent's very conception of canonicity, and by extension to question the latter's understanding of authoritative speech. In his reply, Vasubandhu points out that contradictions and inconsistencies are rife even in the sūtras of the early canon, which is itself incomplete (as some of the texts referred to there were not in existence already in Vasubandhu's time) and inhomogeneous even among the Śrāvaka schools (hence its authority cannot be derived from its past acceptance by a certain school or lineage). In light of all of this, he argues, the opponent's own criteria for scriptural authority render canonicity itself inadequate to serve as the standard for scriptural truth. As noted by Cabezón, Vasubandhu's aim here is neither to refute the authenticity of the early Buddhist canon nor to undermine the epistemic role of testimony but only to demonstrate the practical impossibility of establishing the authenticity of any Buddhist text (the Mahāyāna sūtras included) solely on the basis of a clear-cut philological or historical criterion (Cabezón 1992: 228). Canonical indeterminacy and textual inconsistencies, he seems to suggest, are not themselves markers of textual inauthenticity, but are a call for the interpreter to step in and recover the implicit intent underlying the imperfect text, thereby restoring its connection to the authoritative words of the Buddha.

While the hermeneutical framework described above is by no means exclusive to the Mahāyāna,<sup>5</sup> it does seem to assume an exceptionally significant role in this context. Seen as constituting a response of sorts to doubts regarding the Mahāyāna scriptural authenticity, this framework emerges as not merely a hermeneutical device but a constitutive feature of the Mahāyāna textual and commentarial identity. This very understanding seems to underlie, for instance, the hermeneutical agenda of such seminal texts as the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, and is openly acknowledged by various other Yogācāra scriptural and commentarial passages. An example that epitomizes this approach is found in Sthiramati's *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya*, where he states, with respect to the definition of

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Davidson has argued that an earlier hermeneutical apologetics was applied by the Abhidharma – being the first new class of texts in Buddhist India that claimed the status of scripture, and laid the ground for the later Mahāyāna apologetics. See Davidson (1990: 303-06).



*Vaipulya*, that those inclined to understand only the literal meaning (*yathārutārthābhīniveśa*) cannot “ride” the great vehicle, because the Mahāyāna doctrines are expressed only via implicit meaning.<sup>6</sup>

It should be emphasized that this understanding of meaning as inherently layered was not merely a feature of the interpretations and commentaries on the Mahāyāna scripture, but traces back to the very nature of the Buddha’s word. This is manifested in the polysemic quality of the Buddha or a Bodhisattva’s speech, seen as capable of simultaneously teaching beings of diverse levels of understanding. Consider, for instance, the following paragraph from the *Daśabhūmikasūtra*, a text traditionally identified with the Yogācāra (and for which Vasubandhu is said to have written a commentary):

If all the living beings, involved in the triple thousand great thousands world regions, approaching him, would ask questions in a moment and each of them would ask with the variety of immeasurable sounds and the second living being would not ask what the first one asks, a Bodhisattva will comprehend (all) the words and syllables of voices of all the living beings and after having comprehended he will completely satisfy the intentions of minds of all living beings by uttering one voice (Honda and Rahder 1968: 249).

The polysemic quality of the Bodhisattva’s voice is clearly supposed to explain his ability to relieve the suffering of *all* beings, but it may also, against the backdrop of the Mahāyāna apologetics discussed above, stand to explain the apparent diversity of Buddhist teachings and constitute an argument of sorts for the Mahāyāna sūtra’s own authenticity (Davidson 1990: 309).

While this passage seems to imply that a Bodhisattva’s authorial intentions are as multifarious as his interlocutors’ understandings of them (and that the hermeneutical recovery of these intentions is necessarily contextual and relational),<sup>7</sup> it should not be understood as abandoning the possibility of interpretive closure. Indeed, while the Mahāyāna notion of meaning as inherently layered opens up a hermeneutical space in which the commentarial endeavor can materialize creatively and unapologetically, this hermeneutical openness is far from being all-permissive. The very idea of the Buddha’s teaching as revealing the true nature of reality requires meaning to be decisively and univocally determined, and to this end various Mahāyāna discourses establish a set of hermeneutical tools and criteria designed in theory to provide a definitive understanding and interpretation of the Buddha’s words (the most important of these tools being, of course, the distinction between

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<sup>6</sup> Tatia (1976: 112, lines 8-19). On the issue of non-literality in the Mahāyāna scriptures with respect to the *Lañkāvatārasūtra*, see Lamotte (1988: 15).

<sup>7</sup> Or alternatively, that interpretive closure is not to be found in the speech acts of the Buddha. See, for instance, Lugli 2010. Lugli points out an underlying dichotomy – common to various Mahāyāna sūtras – between the mere words (*ruta*) and the meaning (*artha*), and understands the latter to be inconceivable within the sheer realm of language.

interpretable and definitive meaning – *neyārtha* and *nītārtha* respectively – and their respective conditions, which apply to both discrete claims and entire texts; see Lopez 1988: 65-67 and Lamotte 1988: 16-20).

The main difficulty with these criteria for achieving interpretative objectivity and conclusiveness, however, is that in light of Vasubandhu's critique described above, we must regard them as inevitably circular: definitive teachings are the mark of authoritative texts, and authoritative texts, in turn, determine which teachings may be considered definitive. Thus, despite the rhetoric of definitive meaning and authority, in praxis these criteria were often applied within Mahāyāna literature more through commentarial ingenuity than through rule following so as to confirm sectarian loyalties and pre-existing theoretical assumptions.<sup>8</sup>

To recap: the hermeneutical framework described above presents a notion of scriptural authority marked by an internal tension – between the inherent openness and proliferation of meaning underlying the Mahāyāna view of scripture as the Buddha's word, on the one hand, and its need for a clear-cut objective hermeneutical criteria for the determination of meaning, on the other; and between the rhetoric pronouncing such a definitive criteria and the inevitable circularity that in fact underlies its application.<sup>9</sup>

In the following section I turn to examine how and to what extent this hermeneutical framework, which has thus far appeared to be largely normative and prescriptive, along with its underlying tensions and inconsistencies, was worked out by the “normal science” of commentarial discourse. For this purpose I turn to Sthiramati's sub-commentary on Vasubandhu's commentary on the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, the former commentary being particularly fruitful for this kind of inquiry

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<sup>8</sup> See Lopez (1988: 52) and Lamotte (1988: 19).

<sup>9</sup> It is hard to determine the extent to which this tension was explicitly acknowledged by the Yogācāra thinkers, though it is unlikely that Vasubandhu could produce in the VY such a nuanced textual critique of early Buddhist canonicity without seeing its broader implications for his own criteria for establishing the status of the Mahāyāna texts – and in particular, the circularity of these criteria. An indication that Buddhist thinkers were indeed aware of this tension can perhaps be found in their professed and recurrent expressions of concern regarding scriptural misinterpretation, even at their own hands. Viewed in this light, Vasubandhu's famous statement in the concluding section of his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* is particularly telling:

‘Is the catechism [Abhidharma. R.T] expounded in the present treatise the same as the one that the Teacher set forth? For the most part I have expounded the catechism established in the teachings of the Vaibhāṣika school of Kaśmir.... Whatever I have misunderstood here is my own fault. For only Buddhas and their direct disciples are authoritative in teaching the true religion. Now that our Teacher is dead, the eyes of the world are closed, and now that the majority of those who had firsthand experience [of the truths he taught] have met their ends, his teaching, which is being transmitted by those who have not seen reality and have not gained freedom [from their passions and misconceptions] and are inept at reasoning, has gotten all mixed up.... So, those who desire salvation, seeing that the Buddha's teaching is gasping its last breaths . . . must not become distracted.’ (Hayes 1984: 654).

because of its heightened hermeneutical self-awareness, a trait that no doubt reflects Sthiramati's particular position within the Yogācāra's textual development, as he is facing the task of further synthesizing a vast corpus into a single coherent and consistent worldview that fits under the doxographical heading of Yogācāra.

## 2. Sthiramati's definition of *Śāstra* in the *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya-ṭīkā*

In the introductory part of his sub-commentary, commenting on Vasubandhu's salutary verses, Sthiramati provides an overview of the text's transmission and accounts for its authoritative status. According to this account, the "author" or "promulgator" (*praṇeṭṛ*) of the text was Maitreya, said to be a Bodhisattva removed from complete Buddhahood by only one birth, who revealed the work in verse form<sup>10</sup> to the expounder (*vakṭṛ*) Asaṅga, who in turn made it available to Vasubandhu, who composed the commentary.<sup>11</sup> According to Sthiramati, one of the aims of the salutary verses is to inspire general reverence for the text and buttress its authority:

Reverence is generated towards the commentary because the meaning of the Sūtra is unerringly stated in it because these two [Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. R.T], since they possess the highest wisdom, are able to understand, retain and explain [it], without erring. In this way, reverence arises towards both the Sūtra and the commentary on the part of those who rely on the authority of individual people. Also, on the part of those who rely on the Dharma, reverence arises towards both the author and the expounder because after the true meaning of Sūtra and the commentary has been understood, when a positive determination occurs, it is brought about through the understanding of the author and the expounder, but it is not accomplished through just speculation and scriptural tradition – thus reverence is generated towards the author and the expounder (Stanley 1988: 3).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In the dedication, Vasubandhu refers to "the author of the treatise" (*śāstra*). Sthiramati's commentary clarifies that this means the *kārikās* authored by the Bodhisattva Maitreya, and hence he consistently refers to the work not as a *śāstra* but as "the *Madhyāntavibhāga sūtra*." See Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 2, line 4). The expounder he explains to be Asaṅga.

<sup>11</sup> Sthiramati seems to distinguish between two commentaries – the hypothetical *ṛtti* of the expounder Asaṅga, and the *bhāṣya* of Vasubandhu, which is the work before us. See Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 1, lines 11–12; 3, lines 1–2; and 2, lines 8–9), respectively. Apart from these instances, Sthiramati makes no further use of this distinction, which was perhaps intended to indicate that the text delivered to Vasubandhu was already accompanied by Asaṅga's elucidation.

<sup>12</sup> Here I follow Stanley's suggested corrections (based on the Tibetan) to Yamaguchi's edition. The passage thus reads as follows:

*tāv api uttamaprajñāvantau 'bhrānti pratedhadhāraṇopadeśasāmarthyād atra sūtrārtham abhrāntam upadiśata iti ṛttiyām gauravam utpadyate /evaṃ ye pudgalaprāmāṇikās teṣāṃ sūtravṛttigauravotpattiḥ / ye ca dharmānusārinās teṣāṃ sūtravṛttyoḥ śubhārthe 'vabodhaḥ / nīscayaś ced utpadyate sa praṇeṭṛvakṭṛāvabodhād api prabhāvito bhavati na tu tarkāgamātreṇa prabhāvito bhavatīti praṇeṭṛvakṭṛgauravotpattiḥ /*

See Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 3, ns. 6, 7). Unless otherwise indicated, all further translations of *Ṭīkā* passages are my own.

Here the authority of the text seems quite evident, firmly established by the double criteria of the reliability of its source (attested by the level of accomplishment of the author and expounder) and the text's compatibility with the doctrine (once the author's and expounder's intentions are properly understood). Sthiramati, however, goes on to further problematize this issue by complementing it with a rather intriguing definition of *śāstra*:<sup>13</sup>

Now this should be discussed: what is the nature of a treatise (*śāstra*), and why is it [called] *śāstra*? A treatise consists of representations appearing as a collation of names, words, and syllables. Or alternately, a treatise consists of representations appearing as specific linguistic expressions that procure supramundane direct knowledge. But how can representations be articulated or expounded upon? There is no fault in here since the representations [obtained] by hearing follow from the representations of the author and expounder [Maitreya and Asaṅga].<sup>14</sup>

Sthiramati's definition of *śāstra* (alongside an etymological definition drawn from Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti*)<sup>15</sup> is obviously made to fit the Yogācāra understanding that all phenomena – including all types of discourse – can be either known or discussed as mere mental representations (*vijñapti*). But this, says the opponent, poses a difficulty for its function as a discursive communicative activity. There are several ways of understanding what it is that Sthiramati sees as a possible difficulty.

On one interpretation, the difficulty concerns, as in the case of the epistemological problem of the knowledge of other-minds, the epistemic access or lack thereof of a commentator to the mental representations of the expounder and author.<sup>16</sup> An alternative interpretation, presented recently by Sonam Kachru, understands Sthiramati as referring here to the fundamental difficulty of attributing intention ascriptions – which are presupposed by any communicative discursive acts (and all the more so by commentarial activity) – to mere mental events (i.e., independently of any intentional agent; Kachru 2014). Drawing from Buddhist philosophy of action, Kachru suggests that Sthiramati's solution to this difficulty is to point out that intentional content, much like public action, is not

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above (n. 19), the term *śāstra* stands in this context for the entire MAV corpus, including both revealed verses and commentary.

<sup>14</sup> *idam idāniṃ vaktavyaṃ kiḍṛśaṃ śāstrarūpam | śāstraṃ kiṃ ceti nāmapadavyarījanakāyaprabhāsā vijñaptayaḥ śāstram |atha vā lokottarajñānaprāpakasābdaviśeṣaprabhāsā vijñaptayaḥ śāstram | kathaṃ vijñaptayaḥ praṇiyanta ucyante vā | praṇetrīvaktṛvijñaptiprabhavatvāt śravaṇavijñaptināṃ nātra doṣaḥ|. The Sanskrit is from Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 2, lines 16-20). I have accepted Stanley's suggested correction of the Sanskrit, based on the Tibetan (D190a5), of *śravaṇavijñaptināṃ* in place of *prajñaptināṃ*; see Stanley (1988: 3, n. 9).*

<sup>15</sup> See TD. 4061 shi 123a, in Lee (2001: 227).

<sup>16</sup> See Kochumuttom (1982: 210: 212 n. 7).

external to the perception of a communicative act but rather constitutes, *phenomenologically* speaking, its experience as such. In this respect, ascribing intention to a mental event would not be false because intentions are regarded as an intrinsic feature of the *experience* of the mental event as a discursive act. As regards our present concern, this interpretation carries important implications for the understanding of authorial intent. As noted by Kachru, while this shift into the phenomenological realm sustains the necessary alterity of the author's intent (that is, it is different than the intent of the interpreter), confining intent to our experience also implies that it is inevitably mediated and accessible only via our interpretation.

While I find this argument largely convincing, it should be noted that its view of intent as necessarily mediated (and hence inevitably reconstructed) by interpretation arguably undermines the Buddhist hermeneutical approach described above and in which Sthiramati partakes. This is because treating intention ascription as an intrinsic feature of our experience would appear to be incompatible with treating the conclusive determination of authorial intent as a criterion for correct interpretation, and thus as *extrinsic* to interpretation. This incompatibility can be reconciled, it seems to me, by considering that Sthiramati is referring in this context not just to any discursive acts but to those prompted by the exceptionally accomplished personas, namely the author, expounder and "listener" (Vasubandhu).<sup>17</sup> So that whereas under the framework of mere mental representations intentions become themselves a matter of mental representations (insofar as they are necessarily mediated by interpretation), it is these accomplished personas' utmost wisdom, Sthiramati seems to tell us, that guarantees that the intention interpreted is indeed the one intended. It is therefore the textual authority that stems from possessing true knowledge of reality that rescues interpretation from becoming mere self-interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, there is yet another way to understand the difficulty that arises from Sthiramati's account of *śāstra*. According to Sthiramati's definition – and it should be noted that this is his own emphasis, and not Vasubandhu's – *śāstra*, insofar as it is carried by a line of second order mental representations, is fully immersed in the conventional realm. As such, he tells us, *śāstra* can be understood to operate in two distinct ways. First, it can be understood simply in terms of its assembled linguistic parts and their meanings, like any other communicative act. In addition to this, however, and unlike ordinary communicative acts, the discursive elements of *śāstra* can be

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<sup>17</sup> Most telling in this respect is Sthiramati's omission of his own commentarial project from this tally.

<sup>18</sup> This framework seems to be on par with Sthiramati's additional gloss of *śāstra* as an edifying discourse, which is evidently intended for Buddhist "insiders." See Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 2, line 20; 3, line 2).

understood as efficacious in *procuring* supramundane gnosis, implying that the genre has a performative and transformative function over and above its informative role.<sup>19</sup>

The main difficulty that arises from such a view is that defining discourse as mere mental representations of mental representations can imply a kind of mentalism, and as such, threatens to deprive discourse of any extra-discursive referential foundation.<sup>20</sup> An explanation is therefore required as to: 1) how discourse can maintain its meaningfulness – how it can “be articulated or expounded upon,” in the words of the objection above– and 2) how, if discourse is self-referential, it can still maintain its pretense to “reach” reality so as to be able to procure true knowledge. Seen in this light, Sthiramati’s discussion of the nature of *śāstra* seems to go beyond mere local textual concerns to question the meaningfulness and efficacy of the full range of the Yogācāra discourse.

A possible solution to this difficulty may be found in other sections of Sthiramati’s sub-commentary – most notably the third, “Reality” chapter (*tattvaparichedaḥ*)<sup>21</sup> – which propose a general understanding of how reference and ordinary discourse map onto the Yogācāra three natures scheme (*trisvabhāva*). As we will see shortly, this understanding allows Sthiramati both to ground discourse in causal mental descriptions, enabling him to avoid the traps of mentalism, and to view *śāstra* as a vehicle for transformative knowledge.

As a preface to my exploration of this account of the referential process, a brief exposition of the three nature scheme is in order. Stated in the most general terms, this important Yogācāra tenant provides an account of reality as an interplay between three different aspects or points of view – the deluded way in which we ordinarily conceive phenomena (the imagined nature), its interdependent causal foundation (the dependent nature), and the true understanding of the ultimate state (the perfected nature). The presentation of this scheme varies across Yogācāra texts, perhaps reflecting a gradual development of this doctrine, and the question of its proper interpretation and the nature of the relations among the three natures is a matter of contention among scholars, both ancient and modern. One useful way of approaching this broad and complex issue is through Alan Sponberg’s distinction between a “pivotal model” and a “progressive model” of the three natures scheme (Sponberg 1982).

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<sup>19</sup> Here too Sthiramati seems to follow Vasubandhu’s VY, where the Buddha’s speech is described as the ultimate *śāstra*. See text quoted in fn. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Insofar as mentalism treats meaning as a function of the speaker’s mental content.

<sup>21</sup> In particular the subsections on the “subtle and gross reality” (*audārikasūkṣmatattvam*) and the “skillful reality” (*kausālyatattvam*), the relevant sections roughly commenting on MAV verses 16 c-d and 10 b-c respectively. Sthiramati’s comments are invariably consistent and coherent, but their presentation is not ordered or linear. In what follows I will try to reconstruct their overall argument.

In brief, the pivotal model takes both the imagined and the perfected nature to be aspects or modes of the dependent nature. The imagined nature is regarded as the deluded way in which we ordinarily conceive phenomena (in terms of a dualist distinction between subject and object and through conceptual differentiations), and the dependent is understood as the ontological interdependent causal reality underlying the imagined. In other words, while the imagined is the mistaken way in which reality *appears* to us, the dependent stands for the real causal nexus that brings about these false appearances. The perfected is understood within this framework as simply the absence of the imagined from the dependent – i.e., the dependent as seen once our misconceptions of it have been understood and removed.<sup>22</sup>

The progressive model, by contrast, takes each of the three natures to represent stages of understanding, progressively higher, of the true nature of reality. Within this framework, one first conceives phenomena, mistakenly, as dualist appearances (the imagined), then understands them in causal and mental terms (the dependent), and eventually transcends this understanding (which is still pervaded by dualistic distinctions) in favor of a true vision of ineffable reality.

With respect to the MAV, Mario D'Amato has argued that while the pivotal model appears to be the more prevalent, there seems to be at least one instance that conforms to the progressive model, suggesting perhaps that these are not after all incompatible perspectives.<sup>23</sup> For present purposes, however, suffice it to point out the common features in the theoretical work performed by the two models of the three natures scheme: both enable the Yogācāra to supplement the two-truths distinction with a more dynamic model of reality understood in terms of a shift between three epistemic points of view, and this dynamic model, in turn, can readily accommodate the school's causal description of the workings of the mind and its role in the construction of phenomena.

Bearing this in mind, let us now return to Sthiramati's explanation of the workings of language and reference through their mapping onto the three natures scheme. According to Sthiramati, the realm of the imagined can be correlated to a realist and essentialist understanding of meaning in

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<sup>22</sup> Still largely within the framework of the pivotal model, one can further distinguish between roughly two common interpretative strands that are tightly connected to the question of the nature of the Yogācāra Idealism – an approach that sees the three natures doctrine as providing an ontological account of reality, and one that considers it a description of reality from three different epistemic points of view. A lucid discussion of these interpretative approaches and the philosophical role of the three natures scheme is provided in a recent polemic between Jay Garfield and Jonathan Gold held at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. See Garfield and Gold (2011).

<sup>23</sup> 'But perhaps the pivotal and progressive models may be seen as consistent with one another, each providing an interpretation of the three-nature theory in a different key: while the pivotal model interprets the three natures in an ontological epistemological key (mind in relation to world), the progressive model interprets the three natures in a semiotic-epistemological key (mind in relation to signs, language, concepts)' (D'Amato 2012: 18).

which designations are ordinarily (and falsely) understood to refer to existent essences (Yamaguchi and Lévi 1934: 140, lines 5-14). The dependent correlates to the understanding of these referential processes in terms of the causal-mental activity that underlies them. The perfected, as the absence of the imagined from the dependent, is understood as the ultimate nonexistence of such designated essences. Sthiramati further notes that while the dependent serves as the causal support for the process of designating, this is not evident in ordinary discourse because words are erroneously understood as referring to essences that are superimposed (*adhyāropita*) on the causal nexus.<sup>24</sup> So, according to Sthiramati, words are ordinarily understood to refer to (imagined) existent essential objects that as a matter of fact are superimposed on the dependent, the latter conceived of as the causal nexus that brings about the mental appearances of these objects (and their corresponding designations).<sup>25</sup>

In another subsection of this chapter, the “subtle and gross reality” (*audārikasūkṣmatattvam*), Sthiramati further develops this theory of meaning to differentiate between three modes of conventional language use (which once again map onto the three natures scheme).<sup>26</sup> According to Sthiramati, when a person uses a word to refer to what he considers to be real existent entities, this mode is termed “the conventional as designation” (*prajñapti-saṃvṛttiḥ*). Here designation is understood in terms of its bare denotative (*abhidhā*) function, subsumed within the category of the imagined. The second mode is the “conventional as comprehension” (*pratipatti*), which stands for the deep structure of linguistic use, namely attachment (*abhiniveśa*) to objects that are taken to be externally existent because of conceptual differentiation (*vikalpa*). This mode is seen as corresponding to the dependent nature. The final mode, “the conventional as expression” or “proclamation” (*udbhāvanā*), is conventional language use with respect to true reality (*dharmadhatū*), despite the latter’s ultimate inexpressibility. This mode corresponds to the perfected. It should be emphasized that for Sthiramati, these three modes do not represent three different ways of talking

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<sup>24</sup> Which he elsewhere seems to refer to as consciousness. See Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 139, lines 3-9).

<sup>25</sup> Sthiramati’s account of how reference and meaning work according to the Yogācāra (that is, along the three natures scheme) is then supplemented, and to some extent supported, by a devastating critique of a realist-essentialist theory of meaning. This consists in demonstrating that any attempt to understand linguistic meaning as the outcome of relations between the triad of designation, an object, and its essence, is logically untenable. To this end, Sthiramati embarks on a set of arguments that also consider other referential theories – such as the view that designations manifest or reveal the object – and which are a summarized synthesis of similar arguments from a variety of sources, including the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, and the *Mahāyānasamgraha*. See Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 140, line 10; 141, line 21). For a survey of similar arguments in the Yogācāra texts mentioned above, see Tzohar (forthcoming).

<sup>26</sup> The text section under discussion is Yamaguchi and Lévi (1934: 123, line 19; 125, line 3).



but, rather, three ways of conceiving of the meaning of the same language use<sup>27</sup> – the first merely in its denotative-semantic function, the second as indicating the various *causal* processes underlying it, and finally in terms of its soteriological efficacy, that is, its capacity to delineate its own limitations.

This layering of the meaning of conventional discourse brings us back full circle to Sthiramati's initial definition of *śāstra* and its attendant difficulties. Recall that these concerned, first, the meaningfulness of discourse, and second, its ability to procure true knowledge under a framework of mere mental representation (which threatens to undercut discourse from any extra-discursive referential basis). As a possible response to these difficulties, Sthiramati seems to tell us that conventional discourse, when properly understood, reveals itself to be inherently polyphonic, simultaneously speaking in different voices that embody different points of view on the same reality (and which correspond and are delimited by the three natures scheme). It is therefore *śāstra*'s embrace of this polyphony that renders it a vehicle for obtaining super-mundane knowledge: the polyphony reflexively facilitates a *shift* away from the understanding of discourse as reifying linguistic phenomena toward its understanding as a line of second-order representations understood in terms of their underlying causal and mental reality. In this respect, *śāstra*, while still conventional insofar as it reflexively points out the limits of ordinary expression and facilitates a gradual understanding of the true causal reality underlying language, is seen to be denotative of the ultimate.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, this framework also enables Sthiramati to avoid the kind of mentalism that would readily attach itself to a view of discourse as second-order mental representations. This is because while there are no real external objects to serve as referents for words, meaning and reference are nonetheless grounded in the causal mental reality that produces them. So with respect to the first difficulty, while this account undermines a notion of meaning as a function of a realist correspondence theory of truth, it does not render all discourse meaningless. Rather, what we find here is an understanding of discourse that, by reflexively uncovering its very conditions of becoming, broadens its semantic range to include causal and mental descriptions.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The way these three modes being analogous to the three natures scheme as three “modes” of viewing reality seems self-evident.

<sup>28</sup> It should be emphasized that this does not mean merely that *śāstra* is capable of demonstrating the conventionality of all discourse and the limits of language (and hence of gesturing in the direction of an inexpressible absolute); it suggests that *śāstra* also facilitates the turning of one's gaze upon the ontological and causal reality that lie at the root of conventional discourse, and in this case, of *śāstric* discourse itself. *Śāstra* shows the ontological conditions that underlie discourse, including the ones underlying itself.

<sup>29</sup> Hence accounting for referential relations in terms of causal and mental descriptions rather than under a realist correspondence theory of truth. This link between causal ontology and the realm of language and meaning is found also in

### 3. Conclusion

In the first part of this essay I outlined several features of Vasubandhu's account of authoritative speech as grounded in a broader understanding of scriptural interpretation. I began with his critique of the attempt to establish canonicity and textual authority using philological or historical criteria, and his alternative proposal of a hermeneutical approach that identifies meaning with implicit authorial intent, excavated from the text by the application of hermeneutical criteria that ensure the definitive status of such meaning. I argued that this non-literalism and the attendant view of meaning as inherently layered becomes something of an interpretative strategy for the Mahāyāna and an important part of its textual identity, which is often in conflict with a no less important practical need for final and definitive interpretative closure. Thus, this scheme was shown to be marked by an unresolved tension between the inherent openness and proliferation of meaning underlying the Mahāyāna view of scripture, on the one hand, and the school's need for clear-cut objective hermeneutical criteria for the determination of meaning (and the inevitable circularity that in fact underlies its application), on the other.

In the second part I examined how the inherent tensions of this framework are worked out in Sthiramati's *MVBhT*. Considered in light of the general interpretative framework described above, Sthiramati's account of *śāstra* appeared to be engaged primarily with the problem of conclusively determining the meaning of a text under a "representation only" account, once both the agent and external objects are taken out of the equation. This is because the "representation only" view threatens to undermine the understanding of meaning as a function of either intention ascriptions or an extra-discursive referential ground, which is required for establishing the text's authority and its efficacy in procuring knowledge, respectively. Sthiramati's solution to this problem, I suggested, is multifaceted. First, he suggests that the correct determination of meaning is guaranteed by the exceptional expertise of the persona involved (which serves as an extra-textual criterion for its meaning, authority, and relatedness to reality). This appeal to extra-textual authority, however, is not at odds with the understanding of the text as inherently layered, a feature that in the hands of Sthiramati is identified with the polyphonic quality of śāstric discourse – its ability to speak in multiple "voices" simultaneously. These 'voices,' it was demonstrated, are systematically and

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the unique theory of meaning explicated in Sthiramati's *bhāṣya* to Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā*, in which the causal underpinnings of language are developed into something akin to a (non-realist) figurative causal theory of reference. See Tzohar (2017).

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hierarchically ordered in accordance to the degree to which they can embody and express the underlying causal and mental reality – degrees outlined by the three natures scheme. Moreover, this framework, insofar it serves to evaluate discourse in terms of its insight into its underlying mental and causal conditions, provides an additional hermeneutical criterion – and this time *intra-textual* – for determining the meaning and truth of discourse. In this respect, the framework offered by Sthiramati was shown to strike a certain balance between the need for a decisive interpretative reduction, on the one hand, and the Mahāyānic conception of the layeredness of meaning on the other. By incorporating both strands into his understanding of the nature of *śāstra*, Sthiramati is therefore able to guarantee the kind of interpretative closure necessary for upholding the authority of scripture, while understanding the ingrained ambiguity of the text not as an obstruction of truth but as means toward a transformative end.<sup>30</sup>

### Abbreviations

MV	<i>Madhyāntavibhāga</i> . [Maitreya-Asaṅga].
MVBh	<i>Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya</i> . [Vasubandhu].
MVBhṬ	<i>MadhyāntavibhāgabhāṣyaṬīkā</i> . [Sthiramati].
Vy	<i>Vyākhyāyukti (rnam par bshad pa'i rigs pa)</i> . [Vasubandhu].

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<sup>30</sup> It is transformative in the sense that the polysemy of the text (understood in terms of a polyphony of voices) when mapped onto the three natures scheme, facilitate a progressional understanding of reality.

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## Testimony and the epistemic problem of society in

### *al-Risālat al-Kāmiliyya fī al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya*

Marco Lauri

This paper outlines some of the historical and epistemological themes of *al-Risālat al-Kāmiliyya fī al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya* ('the Epistle of Kāmil on the life-story of the Prophet'; henceforth, *Risālat Kāmiliyya*) by Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 1288) in the context of discussions about testimony in Medieval Islamic intellectual milieus. The paper is divided into three parts.

The first one will offer a brief description of the place of testimony in Medieval epistemic discussions, with some comparative elements. The second part presents a short summary of *Risālat Kāmiliyya*'s close precedent, Ibn Ṭufayl's *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, with some remarks on the role of testimony in its epistemology. In the third part, *Risālat Kāmiliyya*'s original epistemic stance on testimony will be examined and discussed, with some proposals about its historical and philosophical significance.

*To Carola, thank you for all the curry.*

#### 1. Testimony and transmission in Medieval Islam

Testimony is defined (Strawson 1994, Fricker 1994) as the acquisition of valid knowledge through words from an external source.

It is common experience that testimony represents a basic source of a large portion of anyone's knowledge; furthermore, it operates as an essential feature of any kind of known culture. In particular, testimony underpins *socialized* knowledge; knowledge obtained through other means such as perception or inference would remain confined within the consciousness of the individual performing them, unless their awareness can be conveyed through intelligible words or other shared symbolic means.<sup>1</sup> The epistemic status of testimony among the instruments of knowledge has been a long-term focus of intellectual discussions in several cultures.<sup>2</sup>

A distinction of three main instruments of knowledge (the *pramānas* of Indian thought) amounting to perception, (inferential) reasoning and testimony respectively is found in different

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<sup>1</sup> "In order to recognise the distinctiveness of testimony one should start with the obvious point that we acquire testimonial knowledge through communication" (Faulkner 2000: 587).

<sup>2</sup> See Freschi in this volume.

cultural contexts; in India, most traditions of thought discussed these (*pratyakṣa*, *anumāna* and *śabda*<sup>3</sup> in Sanskrit, respectively) as the major *pramānas*. Likewise, Islamic theological and philosophical discussions from the ninth century onwards frequently offered a general tripartite division of sense perception (*ḥiss*), rational inquiry or speculation (*naẓar*) and report (*ḥabar*; Wisnovsky 2004: 66-67).<sup>4</sup>

These fundamental typologies may be expanded or reduced.

In contemporary Western epistemology, testimony as means of knowledge is contrasted with empirical perception, inference through independent reflection, and memory (Fricker 1995, Faulkner 2000). The Indian Nyāya school counted *upamāna*, rendered as ‘comparison,’ as a *pramāna* (this may recall *qiyās* ‘analogy’ in Arabic grammar and Islamic law)<sup>5</sup>. Other Indian traditions distinguished other more specific *pramānas*. However, *upamāna* and similar types may be seen as secondary and reducible to more broadly defined notions of ‘reason’ and ‘inference;’ memory may be construed as a repository, providing knowledge that had been previously perceived, deduced or received as a report. Therefore, perception, reason and testimony can be proposed to be the principal available instruments to acquire knowledge in the context of the present discussion, although this assertion would be incomplete under other aspects.<sup>6</sup>

Some traditions of thought have not considered testimony as independent instrument of knowledge. This is the case of Vaiśeṣika in India. Platonic and Aristotelian schools, which, in this regard, inspired many strains of Modern “Western” philosophy, tend to focus on intellectual, universal knowledge, accomplished by individuals through reasoning, particularly syllogistic, abstract reasoning. In general, the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition thus regards insights from sense perception and testimony as a necessary preliminary step to universal, “scientific” abstract knowledge based on rigorous rational reasoning, rather than constituting knowledge in themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> *Śabda* conveys a broader meaning than “testimony”; in some philosophical schools, the role of language is emphasised over that of the witness. Here I am using “testimony” as roughly equivalent to *śabda*, as knowledge transmitted through words. See Freschi in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> See below.

<sup>5</sup> *Qiyās* means ‘syllogism’ in other contexts. Generally, it may be defined as a heuristic procedure of reducing an unknown or abnormal phenomenon to known categories. See below.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Sīnā’s reading of Aristotelian epistemology discusses memory (*dīkr*) and ‘experience’ (*taḡriba*) as intermediate modes of knowledge between pure sense perception and intellection. See Janssens (2004).



Interestingly, disciplines closely tied to word-transmitted cognition, such as grammar and history, receive relatively little epistemic attention in Aristotle's works.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle also goes as far as denying that perception is a source of 'scientific' knowledge;<sup>8</sup> while sense perception has a role in his epistemology, the Aristotelian approach regards *knowledge* (ἐπιστήμη, *epistēmē*; 'ilm in Arabic) as inherently universal.<sup>9</sup> In this view, perception and testimony only convey awareness of particular things; therefore, they both take a secondary role.

A roughly comparable attitude to testimony exists among reductionist modern philosophers; while there is little question about testimony's instrumental role, they argue that it does not make an *independent* instrument for knowledge. Nevertheless, while a thorough epistemological discussion of testimony is, in general, a relatively recent feature of "Western" philosophical thought, the presence of testimony in the set of epistemic tools of "Western" philosophers is long established (Fricker 1994, Mohanty 1994, Faulkner 2000, Adler 2012, Freschi in this volume). Even Aristotle's writings often begin discussions on any given topic with a reference and review of previously transmitted opinions about it (although he does not appear to concede that this by itself provides *knowledge*); furthermore, Aristotle's corpus notoriously lies at the root of an extensive commentary tradition, whose cognitive enterprise thus features instances of testimony.

For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to take that testimony may be an instrument of knowledge in practice, and that it constitutes a basic type alongside perception and reason, without question of either its further epistemic reducibility or independence.

The assessment of the reliability of transmitted information represents an important social task, in everyday life as well as philosophical discussion. Cultures and intellectual traditions differ in their epistemic strategies to define and assess the role of testimony.

The following remarks are generalizations that should not be taken as an exhaustive description of the epistemic options existing within the Medieval Islamicate high culture. Their main purpose is rather to provide an expanded frame of reference for the analysis of the complex epistemology of

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<sup>7</sup> "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." *Poetics*, 9, trans. S. H. Butcher. See also Faulkner (2000) and Adler (2012). However, history and grammar were not, overall, neglected fields in the Greek Aristotelian tradition as a whole.

<sup>8</sup> "Scientific knowledge is not possible through the act of perception." *Posterior Analytics*, I, 31, trans. G. Mure. This must be put into perspective by more nuanced views stated by Aristotle elsewhere and the broader context of Aristotelian epistemology.

<sup>9</sup> Adamson (2005) illustrates this point clearly, also clarifying the reception of this aspect of Aristotelian epistemology in the Arabic philosophical tradition. See also McGinnis (2003, 2007).

testimony featured, according to my analysis, in *Risālat Kāmiliyya*. Accordingly, I will focus on the epistemology of testimony in the Aristotelian philosophical traditions in Arabic, without delving into the related debate in natural philosophy on the epistemic value of experience and induction.<sup>10</sup> I will relate these epistemic discussions to aspects of mainstream Sunni theology and law, but this is not the place to discuss them in full. Likewise, the rich traditions of thought connected with Shi'ism and other relevant schools of thought such as the *Zāhirites*, or the lively Sufi discussions about the possibility to apprehend God directly, cannot be detailed here.

### 1.1. Islamic epistemic debates

In this section, I describe some dimensions within the epistemological debates shaping the Islamicate Medieval intellectual space with regard to testimony, in the context of the wider discussion that hinged on the relative place of rational, independent thinking and revealed, transmitted word in the overall social system of knowledge.

It is important to stress that these discussions did not usually create unbridgeable oppositions of mutually exclusive epistemic alternatives; I rather see a tension among different ideas about the appropriate balance between poles, which competed for epistemic primacy as bases for a socially viable body of knowledge.

The general epistemic attitude of the Medieval Islamicate culture may be described as “a genealogical conception of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> Tracing the sources and the chain of transmission of a given statement or discourse usually played a key role in defining its validity. This pattern is based on the study of *ḥadīth*, the reports of sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, which emerged as a central element in the theological and political debates of the eighth and ninth centuries AD. Fabricated stories about the Prophet and the first generations of Muslim believers circulated in order to support theological or political positions; defining criteria and hierarchies of authoritativeness and authenticity became critical as the general epistemic validity of the *ḥadīth* was recognized. Some scholars devoted their whole life to examine hundreds of thousands of circulating sayings, in order to detect and preserve the authentic ones. The main criteria to do so were, in general, extrinsic, referring to the context in which the testimony had been delivered, involving examination of reliability in the transmission. A given statement was usually accepted as authentic on the

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<sup>10</sup> See McGinnis (2003, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> “Una concezione genealogica del sapere”. Capezone (1998: 27; my translation).

trustworthiness of each link in its attached chain of transmitters (*isnād*), with limited regard for its content (*matn*). This procedure extended beyond the critical analysis of sayings and deeds of the Prophet and came to be applied in many areas of knowledge, although with significant variations.

A transmitted statement whose validity is under consideration, normally composed of *isnād* and *matn*, is generally called a *ḥabar* (pl. *aḥbār*; in Modern Arabic, ‘news’), a ‘report,’ or a *ḥadīṭ* (pl. *aḥādīṭ*) ‘tale;’ the latter term is used mostly but not uniquely for Prophetic reports. The standard form of a *ḥabar* is often story-like, as “Zayd told me that ‘Umar reported he was sitting playing chess with Aḥmad who told him his tale about Zaynab,” thus frequently providing a context for the utterance of the statement reported. A *ḥabar* could then expand into a full story, or collection thereof. It is worth noting that *isnād* and *ḥabar* feature in the technical jargon of Arabic classical grammar as the two main ways to refer to grammatical predication, highlighting a possible link between report-based epistemology and linguistic analysis of logic and grammar (Lancioni 1991).

In traditional study of the Prophetic *ḥadīṭ* corpus, critical review of *isnād* grounds the reliability of single reports; an *isnād* may include a link that is not considered trustworthy, or may be rejected, for example, if it is known that two successive transmitters could not possibly have met. In general, reports that are known through multiple *isnād* chains that show no weakness such as unlikely meetings or known liars are considered the most secure and their authenticity is normally accepted. Many reports however have to rely upon one chain of transmission only. These traditions may be held to be valid, unless they have other defects, but are often considered somewhat less authoritative than the ones reported by several independent sources. This is in accord with the trend of classical Islamic legal practice to require more than one witness for valid proof; however, requirements are usually stricter in law than in the study of *ḥadīṭ*. In principle, there is no limit on the length of the chain of transmitters, provided that it has no gaps or unreliable witnesses in it.

The validity of information, especially normative information, in religion and law is thus normally based upon the traceability of its transmission to authoritative individuals, whose definition is close to the one of the Sanskrit *āpta*: competent in the matter, willing to convey knowledge and truthful in what is said.<sup>12</sup>

In a sense, classical Arabic literature could be described as an effort to organize, refer and systematize the whole corpus of (secular) *aḥbār* at its disposal in a coherent and useful frame. Narratives are frequently presented as reported rather than invented fiction, exemplary tales referred to identifiable (albeit fictional) sources (Drory 1994). The frame-tales such as the *Arabian*

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<sup>12</sup> See the contributions of Freschi and Rostalska in this volume.

*Nights* exemplify this attitude (Kilito 1992, chapter 2). Thus, Medieval Arabic prose at large features a distinct educational and cognitive purpose, that also appears in the works considered here.

A defining point of contention in the formative discussions of Islamic law and theology was the role, if any, that independent, individual opinion (*ra'y*; epistemically close to 'inference') should have in relation to reported information (*ḥadīth*). A hierarchy of the sources of religious knowledge was set out by Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā', an early theologian who lived in Iraq in the first half of the eighth century, as follows (Van Ess 2008: 106-107):

- The Qur'an, whenever its meaning is clear.
- Tradition (*aḥbār*) attested by several independent and reliable sources.
- Tradition attested by one source only, provided the source is reliable.
- Qualified use of reason (*'aql*).

This epistemic hierarchy reflects the important place assigned to testimony as a shared patrimony of the community. Likewise, the hierarchy of the "foundations of law" (*uṣūl al-fiqh*, sometimes less accurately rendered as "sources of law") upon which legal rulings were based came to be generally settled in this basic order:

- The Qur'an (reliable by definition).
- The *ḥadīth* corpus.
- The consensus or general agreement (*iǧmā'*) of the competent people (usually scholars).
- The analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) whereas the result of three above *uṣūl* is applied to new cases based on resemblance.<sup>13</sup>

Sunni scholars tended to avoid the explicit incorporation of personal opinion (*ra'y*) and reason (*'aql*) among the *uṣūl*. There was fear that this would have divisive consequences for the community of believers; thus, in principle (not always in practice) the scope of reasoning in law was limited to the relatively restricted application of precedent-based *qiyās*.

Consensus became the overarching concern, as the validity of the *ḥadīth* was in turn established, in part, through it. Acceptance of the Qur'an's authoritativeness was underpinned by the general

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<sup>13</sup> As a comparative note, in Classical Indian law according to the texts of the Dharmaśāstra corpus, the sources of law are: 1) the Vedas. 2) The tradition (*smṛti*) that is the texts based on the Vedas. 3) The custom of those who know the Vedas. 4) Individual judgement (sometimes translated as 'pleasure') of educated people.

The parallel with the Classical Islamic approach is striking and may deserve further analysis.

agreement of all Muslims.<sup>14</sup> In epistemic terms, one could consider the Qur'an a token of testimonial knowledge attested to those living after Muhammad by many independent sources although, to Muslims, its epistemic value is rooted in its divine origin, not in its social transmission.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout a large portion of Islamic intellectual history, however, theological, legal and even literary discussions relied on textual proof (*naṣṣ*) from either the Book or the *ḥadīth* heavily, in preference to individual reason or sense perception (Rosenthal 2007: 93 ff.). This form of textual knowledge has a social value marked by its testimonial character (Faulkner 2000).

The wide-ranging reception of Greek philosophical thought into the Islamic intellectual space through translations and original works in Arabic fostered a tradition of thought known as *falsafa*, 'philosophy' in the Aristotelian-Platonic mode. *Falsafa* emphasized an intellectualist, 'individualist' epistemology oriented toward rigorously demonstrated, personally reached universal knowledge (*ḥikma*, 'wisdom' or 'philosophy'; *ilm*, 'science'). Islamic intellectual life thus experienced an epistemic polarity between the intellect or reason (*ʿaql*) and transmission or tradition (*naql*; Capezone 1998: 79, Wisnovsky 2009). After the eleventh century, the reception of Ibn Sīnā's (known as Avicenna in the West; d. 1037) vast philosophical work molded the terms of this epistemic debate (Wisnovsky 2005).

In the scientific and philosophical fields, a divide between 'traditional' (*naqlī*) and 'reason-based' (*ʿaqlī*) disciplines (*ʿulūm*, sg. *ilm* 'science'), grounded in their epistemological and historical status, came to be widely accepted; the different impact of reliably transmitted knowledge in the epistemological foundations of these groups of sciences was among the factors differentiating them, since traditional sciences depend much more on the importance of testimony.

This division tended to overlap with the division between 'Arabic' and 'Foreign' or 'Ancient' sciences, with the former roughly corresponding to the traditional ones.

We should not overstate, however, the rift between reason and transmission. "Rational" disciplines, which included logic, the mathematical disciplines, and various branches of natural philosophy, did not abandon the authoritativeness of transmission, relying on knowledge and commentary from the Greek translated texts. In theoretical matters there was, as will be shown, an emphasis on individual intellection. On the other hand, in more practically oriented disciplines such as medicine and politics the accepted, transmitted views were regarded as a valid epistemic tool, alongside experience extracted from sense perception through abstraction. These would provide

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<sup>14</sup> See also Gilliot (2007).

<sup>15</sup> See also Hallaq (2009, chapter 2).

needed information about particulars that are outside the grasp of rational, universal intellection.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, philosophers did not regard these particular insights, useful they might be, as *knowledge* in themselves (Adamson 2005).

Conversely, ‘traditional’ and ‘Arabic’ sciences like theology, law and grammar had room for independent inquiry based on reason; grammar and theology, in particular, quickly incorporated logic and other aspects of Greco-Arabic intellectual toolkit, especially after the tenth century.

A prominent representative of *falsafa*, al-Fārābī (d. 950 AD), developed a classification of sciences which was oriented by a topic-driven, ordered pedagogical progression, rather than the more common epistemic-historical one (Capezzone 1998: 90.).<sup>17</sup>

Philosophers held inferential syllogism (*qiyās*) their central intellectual tool, conducive to certain (*yaqīn*) knowledge, namely universal knowledge, through a process of independent ‘inference’ that required specific training (Black 2006). Like Aristotle, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā recognized the possibility to use data from experience (repeated, abstracted perception in controlled condition) as premises of syllogistic reasoning offering a qualified form of certainty.

Most Muslim philosophers, particularly Ibn Sīnā and his disciples, followed Aristotle in considering knowing something an actualization of its form in the intellect, in a sense becoming like it.<sup>18</sup> Ibn Sīnā argued for a direct, non-discursive intellectual apprehension or “taste” (*ḥads*) of universal truths, to be juxtaposed to and contrasted with the logical, cogitative progression to it (Adamson 2004, Black 2013, Ivry 2012, Gutas 2014: 213 ff.). This epistemology stressed the personal role of the individual in receiving intellection, which according to Ibn Sīnā is the apprehension of a pre-existing supra-sensible Form, that the mind can usually access after appropriate preparation through the exercise of reason.

This philosophical stance, giving preeminence to intellect and individual reason, generally downplayed (but, it is worth repeating, without a total rejection) testimony as a valid epistemic instrument, in accord with the general Greek approach. This contrasted in principle with the “genealogical” and consensual conception of knowledge described above, and its social value.

Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* and Ibn al-Nafīs’ *Risālat Kāmiliyya* represent, in my reading, two witnesses of this underlying epistemic and social tension.

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<sup>16</sup> See Forcada (2011).

<sup>17</sup> See also Rosenthal (2007).

<sup>18</sup> *De Anima* III 7-8.

## 2. Self-taught knowledge

The well-known Andalusian physician and philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) developed *falsafa*'s reason-centered epistemology in his celebrated philosophical narrative treatise *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān fī asrār ḥikmat mašriqiyya* (*The Epistle of Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān on the secrets of Oriental wisdom*), also known under the epistemically charged title of its Early Modern Latin translation, *Philosophus Autodidactus* (*The Self-Taught Philosopher*, 1671). This text has attracted significant philosophical and scholarly interest in both the Islamicate world and the West for a long time.<sup>19</sup>

Ibn Ṭufayl begins his work with an introduction in form of a letter, where he explicitly presents the text as a philosophical allegory created by the author himself, in order to point the way to apprehend the highest truths. He references to the work of his predecessors, such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Bāḡḡa (d. 1137) and al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), assessing their philosophical significance. He declares that the book will present views elaborated particularly upon Ibn Sīnā's thought.<sup>20</sup>

The wording suggests the text to be taken as a *pointer* (*išāra*) to the path to truth, rather than a *communication about* it, which the author implies to be impossible. The intelligent reader should follow this path by himself in order to apprehend a glimpse of the reality that exists beyond words (Conrad 1996, Bürgel 1996, Kukkonen 2009).<sup>21</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl understands the 'taste' of Avicennian epistemology as a personal process that cannot be properly "taught;" but, it appears, it may be "hinted at" in metaphor.

It appears right away that, for Ibn Ṭufayl, the higher intellectual realities transcend the verbal world entirely, and would therefore be outside the grasp of testimonial knowledge, and, therefore, society.

The book proceeds to relate a tale on the authority of some unspecified "pious forefathers" (*salafnā ṣāliḥ*)<sup>22</sup> about an individual named Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān (The Living, Son of the Vigilant). The name comes from a from a philosophical tale by Ibn Sīnā equally titled *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān*, with

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<sup>19</sup> See among others Hourani (1956), Hasanali (1995), Conrad et al. (1996), Germann (2008), Lauri (2013), Kukkonen (2014).

<sup>20</sup> See though Hawi (1976), Gutas (2000) and Kukkonen (2008).

<sup>21</sup> See also Yorke (2006).

<sup>22</sup> These 'ancestors' are sometimes speculated to be identified with the Ihwān al-Ṣafā', an intellectual circle of Ismailite leanings who operated in Iraq in the tenth century. They authored a series of philosophical treatises, collectively forming an encyclopedia of sciences; these works offer some resemblances with Ibn Tufayl's text. See Kruk (1996).

which Ibn Ṭufayl's work is sometimes confused by later Arabic sources (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 29).

Ḥayy is either abandoned or spontaneously generated in an otherwise uninhabited island near the Equator.<sup>23</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl treats the two accounts of Ḥayy's birth as two contrasting reports of the tale, a common procedure in Arabic literature, which however he does not use in the rest of the narrative.<sup>24</sup> The testimonial structure is thus explicitly invoked for the descriptions of the island and Ḥayy's generation, and then largely abandoned in the following text.

Raised by a doe, Ḥayy gradually becomes aware of the use of his limbs and discovers the inner workings of the external world around him, described in general within the frames accepted by Aristotelian Arabic philosophers.<sup>25</sup> Ḥayy determines that everything around him, especially living beings, is well designed to fit in a well ordered, hierarchically structured whole according to a purposeful harmony. He notices the perfection of the celestial bodies and understands the incorporeality of the soul. Thus, Ḥayy deduces the existence of a Creator and understands that his own purpose as a rational being is to *know* Him as closely as possible. He deduces by himself a set of steps towards this knowledge, that is, according to an Aristotelian-Avicennian epistemology, towards the apprehension of intelligible Form. He thus elevates himself to the ineffable, non-communicable degree of pure contemplation (*mušāhada*)<sup>26</sup> of the incorporeal Forms and the underlying unity of all being, attained directly, without discursive thinking or verbal mediation.

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<sup>23</sup> The spontaneous generation process is described in some detail, giving the author the opportunity to express his position on some contemporary physiological discussions with significant implications. This feature of the tale is rather striking to the modern reader and indeed interesting. It should be noted that the possibility of spontaneous generation of human beings was debated by Ibn Ṭufayl's forebears and contemporaries and is consistent with his interpretation of the Aristotelian-Avicennian scientific paradigm. See Kruk (1996), Richter-Bernburg (1996), Bertolacci (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Malti-Douglas (1996). Alternative accounts, however, are referred later as the result of Ḥayy's reflections on the eternity of creation of the world.

<sup>25</sup> See though Richter-Bernburg (1996).

<sup>26</sup> This term, used in Sufi milieus, is cognate with the Arabic word for the act of witness, *šahāda*. This latter word does not refer only to a report of eyewitness in a judicial context, but indicates the Muslim profession of faith: the believer accepts the basic religious tenets as personally testifying them, rather than believing them as implied in the corresponding Christian formula of *Credo*. The root Š-H-D, which forms *šahāda*, covers a semantic area roughly equivalent to the Greek μάρτυρ- (*martyr*-) and encompasses the notion of martyrdom; it normally refers more to a willingly accepted self-sacrifice for the faith rather than a suffered persecution. However, the root is not significantly invested with the epistemological meaning of "testimony" which is the topic of this article.



At this point, Ḥayy meets another man called Asāl, who had come to his island to live as a hermit from a neighboring, civilized community. Asāl is fascinated by Ḥayy's intellectual self-elevation to contemplative experience, that he himself had been seeking. In turn, Ḥayy is made aware of linguistic communication and organized society. He realizes that Asāl's people's religion (a thinly disguised Islam) underlies the same truths he had arrived at by himself, veiled in metaphoric language. He decides to join civilization to teach to Asāl's friends the true significance of these metaphors, so that they can partake in the blissful contemplative state he had reached. However, Asāl's people, while virtuous, only follow religious revelation with outwardly compliance. Attempts by Ḥayy to deepen their understanding of divine things through teaching are met with revulsion and bewilderment. Ḥayy realizes that shrouding truths in religious metaphor was necessary to those people, whose intellect is supposedly too weak to attain the truth; he sees that attempts to communicate them higher truths are pointless, if not dangerous. Then, he returns to his island with Asāl, where both end their life in blissful intellectual contemplation.

The focal point of the treatise has been debated, but epistemology and its relationship to social life clearly play a central part. Many readers have felt its principal subject to be the contention that independent thinking can reach knowledge with no reference whatsoever to previously known notions, actually without teachers or guides at all (Hourani 1956). It may also show that attempts to relate intellectually acquired, individual knowledge into society are problematic and may require a specific way of expression that Ḥayy does not possess.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, many interpreters have agreed in seeing the call for the self-sufficiency of human, individual reason, as opposed to society-based (and thus, word-based, although this has been rarely pointed out) knowledge, as a component of the core message of the treatise.

Ḥayy's epistemic journey is consistent with the Aristotelian epistemology of universal knowledge based on abstract reason, with experience from the senses as a (very important) preliminary step to it. It is also generally faithful to Ibn Sīnā's notion of non-discursive knowledge, with a markedly mystical bent.

On the other hand, verbal communication among individuals is not presented as an unalloyed epistemic failure: once Ḥayy familiarizes with language, both he and Asāl do not appear to have any difficulty in understanding or accepting the other's testimony. This is somewhat striking as Ḥayy had no previous experience of testimony as an epistemic tool, and the matters, such as the existence of social life, Asāl relates to him are entirely outside his previous experience and knowledge.

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<sup>27</sup> This conclusion is argued especially by Kochin (1999), but may be also implied in Marmura (1979).

This should not be read as a naïve approach to testimony that takes its epistemic possibility for granted.<sup>28</sup> Ḥayy may be implicitly operating under some underlying form of “acceptance principle”<sup>29</sup> in his communication with Asāl; but Ḥayy’s subsequent encounters with verbal communication present it more problematically; other people, described as irrational, question his words to the point of doubting his sanity. Ḥayy’s self-reliant epistemology does not pass the test of social life. At this point, Ḥayy resorts to deception, feigning having understood his error and exhorting the people to keep following the outwardly dimension of religion without further question into deeper matters, before leaving them and isolating himself again. While not proving to be socially effective, Ḥayy’s understanding of verbal communication is therefore sophisticated enough to include a form of “noble lie”.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Ḥayy’s earlier epistemic process actually *verifies* to the reader (if not to his audience in the story) the truth of revealed religion.

Ultimately, the overall epistemological position of *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* discusses and considers perception and reason as being much more significant than testimony; Ḥayy can be an archetypal figure for the “autonomous knower” implied by the Greek philosophical tradition and many subsequent philosophers, most notably John Locke (Adler 2012). The treatise may have been, indeed, available to Locke in Latin translation (Russel 1994).

It is clear, however, that the text offers a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to epistemology in a social context than it appears at first sight. It represents an epistemic challenge to defenders of tradition in emphasizing the autonomy of reason, but it also suggests that reason alone is inadequate to the workings of social life.

### 3. Epistemology as a social problem

The renowned Syro-Egyptian physician and scholar Ibn al-Nafīs answered to some of Ibn Ṭufayl’s views in his *Risālat Kāmiliyya*, probably written around 1274 (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 34).

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotelian psychology does not assume a specific faculty for language, and, to my knowledge, does not generally see language as the bearer of any specific cognitive value. In *De Anima*, Aristotle appears to be taking grammar for granted.

<sup>29</sup> This principle states that “a person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so” (see Faulkner 2000). (An interesting parallel to this principle can be found in Kumarila’s intrinsic validity theory, according to which every cognition should be accepted as true unless and until contrary evidence arises. Note by the Editor).

<sup>30</sup> On this point, I expand and partly correct what I argued in Lauri (2013), where I followed Kochin (1999) in pointing out Ḥayy’s failure to convey truth adequately in a verbal form. See also Lauri (2015).

Accounts on Ibn al-Nafīs' life are relatively scant, but they concur to portray a well-respected cultivated man, praised by his contemporaries for his mastery of medicine and his literary style. He is remembered as a physician through his discovery of pulmonary transit of blood. His scholarly curriculum included the usual strong focus on language, sciences and logic as a preliminary basis for further knowledge that frequently characterized Medieval Islamic scholarship in his time. He was also well acquainted with *falsafa* themes. He is credited with a vast corpus of writing, of which several texts have survived. While he mainly wrote about medical subjects, his expertise was, as common in his time, wide-ranging, and his production includes treatises on logic, *ḥadīth* study and Arabic grammar, most of which lost (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 22 ff.).

In the introductory lines of *Risālat Kāmiliyya*, Ibn al-Nafīs declares that his purpose is “to relate [*iqtīṣāṣ*, from *iqtaṣṣa* ‘tell,’ ‘narrate’] what Fāḍil bin Nāṭiq [an ominous name, meaning “the Virtuous, son of the Rational”<sup>31</sup>] transmitted [*ḍakara*] from the man called Kāmil [meaning “Perfect”] concerning [more literally: “on what relates to”] the life-story of the Prophet and the ordinances of religious law.”<sup>32</sup> The life-story of the Prophet was the topic of the genre of *Sīra Nabawiyya* (Prophetic Biography), which usually relied on *aḥbār* reported to that effect. “The ordinances of religious law” (*al-sunan al-ṣar‘iyya*) also are treated by a very large corpus of legal writing in Islam. However, these traditional matters are associated with other topics and presented in a strikingly original way in *Risālat Kāmiliyya*. The book is divided into four parts.

In the first part, the basic plot of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* resembles *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* very closely. “The man called Kāmil,” as he is consistently called through the text, is spontaneously generated in a desert island, where he comes to know the material world by deduction from sensible experience, broadly mirroring, with considerably less detail, Ḥayy’s discoveries. His solitary reflection leads him to the understanding of the existence of a Creator, on the basis of the Avicennian argument *ex contingentia*.<sup>33</sup> Kāmil then wants to know how to honor and serve this Creator. At this point, however, *Risālat Kāmiliyya* dramatically diverges from Ibn Ṭufayl’s narrative: as noted by Fancy (2010), Kāmil does not come to fulfill his desire to know about God’s will in isolation. A ship wrecks on his island; he meets the crew and learns from them aspects of civilized life such as language, cooking and clothing.

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<sup>31</sup> As rendered by Mahdi (1970).

<sup>32</sup> Schacht and Meyerhof (1968: 38); text in square brackets is mine. I chose to highlight the Arabic lexicon pointing to testimony and transmission.

<sup>33</sup> For the Avicennian arguments for the existence of God, see Marmura (1980) and Wisnovsky (2005).

Kāmil agrees to leave his island with them to live in society, whose necessity he comes to know (*‘alima*).

Only then, from the second part of the book, Kāmil goes on applying his process of knowledge through deduction, on the basis of empirical data, to the knowledge of God, the Prophet, Islamic law and Islamic history. The necessity of Prophecy and the life-story of the last of the Prophets (Muḥammad, although he is not generally referred to by name) are discussed in the second part. In the third, the basic legal ordinances established by Islamic Law, traced to the Prophet, are explained through the same epistemic process. The fourth part discusses Islamic history after the death of the Prophet, including events of the time of Ibn al-Nafīs like the Mongol invasion, as well as Islamic eschatology, closing the text with detail on how bodily resurrection will occur. Only the first part details Kāmil’s spontaneous generation, solitary inquiry and initial meeting with other humans. Kāmil’s rational findings display general accord (although not total accord) with religious views as presented by preceding and contemporary tradition.<sup>34</sup> The original elements lie mostly in the way these matters and discussions are presented in a story of seemingly solitary learning. Then, the actual *topic* of the treatise appears to be, not the life of the Prophet in itself, but the way Kāmil comes to know it and everything else.

This is indeed emphasized in the titles of single chapters and sections, several of which include variations of “how the one called Kāmil came to know” (*ta’arrafa* or related expressions) while other section titles (mainly the ones referring specific features of the life-story of the Prophet) simply state the topic of the reflection. Many sections however begin reiterating that their content is the product of Kāmil’s thinking, with recurring expressions like “then the one called Kāmil reflected upon (*tafakkara fi*).”

Transmission, and language at large, are not featured explicitly as modes of knowledge available for Kāmil, except for the passing mention of him learning the language of the ship’s people to a good degree (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 45). Kāmil explicitly arrives at the notion that testimony can be a sound epistemological basis for socially accepted knowledge; but he is never described to make any epistemic use of it himself, except for practicalities: he is taught the use of clothes and cooking by others, in contrast with Ḥayy, who devises both by himself. Kāmil is never mentioned being taught such inherently testimony-based subjects as history or law, which make up the vast majority of his reflection.

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<sup>34</sup> See detailed discussion in Fancy (2006, chapters 2 and 3).

Nevertheless, testimony occupies an important place in the epistemic toolkit of Ibn al-Nafīs' book. As quoted above, the story begins with its "isnād," presenting itself as reported on the authority of one Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq, of which however nothing is said at all, providing no instrument of extrinsic validation except for the meaning of his name. *Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq* is also the title by which the tale is recorded by Ibn al-Nafīs' subsequent biographers, in explicit contrastive parallel with *Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* (which those biographers attribute to Ibn Sīnā). Each of the four parts of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* also starts with the opening formula *qāla Fadil bin Nāṭiq*, 'Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq said,' thus restating his epistemic responsibility.

As noted, *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* as well is presented as a report, to a point; but Ibn al-Nafīs seems more consistently committed to this framing, mentioning its "source" throughout instead of some unspecified "forefathers" at the beginning. This fictional presentation device is complementary to the picture of Ḥayy's and Kāmil's knowledge as essentially (although not entirely) perceptive and intellectual (but not explicitly syllogistic) in nature. Testimony is a "thin veil," a cover under which quotes from sources known to the readership such as Qur'anic quotations (more common in *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān*) or the works of Ibn Sīnā (in *Risālat Kāmiliyya*) can be embedded.

The apparent purpose of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* would then appear to be a treatment of "traditional" sciences like history and law as rationally deducible into a frame that gives them validity independent from tradition, as products of inner workings of Kāmil's mind, validating transmitted truth through rational means.

The same epistemic process we have seen at work in *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* would be applied here to orthodox tenets, and, critically, social norms. This is the reading that Schacht and Meyerhof offer in their introduction to the critical edition and abridged translation of the text, justifying the title of *Theologus Autodidactus* they chose, implying it as counterpart to Ibn Ṭufayl's *Philosophus Autodidactus*.

The overall epistemic stance that emerges, though, appears puzzling. It has been re-examined recently by Nahyan Fancy. Fancy refutes Schacht's and Meyerhof's view of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* as a defense of "traditional" conclusions through rationalistic epistemology (Fancy 2010); rather, he reads it as a defense of the rationality of both traditional conclusions and traditionalist epistemology against the perceived challenge posed by *falsafa*, and particularly by Ibn Ṭufayl's radically autonomous, non-social knower.

It should be observed, however, that, Ibn Ṭufayl's work may be less radical than his Early Modern readership took him to be, as suggested above.

Fancy points to the mentions of specific names of historical or geographical relevance that would have made no sense if Kāmil's consideration of society, history and law had been entirely deductive and inferential. The presence of such concrete references had puzzled the editors of the treatise, who considered it slips on the author's part that undermine the self-consistency of Ibn al-Nafīs' supposed rationalist defense of dogma (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 35). In Fancy's analysis, these show that Kāmil's bases his reflection, after his meeting with the ship crew, on testimony, which he subsequently rationalizes: a procedure akin to what Aristotelian epistemology, as presented by the Arabic tradition, accepts in fields where particulars play an important part, such as medicine. We are not seeing individual intellectual inference in isolation: the *limits*, not the powers, of self-sufficient individual reason are what the treatise would highlight.

I agree, in general, with Fancy's assessment of the testimonial nature of historical and geographical references in the text. This reading makes justice of Ibn al-Nafīs' rigorous thinking, rather than positing widespread and unexplainable sloppiness in his core argument. Since Kāmil displays knowledge of particular instances of events and places, clearly outside his direct experiential access, he cannot be an entirely self-taught knower like the one Ḥayy is presumed to be, whose epistemic concerns mostly regard universal Forms.<sup>35</sup> Testimony plays, implicitly, a much larger role in *Risālat Kāmiliyya* than it would seem at first.

In partial contrast to Fancy's "traditionalist" interpretation, though, I would note that the language used by Ibn al-Nafīs emphasizes Kāmil's epistemic isolation very markedly, even after his socializing experience. The common expression is "Kāmil reflected [*tafakkara*] about [...] and said to himself [*qāla fī nafsihi*]" with variations. The specific chains of historical events and legal dispositions he reasons about are thus shown to conform an internal, deducible line of development in which they follow necessarily from some basic premises established by reasoning (the existence of a Creator) and experience/perception (the existence of society). Some testimonial data, such as the mentioned place names, operate likewise as secondary premises (alongside experiential data), and knowledge at large would be impossible without them, but they alone do not warrant a wholesale defense of "traditionalist" epistemology, although they do challenge the self-sufficiency of reason.

The question of what *Risālat Kāmiliyya* actually intends to demonstrate remains problematic. This paper cannot offer a final answer on this, for which deeper study would be necessary. It is clear that epistemology is a central concern of the treatise. Like *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān*, it intends to

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<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, particular knowledge comes to Ḥayy through perception and, in the case of the specifics of religious law, through Asāl's testimony.

support some form of balance between rationalistic-inferential and traditional-testimonial epistemic resources, validating each other. The balance is, however, different in the two cases, in accord with the difference in the primary subject matters of the relevant knowledge itself.

It is also clear that *Risālat Kāmiliyya* is in a close, but tense relationship with *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* and that the similarities between the two plots should be understood as marking the numerous theoretical differences between their authors. Fancy's compelling arguments that Kāmil is not, as it may appear at first, self-taught in the same integral way Ḥayy is, show that these differences extend into the respective epistemological conceptions, as well as conclusions.

I suggest that Ibn al-Nafis' choice to focus on an inference-driven presentation of inherently testimonial subjects such as history and law ultimately illustrates the social and political nature of his tension with Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophy, from which Ibn al-Nafis' implicit critique of self-teaching stems.

In philosophical epistemology, as noted, subjects of such particular knowledge as history cannot be easily accommodated, while Ibn al-Nafis regards this kind of knowledge of particular facts and events as essential.

Conversely, in illustrating that the religious corpus of testimony is in accord with reason, he does not agree entirely with the traditionalist scholars who stood for a more purely genealogical conception of knowledge. This stance parallels Ibn al-Nafis' relatively unusual call for rational examination in his work on the study of the *ḥadīth*, where he contends that rational analysis of *matn* should play a role in their assessment alongside the usual analysis of *isnād*. He thus moves away from the extrinsic epistemology dominating that field (Fancy 2006: 57-72).

In my opinion, Ibn al-Nafis opposes Ḥayy's isolation, rather than his rational approach; the treatise appears to imply that knowledge is inherently, necessarily social in nature and aims, as it offers a rational understanding of society, law and history. Once this social nature is accepted, independent rational activity can be accommodated in an unproblematic way; its conclusion may converge with what is transmitted through socially validated testimony, as in reported historical and legal knowledge based on testimony.

As I discuss elsewhere, the tension between individual and society is a deep driving factor of Medieval Arabic philosophy that operates on the epistemic and political levels alike (Lauri 2015).

It is apparent that *Risālat Kāmiliyya* has a political dimension. Its fourth and last part describes what will happen after the Prophet's death, that is, Islamic history and eschatology. Kāmil's reflection focuses on three aspects: the conflict among early Muslims for the caliphate, the events of his own

age marked by the Mongol irruption and successful Mamlūk resistance against them, and the temporal end of the world with the final resurrection of the bodies.

The Mongol invasion was felt as a devastating blow to the Islamic community. Mongols were associated with the apocalyptic hordes of Gog and Magog; their sack of Baghdad destroyed the last remnants of the Abbasid Caliphate, and with it, a significant symbolic focus for Sunnis, although one largely deprived of actual political power. The Eastern half of the Islamic world went for some decades under the infidel rule of the Mongol ilkhans, until they converted to Islam.

Ibn al-Nafīs offers a rational understanding of these deeply worrying events in terms of providential historical necessity, inspired by Egyptian apocalyptic literature (Kruk 1995). In Fancy's reading, Kāmil would have known of the invasions testimonially and further proceeded to make sense of it inferentially. However, the wording of the text, in referring to actual historical events, is careful to keep their description abstract and general, and to stress that it is presenting Kāmil's thought process. Thus, in my reading, the text does not support Fancy's interpretation, which, in my opinion, would weaken the argument of the necessary nature of history.

Ibn al-Nafīs proceeds to illustrate how Muslim resistance to the Mongols is likewise a rational necessity. Necessarily, Kāmil thinks, a Muslim leader will emerge to stop the Mongol invasion.

His detailed description of this leader identifies the famous Mamlūk ruler Baybars, who had actually defeated the Mongols at 'Ayn Ğalūt in 1260; true to the presentation of Kāmil's knowledge as non-testimonial, Ibn al-Nafīs does not name him (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 34). The details given in the text strongly suggest that Ibn al-Nafīs knew Baybars personally, and it has been proposed, but not proven, that he could have been his court physician (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 34, Fancy 2006: 45-46).

The text then can be understood, among other things, as a call to Muslims to rally around the Mamlūk rule, and Sunni orthodoxy, grounded in a sophisticated epistemology where, paradoxically, testimony finds its way through attempts at validating means of knowledge supposedly independent of it, reinforcing the social nature of knowledge.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Western teaching traditions, Jewish and Islamic philosophies are often detached from the Western one and lumped together as "Oriental" philosophy, with the historically inaccurate inclusion of



Indian philosophy and Chinese traditions<sup>36</sup> of thought into the same category. These misconceptions contributed making the understanding of Islamic philosophy at large problematic. A long standing point of contention has been how to relate a tradition of thought which painted itself as based on independent, primarily not genealogical inquiry to the context of a culture where transmitted word represents the basis of knowledge. This contrast has led several scholars to see philosophy as only superficially linked to ‘Islamic culture.’<sup>37</sup>

This epistemic opposition should be nuanced, at the very least, among other things, based on the notes above. While Ibn al-Nafis adopts the hegemonic views shared by Sunni scholars of his time, he originally adapts epistemic preoccupations and philosophical strategies of knowledge that characterized *falsafa*. He found a narrative way to found the pillars of his world’s “traditional” sciences of social significance, such as history and law, on a non-social basis; on the other hand, he shows purely self-relying reason to be insufficient, bringing it again to its societal and testimonial dimensions.

It may be that Ibn al-Nafis realized that he needed to show epistemic isolation to demonstrate the social nature of knowledge. Testimony operates, according to him, in conjunction with independent reason in a shared epistemic space. In an original way, *Risālat Kāmiliyya* addresses what, in another context, Leonardo Capezzone has called “the political problem of knowledge in the city.”<sup>38</sup>

I conclude in the cooperative spirit of the project of which this article is part. In showing, through fictional epistemic isolation, the social character of knowledge, Ibn al-Nafis would have probably shared our conviction of the inherently collaborative nature of scholarly activity.

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<sup>36</sup> The expression “Chinese philosophy” is controversial; in this context I am reluctant to refer to it, given what appears to my limited knowledge a less central position of systematic rational argument in the discussion of areas such as ontology, epistemology and formal logic within a significant portion of Chinese thought. This is not to be intended as a judgment of value. See Cheng (2005).

<sup>37</sup> This point is discussed, and refuted, at length in Gutas (2002).

<sup>38</sup> “Il problema politico della conoscenza nella città cortese” (Capezzone 2010: 111; my translation).

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Part 3:  
Change of Paradigms and  
Mechanical (Re)discoveries:  
Manuscript and Print Cultures across Asia

editor:  
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## Change of Paradigms and Mechanical (Re)discoveries:

### Manuscript Cultures and Print Cultures Across Asia

Camillo A. Formigatti

This introduction summarizes the articles included in this section, at the same time presenting some fundamental aspects of the scholarly debate about the so-called 'print revolution.' The attempt is made to draw preliminary conclusions about the impact of printing technology in a wider context, taking into consideration the peculiarities of different Asian book cultures as compared to European book culture. The aim of this short contribution is to elicit a discussion between scholars rather than provide definitive answers.

The issue is not whether the Web produces liberation or submission: it invariably produces both from the very outset. This is a function of its dialectical nature, the two aspects always go together, for the Web is the form that capitalism has taken on in our times, and capitalism is a contradiction in progress at each and every moment. [...] Accordingly, the fight should consist in this: to play on liberation to fight submission. [...] *This is however possible only if we stop thinking of technology as an autonomous power, and recognize that it is shaped by ownership and capitalist relations of production, as well as guided by power and class relations.* If technology could impose itself only on account of its being innovative, regardless of such relations, the steam engine would have come into use already in the first century BCE, when Hero of Alexandria built the aeolipile. Yet the ancient mode of production had no need for mechanical machines, since all required labour force was provided by slaves and nobody could or wanted to imagine a way to put machines to a productive use.

Wu Ming, *Fetishism of Digital Merchandise and Hidden Exploitation: the Amazon and Apple Case* [emphasis mine]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Feticismo della merce digitale e sfruttamento nascosto: i casi Amazon e Apple* (<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2011/09/feticismo-della-merce-digitale-e-sfruttamento-nascosto-i-casi-amazon-e-apple/>; retrieved 20 May 2016). The Italian original runs as follows (emphasis mine): “La questione non è se la rete produca liberazione o assoggettamento: produce sempre, e sin dall’inizio, entrambe le cose. E’ la sua dialettica, un aspetto è sempre insieme all’altro. Perché la rete è la forma che prende oggi il capitalismo, e il capitalismo è in ogni momento contraddizione in processo. [...] La lotta allora dovrebbe essere questa: far leva sulla liberazione per combattere l’assoggettamento. [...] *Ma questo si può fare solo smettendo di pensare alla tecnologia come forza autonoma e riconoscendo che è plasmata da rapporti di proprietà e produzione, e indirizzata da relazioni di potere e di classe.* Se la tecnologia si imponesse prescindendo da tali rapporti semplicemente perché innovativa, la macchina a vapore sarebbe entrata in uso già nel I secolo a.C., quando Erone di Alessandria realizzò l’eolipila. Ma il modo di produzione antico

As soon as I read the conference program and noticed that our panel was scheduled to open the second day at 8.30 in the morning, I became worried. This is a time that most academics would consider deep night, and I feared the listeners would fall asleep immediately, for the abstract of the panel promised a series of paper on a seemingly very specialized topic: manuscript and print culture. Luckily, my fear gave soon way to great enthusiasm as the discussion after each paper became very lively, engrossing the public beyond my expectations. At the end of the day however, I was still wondering how people could have been so interested in what to me seemed a rather passé field of study. After all, in Western culture the dichotomy between manuscript culture and print culture had been introduced long time ago—to mention the *locus classicus*, already in 1620 Francis Bacon had pointed out the revolutionary influence of the printing press in his well-known aphorism.<sup>2</sup>

Luckily one of the contributors to this volume, Aleix Ruiz-Falqués, came to my help. He told me that to him it had been easy to structure his paper precisely because the aim of the panel was very clear. It was indeed clear (and surely bold too): to challenge the idea of a universal cultural revolution caused by the introduction of the printing press, starting from a re-evaluation of the theories presented in two very influential books, M. McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) and E. Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979). The discussion triggered by these two studies is still very lively both in academia as well as among non-specialists (above all because we are witnessing in our lives the effect of another agent of change, the electronic medium). The panel addressed some seemingly harmless questions: is the paradigm of a print revolution universally valid? Can we speak of one uniform printing technology around the world or should we rather think of different "printing technologies"? And if the latter case is true, how did these technologies affect different cultural traditions? To my biggest surprise, what I had secretly considered too bold an aim struck the right chords. Maybe it was sheer luck, but I believe that there were deeper reasons. In fact, a few months later a workshop with the title *Printing as an Agent of*

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non aveva bisogno delle macchine, perché tutta la forza-lavoro necessaria era assicurata dagli schiavi, e nessuno poté o volle immaginarne un'applicazione concreta."

<sup>2</sup> Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, Aphorism 129: "Again, it is well to observe the force and virtue and consequences of discoveries; and these are to be seen nowhere more conspicuously than in those three which were unknown to the ancients, and of which the origin, though recent, is obscure and inglorious; namely, printing, gunpowder, and the magnet. For these three have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world; the first in literature, the second in warfare, the third in navigation; whence have followed innumerable changes; insomuch that no empire, no sect, no star seems to have exerted greater power and influence in human affairs than these mechanical discoveries."

*Change in Tibet and Beyond* was to be held at the University of Cambridge.<sup>3</sup> Why this widespread and renewed interest in Asian print culture? Surely there are many possible answers, but the first one that comes to my mind is very simple (maybe even simplistic): the first book ever printed was printed in Asia.<sup>4</sup> It seemed therefore inevitable that scholars of Asian studies would sooner or later start to coordinate their effort, investigating the impact of printing technology in Asia on a wider scale.

Although the studies by McLuhan and Eisenstein date back to more than thirty years ago, their approach still dominate the historiographical debate about the consequences of the introduction of the printing technology in Western societies and cultures. They dictate the agenda of the scholarly discussion to such an extent that sometimes it seems impossible to challenge the very notion of a printing revolution. Yet it is precisely the revolutionary character of printing that is questioned in A. Ruiz-Falqués' article, *Notes on Printing Press and Pali Literature in Burma*. In this short but incredibly rich article, the author addresses directly and indirectly a wide range of topics, often raising provocative questions—to which he provides equally provocative answers. The very simple observation that “it is generally accepted [...] that the invention of the printing press triggered a major cultural revolution in Europe” is taken as a starting point for a definition of revolution. Revolution is a phenomenon characterized by *suddenness* and *progress*: not only “revolution causes events to develop at higher speed,” it also implies “a sudden break, a turning point.” In the case of the printing press, the sudden possibility of producing an unprecedented quantity of books in much shorter time meant an increased dissemination of information. In the words of the author, quantity is transformed into quality—where quality might be interpreted as a synonym of Progress (capitalized by the author). Although mentioning dissemination (the very first aspect of the cultural change ushered by printing technology, according to E. Eisenstein), the author immediately shifts his focus to McLuhan's analysis of the qualitative changes caused in the human mind by the introduction of the typographical medium. A critique of several tenets of the Canadian thinker are introduced in a style that at times is (unavoidably) as idiosyncratic as McLuhans', mixing examples ranging from the Kabbalah, the use of “the symbolic force of [...] letters [...] in the opening title of the TV series *Breaking Bad*,” to a stanza of the Sanskrit classical poem *Meghadūta* by Kālidāsa. The second part of the article is devoted to an historical excursus of print culture in Burma and accordingly is more “Eisensteinian” in character. It deals with other aspects of print culture as delineated by the American scholar, without however

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<sup>3</sup> The proceedings of this workshop have been published in Diemberger, Ehrhard and Kornicki (2016).

<sup>4</sup> The first printed book is represented either by the series of Japanese *Hyakumantō darani* commissioned by the Empress Shōtoku between 764–770, or by the printed *dhāraṇī* discovered inside the Sokkat'ap stone pagoda of the Pulguksa temple in Kyongju in South Korea, traditionally dated before 751 CE; the evidence has been recently discussed by Kornicki (2012).

mentioning directly her works and theories. Although woodblock printing was probably known in Burma due to the intense relationships with China, the introduction of printing is traced back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Baptist Missionary Press in Rangoon, led by George H. Hough, started its activity thanks to a printing press sent from the Indian printing house in Serampore. The diffusion of printing presses in the southern provinces of Burma “after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852), in the advent of British occupation of the southern provinces” coincided with an attempt at modernization of the northern kingdom of Mandalay by king Mindon. Notably, instead of introducing printing presses to foster Buddhism by means of distributing the Buddha’s message in printed form, this king preferred to “sponsor a monumental edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka [...] in stone slabs in commemoration of the so-called 5<sup>th</sup> Theravada Buddhist Council.” The last part of the paper is devoted to a description of the persistence of manuscript culture in Burma and its relationship with nationalism. Finally, the difficult life of printing in Burma is exemplified also by the diffusion of xerography for the production of photocopied “editions” of Pali Buddhist texts. King Mindon’s choice of sponsoring an edition of the Buddhist canon in the form of inscriptions, the persistence of manuscript culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the use of photocopiers to produce new editions – these three episodes in the history of printing in Burma suffice to call into question the universal revolutionary character of printing.

The preference of printing technologies alternative to the printing press with movable types is not limited to Burma. Asian print cultures are indeed characterized by the use and diffusion of other printing technologies, for instance xylography and lithography. Michela Clemente’s article is precisely devoted to some fundamental aspects of woodblock printing. In her insightful contribution she sheds light on the role of craftsmen in the early production of xylographs in the Mang yul Gung thang region of Tibet in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. In her introduction some of the issues central to Eisenstein’s tenet of the revolutionary agency of print are tested against the backdrop of Tibetan book culture. Building on the observation of other scholars (Chow 2007; Chartier 2007), she reminds us that at least we ought to rethink our approach to print culture. The different nature of woodblock printing should not be used to discard it as irrelevant in a global history of print, as sometimes Western scholars have done. On the contrary, it was – and partly still is – a highly developed technique, which should arguably be put on the same level as movable-type printing. In Tibet (and I would argue elsewhere too), it fulfilled the same role movable-type printing had in Europe. In my opinion it is not by chance, as Clemente puts it, that “in Tibet, the xylographic technique had such a success since its introduction that it has been only recently superseded by movable type and digital technologies.” The core of her article investigates the role of craftsmen and artists in the production

of xylographs in the Tibetan region of Mang yul Gung thang during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the preliminary work of two large projects, the analysis of a fairly large body of materials enabled Clemente not only to identify specific persons involved in different printing projects, but also to clarify important aspects of the production process of xylographs that might lead to the identification and assignment of prints to specific printing houses, even in the case of a lack of information in the colophon. The attempt at creating a template for the identification of xylographs brought to light a fundamental and fascinating issue. According to Clemente, “there are at least four distinctive features that may identify a Gung thang xylograph: front page, layout, orthographic peculiarities and woodcut representations.” A fifth feature that was originally taken into consideration to identify the style of the edition was the *ductus*. This had to be excluded because “the variables that influence the writing style of a certain scribe (materials, writing and carving tools, carver's style, etc.) are too numerous and random to make it an element for identification.” In this respect, another possibility has to be considered: even though scribe and carver were usually two different persons, yet in some cases they were one and the same person. One example is Vajradhvaja (fl. 1540-63), a scribe who was a carver as well. How is it then possible to recognize the difference between a book printed from a woodblock based on a manuscript by Vajradhvaja and carved by somebody else, and a book printed from a woodblock based on a manuscript by Vajradhvaja and then carved by himself? In other words, the interplay between the manuscript model used for carving the woodblocks and the final result in the form of the printed book creates a situation in which the clear-cut division between manuscript and print is blurred.

Eva Wilden's contribution describes yet another case of fluid situation in which the interaction between oral tradition, manuscript culture, and printing technology contributes to the creation of a specific type of textual transmission that adds new layers of interpretation to the issue of the influence of media change on the shape of texts. In her paper she focuses on the transmission of the classical *Caṅkam* and *Kiḷkkaṇakku* corpora of Tamil poems. Although the former corpus probably goes back “to oral predecessors from about two-thousand years ago, collected and presumably written down for the first time around the 6th or early 7th century,” due to South Indian climate the “direct sources in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts dat[e] back only some three hundred years.” South Asian manuscripts consist of bundles of loose palm leaves kept together by two wooden boards and a string passed through a hole punched in the middle of the leaves and the boards. Due to this type of binding the leaves can get mixed or lost very easily. A similar situation is vividly described at the outset of the article. When the great Tamil scholar U.V. Cāminātaiyar first examined the manuscripts of the *Caṅkam* corpus, he “had never read, let alone learned any of the old texts, but he knew of their

existence from an old anonymous stanza he presumably learned from one of his teachers.” The structure of these corpora is reconstructed precisely by means of orally transmitted mnemonic stanzas “in terse four-line *Veṅpās*” which “preserve essential information about the external and internal order of literary works, their contents, their authors or their commentaries.” These floating stanzas are so important for the process of transmission and shaping of these *corpora* that in some cases not only “they alone preserve crucial bits of information that is not available elsewhere,” but they were even made up anew, if traditional information was lost. In her contribution, Wilden examines in detail the transmission of these signature verses and mnemonic stanzas, describing their recent rediscovery and analyzing their numerous functions (for instance, organizing the corpus, structuring the content, and providing the name of authors or commentators). Surviving in the oral transmission, they almost disappeared in the manuscript tradition, to resurface completely in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the first editions of these corpora of poetry were printed. Incorporated into the prefaces of early editions, these stanzas underwent a process of fixation and “helped to reassemble and shape the corpora that today we know in print.” Almost bypassing the manuscript transmission, the trajectory of these oral “satellite stanzas” is a very instructing example, reminding us how we ought to rethink the deterministic and progressive model orality – manuscript – print that still informs much of our thought about textual technologies.

The last article by Ann-Kathrin Bretfeld-Wolf deals with the emergence of print technology in Sri Lanka and the role it played in shaping modern Sri Lankan Buddhism, as exemplified by the case study of the textual transmission of the *Mahāvamsa*, a chronicle of the history of Sri Lanka. The first part of her contribution is devoted to a description of the reception of this work in the European scholarly tradition, followed by a brief examination of the interaction of oral and manuscript transmission of Buddhist texts in pre-modern Sri Lankan Buddhist culture and society. Since the publication of the English translation of the *Mahāvamsa* by George Turnour in 1837, Western scholars have considered this work mainly as a historical source for the reconstruction of Sri Lanka’s past, thus examining it from the point of view of its reliability as a historical source. Only recently Western scholars studying the *vamsa* literature have shifted their interest to other functions of such works, for instance their role in shaping national identity. According to the author, apart from these two, a third type of exegesis of the *vamsa* literature “centres around the social practice connected to the *vamsa* literature.” This reception and analysis take into consideration the role of orality in the fruition of texts transmitted primarily in manuscript form, such as the dictation to scribes and the widespread ritual recitation. The *Mahāvamsa* was very popular not only in Sri Lanka, but throughout South-East Asia, serving “as a model and reference text for the composition of autochthonous texts in

Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.” Manuscripts of the *Mahāvamsa* partook of the ritual aspect of Buddhist book cult, a fact reflected in their various constitutive elements, both physical as well as textual. The status of the *Mahāvamsa* changed with the advent of printing in Sri Lanka in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although printing had been introduced by the Dutch in Sri Lanka as early as 1736, until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it remained an activity confined to the monopoly of colonial powers (first the Dutch, then the British). The author traces the emergence of printing houses run by Sinhalese to the so-called Buddhist Revival Movement in the early 1860s, highlighting the role of printing activities as a means for the diffusion of short anti-Christian texts and pamphlets. The introduction of printing technology marked a change in the textual practices of Sri Lankan Buddhists, giving “rise to creative tension between new and traditional forms of religious learning and engagement, which quite quickly shaped a new form of Buddhism [...] Printing marked a new period in which Buddhist self-confidence and identity grew stronger amidst a British-dominated environment.” This tension resulted also in a shift of the reception of the *Mahāvamsa*: from being a text strongly rooted in the dimension of religious practice, it quickly became a fundamental historical source for a Buddhist nationalistic discourse.

The geographical area covered by the articles presented here ranges from Tibet to Burma, and further south to Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. In her seminal study, Eisenstein narrowed down the scope of her analysis to Western Europe, explicitly stating that

The term “print culture” is used throughout this book in a special parochial Western sense: to refer to post-Gutenberg developments in the West while setting aside its possible relevance to pre-Gutenberg developments in Asia. (Eisenstein 2005: xviii)<sup>5</sup>

We cannot possibly expect that one single scholar could study and assess the impact of print in the whole Eurasian continent. Yet the changes in Western culture triggered by the introduction of printing are considered almost universal — and to a certain extent inevitable, as if they would happen in every historical moment and in each culture in which printing is introduced. In this respect, it is important to notice that Eisenstein does not provide a clear-cut definition of printing, a fact that is bound to yield important consequences in subsequent scholarly studies of the impact of print culture. The following passage, added to the abridged version, comes close enough to a definition — although not a definitive one:

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<sup>5</sup> See also Eisenstein (1979: 9, fn. 18).

We will take the term “printing” to serve simply as a convenient label, as a shorthand way of referring to a cluster of innovations (entailing the use of movable metal type, oil-based ink, wooden handpress, and so forth). (Eisenstein 2005: 14)

If we follow this definition of printing, then we ought to exclude xylography and lithography from the study of what Eisenstein labels the “pre-Gutenberg developments in Asia.” The dismissive attitude of Western historians of the book towards xylography has been recently discussed by K.-W. Chow, who stressed that usually it is not considered a full-fledged printing technique, but rather “a primitive and inferior method of reproducing text, incapable of producing large editions.”<sup>6</sup> This was certainly not the case, for in reality it is possible to produce large numbers of books by means of xylography (as witnessed by large printing project such as the printing of the Buddhist canon in Chinese, Tibetan, and Uyghur). Is this dismissive attitude the result of a certain type of “evolutionary historiography,” in which we might be tempted to see an indirect attempt to establish a technological advantage of European culture over Asian cultures? In fact, this evolutionary – and in the case of printing, “revolutionary” – historiographical approach has been criticized also in relation to the analysis of the impact of printing technology in Europe. The nature of what ought to be considered printing and its role in shaping modern European culture has been discussed by many scholars. It is impossible to provide here a full account even only of the major contributions in this field. I believe though that the discussion sparked between Elisabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns in *The American Historical Review* in the early 2000s is emblematic of the research directions taken by scholars of print culture (Eisenstein 2002 and Johns 2002). Stripped to its bare essence, this dialogue is an attempt to answer the following question: is history conditioned by print, or print by history?<sup>7</sup> The articles presented here are very helpful in our quest for an answer. While reading the four articles, the first – and almost obvious – observation that comes to mind is that printing was introduced in South and South-East Asia only after the contact with colonial powers, while in the Tibetan cultural area xylography was a widespread technology already before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The case of Burma is striking, for the contact with China (where xylography was well established) did not result in the adoption of this type of printing technology. What do Burma, Sri Lanka, and Tamil Nadu have in common? In what do they differ from Tibet? Setting aside for a moment the role of the colonial powers, it is noteworthy that the main writing material for manuscripts traditionally used in these

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<sup>6</sup> Chow (2007: 172); in her insightful article, Chow (2007: 171-180) discusses at length the evaluation of the role of xylography in book history proposed by historians of the Western book.

<sup>7</sup> Or, in Johns' words, should we focus on the *history of print culture* or on the *cultural history of print*? (Johns 2002: 116).



three cultural areas is palm-leaf, while in Tibet (like in China, Central Asia, and Japan) paper was adopted relatively early as the main writing material for a wide range of purposes. It could be a mere coincidence, or maybe there was indeed a sort of “palm-leaf line” dividing the Asian continent into two areas. In the first one the use of paper permitted the rapid diffusion of printing, while in the second one the availability of large quantities of palm-leaf, a material unsuitable for hand-press printing, delayed the introduction of this technology. Other factors surely played a role in favoring the continuity of manuscript culture.<sup>8</sup> As exemplified in the quote at the beginning of this introduction, technology does not come into existence in the void, it is part of a complex interplay of human power relations. It is influenced by the historical and social conditions in which it exists as much as it influences them. This assertion is corroborated by the role of printing in Burma and Sri Lanka as described in the articles published here. In the case of Sri Lanka, the diffusion of printing in 19<sup>th</sup> century was linked to the Buddhist Revival Movement, while in Burma a political and social program of reform to usher modernization in the northern kingdom of Mandalay linked the fostering of Buddhism to the production of a new edition of the canon in the form of a series of inscriptions. A stark persistence of manuscript culture is witnessed also in the case of the transmission of the *Caṅkam* corpus of Tamil poetry. In this case we even see a direct interaction with the oral tradition in the form of mnemonic stanzas, which helped shaping the printed editions of the corpus but were almost lost in the manuscript transmission.

In the light of these remarks, it is evident not only that the evolutionary model orality–manuscript–print is not tenable anymore on many levels, but also that printing had a different (and not always revolutionary) impact on different cultures. As pointed out by T. Ballantyne, “the ‘European’ and ‘non-European’ histories of the book and print culture need to be brought more firmly into dialogue” (Ballantyne 2007: 352). It seems to me that if we widen our perspective to non-European cultures, the answer to the question whether history is conditioned by print, or print by history, must be clearly answered in favor of the latter.

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<sup>8</sup> A discussion of some possible factors for the late diffusion of print in South Asia is found in Formigatti (2016: 110-18).

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## Making Order in the Vaults of Memory: Tamil Satellite Stanzas on the Transmission of Texts

Eva Wilden

The Tamil intellectual universe, like so many others, underwent a profound change in the course of the 19th century, the period when print, although not unknown before, became available for the first time on a large scale, which allowed the publication and dissemination of a variety of text corpora from the Tamil poetic and religious traditions. This process has been described in recent years, for its material and political impact, from a number of sides, be it manuscript studies, print studies and literary or general social history. An understudied aspect seems to be the sources of continuity in this transformation, and an important part of these is a type of free-floating stanza, most often a four-liner in the *Veṅpā* metre, transmitted in the paratextual margins of texts, orally handed down from teacher to student and figuring large in prefaces and introductions to the early prints. It is these little verses of mostly indeterminable date and origin which helped to shape the form today's corpora and canonic works are printed in. They have to be understood, on the one hand, as a way precarious knowledge was preserved in periods of instability and perishable media, and on the other hand as specimens of a literary genre by itself. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that they were deemed important enough to supply them in cases where transmission failed.

### 1. The core of the classical corpus on the verge of the print era: *Caṅkam* and *Kīlkaṅakku*

Tamil, India's second-oldest classical language after Sanskrit, looks back on a literary history of roughly two thousand years. In this long and often politically unstable period its different branches – religious and secular, learned and poetic – underwent varying fortunes. As elsewhere in India, the processes of transmission were shaped by peculiar forms of interaction between oral tradition and manuscript culture. It is only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and largely by colonial impulse, that print began to play a major role in the preservation and dissemination of texts, which resulted in changes in the perception of texts and their interrelations (Blackburn 2003, Trautmann (ed.) 2009, Ebeling 2010, and Venkatachalapathy 2012).

The most prominent case in point is the so-called *Caṅkam* (“academy”) corpus, made up by two hyper-anthologies of erotic and heroic poetry, named *Eṭṭuttokai* (“the Eight Anthologies”) and *Pattuppāṭṭu* (“the Ten Songs”), in their core probably going back to oral predecessors from about two-

thousand years ago, collected and presumably written down for the first time around the 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century, and since then transmitted on palm leaf.<sup>1</sup> Roughly around the same time, or slightly earlier, other collections were initiated, in many ways following the conventions of the first, but innovative with respect to metre and of predominantly moral-didactic content, although some also continued the older heroic and erotic tradition. At some point these were put together into a corpus, mirroring that of the *Caṅkam* in number – that is, eighteen (eight anthologies plus ten songs) –, called the *Paṭiṇeṅkīlkkāṇakku*, the Eighteen Minor Classics.

The development of an exegetical apparatus and a commentarial tradition suggests that by the turn of the first millennium those collections had become canonised and associated with the court of the southernmost royal house situated in the city of Maturai, the Pāṇṭiyas. After a peak in classical learning and commentary-writing around the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century the texts themselves began slowly to fade out of general consciousness, to be replaced, however, by widely told and prolific stories about the lives and deeds of poets belonging to the “academy”. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the whole *Caṅkam* corpus and most of the *Kīlkkāṇakku* had vanished completely from the canon of Tamil literature and had to be rediscovered, a process that took the form of editing and bringing out in book form what was soon perceived as the most precious Tamil literary heritage and strongly promoted by rising Tamil nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. A glimpse into the vaults: Nampi’s *Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam*

For a period of about two thousand years of transmissional history we have direct sources in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts dating back only some three hundred years, because in the South-Indian climate manuscripts do not survive longer. Of course it is possible to follow the traces of our texts through the network of quotations and references left in the exegetical and theoretical literature, and also to some extent in the intertextual play and allusions of later literature still aware of those classics. But this tells us little about the every-day task of preserving them, which meant, concretely: keeping the manuscripts in a safe and (comparatively) dry place, oiling them regularly to keep the insects out, renewing regularly the strings that bound them, and recopying every single text at least

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<sup>1</sup> To be precise, this is just a hypothesis, since no palm-leaf from anywhere near that period survives. It seems justified, however, given the fact that from early times onwards there are literary references to the use of palm-leaf in writing, followed up, for the first millennium, in Wilden (2014°).

<sup>2</sup> For a reconstruction of this long and varied transmissional history, see Wilden (2014b); for the development of Tamil nationalism see Nampi Arooran (1980).

once every hundred years, because within that span the first holes will appear and the first bits of textual information stand in danger of getting lost.

In fact the anxiety of such a transmission process is well captured in a foundation legend belonging to the somewhat later devotional tradition of the Śaivas. Preserved in a hagiographic text from perhaps the 15<sup>th</sup> century (the *Tirumuraikaṅṭapurāṇam* attributed to Umāpati Civaṅ)<sup>3</sup>, it tells the story of the resurrection and subsequent preservation of the *Tēvāram*, the most important portion of the Śaiva bhakti canon (7-9 c.). It is the king Apayakulacēkaraṅ who listens to a song in a temple, presumably from oral tradition, and is so touched that he wants to have the whole corpus preserved. But where to find it? He instigates Nampiyāṅṭārnampi, the compiler of the *Tirumuṛai* (the holy books of the Śaivas), who in a meditation on Gaṇeśa receives the answer: in Śiva's temple in Citamparam there would be a locked chamber containing a heap of dilapidated, disordered and insect-eaten palm-leaves. The salvage from this former abundance was meant to become what is today known as the *Tēvāram*.

A similar scene with respect to the classical corpus seems to have survived in the earliest chronicle of Maturai, a narrative that entwines the so-called sixty-four “sports” (Tamil *viḷaiyāṭal*, Skt. *līlā*) of Śiva with a (legendary) account of the exploits of the Pāṅṭiya dynasty, for which today there exist many versions in three languages, Tamil, Sanskrit and Telugu. Into this cycle belong five episodes where Śiva deals with the poets belonging to the academy (*Caṅkam*) in Maturai. The earliest extensive version, Nampi's *Tiruvīlaiyāṭarṭapurāṇam* (14<sup>th</sup> c.?), still lacks narrative smoothing over and preserves the cracks and redundancies that betray the integration of formerly independent elements. The context is a poetic meeting in the said academy, with a lapse of time after Śiva had granted the famous bench of judgement (*caṅkaṭ palakai*), which allows only true poets to sit on it and thus put an end to the everlasting quarrels in the academy hall set up by the Pāṅṭiya king in Maturai. For a long time poets had been sitting on that bench, blissfully composing poetry, and putting down the palm-leaves they had written on in the middle of the hall. That system had its drawbacks, as the following stanzas reveal:

TVP(N) 15.6.

*cāṅṅavar tērtu tammuṭai teḷivāl cayam uṛak kōtta cen tamīlai*  
*tōṅṅriya caṅkam maṅṅapattiṅkaṅ cōrv' ara vaittu vaitt' ēka*  
*āṅṅava ceyyuḷ kālam niḷattāl aḷav' ila-v-āy talaimayāṅki*  
*vāṅṅ toṭa uyarnta āṅk' avar tiraṅṅṅu vantaṅṅar maṅṅ' oru kālam.*

<sup>3</sup> For a recent translation and discussion of the legend, see Pechilis Prentiss (2003a; 2003b).

As the worthy [scholar-poets] went on examining, ever putting diligently down in the academy hall what appeared as refined Tamil, victoriously arranged by their clarity, because of the length of time, [their] worthy verses, unnumbered, became confused, [and] in that place where [the pile of palm-leaves] had become so high as to touch the sky, at another time, they (the later-time scholars) came together in a meeting.

The words “palm-leaf” or “manuscript” are not explicitly employed here, but the context unequivocally demands them. One cannot put down texts in the academy hall, but only the leaves they are written on. These are piled high, even sky-high, with a familiar poetic hyperbole, and they are in disorder, which either means they were not tied in bundles or that the strings, the weakest point in the construct that is a manuscript, had been worn away by time. This is the situation that scholars of another – later – time are faced with.

TVP(N) 15.7.

*col arum collin takutiyāl tammiṅ toṭar viṭā valakkiṇuḷ malaintu  
vel arum tirattai kaṇṭu “nam tamiḷuḷ viḷakkam illātana viṭṭu  
nallaṇa kollā kaṭavam” eṇr’ iyaintu nayan-taru paṇuvalār āyvāṅ  
ollaiyil aḷakār caṅkam maṅṭapattuḷ ēriṅār uṛa tamai matittu.*

After looking at those elements difficult to conquer since they were at variance with [modern] custom, without, [however,] losing their coherence, because of the appropriateness of words rarely spoken, those with pleasing compositions agreed: “we will proceed by leaving off those that are not clear in our Tamil [and] then take those that are good”, [and] mounted [the bench] in the academy hall beautiful in antiquity in order to investigate [the verses], thinking themselves to have [found the solution].

Their natural first reaction is the wish to make order. The next obstacle that meets them is language. Poetic conventions and vocabulary have undergone changes, and what they find is only partly intelligible to them. They decide to discard the incomprehensible portions.

TVP(N) 15.8.

*vantavar kulaintu muṅṅamē kalaintu varai aṛa kiṭantavai eṭuttu,  
muntavar āyumu aḷav’ ila paṇuval muṛai talaimayaṅkalāl aḷintu,  
“cintai ākulattōṭ’ eṇ ceykēm” eṇa tam ceḷu mukam vāṭalum karuṇai  
entai nāyakaṇum vantaṇaṅ tāḷāt’ iṅ tamiḷ pulavaṅ āy irāṅki.*

Those who had come were upset, and when they took up the [leaves] lying about unrestrained, formerly untied [and] dispersed,



they were desolate because the order of the countless compositions selected by the former ones was completely confused,  
 [and] as their resplendent faces turned pale, saying “what shall we do with what is empty to the mind?”,  
 my compassionate father, the lord felt pity [for them and] came as a scholar of non-declining, pleasing Tamil.

But even that pragmatic compromise is not sufficient to solve their problem, because the leaves are in disorder. It is at this point that divine intervention saves the situation and the classical Tamil corpus. Śiva in person descends as a poet and takes his place in the learned circle. He, of course, can both find the leaves that belong together and understand obsolete words and phrases. To be sure, the story cannot be taken at face value, even when one discounts the appearance of the god who with a turn of his hand solves the problem. But many other elements of the situation have a ring of truth about them. Once the oral tradition and line of transmission is disrupted, palm-leaves are a very imperfect medium, because they are vulnerable to damage, fall into disorder very easily and, before the era of commentaries at least, do not carry on the explanations of difficult words and phrases. Not to mention the fact that the older Tamil script is not free from ambiguities and has to be complemented by the mind of a reader who already knows the text. And, how, even if one understands what is written, will one recognise a text, how will one know whether it is complete, especially if it is a collection, and how can one know of an even greater structure such as a corpus or several of them that may make up a literary canon?

### 3. Verses as corpus organisers

The starting point of the Tamil renaissance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not dissimilar to the one narrated in the *Tiruvilaiyārṭarpurāṇam*. Editors were confronted with scattered and mutilated manuscripts with contents they knew next to nothing about. How did they proceed in their reconstruction of the classical corpus? One of the answers has been given incidentally, without eliciting much scholarly attention, by the most famous among the early editors, the great U.V. Cāminātaiyar himself, in his autobiography, entitled *eṇ carittiram* (“My life”). He recalls his first encounter with the *Caṅkam* manuscripts in the mutt library of Tiruvāṇṭur, some of which survive to this day:

I began to search among the bundles of old palm leaf texts which were there. Some of the palm leaves were very old; when one touched them, they felt sticky and fragile. On one bundle was written ‘*Eṭṭut tokai*’, and ‘seems to be *Caṅkam* books’; it was Kumāracāmit Tampirāṇ [one of the *mutt*’s scholars] who had tied up the bundle separately and

inscribed it. When I took it and looked at it I found it to be *Narriṇai* and other *Caṅkam* books – the plain texts. I had guessed that *Eṭṭuttokai* ('Eight Anthologies') had become *Ēṭṭuttokai* ('Collections of palm-leaves'). The eight texts of *Narriṇai*, *Kuruntokai*, *Aiṅkurunūru*, *Paṭirruppattu*, *Paripāṭal*, *Kalittokai*, *Akanāṇūru* and *Puranāṇūru* make up the *Eṭṭuttokai* Anthology. **I knew the name of the anthology from an old verse.** In that bundle I found palm leaf manuscripts of the basic texts of all the collections. *Kalittokai* and *Paripāṭal* were not in it.<sup>4</sup>

The important piece of information is printed here in bold letters. Cāminātaiyar had never read, let alone learned any of the old texts, but he knew of their existence from an old anonymous stanza he presumably learned from one of his teachers, be it in his youth at the village school or later from the poet-scholar Miṇāṭcicuntaram Piḷḷai. Of such verses there exist many in the Tamil tradition, most of them in terse four-line *Veṅpās*, and they preserve essential information about the external and internal order of literary works, their contents, their authors or their commentaries. They are easy to recognise as a genre, following a simple scheme and easy to memorise, indeed if a designation should be chosen on the basis of their function, it might be best to call them mnemonic stanzas. For all the three of the early collections mentioned above such a stanza survives, rarely on manuscript – perhaps these verses were rather a part of the oral transmission, as Cāminātaiyar's remark suggests – but in virtually any preface to an early edition of the respective texts. As one would expect with such material, the wording is fluid in little details, abounding not in semantic variants concerning the actual information imbedded in the verse, but formulaic, morphological and dialectal variation. For the sake of readability that aspect has been excluded here and only one version per stanza will be quoted.

Here is the one for the *Eṭṭuttokai*, the Eight Anthologies, the venerable scholar refers to:<sup>5</sup>

*narriṇai nalla kuruntokai aiṅkurunūr'*

<sup>4</sup> Thus translated into English by Zvelebil (1994, vol. II: 385 f.); the Tamil original is to be found in chapter 92 of *eṇ carittiram*, *vēru paḷaiya tamil nūḷkaḷ: nāṇ aṅkirunta paḷaṅ cuvaṭik kaṭṭukkaḷaip purattik pārkkalāṇēṇ. ēṭukaḷellām mikap paḷamaiyāṇavai; eṭuttāl kaiyil oṭṭik koḷḷak kūṭiyavai. oru kaṭṭil 'ēṭṭut tokai' eṇrum 'caṅkanūlpōl tōrrukiratu' eṇrum eḷutik kumāracāmit tampirāṇ kaṭṭi vaittiruntār. atai eṭuttup pārkkaiyil narriṇai mutaliya caṅkanūḷkaḷiṅ mūlam eṇru terintatu. eṭṭut tokaiyēṇpatu tāṇ ēṭṭuttokai āyirreṇru uṇarntēṇ. narriṇai, kuruntokai, aiṅkurunūru, paṭirruppattu, paripāṭal, kalittokai, akanāṇūru, puranāṇūru eṇra eṭṭu nūḷkaḷum eṭṭut tokaiyākum. oru paḷaiya pāṭṭiliruntu anta eṭṭiṅ peyarkaḷum eṇakkut teriyavantaṇa. ellāvāriṅ mūlattaiyum cērttelutiya eṭṭuc cuvaṭi oṇru akkaṭṭil akappaṭṭatu. atil kalittokaiyum, paripāṭalum illai.*

<sup>5</sup> It is found today in three palm-leaf manuscripts *Kiḷkkaṇakku* (UVSL 885, UVSL 603, UVSL 1078), in a paper manuscript of an unpublished study of the *Kalittokai*, entitled *Kaliyārāycci* (GOML R-5780), in in Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai's and Aṇantarāmaiyaar's editions of the *Kalittokai*, in Rākavaiyaṅkār's *Akanāṇūru* edition, as well as in Cāminātaiyar's *Kuruntokai* edition.

*otta patirrupatt' ōṅku paripāṭal*  
*karr' arintār collum kaliyōṭ' akam puṛam eṅṛ'*  
*it tiratta eṭṭuttokai.*

“*Narriṅnai*, good *Kuruntokai*, *Aiṅkurunūru*,  
 even *Patirrupattu*, high *Paripāṭal*,  
 along with *Kali Akam* [and] *Puṛam* praised by learned  
 knowledgeable people:<sup>6</sup> these parts [form] the *Eṭṭuttokai*.”

So here we see a simple enumeration of the single anthologies that make up the hyper-anthology of the *Eṭṭuttokai*. It is metrical restraints that lead to the uneven treatment of the single titles. In the first two lines, three of five titles receive an adjective. Line 4 names the remaining three collections, and here abbreviation becomes necessary. The shorthand designations *kali*, *akam* and *puṛam* have to be restored into *Kalittokai*, *Akanānūru* and *Puṛanānūru*. This is done by Cāminātaiyar in his list of works cited above, and this means he either retained the verse along with his teacher's explanations or he was helped by his familiarity with the grammatical tradition where both the short and the long titles for the respective texts are mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

The same principle governs the following stanza, which enumerates the works collected in the *Pattuppāṭṭu*:<sup>8</sup>

*muruku porunāru pāṅ iraṅṭu mullai*  
*peruku vaḷa maturaikkāñci - maruv' iṅiya*  
*kōlam neṭunalvāṭai kōl kuriñci paṭṭiṅap-*  
*pālai kaṭātoṭṭum pāṭṭu.*

Muruku, Porunāru, the two Pāṅ, Mullai,  
 Maturaikkāñci of growing luxuriance, jointly pleasing  
 [and] beautiful Neṭunalvāṭai, exquisite Kuriñci, Paṭṭiṅap –  
 Pālai along, finally, with Kaṭām [constitute the] Pāṭṭu.

<sup>6</sup> Or those who have acquired knowledge by learning, that is, “educated people”.

<sup>7</sup> For detailed documentation concerning the representation of the corpus in the grammatical tradition, see Wilden (2014b: chapter III.5).

<sup>8</sup> Preserved in the same manuscripts of the *Kiḷkkaṅakku* (UVSL 885, UVSL 603, UVSL 1078), in Tāmōtarāṅ Piḷḷai's *Kali* edition and in Cāminātaiyar's edition of the *Pattuppāṭṭu*.

Here the distribution between ornamentation and abbreviation becomes slightly more unbalanced, and the task is more difficult because ten titles have to be incorporated. In this case neither the stanza alone nor the shorter titles known from the grammatical tradition would be sufficient for the reconstruction. In the first four titles the genre designation *ārruppaṭai* is missing, but it is easy to recognise *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* and *Porunarārruppaṭai*. Only for someone familiar with the anthology the two *Pāṇ*-s are easily restored into *Cirupāṇārruppaṭai* and *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai*. *Mullai* and *Kuṛiñci* are established shorthand for *Mullaippāṭṭu* and *Kuṛiñcippāṭṭu*, *Kaṭām* is, less obvious again, *Malaipaṭukaṭām*. And though it is notoriously difficult to give an age to a *Veṅpā* verse, since the metre was in use from about the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the early *Kīlkkāṇakku* anthologies onwards, there is reason to believe that this one is not particularly early, for the older name of the *Malaipaṭukaṭām*, both in the grammatical tradition and in the extant manuscripts, is *Kuttarārruppaṭai*.

The wish to retain all the necessary information in a single stanza of four lines becomes a liability with the *Kīlkkāṇakku*, because here it is necessary to integrate a full eighteen titles into this very limited space:<sup>9</sup>

*nālaṭi nāṇmaṇi nāṇāṛpat' aintiṇai mu-*  
*pāl kaṭukam kōvai paḷamoḷi – māmūlam*  
*iṇṇilai col-kāñci-uṭaṇ ēlāti eṇpavē*  
*kainnilai avām kīlkkāṇakku.*

The *Nālaṭi*[yār], *Nāṇmaṇi*[kaṭikai], the four *Nāṛpatu* (*Kaḷavali Nāṛpatu*, *Kārnāṛpatu*, *Iṇṇānāṛpatu*, *Iṇiya Nāṛpatu*), the *Aintiṇais* (*Aintiṇai Aimpatu*, *Aintiṇai Eḷupatu*, *Tiṇaimālai Nūṛraimpatu*, *Tiṇaimoḷi Aimpatu*), the one in three parts (= *Tirukkuraḷ*), [*Tiri*]kaṭukam, [*Ācāra*]kōvai, *Paḷamoḷi*, *Māmūlam* (= *Cirupaṇcamūlam*), *Iṇṇilai*, with the *Colkāñci* (= *Mutumolikkāñci*) the *Ēlāti*, they say, the *Kainnilai* – those are the *Kīlkkāṇakku* (the minor classics).

Here the amount of reconstruction that is needed to make the stanza functional is made visible by complementing the all too minimal titles already in the translation. There is no way the verse could have been understood without the explanations given by a teacher, and one wonders how to visualise this instruction in a time when only two of these eighteen text were still widely known and

<sup>9</sup> Preserved in the same manuscripts of the *Kīlkkāṇakku* (UVSL 885, UVSL 603, UVSL 1078), and in *Tāmōtaraṇ Piḷḷai's Kali* edition.

read or recited, namely the *Tirukkuraḷ* and the *Nāḷaṭiyār*.<sup>10</sup> That the verse was important in the reconstruction of the corpus, however, is testified by a scholarly dispute about the exact list of texts included here [Zvelebil 1994: 251f.]. For, if one counts, the enumeration contains not eighteen but nineteen titles. The solution agreed upon today is to read *Inṇilai* not as the title of a text, but as an attribute (*iṇṇilai*, “of sweet constitution”) to the subsequent *Colkāñci*. However, a text of that title exists, and even if there is reason to believe it might be later than others, because of its deviation from the *Veṅpā* that is the standard metre of the *Kīlkkāṇakku*, the argument is not incontestable, for the *Inṇilai* is quoted in the *Yāpparuṅkalavirutti*, generally attributed to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, which is not so far off the *Kīlkkāṇakku* period.

In sum, would it have been possible to reassemble the respective corpora without these verses? There were other sources, to be sure. The grammatical tradition does not only preserve quotations and references that name particular texts, but also the famous *Caṅkam* legend (cf. note 10) with the list of the works from the third academy, containing all the titles that make up the *Eṭṭuttokai*, but notoriously silent about the *Pattuppāṭṭu*, not to talk about the *Kīlkkāṇakku* which are supposed to be a later offspring of the same tradition. The ubiquitous and fluid Śaivite legends about the poets of the academy could not be of help because the few works they mention are, with the exception of a single stanza, devotional poems to lord Śiva or to *Murukaṇ* and incorporated into the Śaiva canon.

The other most obvious source of elucidation are naturally the manuscripts. Serial manuscripts exist even today, and presumably some of the ones that are lost today, although they are still mentioned in the early editions, were of that type. Usually they are kept under the name of the hyper-anthology (with luck that name is written on the wooden cover), while they give the names of the single anthologies as marginal inter-titles and in the final colophon.

For the *Eṭṭuttokai* we still find two, one from the U. V. Swaminathayar Library (UVSL) Chennai, distributed over three sequential bundles 1076, 1075 and 237, beginning with *Narriṇai*, then *Kuṟuntokai*, followed by the beginning of the *Aiṅkuṟunūru*, followed after a break by *Patirrupattu*, another break, followed by the *Akaṇāṇūru* and finally the *Puraṇāṇūru*. *Kalittokai* and *Paripāṭal* are missing. A different sequence seems to have been observed by the incomplete single *Eṭṭuttokai* manuscript still found in the library of the Tiruvāvaṭuturai Ātīṇam (TVM), namely the last hundred-and-two of the *Akaṇāṇūru* followed by *Aiṅkuṟunūru* and *Patirrupattu*. The catalogue still includes the

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<sup>10</sup> One clear instance of tradition going on with mere titles is the works of the first and the second academy as they are enumerated and said to be lost in the *Caṅkam* legend from the preamble to Nakkīraṅ’s commentary on the *Iraiyāṇār Akapporuḷ*, faithfully handed down through subsequent versions, and ironically it is the texts still extant, those of the third *Caṅkam*, where there is variation; cf. Wilden (2014 [in print], chapter III.4.2).

*Kuruntokai* in the self-same manuscript, and we have already seen Cāminātaiyar’s testimony as to the presence of *Narriṇai* and *Puṛaṇāṇūru* as well, though again not the *Kalittokai* and *Paripāṭal*. Precarious evidence, but it suggests that the customary serial manuscript of the *Eṭṭuttokai* contained only the six older anthologies, not the late-comers *Kalittokai* and *Paripāṭal* which are moreover always transmitted with commentary. So, in order to make up the number eight that is suggested by the title *Eṭṭuttokai*, probably manuscript evidence would not have been sufficient. The enumeration of the *Caṅkam* legend would have helped, but there more works than just eight are enumerated for the third *Caṅkam*. The place that puts just the eight titles together is the stanza.

The exercise could be repeated for the *Pattuppāṭṭu* and *Kīlkkāṇakku*, but for the argument it is enough to do so summarily. For the *Pattuppāṭṭu* we currently dispose of five serial manuscripts, all of them incomplete, four from the UVSL<sup>11</sup> and one from the national Library in Kolkatta. Only one of them contains the *Tirumurukārruppaṭai*, otherwise with currently fifty-seven manuscripts the best-attested classical text of all, grace to its integration into the Śaiva canon and its popularity as a devotional hymn to Murukaṇ. With respect to the *Pattuppāṭṭu*, as already mentioned, the *Caṅkam* legend is silent, and all manuscripts but the most fragmentary one seem to follow the sequence of the stanza. For the *Kīlkkāṇakku* the situation is less clear because the manuscripts have not been properly catalogued as yet<sup>12</sup> and so there is no reliable statistics as to the distribution of texts. What can be said at the moment is that serial manuscripts are frequent (at least twelve have been found so far) and that none of them contains either the *Tirukuraḷ* or the *Nālaṭiyār*, the two most popular texts in the collection. However, it is only in three of these serial *Kīlkkāṇakku* manuscripts (UVSL 885, UVSL 603, UVSL 1078) that the anonymous stanzas for the threefold corpus as quoted above have survived in the form of a prepositioned folio.

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<sup>11</sup> Among these fours, one comes in three batches, for *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* up to *Neṭunalvāṭai* with commentary (UVSL 1074), one text only for *Cīrupāṇārruppaṭai* up to the later parts of *Malaipaṭukaṭām* (UVSL 184), one with commentary for *Porunarārruppaṭai* up to the end (UVSL 579), and a fragmentary one with the colophon of *Cīrupāṇārruppaṭai* plus the *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai* and part of *Maturaikkāñci* (UVSL 166). The Kolkatta manuscript (BL 3112), which so far I have not been able to see, contains, according to the catalogue, four songs from *Porunarārruppaṭai* to *Mullaippāṭṭu*. Mention should be made here of a composite manuscript containing part of the *Pattuppāṭṭu* and of the *Kīlkkāṇakku*, but here the principle is different, as becomes clear from the table of contents: this is a copy from various disintegrating palm-leaf bundles that have since been given up.

<sup>12</sup> And also because the digital collection of the Pondicherry *Caṅkam* project might have gaps.

#### 4. Verses pertaining to content and inner structure

Revealing the organisation of a corpus is by no means the only function fulfilled by our anonymous stanzas. Some deal with the contents and inner structure of an anthology, and the two quoted here are important, because they alone preserve crucial bits of information that is not available elsewhere.

A simple case is that of the verse enumerating the topics treated in the *Paripāṭal* along with the number of hymns devoted to each topic. Since today what remains of the text itself is only a fragment, there is no way of knowing whether the information provided is genuine, although the overall number of hymns mentioned, that is, seventy, corresponds to the figure named in the *Caṅkam* legend:<sup>13</sup>

*tirumārḱ' iru nāṅku cevvēṭku muppatt'  
oru pāṭṭu kātukāṭk' oṅru - maruv' iṅiya  
vaiyai iru patt' āru mā maturai nāṅk' eṅpa  
ceyya paripāṭal tīram.*

For Tirumāl eight, for Cevvēḷ thirty one  
songs, for her who guards the forest(?) one, for the Vaiyai,  
pleasing to unite in, twenty six, for great Maturai four, they say,  
[are] the constituents of perfect Paripāṭal.

Today of eight hymns to Tirumāl-Viṣṇu seven are available, of thirty-one hymns to Murukaṅ only eight, the one for Kāṭukāḷ is lost, of twenty-six for the river Vaiyai nine survive, and of the four hymns to the city of Maturai a few fragments remain.

Impressive is the example of the following, very well-attested stanza pertaining to the sequence of songs, the *tiṅai* arrangement of the *Akanāṅṅūru*:<sup>14</sup>

*viyam ellām pattām paṅi neyṭal  
nālum naṅi mullai nāṭum-kāl - mēlaiyōr  
tērum iraṅṭ' eṭṭ' ivai kuṅiṅci cem tamīḷiṅ  
ārum marutam avai.*

<sup>13</sup> The verse is found in the manuscript UVSL 1077 and has found entry into Cāminātaiyar's edition.

<sup>14</sup> This verse is attested in the six manuscripts that contain the traditional textual colophon, namely in the one of Tiruvāṭuturai, in UVSL 237, in UVSL 11/73, in UVSL 4/66, in UVSL 5/67 and in GOML R-5734/TR1050; in two further mss., NL 3141/S.V.P. 91 and UVSL 6/68 the quality of the current reproductions does not allow deciphering the colophons, but it is highly likely that the verse is present there too.

Pālai [will be] all the odd ones, the tenth dewy Neytal,  
all the fourth, upon examination, abundant Mullai, to the former ones  
are known these second and eights [as] Kuṛiñci, in sublime Tamil  
all those that are sixth [will be] Marutam.

So, out of every ten poems in the anthology, with every odd one five will be situated in the inner landscape of the desert region (*Pālai*), every second and eighth will play in the mountain region (*Kuṛiñci*), every fourth in the woodland (*Mullai*), every sixth in the rice-growing plains (*Marutam*) and every tenth, finally, on the seaside (*Neytal*). There is nothing surprising in a *tiṇai* arrangement as such; on the contrary this is quite customary for any but the oldest Akam anthologies, although this one is by far the most complicated: in all the other examples, beginning with *Aiṅkurunūru* and *Kalittokai*, the *tiṇais* are simply separated into groups or sections. But, in the by far predominant strand of the manuscript transmission, currently represented by eight witnesses, the sequence is broken by a mistake which indeed can be counted as the first diagnostic feature of this strand I have called the Śaiva vulgate.<sup>15</sup> It is only in the two incomplete manuscript witnesses of a second strand that the sequence is still in good order. Thus the information given in this verse confirms the arrangement preserved in the minority strand and is adopted from the later paper copies onwards, where the two strands are conflated for the first time in the wake of preparing the anthology for print in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 5. Verses naming authors

Another very current function of the mnemonic stanzas is to provide the name of an author, or authors, or of a commentator, and here one may wonder whether in their origin they are related to the signature verses that appear with the earliest devotional collections and soon begin to form the traditional ending verse for a *bhakti* decade, that is, a group of ten poems that is the poetic unit above the stanza but within a text for many of the canonical devotional anthologies. Examples can be given not only from the classical corpus, but also from the Vaiṣṇavas *Tivyappirapantam*. These names too

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<sup>15</sup> In short, the point of origin for the confusion is AN 107, which includes the last 8 lines of 108, while the first 10 lines of 108 are missing. The result is that from this point onward (i.e., No. 109), the number given for each poem is one less than its original number. This is kept up until No. 387. Then the No. 388 is skipped, so that for the final 11 poems we are back to the traditional numbering. For a first description of the AN manuscripts and their interrelation, see Wilden 2014, chapter IV.4.3; the critical edition of the *Akanānūru* is under preparation but will take a few more years.



constitute most precious pieces of information, because for many author names such a stanza is the only indication that can be found, apart from occasional references in the commentarial literature, and, in a very few cases, in inscriptions.<sup>16</sup>

The first example comes from one of the smaller Akam collections among the *Kīlkkāṇakku*, the *Aintiṇai Aimpatu* and is probably an early one, since its features show elements both of a signature verse and of a mnemonic stanza so that it is apparent that the two genres were not yet distinct:<sup>17</sup>

*paṇṇu ulli niṇṇa periyār payaṇ teriya*  
*vaṇṇu ulli māraṇ poraiyaṇ puṇarttu yāṭṭa*  
*aintiṇai aimpatum mātavattiṇ ṭātār*  
*cen tamil cērātavar.*

Those who do not recite the sweetness of the whole *Aintiṇai Aimpatu*,  
 joined [and] strung<sup>18</sup> by *Māraṇ Poraiyaṇ*, [always] thinking of generosity,  
 so that [its poetic] yield be clear to great people that permanently remember quality,  
 have not joined with refined Tamil.

To begin with, the verse does not really make clear whether it talks about an author or a mere compiler; in fact both might be possible. Also the name is slightly puzzling because it is a combination of the titles from two royal houses, *Māraṇ* pertaining to the *Pāṇṭiyas*, *Poraiyaṇ* to the *Cēras*. So is he rather a patron? That sort of problem is not unusual, especially in cases where the only mention of the respective name is found in the stanza. Another element is slightly less associated with the mnemonic stanza and more with the signature verses, always written in the third person, namely the concern with what gain is to be derived from learning and reciting the text – what would, in Sanskrit, be called the *phalaśruti*. And this can be expressed in positive or in negative form (by reciting one gets something, by not reciting one does not). Here the result to be expected of course cannot be heaven or the view of the lord, as is the customary reward for a devotee reciting a *bhakti* decade. What is at stake here is being accepted into the circle of connoisseurs of higher Tamil literary culture.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of such materials, see Govindasamy (1977).

<sup>17</sup> It is found in the manuscripts GOML D.205/TD.84, GOML D.206/TD.53 and GOML D.207/D.137.

<sup>18</sup> *puṇarttu yāṭṭa*: my late teacher, the pandit T.S. Gangadharan, suggested that the abs. refers to the composition of the poems and the subsequent *peyareccam* to the sorting according to *tiṇai*.

The next example is from the *Nālāyirat Tivyappirapantam*, the Four-thousand Holy Compositions of the Tamil Vaiṣṇavas. Such verses appear with every text within the *Tivyappirapantam*, each called a *taṇiyam*, a solitary stanza, and what is peculiar about them is that they come with an author, here Mutaliyāṇṭaṇ, who is said to have been a disciple of the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosopher Ramānuja:

*taṇiyaṇ mutaliyāṇṭāṇ aruḷicceytatu*  
separate stanza, made by the grace of Mutaliyāṇṭaṇ

*kaitaicēr pūmpoḷilcūḷ kaccinakar vant' utitta*  
*poykaiṇ pirāṇ kaviṇar pōr ēru vaiyattu*  
*aṭiyavar vāḷa arum tamī antāti*  
*paṭi viḷaṅka ceytāṇ parintu.*

The lord Poykai, bull combative among poets who hails from Kaccinakar surrounded by flower groves joined by screw pines has lovingly made, for the genre to shine, [this] Antāti in precious Tamil so that the servants (of god) may prosper in the world.

The information given is simple, although adorned with a number of epithets: The author of the first *Antāti* (one of the earliest texts in the Tamil *bhakti* corpus) is named Poykai and comes from the place of Kaccinakar. It is written in “precious” or “difficult” Tamil and in praise of Kṛṣṇa. The fact, however, that the author of the *taṇiyam* is named makes one wonder. If the ascription is correct, it gives us a date, namely the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century and the heyday of Vaiṣṇava commentary production. At that time with the *Divyasūricarita* (in Sanskrit) and the *Guruparamparāprabhavam* (in Maṇipravāḷam) also the first saint hagiographies, an important genre, were probably already around. In other words, things do not look as if this stanza could have been composed for the sake of preserving precious information in a predominantly oral milieu. The rationale for the composition of such a stanza is that it was regarded as a desirable complement, if not as a requirement: many Tamil texts come with such a verse, though by no means all of them. Thus, the Vaiṣṇava *taṇiyam*-s could be seen as an indication that the genre of the mnemonic stanza was well established by their time.

The last example is a stanza which enumerates the commentaries written by the great medieval scholar Nacciṇārkkīṇiyar. It is quoted, for example, in Cāminātaiyar’s edition of the *Pattuppāṭṭu* (one of the texts commented on by Nacciṇārkkīṇiyār), and manuscript evidence has not yet been checked:

*pāra tolkāppiyamum pattupāṭṭum kaliyum  
āra kuruntokaiyuḷ aiññāṅkum – cāra  
tīru taku mā muṇi cey cintāmaṇiyum  
virutti nacciṅārkkīṇiyamē.*

On the weighty Tolkāppiyam and the Pattuppāṭṭu and Kali  
and on five [times] four verses in the ornamental Kuruntokai and on the essential  
Cintāmaṇi made by the brilliant great sage<sup>19</sup>:  
[these five are] the elaborate commentaries attributed to Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār.

So, the commentaries attributed to Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār are five of which four are well-known: one on the bigger portion of the first known treatise on Tamil grammar, the *Tolkāppiyam*, one on the Ten Songs of the *Caṅkam* corpus, one on the *Kalittokai*, a *Eṭṭuttokai* anthology, and one on the huge Jain *Mahākāvya* poem, the *Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi*. Here the interesting part is the mention of a commentary on twenty poems of the *Kuruntokai*, one of the early *Caṅkam* anthologies for which no traditional commentary is extant. This stanza is our primary source for the information that Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār would have written such commentary, if only for twenty stanzas. So far no trace of it has been found, however.

## 6. Authorising recreated tradition

Just how important those stanzas were, is also revealed by another factor: there is evidence to suggest they were made up in cases where genuine traditional information was lacking or lost. A case in point is the *Aiṅkurunūru*, one of the intermediate texts contained in the *Eṭṭuttokai*, the earliest Akam collection to be sorted by *tiṇai*<sup>20</sup> in a series of five hundreds. The colophon testifies to its being an anthology from the south-western Cēra dynasty, but it became part of the first hyper-collection of five or six texts, as is documented by its invocation stanza composed by Pāratam Pāṭiya Peruntēvaṅār, a poet associated with the Pāṇṭiya court and author also of the invocations to

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<sup>19</sup> I.e., the author, Tirutakkatēvar.

<sup>20</sup> The term *tiṇai* pertains to the construction of the poetical universe and refers to the five codified internal landscapes Kuṛiṅci (mountain), Mullai (forest), Neytal (seashore), Marutam (river valley), Pālai (desert).

*Kuruntokai*, *Narriṇai*, *Akanānūru* and *Puranānūru*.<sup>21</sup> Its mnemonic stanza enumerates five authors, one for each *tiṇai*:<sup>22</sup>

*marutam* *ōrampōki* *neytal* *ammūvaṇ*  
*karutum* *kuṛiṇci* *kapilar* *karutiya*  
*pālai* *ōtalāntai* *pal* *mullai* *pēyaṇē*  
*nūl* *aiyōr* *aiṅkurunūru*.

Marutam by Ōrampōki, Neytal by Ammūvaṇ  
imaginative Kuṛiṇci by Kapilar imagined  
Pālai by Ōtalāntai, many Mullai by Pēyaṇ:  
[such are] the string<sup>23</sup> masters<sup>24</sup> for the Aiṅkurunūru.

The older anthologies are supposed to have been random anthologies (where the length of the poem would decide its place in the collections), and each poem comes with an author name. How reliable that is, is an open question – the variation in the manuscript transmission is considerable, not only with respect to the spelling of a particular name but also for the name itself. The *Aiṅkurunūru*, if we take the stanza at face value, would have been the first text not only broken up into *tiṇai* sections (and into decades), but also with a single author for each section, thus suggesting that the whole was not based on a collection of widely scattered material from a partly oral background, but a premeditated composition. What arouses suspicion about such a claim is the choice of author’s names. All the five names are well-known from the earlier anthologies, Kapilar for one being among the most famous Tamil poets of all times. Thematic, structural and morpho-syntactical development, however, suggest that that *Aiṅkurunūru* poems would not have been composed at the same time as most of the material brought together in its sister anthologies. Be that as it may, the manuscript tradition proves that the stanza was well-embedded in the transmission of

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<sup>21</sup> The prepositioned invocation verse, in Tamil “praise of the deity” (*kaṭavul vāḷṭṭu*) is the counterpart to the Sanskrit *maṅgala* verse (cf. Minkowski 2008). For a detailed analysis of this group belonging to the *Caṅkam* works, see Wilden (2014b: chapter III.1).

<sup>22</sup> The verse is attested in the manuscript from Tiruvāvaṭuṭurai and in UVSL 98, as well as in the edition of Cāminātaiyar.

<sup>23</sup> Surprising is here the use of the word *nūl*, which normally refers to theoretical texts. This induces me to take it here in its literal meaning, “string”, which might be a reference to its being not only an anthology (like most *Caṅkam* texts), but an ordered anthology (in five hundreds that are made out of decades).

<sup>24</sup> The form *aiyōr* is in fact ambiguous. We can either take it as an honorific plural of *ai*, “lord, master”, or of the number five, which would make for five explicit scholars.

the text, because in the manuscripts that survive there are intermediate colophons stating the authorship of each hundred poems, and they confirm the stanza.

Different in this respect is the case of another stanza associated with the *Caṅkam* corpus, namely with one of the two late-comers in the set, the *Kalittokai*:

*peruṅkaṭuṅkōṅ pālai kuriñci kapilaṅ*  
*marutaṅ iḷanākaṅ marutam - aruñcōḷaṅ*  
*nalluruttiraṅ mullai nallantuvaṅ neytal*  
*kalvi valār kaṅṭa kali.*

Pālai by Peruṅkaṭuṅkōṅ, Kuriñci by Kapilar,  
 Marutam by Marutaṅiḷanākaṅ, Mullai by  
 Aruñcōḷaṅ Nalluruttiraṅ, Neytal by Nallantuvaṅ  
 – [such is] Kali seen by those proficient in learning.

So here we get the five names of the poets that would have composed a *tiṅai* section each of the *Kalittokai*. The first three names belong again to three of the very famous poets from the earlier anthologies. Kapilar figures yet again, and by this time he should have reached the ripe age of about 500 years. It is only the last two that could claim a semblance of likelihood, Aruñcōḷaṅ Nalluruttiraṅ because he is mentioned only in this stanza, Nallantuvaṅ because he is known as a late author also from the *Paripāṭal* and some late poem in the *Akanāṅūru*.

Moreover, this time the manuscript transmission does not back up the stanza. There are no intermediate colophons naming authors, and not even a single out of eleven surviving *Kali* manuscripts quotes the verse. However, T. Rajeswari has demonstrated that, on the contrary, there is manuscript evidence—in one old, incomplete palm-leaf manuscript that was kept in the GOML and has since vanished—for single-author ascriptions for *Pālai-Kali*, the first of the *Kalittokai*'s *tiṅai* sections.<sup>25</sup> The verse is not yet quoted in the *editio princeps* by Tamōtarampiḷḷai of 1887, but it figures in the later *Aṅantarāmaiyar* and *Ceṭṭiyār* editions; the earliest references for the time being is an undated, but undoubtedly late paper manuscript of the GOML, containing an unpublished study of the *Kalittokai*, entitled *Kaliyārāycci* (GOML R-5780). Here one cannot help but wondering whether the stanza in fact is a product of the editing phase in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when decisions

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<sup>25</sup> The EFEO photographs of that manuscript are proof of its existence; for the details and the author names see Rajeswari (2009).

had to be made as to whether *Kalittokai* and *Paripāṭal* were the two texts which make complete the eight texts of the *Eṭṭuttokai*, although none of the serial manuscripts included them there.

## 7. Conclusion

On the margins of Tamil literature a type of solitary, mostly anonymous stanza survives, of a type seemingly metrically homogenous – four-liners composed in *Veṅpā* metre, based at least on the evidence so far scrutinised – and similar in structure. A series of examples that could easily be extended suggests that there are three main types of information that could be transmitted in such a verse. Firstly, such verses may put together the single texts that make up a canonised collection, thus functioning as corpus organisers. Secondly, they may deal with the contents and/or the inner structure of a text or anthology. Thirdly, they may hand down the name, background and achievements of a poet or a commentator.

Peculiar is the place they have in the transmission of texts. Some appear integrated into colophons of the traditional type, that is, colophons related to the production of the text, not the manuscript: textual, not scribal colophons. These in particular are the ones that may reach back a very long way, such as the one pertaining to the arrangement of the *Akanāṇūru*, although the only thing we can say for certain is that none of them may predate the advent of *Veṅpā* metre which started with the early *Kīlkkāṇakku* anthologies, after most of the texts in today's *Caṅkam* corpus had been completed. Some, as the ones associated with the canon of the Tamil Vaiṣṇavas, appear before the text and are even ascribed to a particular author and appear rather to fill a genre slot than to have an active function in the transmission of texts.

Others, however, appear on separate leaves before or after the text. Most noticeably, although most of these stanzas have found entry into the early printed editions, only a minority of manuscripts preserves them. Additionally we have testimonies like the one of U.V. Cāminātaiyar, who “knew” the *Eṭṭuttokai* stanza for one “from an old verse”. In other words, here we seem to be at the intersection of oral and written tradition, and I believe we are justified in terming these verses as mnemonic stanzas. They represent the minimal version of literary history as it was handed down from teacher to student, also found in the same manuscripts, albeit a minority. Their wording was fixed and solidified only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when they invariably appear integrated into the prefaces of the early editions. They helped to reassemble and shape the corpora that today we know in print. In some cases, such as the *Kalittokai* discussed above, there is even evidence to suggest that they helped fabricate an order or information that was lost in the abyss of time. In any event they are deemed worthy of quotation and in these latter doubtful instances they

may even be used as a justification by editors, as in the case of the *Kalittokai* stanza. It would certainly be worthwhile to make a separate collection of all of them.

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<i>Akanāṇūru</i>	TVM <i>Eṭṭuttokai</i> UVSL 237 UVSL 11/73 UVSL 4/66 UVSL 5/67 GOML R-5734/TR1050
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## Hoisted by their Own Petard

### The Emergence of Sri Lankan Buddhist Printing and Counter-Christian Activities

*Ann-Kathrin Bretfeld-Wolf*

This contribution describes the emergence of print technology in Sri Lanka and the role it played in shaping modern Sri Lankan Buddhism, as exemplified by the case study of the textual transmission of the *Mahāvamsa*, a chronicle of the history of Sri Lanka. The first part is devoted to a description of the reception of this work in the European scholarly tradition, followed by a brief examination of the interaction of oral and manuscript transmission of Buddhist texts in pre-modern Sri Lankan Buddhist culture and society. *Vamsa* literature can be seen as a product of the change from orality to writing. The establishment of printing culture in the nineteenth century however changed the status of this type of literature. The rediscovery of *vamsa* literature by European scholars caused a change in the reception and use of this genre in Sri Lanka. Thus, in recent times *vamsas* are seen as historical literature and play an important part in Sinhala Nationalism.

#### 1. Introduction

In 1736 the Dutch established the first printing press in Sri Lanka. The use of the technology remained a monopoly of the European colonial powers for the first 100 years<sup>1</sup> and was mainly applied for missionary activities like the printing of Christian works in Sinhala. This changed in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a newly emerged Buddhist elite started to use printing for its own purposes. Prior to the introduction of printing, Sri Lankan Buddhists had used manuscripts for the preservation and promulgation of their knowledge. As has been emphasised by recent publications,<sup>2</sup> Buddhist manuscript culture needs to be seen as a social practice and therefore as connected to certain institutions, routines, and performances. One of those works is Anne Blackburn's study of transformations within monastic education in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka that resulted in the composition of new *sannaya* texts; *sannayas* are Sinhalese word-for-word explanations which enabled those who were not familiar with Pāli to gain access to the canonical literature (Blackburn 2001). The

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch were succeeded by the British in 1796.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Berkwitz, Schober, and Brown (2009).

employment of these new *sannaya* texts, called *sūtra sannayo*, in public recitations merged monks and laity into a new textual community and created a “reading” Buddhist public (Blackburn 2001: 171). If the selection of language contributes to such transformations of the reading practice, what types of changes could then be brought about by the use of mass media like printing? Media historian Marshall McLuhan has already addressed the question of habitual and practical change in relation to the introduction of new media (McLuhan 1962). Elizabeth Eisenstein published an extensive study on the impact of the introduction of the printing press in Europe (Eisenstein 2009). Although several studies have been published on changes of textual media in Europe, the application of this topic in relation to Asia is rather rare. Therefore this paper will consider the textual media change from manuscripts to printed books in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka. We will focus mainly on the *Mahāvamsa* (5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century), because its popularity as a printed book had a major impact on the creation of cultural and national identities of Sinhalese Buddhists in the late colonial phase. Simultaneously, from the perspective of European philologists and historians the text was seen as a valuable source and the key to explore Sri Lanka’s past. In the *Mahāvamsa* and other texts of the genre of *vamsa* literature (succession/lineage literature) the past is organised in the form of lineages of important groups of persons, objects, or practices. 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholars proudly announced the so-called “chronicle literature” of Sri Lanka to be the only existing historical tradition in South Asia. In doing so they imposed their notions of history and textual authority upon Buddhist texts. The *Mahāvamsa*, like several other works of Asian history of literature, was made accessible in critical editions that catered to the needs and interests of the European academia, including ordered annotation of variant readings, page and verse numbering, datings of kings and other persons according to Christian chronology, and indexes to personal names, locations, or cited works. Later, Buddhists adopted these textual authority structures in their own printing activities and thus promoted a major shift in the usage of Buddhist texts. This paper will investigate this shift connected to the rise of printing in Sri Lanka and the related socio-historical processes by example of the *Mahāvamsa*. Before we turn to a short history of orality and writing in Sri Lanka and the mentioned socio-historical processes, we will first devote some words on the European scholarly reception of the *Mahāvamsa* and related texts, which was strongly influenced by its printed form and the aforementioned performative shift.

## 2. The Reception of *Vamsa* Literature in Europe

In 1837 George Turnour published his English translation of the *Mahāvamsa*. Suddenly the text became accessible for scholars not familiar with Pāli, and the *Mahāvamsa* was gradually established as the main source for the reconstruction of the history of Sri Lanka and other parts of India. Intensive

discussions were held concerning the historical value of the *vaṃsas*, especially the *Mahāvāṃsa*. Wilhelm Geiger arrived at the conclusion that, when leaving aside all the legends and accounts of miracles, one could find valuable, historical information in this kind of literature (Geiger 1943). Turnour's and Geiger's works, together with those by scholars like Rudolf Otto Franke and Erich Frauwallner, gave rise to an initial manner of reception in which the search for historical authenticity was in the foreground.<sup>3</sup> Here, *vaṃsas* served as containers of information, and everything that was not deemed useful for the reconstruction of a historically "reliable" picture of the past was banished to the realm of mythology.

This search for historical authenticity was followed by a second line of reception embodied by scholars like Heinz Bechert, Frank Perera, and Steven Kemper, who focused on the ideologies expressed in *vaṃsa* literature. In a prominent article Bechert ascribed political meaning to the *Mahāvāṃsa* and its predecessor from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (Bechert 1969). According to him *vaṃsa* texts form historiographies, in which religion and national consciousness are combined and a certain political ideology is expressed, namely "the equation of the concept of the state with that of a linguistically and culturally unified nation and its religion."<sup>4</sup> This connection between the classical chronicle and a modern concept of nation has been widely discussed in the scientific field. Regarding its historical value Jonathan Walters was among the first to emphasise that texts like the *Mahāvāṃsa* needed to be treated carefully when using them as historical sources. His main argument was that the *Mahāvāṃsa* only represents one possible interpretation of Sri Lanka's Buddhist past, namely that which emerges from the perspective of the monastic group of the Mahāvihārins (Walters 2000: 150).<sup>5</sup> In recent years the search for historical authenticity and ideologies has been contested by various scholars who have begun to see *vaṃsa* literature from a more ethical and practical perspective.

This third type of reception centres around the social practice connected to *vaṃsa* literature. This rather recent development is mainly connected with the works of Stephen C. Berkwitz (Berkwitz 2004), Kevin Trainor (Trainor 1997), and Kristin Scheible (Scheible 2010). In a case study Berkwitz

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<sup>3</sup> Franke (1907), Frauwallner (1984), Turnour (1836), and Geiger (1905). Between Franke and Geiger a dispute over method broke out that focused on the question of the historicity of the Pāli *vaṃsas*. Geiger's response followed in Geiger (1909: 540-550).

<sup>4</sup> "[D]ie Gleichsetzung der Sache des Staates mit der einer sprachlich kulturell [sic!] einheitlichen Nation und ihrer Religion" (Bechert 1969: 49; my translation).

<sup>5</sup> The Mahāvihārins have been the dominant school of monks in Sri Lanka until today. Until the 13<sup>th</sup> century their rivals had been the monks of the Abhayagirivihāra and the Jetavanavihāra in Anurādhapura. However, the Mahāvihārins prevailed and nothing is left of the other two schools.

(2004)<sup>6</sup> points out that there are religious practices and certain notions of identity connected with the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*. One aim of that text is to remind people of deeds done by great persons of the past who serve as models for responsible and meritorious religious activity (Berkwitz 2004: 291-292); by reminding the recipients, the text adopts an appellative function, because people are requested to behave in a certain way, for example to offer flowers in front of a *thūpa*.

Berkwitz refers to the practical dimension of texts: *vaṃsas* are historical accounts but also represent a kind of manual for the practice of relic veneration. Accounts and descriptions of relic veneration can be found frequently in *vaṃsa* texts. In the *Mahāvāṃsa*, for example, a long account, extending over four chapters, is given on the history and enshrinement of a small share of Buddha relics within the Mahāthūpa in Anurādhapura. In this way, *vaṃsas* narrate the background of relic veneration and give plausibility to this practice: by telling the “succession” of particular relics of the Buddha, their authenticity is “proven.” Furthermore, the specific localisation of the relics is described in these stories. Finally, the text provides models for the veneration of relics. By revealing favourable rebirths of past heroes the positive effects of religious behaviour are illustrated. Whereas a practical message was paramount in the pre-modern textual practices of these texts, this message changed with the use of printing: it was transformed, under the influence of modern textual scholarship, into a storehouse of information, contributing to the European academic project of universal history, and into a testimony of an ancient identity policy. This brought forth the first two types of specialists in Asian history. Representatives of the third type attempt to complement the former two approaches with a focus on pragmatic dimensions these texts had for the formation of religious subjects and their embodiment of cultural values.

*Vaṃsas* prospered in a time when Buddhist texts were handed down in the medium of manuscripts. A look at the transition from oral to written transmission will shed some light on the development of certain practices and authority structures related to the medium of Buddhist manuscripts in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* was composed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century based on the Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa*. It represented one of the first texts written in the Sinhalese vernacular.

### 3. From Orality to Written Texts

The introduction of writing to India is dated to the Mauryan period,<sup>7</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. The Aśokan edicts constitute the oldest extant testimonies, written in Brāhmī. In this context, Jens Braarvig formulates the hypothesis that the “development of writing seems to have been closely connected with the promulgation of Buddhism” (Braarvig 2012: 250), as he considers writing to have been crucial for the spread of Buddhism and Buddhist knowledge transfer. He contrasts this with the situation in the Vedic or Brahmanical tradition, where sound was the most important feature in the transmission of sacred knowledge, whereas Buddhism favoured conveying meaning by written texts (Braarvig 2012: 250 ff.).

However, writing was not involved in the spread of Buddhism right from the beginning. Before the usage of writing, the preservation of the *buddhavacana* (the word of the Buddha) was accomplished by an oral system of transmission, performed by monks who memorised the word of the Buddha in terms of labour division. This so-called *bhāṇaka* (reciter) system developed in Northern India from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards. It may be speculated that the *bhāṇaka* system was gradually changed with the advent of writing.

When Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the *bhāṇaka* system was introduced along with it. According to Buddhaghosa, the missionary Mahinda brought the *tipiṭaka* to the island, which was then spread further (Jayawickrama 2010: 63). Only a few centuries later writing was used to transmit Buddhist “texts” in Sri Lanka. The writing down of the *tipiṭaka* and related commentaries is believed to have taken place in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE in the Aluvihāra monastery. The introduction of writing gave rise to new genres of literature, one of them being *vaṃsa* literature. Although *vaṃsa* texts are based upon oral predecessors and reference texts (Geiger 1905: 11), it was only after they were written down that the genre evolved into the form that is preserved today.

Although writing gained importance for the production and transmission of texts, orality as a text-related element did not disappear. The *Dīpavaṃsa*, for example, the oldest existent *vaṃsa* text, contains an important reference to orality at its very beginning:

I will set forth the history of Buddha’s coming to the Island, of the arrival of the relic and of the Bo (branch), of the doctrine of the teachers who made the recensions (of *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*), of the propagation of the Faith in the Island, of the arrival of the chief of men (*Vijaya*); listen. (Oldenberg 1879: 1.1)

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<sup>7</sup> See for example von Hinüber (1990) and Falk (1993); the latter gives a comprehensive overview of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century discussion concerning the introduction of writing in India.

The invitation “listen to me” (*sunātha me*) refers to the practice of recitation. From this we can conclude that texts were meant to be recited orally in front of an audience rather than read silently or in private. The aspiration *sunātha me* appears in later texts as well, for example in the *Mahāvamsa* and in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Thūpvamsa*. Public reading performances seem to have been the natural medium the authors of classical Buddhist texts had in mind when they composed their works. Trainor concludes in dependence on Geiger that *vamsa* texts were not only recited in public but also “used liturgically in the context of regular religious festivals commemorating significant occasions in the history of the island” (Trainor 1997: 81). A hint to this fact can be found in the *Cūlavamsa*, as one passage provides the information that king Dhātusena ordered a recitation of the *Dīpavamsa*:

After having an image made of the great Thera Mahinda  
he brought it to the spot where the Thera’s body had been burnt, to organise there at  
great cost a sacrificial festival.  
He gave orders with the outlay of a thousand gold pieces, for the interpretation [*dīpetum*]  
of the *Dīpavamsa*  
and commanded sugar to be distributed among the *bhikkhus* dwelling there. (Geiger 1929:  
38.58-59)<sup>8</sup>

The exact interpretation of this passage is contested. Even though Geiger translated *dīpetum* as *interpretation*, which can be either a written or oral act, he explains in a footnote that the presented activity is reading and not compiling of a text. The former translation understands *dīpetum* as an illustrated recitation as a part of the festival performances, the latter would mean the festival provided an opportunity for king Dhātusena to order a new commentary to the *Dīpavamsa* to be written. However, with regard to the general presence of recitation in the Sri Lankan Buddhist sphere we can assume that this passage from the *Cūlavamsa* most probably refers to a public narration of the Mahinda story in colloquial language, following the *Dīpavamsa*’s structure of the account. In addition, this narration was probably interspersed with sung verses from the *Dīpavamsa* in Pāli. Such a scenario is reasonable to assume as similar practices became established in the so-called *baṇa* tradition (recitation tradition) which emerged in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is believed to be a transformation of the older *bhāṇaka* tradition (Deegalle 2006: 45):

*baṇa* encompasses four interrelated devotional activities, and within each preaching is paramount: (1) giving religious instruction; (2) rhythmic reading of a religious text in

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<sup>8</sup> *Mahāmahindatherassa kāretvā paṭibimbakaṃ therass’ ālāhanaṃ netvā kātuṃ pūjaṃ mahārahaṃ, datvā sahassaṃ dīpetuṃ Dīpavamsaṃ samādisi, ʔhitānaṃ tattha bhikkhūnaṃ dātuṃ c’āṇāpayi guḷaṃ.*



public; (3) reading a religious text aloud and explicating its content in the vernacular; and (4) narrating *Jātaka* stories with or without explanations. (Deegalle 2006: 17)

However, recitation was not the only element of orality that remained connected to Buddhist texts. As Braarvig states, *mantras* and *voces magicae* were also found in the Buddhist tradition and here “literature was rather for the sound of the reading and magical effect than for understanding its content” (Braarvig 2012: 249). Steven Collins identifies a remaining element of orality within the transmission process of Buddhist texts: one person read the text aloud to a scribe, and the scribe then wrote down the words which he had heard. From this Collins concludes that the Buddhist tradition of texts continued to be oral, although written texts existed (Steven Collins 1992: 128). Still, to characterise the Buddhist textual tradition as oral even after the establishment of writing would go too far. Although the South Asian heritage of the high status of orality was still somehow present, writing developed into the most important medium for the production and transmission of Buddhist knowledge. This especially becomes apparent in the arising of new textual practices with the introduction of writing. We will consider these practices using the example of the *Mahāvamsa*.

#### 4. Worship for a Better Future

The *Mahāvamsa*'s main concern is to give an account of the establishment of the “true *dhamma*” in Sri Lanka. The text was popular in Sri Lanka but also in Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia. This was promoted by the spread of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism to Southeast Asian countries in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the course of these translocal Theravāda network relations a high degree of exchange of texts took place, so that newly compiled texts were relatively quickly exchanged between Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Frasch 2001: 96).

In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia the *Mahāvamsa* existed in different versions. The *Extended Mahāvamsa*, for example, probably has a Southeast Asian text tradition, as all extant manuscripts are in Cambodian script (von Hinüber 1996: 93). Further, Burmese and Cambodian manuscripts of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Mahāvamsa-ṭīkā*, its commentary, bear witness to the presence and distribution of these texts in Burma and Cambodia.

The *Mahāvamsa* served as a model and reference text for the composition of autochthonous texts in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. This is illustrated in the spread of certain narratives and story lines that reappear frequently in different *vamsa* texts. One example is the motif of the visiting Buddha that appears in several Sri Lankan *vamsa* texts, and in a modified form also in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Thai *vamsa Cāmadevīvamsa* written by Bodhiraṃsi. Here, the motif of the visiting Buddha and certain

narrative elements have been adopted, whereas the setting of the story was transferred to Northern Thailand (Swearer and Premchit 1998: 37-40). This accounts for the function of the *Mahāvamsa* as a reference text and as a model after which texts like the *Cāmadevīvaṃsa*, *Dhātuvamsa* or *Thūpavaṃsa* were modelled.

However, reports from British colonial times suggest that at the time of its European discovery the *Mahāvamsa* was not very prevalent any longer. In his introduction to the *Epitome of History* Turnour states that manuscripts of the *Mahāvamsa* are only “rarely found in the temples” (Turnour 1837: xvii). According to a letter by Sir A. Johnston the *Mahāvamsa* was seen by Sri Lankan priests as an important text, bearing “the most genuine account which is extant of the origin of the Buddha religion, of its doctrines, of its introduction to Ceylon” (Turnour 1837: vii). With the “discovery” of the *Mahāvamsa* by Johnston and Turnour the text came to European attention. The seminal, most widely circulated edition and translation of the *Mahāvamsa* were both done by Geiger in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and constitute the most authoritative edition until today. In its printed form the *Mahāvamsa* gained widespread popularity and publicity. For example, modern histories of Sri Lanka rely heavily on the *Mahāvamsa*. Together with inscriptions and archaeological findings it constitutes an important reference source for the reconstruction of events from Sri Lanka’s past. Furthermore, and in the same context, the *Mahāvamsa* serves as a kind of flagship for Sinhala nationalism. Therefore it is not exaggerated to state that this text is omnipresent in Sri Lanka.

The *Mahāvamsa* in pre-modern Sri Lanka is tied to the medium of written manuscripts, which are accompanied by a set of textual practices. Before we turn to the description of these practices we will first consider a brief description of manuscripts in general: as they are made from palm leaves, so-called *ola* leaves, the shape of manuscripts depends on the shape of the leaves. Pages consist of one palm leaf. These pages are tied together by a string that runs through two holes. “The distance at which the holes are punched follows a definite rule” (de Silva 1938: xiv). The manuscript as a whole is surrounded by two woodblock covers called *kamba* which are usually decorated. A manuscript of the *Mahāvamsa* from Haguranketha, for example, has a *kamba* that is illustrated with golden, flowery ornaments and small black lines on a red background. According to B. D. Nandadeva these flower illustrations on *kambas* represent offerings in honour of the *dhamma* (Nandadeva 2009: 159). He describes paintings of flowers on *kambas* of manuscripts as a visual liturgy and points out that they “have the same ritual and visual function as actual flowers offered in ritual veneration of the Triple Gem” (Nandadeva 2009: 167). Another form of textual veneration is the affirmation in the beginning of the *Mahāvamsa* that states *namo tassa bhagavato sammā sambuddhassa* “Honour to him, who is blessed, worthy, and fully enlightened”. This constitutes the most prominent and widespread

affirmation of textual veneration within Pāli works and is found in the beginning of texts very frequently. This *namaskāra* (exclamation of homage) is usually separated from the following textual body by a visual offset in jagged lines. As described by several scholars, manuscripts of Pāli texts, like canonical or *vaṃsa* texts, constitute representations of the *dhamma* and are therefore considered as part of the triple gem. This classification explains textual practices of veneration like the *namaskāra* and flower illustrations connected with these texts. Nandadeva also states that manuscripts containing the *dhamma* of the Buddha are seen in Sri Lanka “as live, animated objects” and are treated in the same way as representations of the Buddha and monks, i.e., with veneration and respect (Nandadeva 2009: 165). However, veneration is not the only textual practice associated with the *Mahāvamsa*.

Being a representation of the *dhamma*, the *Mahāvamsa* is also connected to the textual practice of gaining merit. Berkwitz distinguishes between three different types of expressions of this practice: “1) blessings (*āsīrvāda*), 2) affirmations about the benefits associated with Buddhist texts (*dharmānisamsa*), and 3) aspirations (*prārthanā*)” (Berkwitz 2009: 43). *Āsīrvādas* like *svasti siddham ka* are found on the margins of manuscripts pages. Berkwitz sees this practice, which he considers as a scribal convention, as a mimicry of *paritta* (protection) chanting (Berkwitz 2009: 45). According to him “the *dharmānisamsa* texts celebrate the efforts of those who write, read, and listen to texts, providing a clear rationale for engaging in all kinds of textual activity” (Berkwitz 2009: 45). And *prārthanā*, being at the end of the text, refer mainly to the writers or patrons of a text and the merit they gained with the creation of this work (Berkwitz 2009: 46). All three types of expressions therefore relate to the gaining of merit.

As we will see later, not all elements described here can be found in printed editions neither in each and every palm-leaf manuscript of the *Mahāvamsa*. Each manuscript is unique and comes with its own variations. Hence, the production and transmission of Pāli Buddhist texts like the *Mahāvamsa* has to be regarded as a unique product of a religious practice, prefigured by rules but open for improvisation. The medium of manuscripts is therefore tied to performance. The individual manuscript is thus an imprint of the partly free activity of making religious merit by copying it, illustrating it, endowing it with (written) blessings, ordering and sponsoring its production.

In addition to its importance at the level of religious practice, there was also a vivid and distinct scholarly tradition connected to Buddhist texts. In this regard, commentaries formed the most important type of texts. Commentaries were a widespread vehicle for the scholarly examination of older texts with a long tradition. One example is the *Mahāvamsa-ṭīkā*, the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa*. In the period of manuscript transmission the composition of commentaries required that

the commentator knew a lot of texts by heart. There were no indices and hardly any detailed tables-of-content or even layout indicators to facilitate his access to the text he commented upon, nor to others he wanted to cite in his interpretation.

Buddhist manuscripts served as a medium over centuries and played a major role in the religious field, both on the levels of distributing religious knowledge and performing religious practices. But have there been any changes to these practices with the adoption of the medium of printing in the nineteenth century?

## 5. Printing Saves Buddhism

The statement that printing would save Buddhism was made by the Sri Lankan monk and Buddhist revivalist Mohoṭṭiwattē Guṇānanda in the early 1860s in order to obtain funds for the establishment of a Buddhist printing press (Young and Somaratna 1996: 134). In the following we will explore the historical and social context of this assumption.

As mentioned above, printing was not introduced to Sri Lanka before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Though woodblock printing had been invented in China as early as in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and spread to other countries like Korea, Japan, or Tibet, it was not present in South and Southeast Asia. There, manuscripts formed the most important medium of texts up to the modern period. The increased activity of Christian missionaries in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka led Buddhist leaders to wish to publish printed books. The first Buddhist printing press, called Laṅkopakārā Press, was established in Galle in 1862 with the help of the king of Siam (Malalasekara 1958: 303)<sup>9</sup> and was guided by Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala, an important monk of the Buddhist Revival Movement. During the same period another famous monk, Mohoṭṭiwattē Guṇānanda, ran the Sarvajña Press in Koṭahēna, Colombo. Many others followed, which led to an increased use of printing to publish Buddhist texts. With regard to Sinhalese manuscripts Mark Frost states, for example, that “between 1880 and 1924 every major classical Sinhala work had been edited and published” (Frost 2002: 945). Printing had an influence on textual practices, not primarily because of its technology but because of the contexts in which it emerged: Buddhist-Christian controversies. Therefore, as Blackburn has noticed, the increasing usage of printing by Buddhists was connected with the so-called Buddhist Revival Movement (Blackburn 2010: 199). A short presentation of the movement’s historical background will illustrate this point.

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<sup>9</sup> In the same year the Society for Propagation of Buddhism was founded by Guṇānanda (Frost 2002: 944).

George D. Bond summarises four changes on different levels that were triggers for the rise of the Buddhist Revival Movement (Bond 1988).

1. Before the British rule colonial activities of the Dutch and Portuguese were limited to the coastal areas, while the highlands were still ruled by Sri Lankan kings of the Kandy kingdom. This changed when the British extended their rule of the coastal area to the highlands and changed the political system by deposing the king (political level).

2. and 3. Since power did not lay in villages any longer, the possibility of gaining wealth was no longer bound to a particular caste but led to a formation of a new elite beyond the caste system (economic and social levels).

4. Further, the British had an interest in this new elite and founded schools to promote it (educational level). Bond states:

Although the exact causes for the beginning of the revival are difficult to trace, the rise of an educated, Westernized laity and the repression of both the traditional Buddhist elite, the *Sangha*, and traditional Theravada itself proved to be tandem forces that generated the need for reform. (Bond 1988: 21)

Bond dates the beginning of the Buddhist Revival Movement to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and establishes a connection with the reform activities of the monk Saraṇāṅkara, who introduced the Siam Nikāya in 1753 and laid the foundation for a general period of monastic reform (Bond 1988: 46).

However, the formation of active Buddhist printing more than a hundred years later occurred during another period of the Buddhist Revival Movement, which was marked by the founding of several Buddhist educational institutions from 1845 onwards, whose purpose was to serve as an alternative to British-Christian education.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the rise of printing is connected to the fact that the Buddhist Revival Movement responded to the growing influence of Christianity with reactions directed against it as well as imitations of it. Early printing activities mainly included the printing of anti-Christian expressions such as “scurrilous single-sheet broadsides, angry four-page tracts, and the occasional lengthier and weightier pamphlet on Christianity” (Young and Somaratna 1996: 41). Although — as R.F. Young and G.P.V. Somaratna have shown — before the Buddhist use of printing an apologetical tradition against Christianity on palm-leaf manuscripts existed, printing increased these textual anti-Christian activities (Young and Somaratna 1996: 113). Furthermore, the rise of printing

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<sup>10</sup> In 1845 the Parama Dhamma Cetiya Piriveṇa, an institution that offered higher education for Buddhists, was founded in the South of Colombo. In the 1870s graduates of this *piriveṇa* founded further institutions such as the Vidyodaya Piriveṇa at Maligākanda, which was established by Sumaṅgala (see Bond 1988: 46).

took place during the period of debates between Christians and Buddhists from 1864 until 1873. These debates were held orally as public events and afterwards published by the Buddhist presses (Young and Somaratna 1996: 47). In these times, printing was mainly limited to the publication of anti-Christian texts in various forms. This changed with the great debate of Pānadura between Mohoṭṭiwattē Guṇānanda and David de Silva in 1873, which marked the peak of the period of debate, in that from this time the printing of Buddhist texts was considered as well. The Sinhalese translation of the *Milindapañha* called *Milindaprasānaya*, a version compiled by Hīnaṭikumburē Sumaṅgala in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was among the most important texts that were printed during that period (Malalasekara 1928: 303–304). The choice of this particular text as one of the first printed Buddhist texts is quite telling, since it recounts an ancient debate between Buddhist monks and Greeks (or, more precisely, a dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menandros and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena) and as such, another encounter between Sri Lankans and Western foreigners. The edition was published by Guṇānanda’s press in Kotahena in 1877 (Young and Somaratna 1996: 210).

Printing activities with regard to the *Mahāvamsa* began during the same period. They took place at the boundary between the cultural interests of the colonial government and the revivalist agenda of the new Buddhist elite. In the 1870s monks like Sumaṅgala Hikkaḍuvē and Pandit Baṭuvantuḍāvē were requested by the British colonial government to create editions and translations of the *Mahāvamsa* (Kemper 1991: 95).<sup>11</sup> Even a continuation of the text into the most recent history was produced. All of them were published by the Government Printer. This new edition added new elements foreign to the manuscript design. These mainly served the intellectual desires of philologists and historians of Indian Culture. Therefore, the introduction and establishment of a printing culture not only established a new technology but also implemented new structures of textual authority and functions originating in European academia. However, we must realise that these conventions were not simply European norms for book printing forced upon the emerging Buddhist textual community but also creatively used to “adequately” react to Christian attacks.

A comparison of manuscripts and printed editions of the *Mahāvamsa* shows that there is a variance in the appearance of the text regarding different formats or materials, like paper or palm leaves. Three aspects stand out that relate to connected notions and conventions: illustration, standardisation, and organisation.

1. As we have seen in the previous section, manuscripts of *vamsa* texts in the pre-modern era had a strong connection to religious practice. They were objects of worship, “witnesses” of worship,

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed account of publishing activities around the *Mahāvamsa* see Kemper (1991) and Blackburn (2010).

and simultaneously manuals for this worship. Therefore, illustrations were commonplace in manuscripts. However, printing as a technology heavily influenced by Protestantism did not provide for the worshipping of texts.

2. Driven by the idea that the value of a text solely rests upon its intellectual content, a certain form of standardisation was established. In classical text-critical editions this quest for content was accompanied by the additional task of discovering the “original” content the historical author had actually written. While variants occur frequently in manuscripts, and manuscripts of the same text may differ from each other in their appearance, the text becomes standardised in printed editions. Illustrations and variations disappeared or, as in the case of the latter, were organised in a different way, namely documented in footnotes. Printing marked the birth of critical editions as we know them today.

3. The organisation of texts changed through the use of footnotes and page as well as verse numbers, which enabled different readers to refer to the same text edition. However, pre-modern texts on manuscripts were also standardised and organised, but the form was different. Considering again the example of the *Mahāvamsa* and its manuscript from Haguranketha, it becomes obvious that layout and form of texts on manuscripts are shaped by the medium of palm leaves. The text flows continuously and extends across the whole page. Verses are only separated by a black jagged line. This structure of manuscripts emphasises the narrative flow. The story as a continuous whole stays in the foreground, an aspect that is also reflected in the commentaries and thus in genuine Buddhist scholarly examinations, as these follow the narrative flow of the respective texts. Few illustrations and a high degree of standardisation and organisation in printed editions point to the transfer of the *Mahāvamsa* into a new discursive setting that carries its own authority structure. This structure is now shaped by European formal scientific requirements. Mark-up like footnotes, headings, numerations, long introductions by the editor and indexes guaranteed that an edition would be critical and easily accessible. The index allowed scholars unfamiliar with the text to access it and to quote from it. Printed books were produced with the purpose of collecting and accessing information. Thus, texts like the *Mahāvamsa* became repositories of single particles of information which could easily be re-organised into completely different structures of knowledge authority, such as, for example, history-writing according to European standards. A topic like relic-worship is no longer directly communicated by the *Mahāvamsa* in this sense, but it can recur in studies of cultural history making use of the *Mahāvamsa* as a source. Therefore, we can observe in the shift from manuscripts to printed books how the *Mahāvamsa* transforms from a historical narrative into a historical source.

Within the complex entanglement of European-influenced printing culture, colonial forces, scientific interest and upcoming anti-colonial movements the *Mahāvamsa* has become a work of reference for scholars from various disciplines. However, the status as a reference work is not new to the *Mahāvamsa* since it has been the major reference or model for the compilation of new works like the *Thūpavaṃsa*. But with printing this status has moved into the European-influenced dimension of science and experienced a perceptual shift. Whereas in the period of manuscript transmission the emphasis of *vamsa* texts was on their narrative flows, printing transformed this to the use as an information container, in which the overview of the whole was often abandoned in favour of the focus on details.

Yet, this whole process of adoption and transformation cannot be considered as a one-sided, culture-hegemonic imposing of “Western” achievements. Rather, it has to be seen as a process influenced by two major lines: British-Christian colonialists and Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalists. The case of the *Mahāvamsa* shows very clearly that this text “became a contested site for control of the Sri Lankan past” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kemper 1991: 79), with Oriental scholars on the one side and Buddhist revivalists on the other. The history provided in these ancient texts had become the major interest for both sides, the texts’ connection to religious practice took a back seat.

## 6. Conclusion

In the course of the Buddhist Revival Movement nationalistic ideas arose, in which especially the *Mahāvamsa* played an important role. Thus, next to the scientific a nationalistic discourse emerged, and both strongly interwove and influenced each other. This interaction is still strong today. The general world-wide importance of printing for the emergence of nationalistic ideas has been addressed by several scholars (Eisenstein 2009: 117; Anderson 2006, Kindle edition, chap. 3, par. 20). In the case of Sri Lanka Kemper argues in his study of the *Mahāvamsa*, referring to Benedict Anderson, that the technology of printing contributed fundamentally to the rise and diffusion of nationalistic ideas in Sri Lanka, but he refuses to see them as merely the results of an adaptation of Western models (Kemper 1991: 19). Unlike several earlier studies his investigation sets out from the premise that foreign ideas have to share connecting factors with local ideas and practices (Kemper 1991: 18).

This points to the complex situation of cultural entanglement in which printing in Sri Lanka emerged. Printing represents only one of many factors contributing to the re-fashioning of the *Mahāvamsa* as a central focus of reference on Sri Lanka’s way into Modernity. The adoption of new conventions of text production and reception brought forth a completely new model of education and intellectual engagement in the context of the Buddhist Revival Movement. The leaders and



addressees of this movement were mainly members of the new social and economic elite who were educated according to British standards in the many Christian missionary schools along the west coast. Thus, the transformation of textual practices also gave rise to creative tension between new and traditional forms of religious learning and engagement, which quite quickly shaped a new form of Buddhism. This development gained momentum through the anti-colonial and anti-Christian discourse, which governed these processes right from the beginning. Printing marked a new period in which Buddhist self-confidence and identity grew stronger amidst a British-dominated environment.

In summary, we can say the introduction of a new medium has had a transforming influence on the dimensions of textual practice. However, this influence must be seen before the background of broader historical and social processes, which provided a framework as well as direction for its transformative thrust. What is striking is that both media changes analysed in this article, the one from orality to writing and the one from manuscript use to printing, stimulated the emergence of new forms of Buddhist identity production.

We have seen that the wider introduction of writing in India was connected with the promulgation of Buddhism. In contrast to supporters of the Brahmanical tradition, Buddhists turned writing and manuscript usage into a major constituent of religious practice and reproduction, even if orality nevertheless remained important for the recitation of Buddhist texts—and hence also for their publication. In the exemplary case of the Sri Lankan *Mahāvamsa* it has become obvious how Buddhist manuscripts are subject to practices of text veneration. Therefore, the scholarly investigation of Buddhist textual sources cannot be reduced to their semantic content. Furthermore, during the period of manuscript transmission the narrative flow of the text stood in the foreground. Hence, sophisticated systematic procedures, such as finding parallel passages for exegetic purposes, required memory-based mastery of large literary collections, rather than physical tools of text access (indices etc.). This situation changed with the rise of printing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka. During its 300-year history in Europe printing had already helped to form several epochs of literary history, such as Reformation and Enlightenment, before it arrived in Sri Lanka in 1736. Another 100 years passed before printing was adopted by Sri Lankan Buddhists. This happened at a time of increasing resistance against Christian influence. Personalities like Sumaṅgala Hikkaḍuvē and Mohoṭṭiwattē Guṇānanda endorsed strategies and technologies used by Christian missionaries and transformed them to serve the Buddhist cause. As members of the new anglicanised elite, these leaders of the Buddhist revival movement not only used printing as a technology but also adapted associated European notions of what textual authority had to consist of. For example, the medium of printed

books transformed the perception of *vaṃsa* texts into one of information containers that were not necessarily accepted in total, but “critically” scrutinised according to reliability, rational acceptability, source criticism, originality, ideological implications and the like. The authority structure of European science was introduced also through the backdoor of specific layouts and the organisation of textual presentation (e.g. headings, numerations, and indexes). The usage of the *Mahāvamsa* marked a shift from the dimension of religious practice into the scientific and, later, nationalistic discourse.

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## Notes on Printing Press and Pali Literature in Burma

Aleix Ruiz-Falqués

Beginning with a general reflection on the meaning of “printing revolution”, this paper offers a series of meditations about the role of printing culture in Buddhist Burma. In China and in Tibet, an indigenous printing tradition based on woodblock printing developed over the centuries, much earlier than in Europe. A similar technology, however, was also used in pre-Gutenberg Europe for printing the so-called “Bibles for the poor” (*Biblia pauperum*). I argue that we should differentiate the Gutenberg printing press from other reprographic means, even movable types. Burma has an almost uninterrupted history of relationships with China. Notwithstanding this vicinity, Burma has not developed any kind of reprographic technology. Manuscript culture, on the contrary, has been intensively cultivated at least since the Pagan period, 11th-13th centuries C.E. To judge from epigraphic records, the production of written texts in medieval Burma was extremely costly, for it demanded a great quantity of human labor. The profession of scribe was well known and well appreciated. Monasteries were usually endowed with scribes who would care for the replenishment of the library. The writing tradition was not static. It gained in strength over the centuries. And at the time of British annexation, literacy rates in Burma were higher than in England –without any intervention of the printing press. Even in modern times, two hundred years after the introduction of printing technology in Burma, the name for “literature” in Burmese continues to be “palm-leaf text” (*sa-pe*) and the manuscript imaginaire is still deeply related to Buddhism. The aim of this paper is to problematize printing culture from a particular, local perspective, and link it to the nature of its preceding manuscript tradition.

*The satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act.*

K. Marx, *The German Ideology*, 1845

### 1. General Remarks

The convener of this panel has clearly expressed the object of the present discussion:

The aim of this panel is to challenge the idea of a universal cultural revolution caused by the introduction of the printing press by addressing some “harmless” questions: is this paradigm universally valid? Can we speak of one uniform “printing technology” or

should we rather think of different “printing technologies”? And if the latter case is true, how did these technologies affect different cultural traditions?

This formulation, in itself, contains a series of remarkable problems. I think it is necessary to tackle these problems before we go on with the history of the printing press in Burma, of which I can say only few, but hopefully significant things. Indeed, what I will try to do in this paper is precisely to offer some meditations, in the humanistic style, around the question of printing press and textual culture in Burma. With that I intend to highlight some of the main dialectic tensions in mainstream Burmese Buddhist written culture.

### 1.1. Revolution and Suddenness

It is generally accepted, with a more or less big degree of confidence, that the invention of the printing press triggered a major cultural revolution in Europe. This is considered a fact. By revolution here we understand not only a dramatic shift of paradigm, but a shift of paradigm that accelerates some sort of development. In the case of printing press, the development is in the dissemination of written texts. Revolution is not the change in itself, but something that alters the accustomed pattern –something that actually creates the awareness that the past was a pattern. Revolution causes events to develop at higher speed, or in a higher degree that “revolves”, i.e. spins around the preceding model. Revolution implies a break. A sudden break, a turning point, is essential in a Revolution. Unlike wars (remembered with date of beginning and date of end), revolutions are remembered as events that took place in a particular moment (May 1789, October 1917, May 1968, etc.), a turning point, even though we all know that the French Revolution was a process that lasted years. An Eastern archetypical model for Revolution would be the “setting in motion of the wheel of Dhamma” by the Buddha –by every Buddha. The moment of the Enlightenment of the Buddha is revolutionary.

### 1.2. Revolution as Progress

Originally, the concept of revolution was astronomical: for instance, the revolution of the earth with respect to the sun. In this way, the word revolution expressed cyclicity, a pattern. Today, however, the idea of Revolution is inseparable from the idea of Progress. If a state of affairs dramatically changes for the bad, we call it a “disaster” or a “catastrophe”, not a “revolution”. For instance, the massive extinction in the Jurassic was not a “revolution,” but the domestication of rice was.

When we talk about “universal cultural revolution” we understand immediately a certain acceleration in cultural Progress, a qualitative leap. The idea of Progress is highly controversial but I think we cannot do without it if we are talking about the possibility of a “universal cultural revolution”.

### 1.3. The Transformation of Quantity into Quality

The invention of the printing press has been considered revolutionary in the West because it suddenly allowed information to be disseminated quicker, thus accelerating the pace of progress, the spread of information both vertically (across social strata) and horizontally (across land and sea). Speed itself is the most prominent quality of a Revolution, because with acceleration, quantity is transformed into quality. For instance, one scribe could copy one hundred books in a certain amount of time, but a printing machine could do the same one thousand times faster. This turns the machine into a qualitatively different entity than the copyist, and quantity is changed into quality on account of speed.

### 1.4. The Medium is the Message

McLuhan and others have insisted on the fact that the medium, namely Gutenberg’s printing press, and not the product (books) is the fundamental agent of this revolution. McLuhan has expressed, however, the paradox of conceiving the medium as the container and the message as the content. He says, for instance, that

Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the “content” of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as “content”. The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content. The “content” of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech. (McLuhan 2001: 19)

McLuhan has repeatedly argued that our consideration of a medium as a container is based on our conception of space, thus establishing a relationship that can only be fully grasped against an anthropological background. In tribal culture or in electric age, McLuhan claims, space ceases to be static and therefore the identity of medium and message becomes conspicuous. An example of this phenomenon, nowadays, is the tendency to reduce all mental and spiritual content, which is a sort of

self-narrative, to chemical agents: “It is not love, it is endorphins”. Etc. The tribal man and the man of the electric age is ready to identify the content with the container and is ready to understand that light itself is the information. McLuhan claims that the separation of the medium from its message is a product of literacy and the dissociation of form and meaning that is inherent in alphabetical culture.

In saying this, McLuhan seems to acknowledge that his main theme (“the medium is the message”) is but an epiphany of a literate man awakening in the apparently “tribal” age of electricity (today we would say “of internet”).

### 1.5. McLuhan, Writing and Printing

Sometimes, however, there seems to be some confusion in McLuhan’s arguments, for he tends to equate the literate man with the man of the printing age. In his seminal work *The Gutenberg Galaxy* he devotes only one chapter to the distinction of literacy and typography. This chapter has the title “Only a fraction of the history of literacy has been typographic”. But this chapter is devoted mostly to Joyce, and McLuhan does not clarify what distinguishes the impact of mere literacy from typographical literacy. This ambiguity, I think, involves, again, a greater problem, namely the arbitrary homogenization of human collectives. McLuhan refers to “the tribal man”, “the literate man”, “the Elizabethans”, etc. as if these labels would comprise all the members of the collective he is talking about. This simplification is perhaps useful in the presentation of McLuhan’s argument. Nevertheless, simplification hinders a full assessment of the complexities in the revolutionary processes under examination.

If we take literary practices (oral or written) as the expression of the dominant class, surely these practices cannot account for the dominated class. The dominated class is ultimately the medium’s medium. In other words: if, as McLuhan claims, the novel or the narrative is the content of the book, and the book the content of the printing press, then it follows that the printing press is the content of a mechanized technology involving the physical and mental energy of potentially illiterate workers –let them be the workers in the printing press, or let them be the smiths and carpenters who effectively build and carve the pieces for a printing press. These men and women may be as “Elizabethans” as the others, but they are the medium of the upper class’ medium. They are alienated, that is to say: they are producing books while they are illiterate themselves. And when I say illiterate I do not only mean that they don’t have the ability to read and write, but also that they don’t have the time or opportunity to apply this ability in case they have it. For the products of the dominant class are never the result of the needs of the dominated class.



To sum up, my first claim against McLuhan is that he overlooks the internal dialectic of literary material production, not to mention the mutual dependence between demand and supply.

When we say that the printing press was revolutionary we tend to forget the objective conditions that allowed this revolution to succeed. This is very important, for the idea of Revolution is also (in Marxism) deeply connected with the concept of objective conditions. In Europe, it was not by chance that printing started in the land of Protestantism, for this was an objective condition that allowed the Revolution to take place. It is not by chance that the overseas expansion of European colonial powers began at the same time. In the case of Burma, as I will show, printing culture arrived, precisely, with Protestantism (the north American Baptist Mission) and with colonialism. It was therefore an episode of the long story that began in the fifteenth century.

### 1.6. The Printing and the Profane

McLuhan suggests that printing technology, or in other words, the spread of literacy, generates an isolation of the sense faculties and creates the visual man.<sup>1</sup> The visual man is highly rational and distrusts the supernatural. Therefore the equation has been drawn:

Oral culture = Sacred

Literate culture = Profane

It is not that enlightenment fostered the increment of book printing, but the opposite: book printing fostered rationalism. In the light of the present situation in many countries with high literacy rates, I think it is clear that this equation does not hold good. Moreover, I would say that some openly religious disciplines are deeply rooted in literacy, for instance the Kabbalah, Zodiac correspondences or the tantric letter-symbols. Even mathematics (algebra) requires the use of letters, and the Periodic Table of Elements is also a collection of symbolic letters (a powerful example of the symbolic force of these letters is found in the opening title of the TV series *Breaking Bad*, using the symbols of the chemical elements, which are letters, as conventional letters).

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<sup>1</sup> We have to understand that both oral and manuscript culture do not generate the conception of a static space, something that is achieved only through the mechanical copy of a static text (according to McLuhan).

### 1.7. Literacy and Three Dimensions

In the first sections of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan explores the effect of alphabetic technology in the isolation of visual experience from other senses, and the consequent conception of a static space, which is the basis for the conception of a tridimensional space. It is difficult for us not to think that space is something static. We have seen too many maps and we actually believe they represent real space. But the fact is that for many societies, space is not something in which we exist, some sort of static plane in which we move, without the plane being moved. This idea, namely that there is something static in which things move, would be, according to McLuhan, the result of printed literacy:

The arbitrary selection of a single static position creates a pictorial space with vanishing point. This space can be filled bit by bit, and is quite different from non-pictorial space in which each thing simply resonates or modulates its own space in visually two-dimensional form. [...] Far from being a normal mode of human vision, *three-dimensional perspective is a conventionally acquired mode of seeing, as much acquired as is the means of recognizing the letters of the alphabet*, or of following chronological narrative. (McLuhan 1962: 16; italics mine)

The example chosen by McLuhan is from Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

Edgar... Hark, do you hear the sea?  
Gloucester. No, truly.  
Edgar. Why then, your other senses grow imperfect  
By your eyes' anguish....  
Come on, sir; here's the place. Stand still. how fearful  
And dizzy'tis to cast one's eyes so low!

McLuhan boldly claims that “the anguish of the third dimension is given its first verbal manifestation in poetic history in *King Lear*.” That is true only with respect to anguish. The third dimension and the static point of view, and the marvel, not the anguish, of tridimensional perspective, was expressed in India much earlier, at least as earlier as the times of Kālidāsa, a poet who lived, allegedly, not later than the 5th century C.E. Consider, for instance, this stanza from Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* (“The Cloud Messenger”):

The mountains' flanks are covered  
in wild mango trees shining with ripe fruit  
and you are the color

of a well-oiled braid of hair.  
 When you surmount the peak,  
 it will surely become a worthy sight  
 for coupling celestials,  
 looking as it will  
 like the breast of the world,  
 dark in the middle, pale all around.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the tridimensional perspective is not only compatible with a sacral space, it is actually articulated within it. The static point of view is the one of the gods, high in the sky, and the filling of the three dimensions is clearly expressed by the voluminous image of the earth's breast.

Examples like this one show that printing technology is not necessary in order to configure the tridimensional conceptual space of the literate. Perhaps not even writing is necessary. Indeed, it is very difficult to distinguish the particular effects of printing culture from the effects of plain literacy (in manuscript culture), at least with respect to the dichotomy "literate vs. oral". Therefore, I think it is still to be proven that manuscript copying and printing technology are, from the visual point of view, essentially different technologies. They are different, however, in the qualitative leap of printing technology, which was revolutionary because it allowed a much faster and cheaper spread of information. These two things have to be kept separate in order to understand why the introduction of the printing press never caused a change of mindset in eastern cultures like the Burmese.

## 2. Printing of Pali texts in Burma

### 2.1. No indigenous printing culture in Burma

In China and in Tibet, an indigenous printing tradition based on woodblock printing developed over the centuries, much earlier than in Europe. A similar technology, however, was also used in pre-Gutenberg Europe for printing the so-called "Bibles for the poor" (*Biblia pauperum*) (McLuhan 2001: 172). That is why I think we should differentiate the Gutenberg printing press from other reprographic means, even movable types.

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<sup>2</sup>Translation by James Mallinson (2006: 33). Sanskrit text of the same edition (based on Hultsch 1911):

*channopānta ḥpariṇataphaladyotibhi ḥkānanāmraais  
 tvayyārūḍḥe śikharamacala ḥsnigdhaveṇīsavarṇe |  
 nūna ṇyasyaty amaramithunaprekṣaṇiyām avasthā ṇ  
 madhye śyāma ḥstana iva bhuvah, śeṣavistārapāṇḍu ḥ||*

Burma has an almost uninterrupted history of relationships with China. Notwithstanding this vicinity, Burma has not developed any kind of reprographic technology. Manuscript culture, on the contrary, has been intensively cultivated at least since the Pagan period, 11th-13th centuries C.E.

To judge from epigraphic records, the production of written texts in medieval Burma was extremely costly, for it demanded a great quantity of human labor. The profession of scribe was well known and well appreciated. Monasteries were usually endowed with scribes who would care for the replenishment of the library. The writing tradition was not static. It gained in strength over the centuries. And at the time of British annexation, literacy rates in Burma were higher than in England –this, I shall remind, without the intervention of printing press. Even in modern times, two hundred years after the introduction of printing technology in Burma, the name for “literature” in Burmese continues to be “palm-leaf text” (*sa-pe*).

## 2.2. The Baptist Missionary Press

The pioneering activity of missionary printing press in Burma was remarkable from the early 19th century. In the records of missionary literature we learn that “a printing press had been sent from Serampore, and a missionary printer, George H. Hough, who arrived from America with his wife in 1817, produced the first printed materials in Burmese ever printed in Burma, which included 800 copies of Judson's translation of the *Gospel of Matthew*” (Maung Shwe Wa, Sowards, and Sowards 1963). Judson, an indefatigable man of God, published also the first Grammar of the Burmese language and a Dictionary in the Baptist Mission Press of Rangoon.



Fig. 1. Judson imprisoned in Ava: “It took Judson 12 years to make 18 converts.”

(Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoniram\\_Judson#/media/File:Adoniram\\_Judson\\_imprisoned.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoniram_Judson#/media/File:Adoniram_Judson_imprisoned.jpg), accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2017)

The first Pali materials to be printed were also the work of another Baptist, Rev. Francis Mason, who published a *Pali Grammar on the basis of Kacchayano, with Chrestomathy and Vocabulary* (1868). This book was the first to combine Devanāgarī, Ashokan Brahmi and Burmese scripts with Roman script—a commendable tour de force, given the precarious conditions under which Mason was working. A self-awareness that he was producing something never attempted before is noticeable in the preface. Mason says:

It is an interesting fact that the Pali, which has the oldest alphabet in India, has been printed by Karens whose own language is among the last reduced to writing. Some of the earlier forms show their inexperience, but the general character of the work has been commended.

The Deputy Commissioner in his official report to Government, dated 23, Oct. 1867, wrote: “The Printing department of the Institute I consider a *great success*. Dr. Mason has learned the printers’ art, and taught three Karens to print. The Pali Grammar, a copy of which I shall send you with a separate letter, has been printed by these men, and I think reflects great credit on Dr. Mason and his pupils.”

The Rev. E.B. Cross writes: “I wrote you a hasty note on Saturday, which did not fully answer my purpose. I ought first of all to have expressed my ADMIRATION of your printing in all the characters and languages which it represents, for it is certainly very neatly and BEAUTIFULLY done.” (Mason 1868, iii)

The work was printed with the assistance of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1864, which paid for the types. The book was destined to a group of subscribers, around 150, 50 being for The Government of India and 50 for Trübner and Co.

### 2.3. Printing and Popular Culture

The blossoming of printing activity in Burma took place shortly after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852), in the advent of British occupation of the southern provinces.

In 1870, Mandalay was still the capital of Upper Burma, and the cultural capital of the Kingdom. The court of King Mindon in Mandalay promoted a series of reforms in order to modernize the country. Modernization was an attempt to save the last portions of territory from British annexation, following the reformist diplomatic skills of the Thai rulers. Modern photography and electricity were introduced, but strangely enough, no printing press was established. By contrast, a monumental edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka was engraved in stone slabs in commemoration of the so-called 5<sup>th</sup> Theravada Buddhist Council. The large investment devoted to stone inscriptions instead of printing

press is highly symbolic. Today, scholars all-over the world can consult the stone inscriptions in a cd-rom and a new digital edition of the stones is being prepared by a team directed by Professor Mark Allon (University of Sydney). In this way the 5<sup>th</sup> council edition has skipped printing technology.



Fig. 2. Stone slabs in the Kuthodaw pagoda, Mandalay. <http://www.photodharma.net/Myanmar/Kuthodaw-Sandamuni/Kuthodaw-Sandamuni.htm>, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2017)

Local printing press became very active in Rangoon and the southern provinces by the 1870s. These printing presses mostly published popular literature in Burmese language (Myint-U 2001, 152). For the first time written culture ceased to be the monopoly of Buddhism. British investments on the harbour city of Rangoon, rather than on Upper Burma's capital Mandalay, produced a renaissance in Lower Burma culture. From 1850 until 1880 Lower Burma “grew as a sort of ‘alternative Burma’ which sapped the legitimacy of Mandalay, allowed an unprecedented flight of cultivators, produced a new source of Burmese culture, especially through printed books, and threw up a new class of indigenous administrators, schooled by the British and who retained very limited family and other connections with the old elites in the north” (Myint-U 2001, 207).

Local printing presses of Pali texts like the Suddhammavati Press of Rangoon became active only later on, in the 1920s and 1930s.

#### 2.4. Manuscript Culture and Nationalism in the 20th Century

The manuscript as a medium of transmission of sacred texts was used well into the 20th century. For instance, in the 1920s in the city of Thaton (southern Burma) manuscript provisions for an entire monastic library were commissioned by U Pho Thi, an influential businessman of the region. The printed books and the manuscripts of that library sometimes overlap in their contents. Indeed, they were respectively printed and copied at the same time.

And even though the manuscript copy could be considered an object of worship rather than reference material, many of the manuscripts present signs of having been used, consulted, read. On the other hand we must not overlook the symbolic effect of the library itself, the so-called *Tipiṭaka-taik*.

We ignore how much these manuscripts have been used by monks. The library was established to serve monastic examinations that were independent from the British education system. The copy of Pali manuscripts in the early 20th century, therefore, was meant to be a challenge to English colonial education transmitted by modern printed school books.

A fine instance of the symbolic power of manuscript is the still popular use of lacquered *kammavācā* manuscripts (texts to be recited during the ordination). Christian Lammerts has highlighted the features of the tamarind-seed script used in this kind of text: the letters are extremely squared and bold, and thus difficult to read, a factor that may enhance memorization. On the other hand, this is the only manuscript style still produced in Burma. (Lammerts 2010, 236-237).

### 2.5. The printing of the 6<sup>th</sup> Council Edition

Not long after independence in 1947, Prime Minister U Nu organized a 6th Theravada Council (the 6<sup>th</sup> according to the Burmese tradition only). The outcome of this council was a systematic printed edition of the Canon, Commentaries, Sub-commentaries and ancillary works, which is the origin of the digital edition called the Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana CD ([www.tipitaka.org](http://www.tipitaka.org)).

A different version of the canon, published by the Handhawaddy Press<sup>3</sup>, can still be found, but it is not easy and has been systematically removed from monastic library shelves and Pali bookshops.

The late 1950s and 1960s were very productive in printed Pali editions. In the course of time, however, and following the economic decline that started in 1962 and ended only a few years ago, the printing of Pali works, canonical and non-canonical, has suffered a shortage and as a result of this many books are only to be found, today, in bound photocopies. Offset techniques have replaced true printing types. This change, I think, entails a significant restriction to the lively work in progress extended over the different editions of the same text. Additions, corrections, updates are ruled out.

The spread of offset is known all over the world. In Burma, a country that never signed the Copyright treatise, Pali bookshops are usually also Pali “copy presses” exposed to no legal prosecution.

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<sup>3</sup> Hamsavati Press. Hamsavati is the Pali name for Bago, which was the capital of the Mon kingdom in the south of present day Burma.

## 2.6. Photocopy as printing: a modern workshop

In my last visit to Burma, I was looking for some rare grammatical texts. At first it became apparently impossible to find copies of these books in any major Pali bookshop both in Yangon and Mandalay, the biggest cities in terms of monastic education. Later I visited Sagaing, a small city with a large monastic concentration, not far from Mandalay. In the library of a monastery in Sagaing I found the books I was looking for. I enquired how I could obtain a copy of these books. The librarian told me about a bookshop in Mandalay where rare Pali books were still sold. I went there the same day and what I found was a small monastery, a bungalow really, in a suburb of Mandalay. In the first floor of that house, the head monk had a copying machine and a very remarkable collection of old Pali editions, most of them damaged by insects, weather, or both.



Fig. 3. The balcony of the lost pages. Every two weeks three erudite monks from the Mandalay area meet here and talk about rare books while enjoying a hot tea (photo: A. Ruiz-Falqués, 2012)

This monk uses “clean” pages from different editions and composes a photocopied edition—a new, flawless version of the text. These books are no longer in print. Most of them are very rare indeed, for they are not canonical works and even many Pali scholars ignore their existence. The self-made printer monk has published a catalog and he caters for the monasteries in the Mandalay area—the area with the largest concentration of scholar monks in Burma.





Fig. 4. The picture of a picture. The copy monk with his machine, featured in a local newspaper (photo: A. Ruiz-Falqués, 2012)

The existence of this photocopy workshop was certainly surprising to me. It offers, I think, an example of the ways in which tradition finds its own way to survive. Of course, the labors of this monk would be barren if there would not be a demand.

This is a case of 2013, in the Internet era. The monk being already old, it is difficult to know how long this individual enterprise will last, probably not long, but it has set an admirable example, and surely pdf scans will be done on the basis of his patchworks.

### 3. Conclusions

With respect to Pali publications in Burma, the copy machine has replaced in many cases the printing press. Today, several websites are replacing paper altogether. This gives a new perspective in evaluating the role of printing press in Pali literature of Burma. The great law of bibliography says that “the more there were, the fewer there are” (McLuhan 2001, 172). Mainstream culture changes constantly and tends to forget, whereas the elite tends to preserve its relatively small corpus of texts, sacred and always threatened by the lack of popularity. Since Pali literature is minoritarian and elitist, we can say: “the lesser they were, the better they survive.” This is true, at least, in a country where preservation of manuscripts and Buddhist texts in general is much more secured than secular literature and receives constant (if sometimes insufficient) institutional support.

McLuhan says that “repeatability is the core of the mechanical principle that has dominated our world, especially since the Gutenberg technology.” (McLuhan 2001, 173). McLuhan also suggested that modern nationalism was a product of printing technology. This seems to be very suitable for Burma, because the first period of popular exposition to printing in Burmese (secular literature) coincided with the explosion of Burmese nationalism in the 1920s. Nevertheless, the same could be said of manuscripts or stone inscriptions. I have already pointed out McLuhan’s overlooking of broader material conditions. Material conditions are much more important than the implementation

of certain technologies. For instance, there are many houses now with A/C apparels in Burma, but electric power shortage persists. One may end up possessing the technology as a potential, but the actualization of this technology depends on other factors. But this problem is too complex to be addressed here.

### 3.1. Winding Up

Now, if we ask again the following questions:

Can we speak of one uniform “printing technology” or should we rather think of different “printing technologies”? And if the latter case is true, how did these technologies affect different cultural traditions?

The reply to the first question is that the variety of printing technologies (Gutenberg style) is possible due to certain material conditions, and that applies to Burma as well.

In this case the material conditions were determined by Western colonialism and the Christian missions.

To the second question we could provisionally answer that the effects of printing technology in Burma were primarily caused by the content of the printed texts. If the first printed text in Burmese is the *Gospel of Matthew*, the entire project of printing seems bound to fail. For we cannot ignore the almost imperceptible impact of evangelization in a Buddhist country. The impact is inversely proportional to that of printed Bibles in Christian Europe. This seems to demonstrate that the medium is not the message and that the success of Gutenberg in Europe had to do with other factors involving the content of the printed books, especially the Reform of Martin Luther.

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## On a Particular Aspect of the Identification of Tibetan Xylographs: Preliminary Remarks on the Importance of Craftsmen<sup>1</sup>

*Michela Clemente*

This essay briefly discusses the early history of Tibetan printing by comparing some facets of this subject with the European phenomenon. Printing started to be a means of dissemination of texts in Tibet and Europe at roughly the same time. Recent research indicates that although printing in Tibet does not seem to have had the kind of socially transformative effects highlighted in Elisabeth Eisenstein's study, it did have some important consequences and also similarities with the European printing history. This article also presents a Marie Skłodowska Curie project on Tibetan xylographs entitled *Tibetan Book Evolution and Technology* (TiBET), which was carried out at the University of Cambridge (Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit) from 2013 to 2015. This paper focuses in particular on one of the aspects of the above-mentioned project, that is to say, the craftsmen who worked on sixteenth century xylographs and their importance for the identification of Tibetan prints. These artists were allowed to sign their work, a peculiarity that was typical of the earliest stage of printing and is extremely relevant for locating the printing house where a certain xylograph was produced. By comparing the different signatures and patterns of carving, writing or drawing, we might learn to distinguish the diverse style of each artist. This would help us in identifying those who worked on xylographs that lack signatures and do not mention them in colophons. From these prints we can also extract information about the craftsmen and the printing projects with which they were associated.

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## 1. Introduction

This essay has the twofold aim of briefly discussing the history of Tibetan printing by comparing some facets of this subject with the European phenomenon, and presenting a Marie Skłodowska Curie project on Tibetan xylographs, which was carried out at the University of Cambridge from 2013 to 2015. This paper will focus in particular on one aspect of the project, that is to say, the craftsmen who worked on sixteenth century xylographs and their importance for the identification of Tibetan prints.<sup>2</sup> This paper does not claim to be exhaustive. It is instead an attempt to pinpoint some aspects of this subject which need to be investigated with future research.

I started to work on printing in 2005 when I was preparing my PhD dissertation, mainly focusing on Mang yul Gung thang xylographs.<sup>3</sup> At that time I noticed some distinctive features and started to think about identifying them in a template. In 2010 I became involved, along with Hildegard Diemberger (University of Cambridge) and Franz-Karl Ehrhard (Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich), in a collaborative project entitled “Transforming Technology and Buddhist Book Culture: The Introduction of Printing and Digital Text Reproduction in Tibetan Societies,” organised by the University of Cambridge in cooperation with the British Library.<sup>4</sup> Aim of this project was to achieve an understanding of the book, not only as text, but also as material culture in the context of Tibetan Buddhism by analysing the factors that promoted printing and its impact on Tibetan society and culture.

At the end of 2011 I was invited to Kathmandu in order to identify and examine the original Gung thang xylographs kept at the National Archives. I was also able to have a look at many books that, over some years, had been microfilmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP).<sup>5</sup> At that time I noticed further minor peculiar characteristics; each xylograph from a printing house located in that area seemed indeed to have its own slight distinctive features. Through

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<sup>2</sup> When I talk about printing in Tibet, I refer to texts produced with the xylographic technique. On the origins of woodblock printing, see Brokaw and Kornicki (2013: xvii-xix). On Tibetan early prints, great printing projects, xylographic procedure and materials, see Clemente (2007); Clemente (2011); Clemente (2014a); Clemente (2016a); Clemente (2016b); Dageyab (1977: 44-46, 58-59); Diemberger (2007: 107-09); Diemberger (2012); Diemberger (2016b); Diemberger and Clemente (2013); Diemberger and Clemente (2014); Ehrhard (2000a); Ehrhard (2010); Ehrhard (2012); Eimer (2010); Eimer (2016); Eimer and Tsering (1990); Jackson (1989); Jackson (1990); Jackson and Jackson (1986); Schaeffer (2011); Sernesi (2011); Sernesi (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Mang yul Gung thang is a small kingdom located in South Western Tibet. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century this kingdom became a very important centre for the production of Buddhist xylographs. On this subject, see in particular Ehrhard (2000a). For the history of this kingdom, see Everding (2000).

<sup>4</sup> This project was funded by the British Art and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, 2010-2015) and led by Dr. Uradyn Bulag (MIASU).

<sup>5</sup> This travel was granted by the AHRC project.

an analysis of the numerous extant Gung thang xylographs collected by the above-mentioned project it seems possible therefore to identify their origin; that is to say, the printing house where each of them was printed, or the network of artists associated with a certain printing house, or a specific project to narrow the research.

This is the reason why I carried out a correlated project entitled “Tibetan Book Evolution and Technology” (TiBET), a Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellowship supported by the European Union and hosted by the University of Cambridge (May 2013-2015). One of the aims of this project was to identify the provenance of early Tibetan prints on the basis of peculiar stylistic features and a study of colophons supported by material analyses.<sup>6</sup> I examined the fifteenth and sixteenth century xylographs from Mang yul Gung thang and Southern La stod (La stod lHo). Texts come from various libraries in the UK (Cambridge University Library, the British Library, the Bodleian Library and the World Museum of Liverpool),<sup>7</sup> several libraries in Tibet,<sup>8</sup> the National Archives of Kathmandu (Nepal) and the Tucci Tibetan Collection of the IsIAO Library in Rome (Italy).<sup>9</sup> These works are now hosted at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU, Cambridge) in digital forms and are available on the database of both the above-mentioned projects.<sup>10</sup> We collected about two hundred texts, including reprints and different editions. These xylographs are being studied according to codicological standards and in co-operation with experts from different disciplines. By examining

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<sup>6</sup> On this project, see also Clemente (2016a, 2016b).

<sup>7</sup> The images of these texts have been collected thanks to a previous AHRC project, "Tibetan and Mongolian Rare Books and Manuscripts", led by Professor Stephen Hugh-Jones (MIASU, University of Cambridge).

<sup>8</sup> The images of these texts have been obtained thanks to a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and the dPal brtsegs Research Institute in Lhasa, to which we are particularly grateful. Without the help of the dPal brtsegs staff, it would have been impossible to access these sources. These texts are now available in two CDs attached to a book published by the dPal brtsegs Research Institute. See PT 2013.

<sup>9</sup> The images of these texts have been produced by Laura and Claudia Primangeli (L&C Service) thanks to an agreement between IsIAO and the University of Cambridge within the above-mentioned AHRC project (2010-2015). The images of these texts are particularly precious, since the Institution was closed in 2011 and all works of the Tucci Tibetan Collection are no longer accessible.

<sup>10</sup> A database with a detailed description of these texts, transliteration and mark-up of colophons and entire biographies, entries of personal and place names, information on paper and pigments, if available, has been built by both the above-mentioned projects and is available at: <http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html>, and is also accessible from the website of the TiBET Project: <http://www.tbevoltech.socanth.cam.ac.uk/database/>

The description of each text is linked to its images. The database enables scholars to cross check information extracted by studying early prints from those areas. A map of printing houses located in Mang yul Gung thang and neighbouring areas is available on the websites of both projects. The database is also linked to TBRC and will supplement it with entries of people and places that are not currently available there. The website of the TiBET project is available at: [www.tbevoltech.socanth.cam.ac.uk](http://www.tbevoltech.socanth.cam.ac.uk). For a condensed version of the database, see Clemente (in press).

them from several standpoints the project detected characteristic stylistic features to identify the various printing houses located in the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom and the neighbouring areas, especially Southern La stod, and the network of artists who worked in those places.

Over the years these two kingdoms became important centres for the printing of Buddhist texts thanks to the support of their rulers. As underscored by Franz-Karl Ehrhard, the xylographs printed in the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries played a significant role in spreading the tradition of these Buddhist works.<sup>11</sup> The same occurred in Southern La stod, which was a center for calligraphers and scribes from at least the fifteenth century (Ehrhard 2000a: 13).

Important printing projects were undertaken in Tibet starting from the fifteenth century, which was a flourishing period for arts and culture throughout the country (Reynolds 1999: 23). As underlined by Hildegard Diemberger, "the sponsorship of important Buddhist leaders was not only meritorious but also a means to assert political power" (2007: 32). This was particularly relevant at that time when, after the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1368), numerous Tibetan local noble families had emerged and were fighting to gain more power and territories. On the other hand, the promoters of printing projects were important religious masters who wished not only to preserve and spread Buddha's teachings, but also to increase the prestige of a given lineage by printing the works of that school's renowned *bla mas*. Turning a profit was therefore not the aim of these enterprises.

According to Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, the situation in Europe after Gutenberg's invention was slightly different:<sup>12</sup> "It seems more accurate to describe many publishers as being *both* businessmen *and* literary dispensers of glory. They served men of letters not only by providing traditional forms of patronage but also by acting as press agents and as cultural impresarios of a new kind. [...] The printer

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<sup>11</sup> See for example the history of the *Padma thang yig*, the *rGyud bzhi* (Ehrhard 2000a, 14-15) and the *Maṅi bka' 'bum*, in particular Clemente (2014b, 2016a: 401-402), Ehrhard (2000c, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> The comparison between the effects of printing in the Tibetan and European societies might be weird at first sight since I am referring to two different techniques for printing, that is to say, the xylographic procedure for Tibet and movable type for Europe. The reason behind such a comparison is the strong impact that printing had on both societies, although they employed different methods. In Tibet, the xylographic technique had such a success since its introduction that it has been only recently superseded by movable type and digital technologies. Actually, there is often a direct transfer from xylography to digital technologies. As for xylography in Europe, Chow underlines the fact that this technique "has been ignored by narratives of the history of Western printing. In most standard histories of western European printing, the advent of print is fixed at the point when Gutenberg printed a Bible with movable type no later than 1456. While all scholars of the book know that woodblock printing was used in Europe several decades before 1456, few regard what have been called 'block books' as the ancestor of the Gutenberg Bible" (2007: 171). He also states that contrasting 'xylography' with 'the printed book' means to disregard the former as a true printing method.



could take satisfaction in serving humanity at large even while enhancing the reputation of authors and making money for himself” (1979: 23). Also regarding literacy, things were different in Europe and Tibet: “[...] the advent of printing did encourage the spread of literacy even while changing the way written texts were handled by already literate élites” (Eisenstein 1979: xiii). Concerning the situation in Tibet, Hildegard Diemberger pointed out that the xylographic technique “facilitated access to textual resources, promoted the circulation of standard works, and contributed to the creation of shared standards and editing criteria. Although the spread of literacy remained limited, printing ultimately reshaped the relationship to knowledge in terms of access and control, informing subsequent historical developments, including the rise of clerical power” (2007: 16).

Although the dissemination of the xylographic technique in Tibet had a significant—but still unrecognised — impact in the country, it did not stop the production of manuscripts, although this latter declined, and even froze at times. According to Roger Chartier, the same occurred in Europe: “it is now recognized that printing, at least for the first four centuries of its existence, did not lead to the disappearance of handwritten communication or manuscript publication” (2007: 398). The reasons adduced by Chartier are the following: “[...] writing was cheaper than printing; handwritten texts eluded censorship more easily than printed ones; circulation could be restricted to an elite audience; and manuscript as a medium was more malleable in allowing additions and revisions” (2007: 398). The first and last reasons adduced by Chartier are also valid for Tibet. As for the circulation, it has already been mentioned that one of the aims of undertaking big printing projects in Tibet was the spread of texts, but the restriction of certain works to a specific audience was also embraced. This is true for some of the highest Tantras, which seem not to have been produced by these enterprises. The limited literacy of Tibetans did not restrict the diffusion of most genres of printed works to a minor part of the population. Tibetans indeed used to take paper to monasteries and/or printing houses and ask for a copy of a given text. Since Buddhist books are considered as Buddha’s relics, people certainly used to worship them, but they also asked religious masters to visit their houses and read the books to them.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, even though literacy remained limited, the spread of printing appears to have had an impact on the life of lay people as well, by providing an easier access to sources for their spiritual existence.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, as noticed by Hildegard Diemberger: “Il reste cependant nécessaire d’approfondir les recherches concernant la circulation réelle des livres imprimés afin de déterminer à quel point la nouvelle accessibilité de ces ouvrages a effectivement élargi leur lectorat” (2012: 32).

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<sup>13</sup> On this subject, see for example Diemberger (2016a: 297-298).

<sup>14</sup> For further considerations on the impact of the xylographic technique in Tibet, see Clemente (2016a: 402-405).

As Chow underscored: “the role of woodblock printing as an object of study has been greatly depreciated in the history of European printing. Historians often mention block printing as a crude method promptly replaced by the more sophisticated Gutenberg printing” (2007: 175). This view of woodblock printing as an obsolete, unrefined and slow technology would totally change by looking at some of the lavish beautifully illustrated Tibetan xylographs and by watching Tibetans producing them. You cannot imagine how fast the operation managed by well-trained people is. Also, this technique allows for a flexible demand in market: it is possible to print a rather small number of copies and, once a stock runs out, it is easy to pull out the stored blocks and reprint the text without having to waste labour and time on re-composition (Brokaw and Kornicki 2013: xix; Diemberger 2012: 33).

We know that in the fifteenth century printing houses mushroomed in different places of Tibet within a few decades and that in the sixteenth century they were everywhere. Nevertheless, scholars researching this field tend to think about fifteenth and sixteenth century Tibetan printing as a small scale operation. The scanty number of extant prints that have been discovered so far would seem to support this view, but references to big projects, schools of calligraphy and printing, worn out blocks, circulation of prints, reading practices, the emergence of certain works as classics, transformations elicited by the production of xylographs and so on seem to indicate a wider phenomenon. Also, it is worth considering that most of the original works have either not survived, or have not surfaced as yet; however, many of them are now beginning to appear, therefore some years hence the situation might be very different. Furthermore, the number of printing houses, the extensive support and the wide network of patronage that printing projects required are not compatible with the production of few copies. If we think about all these factors, we cannot really support the theory that Tibetan printing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a small scale operation.

## 2. Woodcut Representations in Mang yul Gung thang Xylographs and the Relevance of Craftsmen

The creation of a template for the identification of Tibetan xylographs requires the examination of texts from different viewpoints, such as materials analysis, the style of the edition, book cover typology (if present) and the study of the colophon. Since these points have already been explored in detail in two previous articles (Clemente 2011, 2016b), I will confine myself here to a discussion on one of the aspects of the style of editions. Generally speaking, there are at least four distinctive features that may identify a Gung thang xylograph: front page, layout, orthographic peculiarities and woodcut

representations.<sup>15</sup> The style of the edition has also another element that, at first, was taken into consideration as one of the possible distinctive features, that is to say the *ductus*. However, after a deeper examination, I decided to exclude it from facets that may help identifying the provenance of a print. The variables that influence the writing style of a certain scribe (materials, writing and carving tools, carver's style, etc.) are too numerous and random to make it an element for identification.<sup>16</sup> Here I will make some preliminary remarks on the last feature, focusing especially on the relevance of the craftsmen who worked on them.<sup>17</sup>

According to Chow, woodblock printing has been treated by European historians only as an art or craft, whereas movable-type is regarded as a technology (2007: 176). I certainly agree with Chow that woodblock printing was a technology but it was also an art. Illustrations on Mang yul Gung thang xylographs are usually depicted on the first and last pages (*le lha'i ri mo*). They represent pictures of renowned religious masters and deities and may either be coloured or black and white. Usually, the first – and sometimes the second – folio carry images of religious masters, often associated with the school to which the text belongs or else with the author's lineage. Deities – also connected to the school or author's lineage – are depicted at the end of texts.

Usually, at least two artists were involved in the creation of these illustrations. The first – the painter (*le lha'i rig byed*) – drew the picture; the second – the carver (*le lha'i rkos byed*) – carved it. Most artists who used to work on these illustrations – but also other craftsmen involved in printing projects – were called *mkhas pa*, which literally means “expert, specialist.” This term was used in the western part of the gTsang region (Jackson 1996: 138, n. 302). These artists were allowed to sign their work, a peculiarity that was typical of the earliest stage of printing (Ehrhard 2000a: 69, 75; Eimer 1996: 12) and is extremely relevant for the identification of xylographs. By comparing the different signatures and patterns of carving, writing or drawing, we might indeed learn to distinguish the diverse style of each artist. This would help us in identifying those who worked on xylographs that lack signatures and do not mention them in colophons. The fact that artists involved in printing projects could sign their work indicates their high status, since this was not usually the case for craftsmen who worked on *thangkas*, wall paintings, statues, book covers, and so on. Moreover, the signature was also an effective method to quantify their work in order to pay them (Ehrhard 2000a:

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<sup>15</sup> On these features, see Clemente (2016b).

<sup>16</sup> On this subject, see Clemente (forthcoming); Boesi and Helman-Ważny (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Detailed information on these craftsmen are available in the database of the above-mentioned projects. On this subject, see also Clemente (2016b) and Clemente and Lunardo (in press).

69). This is especially true for carvers, since a big printing project required a number of them;<sup>18</sup> indeed a carver could take from seven to ten days to complete an average size woodblock (Richardson and Snellgrove 1998, 229). From the signatures in one of the Gung thang texts, for example, we know that eleven carvers were involved in that production. I am referring to “The [Auto]biography and Spiritual Songs of *rJe btsun ‘ba’ ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391)*”,<sup>19</sup> printed by Nam mkha’ rdo rje (1480-1553)<sup>20</sup> at rDzong dkar (the capital of Gung thang) in 1540-41. The carvers mentioned in the xylographs are:<sup>21</sup> *mkhas pa bSod nams bkra shis, dge bshes mKha’ ‘gro, dge sbyong Nam mkha,’ dge sbyong mGon ne, dge sbyor Nam me, dge bshes Tshe ‘phel, dge bshes Ma gcig, dge bshes mGon dbang, Sher rgyal, bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan, Ba dzra dho ja (Vajradhvaja).*<sup>22</sup>

In another text, printed in 1555 at Brag dkar rta so, there are the signatures of ten carvers.<sup>23</sup> Most of them also worked on the above mentioned 1540 rDzong dkar print. The supervisor of the project was again Nam mkha’ rdo rje. This underlines the fact that most masters used to employ the

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<sup>18</sup> I also found the signature of the carver of one illustration included in its caption. This is the only one that I have discovered so far. The caption under the image on the left is not entirely readable due to a damage of the folio. The name of the illustrated master is unreadable, but the second part of the caption says: *rdor rgyal rkos /* (Cf. NGMPP L66/5: f. 1b). This signature refers to *bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal*. On this artist, see n. 40.

<sup>19</sup> *rJe btsun ‘ba’ ra pa rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po’i rnam thar mgur ‘bum dang bcas pa*. An original xylograph of this work is kept in the Tucci Tibetan Collection of the ISIAO Library in Rome (vol. 671/1). For its cataloguing, see De Rossi Filibeck (2003: 335). On the printing of this work, see Ehrhard 2000a, 45, n. 38, 61-63. A copy of this work is also available in the CD of the dPal brtsegs book. See PT 2013 (text no. 21). Microfilms of this work are kept at the National Archives of Kathmandu (NGMPP L195/9, L535/5) but are different editions. Further copies seem also available there, but I was not able to check them.

<sup>20</sup> On this master, see Ehrhard (2000a: 51-66).

<sup>21</sup> Carver’s signatures: f. 10b: *‘di yan le lha stod kyi cha / mkhas pa bsod nams bkra shis rkos //*; f. 20b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig bcu dpon rdo rje rgyan rkos //*; f. 30b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge slong mkha’ ‘gros rkos //*; f. 40b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge sbyong na<m> mkhas rkos //*; f. 44b: *‘di yan bzhi mgo<n> nes rkos //*; f. 60b: *na<m> me lags //*; f. 70b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge bshes tshe ‘phel rkos //*; f. 90b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge sbyong na<m> mkhas rkos //*; f. 100b: *‘di yan bcu phrag gcig / dge bshes ma gcig rkos //*; f. 110b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge bshes mgon dbang rkos //*; f. 120b: *bcu phra<g> gcig / sher rgyal rkos //*; f. 130b: *‘di yan bcu rdo rgyal rkos //*; f. 140b: *‘di yan bcu na<m> mes rkos //*; f. 150b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge <bsh>es tshe ‘phel rkos //*; f. 160b: *‘di yan bcu phrag gcig / dge bshes mkha’ ‘gros rkos //*; f. 168b: *badzra dhwo jas rkos //*; f. 170b: *‘di yan bcu phra<g> gcig / dge sbyong mgo<n> nes rkos //*; f. 180b: *‘di yan bcu phrag gcig / dge slong mkha’ <’>gros rkos //*

<sup>22</sup> Information on the above-mentioned artists are available in the appendix of this essay.

<sup>23</sup> f. 9b: *‘di yan bzhi mgon rgyal rkos /*; f. 12b: *gsum mgon dbang rkos /*; f. 15b: *gsum padmas rkos /*; f. 18b: *‘di yan gsum mgon rdor pos rkos //*; f. 21b: *‘di yan gsum dge ‘dun rkos //*; f. 24b: *‘di yan gsum mkha’ ‘gros rkos //*; f. 27b: *‘di yan gsum mgon pos rkos //*; f. 30b: *‘di yan gsum mgon nes rkos //*; f. 33b: *‘di yan gsum mgon rdor dang gis rkos //*; f. 36b: *‘di yan gsum ‘phrin las rkos //*; f. 39b: *dpal ‘byor //*; f. 43b: *‘di gnyis dge ‘dun //*; f. 45b: *‘di yan gnyis mgon po //*; f. 51b: *gnyis mgon rdor + //*; f. 53b: *gnyis mgon dbang /*; f. 55b: *‘di yan gnyis mgon rdor dang /*; f. 67b: *dge ‘dun //*; f. 68b: *mgon po /*; f. 69b: *mgon nes rkos /*; f. 70b: *‘phrin las /*; f. 74b: illegible; f. 136b: *lnga dge mdun /*; f. 141b: *lnga dpal ‘byor rkos //*; f. 146a: *lnga +++ rkos /*; f. 151a: *‘di yan lnga ‘phrin las skos /*; f. 169b: *mgon pos rkos /* See NGMPP L10/22.

same craftsmen in all their projects.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, according to David and Janice Jackson, “[i]n the remote villages and nomadic regions the artisan often went to the dwellings or encampments of his patrons and customers. There he would stay for as long as his services were needed, and then move on. But in all settlements in Tibet, large and small, there was a continuous demand for the various specialized skills and crafts that supported the traditional way of life” (1988: 6). This statement also supports the fact that most craftsmen used to work with the same supervisor in many of his projects, moving around when it was necessary.

From the titles of artists, we understand that several of them were monks (*dge slong*, *dge sbyong*, *dge bshes*, etc.), but we also find some local officers (*bcu dpon*, *dpon chen*, *dmag dpon*, etc.). This might imply that these craftsmen attended the courses at schools of calligraphy and printing after having started their careers as monks or officers. It is possible that during and after the specialisation, they also carried on their first job while practising their new activity. Then, they probably switched job since most of them seem to have been involved with several printing projects. It might be possible that some of the local officers who later became scribes had acted as scribes of letters before attending the school of calligraphy and printing. It is possible to find different titles that refer to the same person. For example, I found *dge slong* and *dge bshes* associated with the same artist in different texts, but sometimes this also happens within the same work. At first I thought they referred to two different people, but now tend to think that they actually refer to the same person. This also occurs with personal names that can be written in two or three different ways within the same text.

As mentioned above, artists involved in sixteenth century printing projects usually specialised in one particular task, that is to say, carving of woodblocks, carving of woodcut representations or drawing of illustrations or calligraphy. Tim Barrett (2016: 560) reports that a few scholars in Chinese studies attributed the rise of the medical profession based on published, standardised medical classics to the introduction and spread of printing. We might argue that in Tibet this innovation also increased some professions – such as carvers, painters and scribes – in number and quality. If we think about the establishment of schools of calligraphy and printing in the fifteenth century, we might say that this was prompted by the introduction of printing in the country and the consequent increase in the demand for people expert in these arts. At the beginning, promoters of the project might have employed common engravers who used to work on buildings (monasteries, temples, etc.), furniture, statues or book covers, but with the multiplication of printing projects they probably felt the need of specialised carvers as well as scribes. Artists with two different specialisations were

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<sup>24</sup> On this subject, see Clemente (2007: 15; 2016c).

extremely rare. Unfortunately, we do not have significant information on the course of study in schools of calligraphy and printing; a subject that I would like to investigate in future research. Beyond *bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan*, *Badzra dho ja* and *mKhas pa bSod nams bkra shis*, I also found a few further artists with two specialisations, one of them being *sa skyong yig dpon dPal ldan rgyal po*. He was an expert scribe who used to work at the court of the Gung thang kings, but was also a specialist carver who worked with one of the very active masters of that area, that is to say, *btsun pa Chos legs* (1437-1521);<sup>25</sup> *dPal ldan rgyal po* was indeed involved in printing projects supervised by this latter master between 1514 and 1521 (Ehrhard 2000a: 70; Ehrhard 2013: 145).

David and Janice Jackson stated in *Tibetan thangka Painting* that, “According to Vajrayāna Buddhism, any artist who depicted the deities belonging to the four classes of Tantras had to have been ritually initiated into each of these classes” (1988: 12). Unfortunately, we do not have biographies of artists who worked on illustrations of Tibetan xylographs and we cannot assume that they were initiated during their apprenticeship. David and Janice Jackson also stated that, “In the history of Tibetan art a few paintings are known to have been directly inspired by yogic visions. Such visions, however, were usually experienced by those who were meditators by calling and not by professional artists” (1988: 12). *lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal* (1473-1557), a *bka' brgyud pa* master who is well-known for his relevant role in the printing history of the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom,<sup>26</sup> for example, was one of those people, a master who experienced visions and then used to draw *thangkas* and wall paintings accordingly.<sup>27</sup>

It seems that borrowing woodblocks from other works to illustrate a different text was common in sixteenth century Europe (Chow 2007: 179); something that is also claimed as true for Tibetan woodcut representations. It has been guessed that the illustrations could be carved on separate panels that could be fixed to the blocks and re-employed.<sup>28</sup> This seems to be possible but only two cases of re-employed images have been rediscovered so far. I found instead several very similar woodcut representations in different works, but some minor details distinguish them. For example, if you compare the illustration on the left of f.1b in NGMPP L969/4\_1 (Fig. 1) and the representation on the left of f.1b in vol. 657/5, ISIAO Library (Fig. 2), you can observe a very similar framework. They also represent the same figures, namely, Tilopa, Vajradhāra and Nāropa, but they differ in a few

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<sup>25</sup> On this master, see Ehrhard 2000a, 15; Ehrhard 2000b, IX-XIII; Ehrhard 2000c, 201, 204-09. See also my entry in the database of the above-mentioned projects.

<sup>26</sup> On this master, see Clemente (2007; 2009; 2014c; 2015; 2016c); Diemberger and Clemente (2013).

<sup>27</sup> On this subject, see Diemberger and Clemente (2013: 136-37).

<sup>28</sup> See for example Sernesi (2016: 338-339).

details: the hair of the Tilopa and Nāropa, the position of the arms of Vajradhāra's consort and a slightly different position of the arms of Tilopa and Nāropa. The landscape and throne are also different, but the cloth under both figures of Tilopa is very similar and the one under both icons of Nāropa is the same. The former work bears the title of *mKhas grub kun gyi gtsug rgyan / paṅ chen nā ro pa'i rnam thar / ngo mtshar rmad 'byung* and is a biography of Nāropa (956-1040)<sup>29</sup> written by lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal. The latter xylograph is entitled *dPal ldan bla ma dam pa mkhas grub lha btsun chos kyi rgyal po'i rnam mgur blo 'das chos sku'i rang gdangs* and is a biography with songs of lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal.<sup>30</sup> Both xylographs were produced at Brag dkar rta so, a well-known monastery founded by lHa btsun that soon became a famous printing house. According to his biography with songs, he established his seat there in 1525 and started to produce many xylographs.<sup>31</sup> We know that the former xylograph was printed some years earlier than the latter, but we might guess that the painter—and maybe the carver—who worked on both illustrations was the same. Unfortunately, we do not have any information on artists who worked on Nāropa's biography but we know that the drawings in the front and back pages of lHa btsun's biography with songs were made by *mkhas pa dPal chen*, a famous painter from Gung thang.<sup>32</sup> According to the style, he might also be the painter of Nāropa's biography.<sup>33</sup> From other similar examples, it seems possible to assume that artists who worked on sixteenth century illustrations used the same model to draw them but each time they added different details, so that new illustrations had to be carved again.

### 3. Conclusion

As Chow wrote: “The study of woodcut illustrations is no longer the exclusive subject of the art historians as scholars in various disciplines have expanded these objects of investigation beyond the concerns of art history” (2007, 179-180). Nevertheless, since I think that art historians have the

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<sup>29</sup> It is possible to find this work after two other texts with the same reel no. Another microfilm of this xylograph is available at the National Archives of Kathmandu (NGMPP L36/1) but it is unreadable. There is a further copy of this work kept there but it is a handwritten *dbu can* manuscript. On this work, see Clemente (2015: 190; 2016b); PBP 2007, 346; Smith 2001, 76. It has been translated into English by Guenther (1963).

<sup>30</sup> For its cataloguing, see De Rossi Filibeck (2003: 331). For a description and a study, see Clemente (2007: 124, 130-35; 2009; 2014c; 2015: 187-88); Diemberger and Clemente (2013). See also Schaeffer (2011: 475).

<sup>31</sup> On the foundation of Brag dkar rta so and lHa btsun's printing activity, see BKDR: f. 29b2; Clemente (2009: chapetr 3.6-3.7; 2015); Diemberger and Clemente (2013: 134-37); Schaeffer (2009: 58-63); Schaeffer (2011); Smith (2001: 75-77).

<sup>32</sup> See Ehrhard (2000: 77, 79). He also drew the illustrations of the *lam rim* by Phyogs las rnam rgyal. Cf. PT 2013 (text no. 27, ff. 303a1-2). See also Clemente and Lunardo (in press) and Jackson (1996: 122).

<sup>33</sup> For a study of these illustrations, see Lunardo (forthcoming).

background to better understand most aspects of this subject, as a historian I confined myself here to make some preliminary remarks on the importance of artists who worked on sixteenth century illustrations of Mang yul Gung thang xylographs for the identification of these prints. By reading colophons and looking for possible signatures we can extract information about the craftsmen, try to identify their style and locate the printing houses where they worked or the printing projects with which they were associated. A study of the style of illustrations of Gung thang xylographs has been undertaken thanks to the expertise of Dr. Filippo Lunardo, who collaborated with the TiBET project.<sup>34</sup> This will constitute only the first step of this research since many aspects of this topic are in the early stages of study. Also, in order to understand the different facets of this research, it is necessary to collaborate with experts in different disciplines and expand the study in new fields of interest. As mentioned above, one of the topics that I would like to explore in more detail is the specialisation courses that artists attended at schools of calligraphy and printing. Another aspect that I wish to investigate further is calligraphy, in order to understand whether it would be possible to distinguish the diverse styles of scribes. For this purpose, it would be important to collaborate with expert calligraphers.

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<sup>34</sup> This subject is still understudied, with the exception of some pioneering essays: see Clemente and Lunardo (in press); De Rossi Filibeck (2002); Jackson (1996: 122-31); Lunardo (forthcoming); Pal and Meech-Pekarik (1988); Sernesi (2016).





Fig.1. Woodcut illustration of Tilopa, Vajradhāra and Nāropa (f. 1b, NGMPP L969/4\_1, National Archives, Kathmandu). Courtesy of Hildegard Diemberger



Fig.2. Woodcut illustration of Tilopa, Vajradhāra and Nāropa (f. 1b, vol. 657/5, Tucci Tibetan Collection, ISIAO). Credits: L&C Service

Appendix: Information on Artists:<sup>35</sup>

**dge bshes mKha' 'gro** = a famous carver who worked on many printing projects in Mang yul Gung thang at least from 1523 to 1555. He also acted as personal attendant of Chos dbang rgyal mtshan (see Ehrhard 2000a: 32). He was at least involved in the production of the xylographs of: Yang dgon pa's spiritual songs, printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1523-24 (vol. 286/1); Rig 'dzin mChog ldan mgon po's biography and songs, printed at rDzong dkar in 1527 (NGMPP L189/4); *Zhus lan nor bu'i phreng ba lha chos bdun ldan gyi bla ma brgyud pa rnam kyis rnam thar*, printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1538-39 (vol. 361/3); *bKa' rgya / khu chos gnyis / lung bstan / rdor glu / kha skong rnam*, also printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1539; 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang's autobiography and songs (vol. 671/1), printed at rDzong dkar in 1540; *sKyes mchog gi zhus lan thugs kyis snying po zab mo'i gter mdzod*, printed at mDzo lhas in 1540 (vol. 671/6); Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's spiritual songs, printed in 1545 (vol. 709/4); the *lam rim* by Bo dong Pañ chen Phyogs las rnam rgyal, printed in 1546 (PT 2013, text no. 27); the biography of Chos dbang rgyal mtshan, printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1551 (NGMPP L66/5); the Commentary of the Jewel Mound Tantra, printed at Brag dkar rta so in 1555 (NGMPP L10/22). In some of these sources he is also called *dge slong mKha' 'gro* (dpal bzang) and *dge slong Ḍaki*.

**dge sbyong mGon ne** = one of the numerous carvers who came from gTsang, a village located to the south-west of rDzong dkar (see Ehrhard 2000a: 76). This might imply that a school of calligraphy and printing was established there. Ehrhard (2000a: 74) pointed out that "the regions of sNyings and gTsang were the local centres from where the scribes and carvers were first and foremost recruited." *dGe sbyong mGon ne* was active at least from 1538 to 1558. He was involved in the production of the xylographs of: *Jo bo yab sras kyis gsung bgros pha chos rin po che'i gter mdzod / byang chub sems dpa'i nor bu'i phreng ba rtsa 'grel sogs* (vol. 361/4), printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1538; 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang's autobiography and songs (vol. 671/1), printed at rDzong dkar in 1540; *sKyes mchog 'ba' ra bas mdzad pa'i sgrub pa nyams su blang ba'i lag len dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i gter mdzod* (vol. 671/5), printed at rDzong dkar in 1540; *sKyes mchog gi zhus lan thugs kyis snying po zab mo'i gter mdzod* (vol. 671/6); Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's spiritual songs (vol. 709/4); the *lam rim* by Phyogs las rnam rgyal (PT 2013, text no. 27); Nāropa's biography written by lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal, printed at Brag dkar rta so (NGMPP L969/4\_1); the Commentary of the Jewel Mound Tantra (NGMPP L 10/22); Mi la ras pa's spiritual songs, printed at Brag dkar rta so in 1555 (BL 19999a3); lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal's biographies, both printed at Brag dkar rta so (vols. 657/5, 657/6).

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<sup>35</sup> Artists' names are listed in Tibetan alphabetical order.

**dge bshes mGon dbang** = he was active in the Mang yul Gung thang area at least from 1540 to 1561. He worked on: 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang's autobiography and songs (vol. 671/1), printed at rDzong dkar in 1540; the xylograph entitled *Ka kha'i gsol 'debs sogs mgur phran tshegs rnams* (vol. 671/4); the xylograph entitled *sKyes mchog 'ba' ra bas mdzad pa'i sgrub pa nyams su blang ba'i lag len dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i gter mdzod* (vol. 671/5); Nam mkha' rdo rje's biography, printed at Glang phug (La 'debs Valley) in 1554 (vol. 709/2); the commentary of the Jewel Mound Tantra (NGMPP L10/22); the xylograph entitled *'Jam dbyangs zhal gyi pad dkar 'dzum phye nas / lung rigs gter mdzod ze 'bru bzheng la / blo gsal rkang drug ldan nam 'phur lding rol / legs bshad sbrang rtsi'i dga' ston 'gyed pa* (vol. 587), printed at gNas in 1561.

**bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan** = he worked on many printing projects in Gung thang and was active at least between 1538 and 1563. The particularity of this artist is that he had several specialisations, such as calligraphy, carving and carving of illustrations. On this artist, see Clemente (2007: 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 137, 138, 145, 146, 152, 153, 154; 2016b: 76-79) and Clemente and Lunardo (in press).

**dge sbyong Nam mkha'** = he was active in Mang yul Gung thang at least from 1523 to 1540. He also worked at the xylographs of: Yang dgon pa's spiritual songs (vol. 286/1); *bKa' rgya / khu chos gnyis / lung bstan / rdor glu / kha skong rnams* (vol. 363/2) and *Zhus lan nor bu'i phreng ba lha chos bdun ldan gyi bla ma brgyud pa rnams kyi rnam thar* (vol. 361/3), both printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1539; 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang's autobiography and songs (vol. 671/1), printed at rDzong dkar in 1540.

**dge sbyor Nam me** = carver from lHa 'dun/mdun, who worked on: the xylograph entitled *dGe bshes ston pas mdzad pa'i glegs bam gyi bka' rgya*, printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1538-39 (vol. 361/2); 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang's autobiography and songs (vol. 671/1), printed at rDzong dkar in 1540; the *bo dong lam rim* (PT 2013, text no. 27) printed in 1546. Several artists involved in printing projects in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came from lHa 'dun/mdun. This might imply that a school of calligraphy and printing was established there. We do not know exactly where this place is located. According to local informants, it is situated south from sNyings and Rus and north from Nub ris (personal communication by Hildegard Diemberger).

**Ba dzra dho ja (Vajradhvaja)** = a famous scribe who acted as carver as well. He was active at least between 1540 and 1563. Beyond the autobiography and songs of 'Ba' ra ba, he also worked as carver on: the xylograph entitled *sKyes mchog 'ba' ra bas mdzad pa'i sgrub pa nyams su blang ba'i lag len dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i gter mdzod* (vol. 671/5); the biography and songs of Gling ras pa (NGMPP E2518/6), printed at Brag dkar rta so between 1525 and 1557; the xylograph entitled *rJe rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar rgyal thang pa bde chen rdo rjes mdzad pa la mgur chen 'gas rgyan pa* (NGMPP L211/3), printed at Brag dkar

rta so in 1563. As scribe, he worked on: rDo rje 'chang's biography written by Tilopa (NGMPP L456/14), printed at Brag dkar rta so; Ko brag pa's spiritual songs (NGMPP E2518/11), printed at Brag dkar rta so between 1525 and 1557; the xylograph entitled *sTon pa sangs rgyas kyi skyes rabs brgyad bcu pa slob dpon dpa' bos mdzad pa* (vol. 707), printed at Brag dkar rta so in 1541 or 1553; Tilopa's biography and songs (NGMPP L1107/4), printed at Brag dkar rta so in 1550; Phag mo gru pa's biography (NGMPP L194/13), printed at Brag dkar rta so in 1552; Marpa's spiritual songs (NGMPP L969/4), printed at Brag dkar rta so in 1552. A particularity related to this scribe is that his name is sometimes written after the title of the text he worked on.

**dge bshes Ma gcig** = the only female artists found in colophons so far. She worked at the xylographs of three texts produced in 1540, that is to say: the autobiography and songs of 'Ba' ra ba (vol. 671/1); *Ka kha'i gsol 'debs sogs mgur phran tshegs rnams*, also printed at rDzong dkar (vol. 671/4); and *sKyes mchog 'ba' ra bas mdzad pa'i sgrub pa nyams su blang ba'i lag len dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i gter mdzod* (vol. 671/5). However, women had an important role in promoting the production of printings. See for example, Diemberger (2014: 90-91); Diemberger (2016).

**dge bshes Tshe 'phel** = he worked at the xylographs of: *Zhus lan nor bu'i phreng ba lha chos bdun ldan gyi bla ma brgyud pa rnams kyi rnam thar* (vol. 361/3) and *Jo bo yab sras kyi gsung bgros pha chos rin po che'i gter mdzod / byang chub sems dpa'i nor bu'i phreng ba rtsa 'grel sogs* (vol. 361/4), both printed at Kun gsal sgang po che in 1538-39; the autobiography and songs of 'Ba' ra ba (vol.671/1); the *bo dong lam rim* (PT 2013, text no. 27) printed in 1546.

**Sher rgyal** = he worked on: the autobiography and songs of 'Ba' ra ba (vol. 671/1); the *Ka kha'i gsol 'debs sogs mgur phran tshegs rnams* (vol. 671/4); the *bo dong lam rim* (PT 2013, text no. 27).

**mkhas pa bSod nams bkra shis** = He is a famous engraver of illustrations, also called *mkhas pa chen po*, "great expert", but he also worked as carver of blocks. He was involved in many printing projects in Mang yul Gung thang at least from 1523 to 1555. For a detailed list of his activities, see Clemente (2016b: 87-89) and Clemente and Lunardo (in press). See also Ehrhard (2000a: 71-73, 75, 79).

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## Miscellanea



## Spazi e luoghi urbani nella narrativa swahili: Il caso di Dar es Salaam

Graziella Acquaviva

Very often, literature provides visions of the city that are typical of both common sense and collective imagination. Therefore, investigating literature we can sometimes better understand some unexplored 'territories'. In the case of Dar es Salaam, novels and short stories show two different interpretations of the city, concerned as they are with different places and aesthetics, and suggesting an interesting analogy between the city structure and the narrative text. Reading Swahili fiction published at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we get a survey of both urban texture and a picture of the urban space: poverty, migration and illegal activities drive the reader to a fictionalised, yet very real, Dar es Salaam.

Volendo considerare l'esperienza urbana e la città intesa come categoria concettuale ed interpretativa, secondo la prospettiva di Benjamin (1984), ho scelto alcune sequenze di romanzi e di racconti ambientati nella sola Dar es Salaam al fine di impostare l'analisi su due livelli:

- a un primo livello, la città intesa come luogo verrà trattata come strumento narrativo per la messa in evidenza di alcune problematiche sociali;
- a un secondo livello, la città intesa come spazio sarà vista come forma di fenomenologia urbana.

Vediamo quindi come la città/luogo, simbolo di modernità – il modernismo, come categoria estetica, è associato all'organizzazione sociale e territoriale (Barker 2000: 294) – faccia da sfondo alla città concepita come rete di relazioni sociali. Le storie narrate sono ambientate in luoghi reali la cui descrizione pone in relazione il personaggio e lo spazio<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Come afferma Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková: '(...) Les romanciers réalistes swahili (...) travaillent plus particulièrement la justification de la description: son introduction dans le récit par le discours, la vision ou l'action des personnages, sa crédibilité par des scènes, des lieux et des motivations favorables. (...) Toute description réalise différentes opérations. Les opérations dites d'*aspectualisation* (...) Les opérations de mise en relation précisent la situation de l'objet dans l'espace ou procèdent par assimilation avec d'autres objets, par des comparaisons, des métaphores, etc.' (Bertoncini-Zúbková 1994: 13-14).

## 1. La città-luogo

La descrizione dello spazio come strumento narrativo riporta in superficie percezioni di tensioni collettive che convergono e spesso si coniugano con alcuni problemi sociali riconducibili alla storia. Dar es Salaam, fu fondata nel 1860 dal sultano di Zanzibar Seyyid Majid, probabilmente per avere un maggiore controllo sui traffici commerciali nell'area continentale (Fabian 2007: 457), ma fu nel 1890, con l'amministrazione coloniale tedesca, che la città subì i primi grandi cambiamenti strutturali: nuovi quartieri residenziali furono costruiti per i residenti tedeschi e Dar divenne il centro del nuovo Governo.

L'area settentrionale – Kinondoni, Oyster Bay e Msasani – e parte del centro cittadino fu denominata *Uzunguni* ('luogo dei bianchi'); l'area nord-occidentale, compresa fra le zone di Upanga e di Uhuru Street, *Uhindini* ('luogo degli indiani') era la zona commerciale riservata alla comunità indiana; a sud-ovest si espandeva l'area compresa fra Kariakoo e Ilala e nota come *Uswahilini* ('luogo degli africani'; Sutton 1970: 9-11; Brennan and Burton 2007: 4). I confini delle aree così delineate erano monitorati da squadre di polizia militare (Raimbault 2006: 81). La topografia della città coloniale tedesca non mutò o quasi fino al periodo immediatamente successivo all'indipendenza, quando il contesto urbano aveva ormai raccolto elementi tali da indurre a un rapido mutamento sociale: uno dei maggiori problemi fu rappresentato dalla carenza delle unità abitative. La questione risaliva alle politiche per lo sviluppo urbano emanate durante il periodo coloniale e in quello immediatamente successivo all'indipendenza e relative al diritto alla terra. In epoca precoloniale la terra era un bene comune e il diritto individuale dipendeva dall'uso che di essa se ne faceva. Negli anni Venti del secolo scorso, il governo coloniale britannico aveva dichiarato pubbliche tutte le terre, che fossero libere od occupate, e nel trentennio successivo venne emanato la *Circular n. 4*, secondo la quale chiunque avrebbe potuto occupare o usare la terra nel rispetto dell'*African Customary Law*. Al momento dell'indipendenza (1961), le terre libere furono convertite in terre ad affitto governativo con contratti della durata di novantanove anni. Alla fine degli anni Sessanta, con l'emanazione del *Leasehold Enfranchisement Act* veniva riconosciuto il diritto di occupazione della terra. Il controllo quasi inesistente e la bassa condizione economica dei cittadini furono i principali fattori che contribuirono a incrementare il problema dell'abusivismo edilizio. Negli anni Settanta il governo ordinò che le aree abusive fossero risanate e fornite dei servizi essenziali. I quartieri abusivi a Dar es Salaam includevano le aree di Mtoni, Tandika e Kinondoni. Ai primi tre insediamenti abusivi si aggiunsero i sobborghi urbani di Manzese, Mabibo, Magomeni, Chang'ombe, Tabata e Mbagala, che si trasformarono ben presto in *slums* e *squatters* (Banyikwa 1988: 39-41; Obudho and Mhlanga 1988: 10-11, 146). L'ambiente urbano ha molto influenzato una parte della narrativa swahili nel trentennio



successivo all'indipendenza e le immagini di degrado in cui versavano le aree di Magomeni e di Manzese sono riportate nei romanzi *Baharia bila meli*<sup>2</sup> ('Marinaio senza barca', 1989) di Dan Mloka e *Usiku utakapokwisha...*<sup>3</sup> ('Quando la notte avrà fine...', 1990) di Mbunda Msokile.

[...] Il suo amico Mponela lo accolse bene lì a Magomeni... Magomeni Mapipa dove era giunto, non era un luogo molto sorprendente. La casa dove era arrivato e che Mponela aveva organizzato con due stanze, non era più moderna delle altre, quasi uguale a quelle del villaggio di Vigoi... in città...<sup>4</sup> (Mloka 1989: 4)

[...] Manzese<sup>5</sup> è un quartiere della città di Dar es-Salaam e ha molte cose! E' qui che vivono i poveracci [...] della città; una zona della metropoli da cui esalano afiori di ogni genere; il luogo delle fosse e dei canali di scolo cittadini [...] Manzese, che tristezza! [...] Accanto alla loro casupola c'era la discarica dove la città gettava la sua sporcizia. I resti di cibo venivano trasportati dai quartieri cittadini e versati qui. La sporcizia si accumulava. La sporcizia spingeva, urtava contro una parete della loro casupola. A sinistra era pieno di rifiuti, a destra la latrina era sempre stracolma [...] La puzza aumentava la miseria. Non avevano cibo; non potevano più ingannarsi. Anche l'aria non era ben ossigenata, non potevano ingannarsi! Nonostante le proteste degli abitanti di questa parte di Manzese, la

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<sup>2</sup> Il protagonista del romanzo è Sigsimund Kazimoto. Dopo essersi diplomato alla *Secondary School* del villaggio di Vigoi, si trasferisce a Dar es Salaam, ospite dell'amico Mponela nel quartiere di Magomeni, per lavorare presso una ditta. Ben presto però il basso salario e problemi sul lavoro lo inducono a licenziarsi e ad imbarcarsi su una nave cargo. Dopo due anni si ritrova di nuovo per strada e accetta di lavorare come *pusher* per dei trafficanti di droga pakistani. "Marinaio" è il nome in gergo per indicare "trafficante di droga". Il nuovo lavoro lo porta ovunque, finché non viene scoperto e arrestato in Danimarca. Alla vergogna e all'estradizione in Tanzania, Kazimoto preferisce il suicidio in cella lasciando una lettera in cui maledice il suo paese per non aver tenuto fede alle promesse iniziali. Il romanzo è una chiara denuncia allo Stato e alla politica corrotta che ha risotto la popolazione in miseria.

<sup>3</sup> Il romanzo è basato su una sola domanda: perché l'uomo è costretto a dimenarsi nell'angoscia e nella miseria del vivere quotidiano. È la storia di due giovani, Gonza e Chioko, che si ritrovano a Dar es Salaam con la speranza di riuscire a trovare una situazione ottimale per vivere dignitosamente, e che dopo varie peripezie trovano un alloggio nel quartiere popolare di Manzese. Ciò che li affligge è il non riuscire ad avere un lavoro che li aiuti a sopravvivere. Leitmotiv del romanzo è il senso di alienazione e gli interrogativi sull'esistenza dei protagonisti che fungono da immagine riflessa dell'uomo comune tanzaniano alla fine del secolo scorso.

<sup>4</sup> [...] Rafiki yake Mponela alimpokea vizuri pale pale Magomeni... Magomeni Mapipa alikofikia, haukuwa mji wa kushtua sana. Nyumba aliyofikia ambapo Mponela alipanga vyumba viwili, haikuwa ya kisasa kuzidi zile, aghalabu moja moja, za Vigoi...mjini... (Mloka 1989: 4).

<sup>5</sup> Manzese era in origine un villaggio alla periferia della città e la sua crescita si deve alla costruzione della Morogoro Road negli anni Cinquanta del secolo scorso, sotto l'amministrazione coloniale britannica, e alla realizzazione dell'area industriale nella vicina Ubungu nel 1968. La sua popolazione crebbe da 5.000 unità nel 1967 a 60.000 nel 1988. Manzese divenne così il più grande insediamento non pianificato. Noto come "uwanja wa fisi" ('campo delle iene') divenne famoso per essere luogo dove la prostituzione e i traffici illeciti rappresentavano le principali attività commerciali (Tripp 1997: 37)

città non li aveva ascoltati! Davanti alla loro casupola passava un canale di scolo [...] (Msokile 1990: 1-2)<sup>6</sup>.

La rapida urbanizzazione e l'incremento della popolazione hanno trasformato l'ambiente urbano così come la vita di milioni di persone comportando una serie di cambiamenti non sempre positivi. Uno dei tanti problemi sociali associato al cambiamento e alla povertà è la condizione di una 'classe sociale' composta da minori: i *watoto wa mitaani* ('bambini di strada'). In realtà chi sono questi bambini? A differenza dei loro coetanei che 'vivono per strada' e abitano negli *slums* di Dar es Salaam, hanno una famiglia e la sera tornano a casa, i 'bambini di strada' vivono da soli, non hanno più contatti con le famiglie di origine e non godono di alcuna protezione. Molti di loro hanno seguito il flusso migratorio degli adulti, dalle zone rurali alla città. Non hanno una sede fissa, dormono per strada, sui marciapiedi nei pressi di negozi, cinema o discoteche oppure trascorrono la notte negli autobus o nelle stazioni ferroviarie. Durante il giorno svolgono piccoli lavori nel settore informale e con i pochi soldi comprano del cibo misero in piccole trattorie che a Dar sono note col nome di *Magenge* o di *Mama Ntilie* (Lugalla and Mbwambo 1999: 331-335). Quello dei *watoto wa mitaani* è un vero e proprio problema sociale che ancora affligge le aree urbane e che ha ispirato Emmanuel Mbogo<sup>7</sup> per il suo racconto *Watoto wa Mama Ntilie* ('I bambini di Mama Ntilie', 2002). Il racconto narra la storia di Peter e Zita, i figli di una povera ostessa che vengono espulsi dalla scuola perché la famiglia non può permettersi di pagare la tassa per l'uniforme scolastica. Costretti a guadagnarsi da mangiare per strada, incontrano due orfane, due *watoto wa mitaani*, Kurwa e Doto<sup>8</sup>. Quando Doto viene

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<sup>6</sup> [...] Manzese ni sehemu muhimu wa mji wa Dar es-Salaam na ina mambo mengi! Huko ndiko wanakoishi makabwela (...) wa jiji hili; sehemu ya jiji ambayo inavukuta harufu ya uozo wa aina aina; sehemu ambayo ina mashimo na makaro yanayobwabwajia maji machafu ya mji [...] Manzese, inahuzunisha! [...] Karibu na kibanda chao kilikuwa na jaa la takataka ambapo mji ulikuwa ukitupa uchafu wake. Maganda ya vyakula kutoka mitaani yalikuwa yakiletwa hapa na kumwagwa. Uchofu ulilundikana ovyo. Uchafu ulisogea, ukakumba ukuta mmoja wa kibanda chao. Upande wa kushoto uchafu ulijaa na upande wa kulia choo kilikuwa kinaelekea kufurika (...). Harufu iliongeza dhiki. Kulikuwa na dhiki ya chakula; hawakuweza kuitatua vyema. Kulikuwa na dhiki ya hewa nzuri ya oksigeni, hawakuweza kutatua! Ingawa kulikuwa na malalamiko makali ya wakazi wa sehemu hii ya Manzese, mji haukuwasikiliza! Mbele ya kibanda chao kulipita mfereji wa maji machafu [...] (Msokile 1990: 1-2).

<sup>7</sup> Sensibile ai problemi sociali, Emmanuel Mbogo era già noto nel campo della letteratura swahili per il suo romanzo denuncia *Vipuli vya Figo* ('Trapianto di reni'), pubblicato nel 1996, in cui l'autore affronta il tema del traffico degli organi.

<sup>8</sup> Abbiamo qui un chiaro riferimento a Kurwa e Doto, famosa coppia di gemelle della letteratura swahili a partire dal racconto didattico-moraleggiante *Kurwa na Doto* ('Kurwa e Doto', 1960) dello zanzibario Muhammed Saleh Farsy. Ambientato a Zanzibar, è la storia di due sorelle gemelle dal carattere diametralmente opposto. Tanto è diligente e generosa Kurwa, tanto è pigra ed egoista Doto, che arriverà al punto di farsi sposare dal primo fidanzato della sorella, il giovane Faki. Il destino ha però in serbo per lei una tragica fine e i due ex fidanzati potranno sposarsi e vivere felici. Diverso e in pieno stile 'metropolitano' è invece l'omonimo *Kurwa na Doto* ('Kurwa e Doto', 1996) di Baba Lao. Durante un viaggio d'affari fuori

uccisa nel tentativo di rubare in un negozio, Mama Ntilie accoglie Kurwa nella sua casa. Ma una tragica serie di avvenimenti sconvolge la famiglia: il marito di Mama Ntilie viene ucciso dall'alcol, Zita si ammala e muore, Peter e Kurwa vengono arrestati perché coinvolti nel traffico di droga.

Nello spazio cittadino si sviluppano le attività di scambio e all'economia ufficiale di mercato si affianca un'economia sotterranea, informale che vede realizzarsi una moltitudine di attività clandestine (United Nations 1996). L'uso e il traffico di sostanze stupefacenti è una delle piaghe che affligge la Tanzania e di cui si è cominciato ad avere notizie verso la seconda metà degli anni Ottanta. I fattori che hanno contribuito all'espansione del fenomeno nel paese furono principalmente di ordine politico ed economico: già dalla fine degli anni Settanta il governo si trovò costretto a far ricorso ad aiuti esterni per finanziare i suoi programmi per lo sviluppo: salari bassi ed inflazione furono gli ovvi risultati di un'economia in declino (Acquaviva 1997; Mhando 1995; Possi 1996). Sempre nello stesso periodo, alla fine del secolo scorso, si cominciò a parlare dell'eccessivo consumo di bevande alcoliche. L'(ab)uso di alcol è sempre stato socialmente tollerato per la funzione integrativa che svolgeva in molte società tradizionali africane: la birra tradizionale *ugimbi* o *komoni*, presso i Wahehe della regione di Iringa, per esempio, veniva offerta al fine di propiziarsi gli spiriti degli antenati e per rinforzare l'organizzazione sociale (Crema 1987: 151-154). Il tasso alcolico della birra tradizionale era molto basso e la disponibilità della bevanda era limitata al periodo successivo alla raccolta. Poiché il bere era legato ad un evento sociale, gli individui solevano farlo in compagnia e nella misura limitata dagli obblighi dell'etichetta sociale. La scena muta drasticamente durante il periodo coloniale: la disponibilità delle bevande alcoliche non era più limitata a particolari eventi in determinati periodi dell'anno, anzi nelle aree urbane il commercio degli alcolici divenne una delle attività più redditizie in seguito all'apertura di molti bar e chioschi, sia nelle vie del centro città che nelle aree periferiche (Mesaki 1995: 140). Con l'indipendenza furono poste in atto misure restrittive e discriminatorie nei confronti dell'abuso di alcol anche se le fabbriche per la produzione locale della birra rappresentarono il punto cruciale dell'industrializzazione postcoloniale (Heise 1991).

Una famosa pubblicità radiofonica e televisiva della *Tusker*, prodotta in Kenya ma molto consumata in Tanzania oltre alle birre *Safari* e *Kilimanjaro* recitava:

Al lavoro... al lavoro...

Lavoriamo con tutte le nostre forze

Al lavoro... al lavoro...

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città, Robin, un funzionario UNESCO di Dar es Salaam, mette incinta Kurwa. Quando la ragazza si trasferisce in città con l'idea di convivere con il padre di suo figlio, lui la scaccia e lei si suicida. La gemella Doto vendicherà la sua morte facendo sì che Robin si innamori di lei e, dopo averlo lasciato senza un soldo, lo contagherà con il virus HIV.

Edifichiamo la nostra nazione

Dopo il lavoro rilassati

È tempo di Tusker (Mesaki 1995: 141)<sup>9</sup>.

Tradizione e modernità confluiscono nella formula pubblicitaria accostando il concetto di edificazione nazionale che al momento dell'indipendenza aveva segnato lo spirito dell'intera nazione (Nyerere 1966; 1968; 1974; 1977) a quello del consumo di alcol come elemento indispensabile al nuovo modello culturale che si va delineando. Ammantato da un nuovo valore simbolico, l'alcol di importazione viene associato al prestigio e al potere; sinonimo di modernità<sup>10</sup> esso diviene soggetto/oggetto in alcune sequenze nei romanzi *Dar Imenihadaa*<sup>11</sup> ('Dar<sup>12</sup> mi ha ingannato', 1988) di Rashidi Akwilombe e *Tufani*<sup>13</sup> ('La tempesta', 1992) di Baker Mfaume.

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<sup>9</sup> Kazi...Kazi... / Tufanye kazi kwa nguvu zote / Kazi...Kazi... / Tujenge taifa letu / Baada ya kazi burudika / Ni wakati wa Tusker (Mesaki 1995: 141).

<sup>10</sup> Nel perseguire una politica volta a preservare il concetto di "cultura nazionale", durante il periodo *Ujamaa* tutti i beni di importazione vennero proibiti al fine di favorire il mercato interno. Del 1968 è la dichiarazione della *TANU Youth League* (TYL) che proibiva l'uso di una serie di capi di abbigliamento definiti "nguo za kihuni" (abiti indecenti, immorali) e di altri prodotti (Ivaska 2004: 104) molto richiesti e resi disponibili attraverso il mercato nero, e che rappresentavano uno status symbol. Sinonimo di disponibilità economica e di modernità, i prodotti importati continuano a svolgere un ruolo non secondario nell'immaginario collettivo anche nel periodo post-*ujamaa*. Quando nell'ultimo ventennio del secolo scorso, nuovi modelli culturali investono l'ambiente urbano, l'uso del vestiario di importazione, per esempio, oltre a definire un nuovo senso di appartenenza a gruppi sociali diversificati per area e categoria, è anche un modo per sentirsi parte della nuova realtà urbana (Acquaviva 2005: 10).

<sup>11</sup> Il romanzo tratta di Devota, una giovane e bella ragazza che dopo il diploma si trasferisce dal suo villaggio alla città di Dar es Salaam per seguire un corso da segretaria. L'atmosfera cittadina e il senso di libertà la inducono a sperimentare "la relazione con l'altro" nell'unico modo che la città sembra offrirle, ovvero barcamenandosi da una storia di sesso all'altra finché rimane incinta e torna al villaggio, confusa e delusa dalla vita. Gli uomini con cui ha avuto a che fare, l'amante ricco e anziano e due giovani Cheki-Bobu e Sekulu l'hanno apparentemente usata. Ma, tornata al villaggio, trova tre lettere scritte dai suoi amanti nelle quali ognuno le spiega perché l'abbia abbandonata. Devota aveva assunto degli atteggiamenti che credeva fossero normali e tipici delle donne cittadine: arroganza, boria e immoralità. Tuttavia, dopo aver letto ciò che i tra uomini le scrivono e in un ambiente diverso da quello cittadino, si rende conto dei propri errori. Il romanzo è a lieto fine: Devota si sposerà con Sekulu dopo che lui si sarà accertato del cambiamento di lei.

<sup>12</sup> Il toponimo Dar es Salaam nel linguaggio colloquiale viene spesso abbreviato in "Dar".

<sup>13</sup> In questo romanzo l'autore affronta il tema della corruzione che dilaga nel paese all'indomani della liberalizzazione iniziata nel 1986 (Maliyamkono 1997: 22). Il protagonista Allain Beka, si trova involontariamente invischiato in un caso di spionaggio internazionale: il Ministero della Difesa ha ricevuto informazioni segrete dalla SWAPO (*South West African People's Organization*). In città sono giunti alcuni miliziani dalla Namibia con l'intento di sabotare l'economia della Tanzania. Allain viene cooptato dal Ministero per le sue referenze. In realtà è solo una pedina. Il romanzo termina con Allain accusato di omicidio che, pur di ottenere la difesa di un buon avvocato che lo assista al processo e aver salva la vita, accetta di non rivelare i nomi dei veri colpevoli.

[...] Per completare questa gioia, il padre di Devota si recò al bar e acquistò per i suoi ospiti una cassa di birra ‘Pilsner’ e una di ‘Safari’ [...] si recò poi al chiosco locale di Kwamibalama e comprò [...] una damigiana di birra tradizionale ‘kimpumu’ e una di ‘komoni’ [...] Senza neanche vederle, Devota dispreszò le birre locali e ciò, in effetti, significava che stava dispreszando la cultura della sua gente e insieme della Tanzania. Rispose a Dezo che quella birra era contadina, sporca e non era auspicabile che fosse bevuta da persone come loro, istruite e progredite [...]<sup>14</sup> (Akwilombe 1988: 33-34).

[...] ‘Accomodati, fratello Allain’. Disse l’uomo, la sua voce era greve ed il suo alito sapeva di brandy. L’odore fece sì che Allain ne desiderasse un bicchierino [...] L’uomo, che indossava un abito elegante, si diresse verso un mobile pieno di alcolici e ne estrasse una bottiglia di brandy prodotto in Francia, ne versò un bicchiere [...] poi lo porse ad Allain [...]<sup>15</sup> (Mfaume 1992: 13).

È umano attribuire agli spazi dei significati simbolici che non necessariamente fanno riferimento al luogo nella sua oggettività, quanto ad un’atmosfera particolare associata ad esso, a un suo aspetto culturale: la narrativa selezionata, da un lato riporta sulla carta le sequenze di un vissuto quotidiano, immagine speculare di una società che si dimena nella precarietà che continua a dominare il paese dopo il declino della politica *Ujamaa* di Nyerere; dall’altro offre dei modelli culturali e sociali il cui comportamento sembra essere organizzato sulla percezione delle opportunità e della mobilità.

## 2. La città-spazio

Attraverso alcune sequenze tratte dai romanzi *Usiku utakapokwisha...* (‘Quando la notte avrà fine...’, 1990) di Msokile e *Dar es Salaam Usiku*<sup>16</sup> (‘Dar es Salaam di notte’, 1990) di Ben Mtobwa vediamo come

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<sup>14</sup> [...] Kwa kukamilisha furaha hiyo, baba Devota akaenda baa na kuwanunulia wageni kesi moja ya bia aina ya ‘Pilsner’ na kesi nyingine ya bia ya aina ya ‘Safari’ [...] akaenda kwenye baa ya kienyeji ya Kwamwibalama na kununua [...] debe moja la pombe za kienyeji aina ya ‘kimpumu’ na ‘komoni’ [...] Bila kuona haya, Devota akazidharau zile pombe zakwao na jii moja ilikuwa na maana alikuwa anadharau utamaduni wa kwao na wa Kitanzania kwa ujumla. Alimjibu Dezo kwa zile pombe ni za kishamba, chafu na hazifai kunywewa na watu waliosoma na kuendelea kama wao[...] (Akwilombe 1988: 33-34).

<sup>15</sup> [...] ‘Karibu, ndugu Allain’. Alisema mtu huyo na sauti yake ilikuwa nene, mdomoni pake alinukia harufu ya pombe ya Brandy. Harufu hiyo ilimfanya Allain atamani kinywaji hicho [...] Mtu mwenye suti alikwenda kwenyekabati lenye vinywaji vikali na kuchomoachupa ya Brandy iliyotengenezwa Ufaransa na kuimimina kwenye glasi [...] kisha akampa Allain [...] (Mfaume 1992: 13).

<sup>16</sup> Il romanzo, ambientato interamente nella città di Dar es Salaam, ruota intorno alla vita di tre personaggi: Rukia, Peterson e Hasara. Rukia è una giovane prostituta che viene tolta dalla strada da Peterson, un giovane e avvenente uomo d'affari, di cui diviene l'amante. Hasara è un giovane e misero sbandato di cui si innamora Rukia che, per amor suo, vuole rompere la relazione con il ricco Peterson e sposarsi con lui. Arriva il giorno in cui Peterson scopre i due innamorati nella casa che lui

lo spazio e il territorio di Dar es Salaam includono aspetti che risultano essenziali alla comprensione della realtà urbana, nella completezza della sua fenomenologia: il 'privato' e il 'pubblico' dei personaggi, il loro contesto lavorativo, il loro rapporto più o meno conflittuale con la città, la loro maggiore o minore disponibilità a mettersi in gioco e a lottare e la loro stessa capacità di passeggiare, meditando, per le strade della città.

Portavoce della coscienza collettiva, il personaggio vede, guarda, ricorda, immagina.

Il senso di inadeguatezza verso un territorio 'altro' segna l'esperienza di Gonza, che rispetto all'amico Chioko risente maggiormente dell'impatto traumatico e demoralizzante con la città. La violenza con cui essa irrompe nella sua esistenza lo condurrà alla morte nel tentativo di rubare i soldi necessari all'acquisizione di un passaporto falso per espatriare in Zambia. Era stato esortato a trasferirsi lì dall'amico Chuchu che lo informa di aver trovato l'Eldorado d'Africa, un paradiso dove si ritrova l'essenza umana scetra del manto di povertà che trasforma l'individuo nel fantasma di se stesso:

“Gonza... Amico fraterno [...] Ho lasciato la Tanzania due anni fa con un passaporto falso. Ho avuto problemi a Tunduma, sul confine Tanzania Zambia. [...] Sono giunto a Ndola, sono andato a Nchanga [...] Sono stato accolto... Dopo appena una settimana ero un uomo. I soldi mi ridevano in tasca. La birra mi rideva in bocca... I vestiti mi adulano il corpo. Gli odori delle fanciulline profumano il mio corpo. Ti dico... In questi giorni sono diventato un uomo come gli uomini tra gli uomini [...]”<sup>17</sup> (Msokile 1990: 9).

Una città che trasforma l'individuo in 'altro' da sé, può essere percepita come irreali: dalle metafore descrittive si evince il senso di solitudine e di estraneità che affligge Gonza: lo spazio descritto da Msokile non funge solo da sfondo pseudo-topografico alla storia ma si fa anche e soprattutto leggere come la proiezione degli stati d'animo del personaggio, le sue sensazioni, le sue percezioni in relazione allo spazio stesso attraverso le quali, come nodo funzionale, il luogo diviene esso stesso elemento d'analisi (Tuan 1979: 388) e strumento comunicativo che riproduce l'ordine sociale (Barker 2000: 315).

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aveva preso per Rukia, ne segue un forte litigio e i due uomini stanno per darsela di santa ragione quando vengono interrotti dall'arrivo di una coppia di anziani. Sono Nuna e Rashidi che sveleranno agli ignari giovani di essere fratelli fra loro e che loro, i vecchi sono i genitori che ognuno di loro credeva aver perduto.

<sup>17</sup> “Gonza...Ndugu katika damu [...] Niliondoka huko Tanzania mwaka juzi kwa pasi ya bandia. Nilipata matatizo kidogo pale Tunduma, mpakani mwa Tanzania na Zambia. [...] Nilifika hapa dola, nikaenda Nchanga [...] Nilipokelewa...Baada ya juma moja tu nilikuwa mtu. Fedha zilicheka mfukoni mwangu. Bia ilicheka mdomoni mwangu... Nguo zinatuna mwilini mwangu. Marashi ya visichana tete yananukia mwilini mwangu. Nakuambia... Siku hizi nami nimekuwa mtu kama walivyoye watu katika watu [...]” (Msokile 1990: 9).

“Gonza [...] Passò la prima strada. Era una strada degna di rispetto. Vi sorgevano gli edifici del Partito e vari Uffici del Governo [...] Via della PACE, era ben nota per la quiete. Poi veniva un'altra via, oltre questa, la via dei PADRONI. Questa era riservata ai colletti bianchi, gente benestante. Bella vita la loro. [...] Era una strada tranquilla. Via della SPERANZA veniva subito dopo. I suoi abitanti non vivevano poi tanto male, benché la loro condizione non fosse buona se confrontata a quella di coloro che abitavano la via delle PADRONI. Essi speravano che un giorno sarebbero riusciti ad avere una vita migliore di quella che stavano vivendo. Le due strade successive erano molto conosciute qui in città. La via del DILEMMA era abitata da chi aveva perso la speranza nel futuro. Non si aspettavano neanche più una goccia di vita serena. [...] Persino la loro vita era un dilemma. Via dell'INQUIETUDINE somigliava un po' a quella del DILEMMA. La differenza era minima [...]”<sup>18</sup> (Msokile 1990: 38).

Traiettorie metaforiche, queste, che tracciano un percorso di vita gerarchico-discensionale nella semiotica del testo (Greimas e Fontanille 1996: 7) guidando il lettore come ad una mostra itinerante delle emozioni, attraverso immagini di vita e di morte interiore, indubbia manifestazione di disadattamento all'ambiente fisico e sociale. L'incapacità di Gonza ad integrarsi evolve nella morte fisica del personaggio, come estremo atto di abnegazione:

“[...] Sono morto” [...] Si quietò un attimo. Poi disse, “Sono nato povero, muoio povero... Sono nato nudo, sarò sepolto nudo. Mamma a-a!”. Ansimò leggermente, e dopo un respiro profondo parlò: “Sono morto...” Girò il collo, la lingua penzoloni, degli occhi si vide solo il bianco. Stava in silenzio come acqua ghiacciata. All'inizio il corpo era rilassato [...] All'improvviso tutto mutò. Si irrigidì<sup>19</sup> (Msokile 1990: 77).

Diversa è in *Dar es Salaam Usiku* l'esperienza di Peterson, un uomo d'affari con una certa rispettabilità sociale dovuta alla sua discendenza familiare. Possiede macchine lussuose come BMW e

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<sup>18</sup> “Gonza [...] Akapita mtaa wa kwanza. Mtaa huu ulikuwa wa kiheshimiwa. Majumba ya Chama na Ofisi mbalimbali za Serikali zilikuwa katika mtaa huu. [...] Mtaa wa SALAMA ulijulikana mno kwa amani yake. Halafu ulikuwa mtaa mwingine wa WENYEWE. Mtaa huu ulikaliwa na watu wenye nafasi, watu waliojiweza. Maisha yao yalikuwa mazuri. [...] Ulikuwa mtaa tulivu. Mtaa wa TUMAINI ulikuwepo baada ya mtaa huo. Wakazi wake hawakuwa na hali mbaya ingawa pia hali yao haikuwa njema ukilinganisha na wakazi wa mtaa wa WENYEWE. Hao walitumaini siku moja wangepanikiwa nao kupata maisha mema na yaliyo bora kuliko waliyokuwa nayo. Mitaa miwili iliyofuata hapa ilijulikana mno mjini hapo. Mtaa wa MASHAKA ulikaliwa na watu waliokuwa wamekata tamaa ya maisha. Hawakutegemea kupata hata tone dogo tu la maisha mazuri. [...] Hata maisha yao yalikuwa mashakani! Mtaa wa WASIWASI ulifanaa kidogo na huu wa MASHAKA. Tofauti yake ilikuwa ndogo [...]” (Msokile 1990: 38).

<sup>19</sup> “[...] Mimi nimekufa.” [...] Akatulua kidogo. Kisha akasema, “Nimezaliwa maskini, ninakufa maskini... Nilizaliwa uchi, nitazikwa uchi. Mama we-el!” Akatweta kidogo, na kisha kuvuta pumzi ndefu na kusema: “Nimekufa...” Akageuza shingo, ulimi ukatoka, macho yakageuzwa. Alikuwa kimya kama maji barafu. Kwanza mwili wote ulikuwa legelege, umetepeta bila hiyari, utadhani hauna mfupa. Lakini ghafla mambo yakabadilika tena. Alikauka. (Msokile 1990: 77).

Pajero. Vive nel quartiere residenziale di Mikocheni (Mtobwa 1990: 40). I riferimenti all’abitazione, al lavoro, alla vita sociale di Peterson sono essenziali per delineare il suo stile di vita. A fare da sfondo la Dar es Salaam elegante, borghese, che viene tracciata con puntualità: Magomeni, Salender Bridge, Oyster Bay, Samora Avenue, Morogoro, Msasani, creando un’interazione fra luoghi, storia ed ambiente (Ashcroft 1995: 391). A turbare l’esistenza di Peterson, il cui rapporto conflittuale con la dimensione urbana è sedato da una rassicurante integrazione, intervengono l’incontro con Rukia e la loro relazione.

[...] L’orologio di Peterson sembrava non funzionare o che avesse rallentato il suo scorrere. Ogni volta che guardava le lancette erano lì allo stesso posto, quasi lo stessero prendendo in giro. Se l’orologio non va, anche il sole si stava prendendo gioco di lui? Poiché gettando lo sguardo alla finestra per osservarlo vedeva che stava iniziando a calare ad occidente [...] Allora? Peterson si chiese con meraviglia.

La verità è che l’orologio stava funzionando come al solito e la terra compiva il suo giro ordinario. Era lui, Peterson, che non si trovava nella sua condizione normale. Stava desiderando che le ore scorressero in fretta, che il sole tramontasse velocemente, che in fretta calasse la notte. Era in attesa bramosa della notte, affinché giungesse il momento che aveva pianificato per passare dalla sua nuova ragazza. Chi è? Neanche il suo nome aveva ben memorizzato. Qualcosa come Raia, Rusia o Rukia. Il nome non era per lui un problema, stanotte lo avrebbe ridetto<sup>20</sup> (Mtobwa 1990: 12).

Attraverso la narrazione della relazione extraconiugale fra il ricco Peterson e la prostituta Rukia, la città emerge con vivacità proponendosi come uno dei temi dominanti: Peterson individua nello spazio urbano, nei suoi ghetti umani simbolicamente incarnati da Hasara, il poveraccio di cui Rukia si innamora perdutamente, il principale ostacolo alla realizzazione del suo sogno d’amore:

“Si chiama Hasara”

La risposta infastidì ancora di più Peterson “Non ho bisogno di conoscere il suo nome. Voglio sapere chi è per te?”

“È il mio amante”.

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<sup>20</sup> Saa ya Peterson ilikuwa kama haiendi au iliyopunguza mwendo. Kila alipotazama mishale ilikuwa iko palepale, kana kwamba inamchezea. Kama saa ilikuwa haiendi jua pia ilikuwa likimdhaki? Kwani kila alipotupa jicho dirishani kulitazama aliliona likining'inia palepale juu kidogo ya magharibi [...] Vipi? Peterson alijiuliza kwa mshangao.

‘Ukweli ni kwamba saa ilikuwa ikienda kama kawaida na dunia ikiwa katika mzunguko wake wa asili. Ni yeye Peterson ambaye hakuwa katika hali yake ya kawaida. Alikuwa akitamani saa ziende haraka, jua lizame upesi, usiku uingie. Alikuwa akiusubiri usiku kwa hamu na shauku kubwa, ili uwadie wakati ambao alipanga kumpitia yule msichana wake mpya. Nani vile? Hata jina alikuwa hajaliweka vizuri akilini. Kitu kama Raia, Rusia au Rukia. Jina lisingemsumba, usiku wa leo angelikariri (Mtobwa 1990: 12).



Peterson restò esterrefatto. Era una risposta sincera, diretta come aveva voluto. Ma non si aspettava che Rukia potesse avere tanto coraggio da rispondergli così apertamente. Di fatto, si aspettava di venire ingannato, e che Rukia cominciasse a difendersi e a chiedere perdono [...].

Peterson gettò lo sguardo sul giovane che sedeva calmo come se non fosse accaduto nulla. Era uno dei tanti che si arrangiavano per strada. Era evidente dai suoi vestiti dozzinali, dal suo corpo che poteva essere più robusto se il cibo non fosse scarseggiato, dai suoi occhi che erano il manifesto del suo dolore di vivere una vita misera. [...] Poi Peterson pensò di averlo visto da qualche parte. Dove? Non riusciva a ricordare il luogo [...].

“Perché non ti siedi e parliamo civilmente?” Gli disse Rukia con gentilezza.

Peterson si trovò costretto a ridere. “Sederci? Io e te? Ascolta signorina. Dovevo essere impazzito quando osai sedermi con una cagna come te. Non so quale demone mi abbia assalito. Ma tutto questo è passato. [...] lascia immediatamente questa casa. Ti do cinque minuti<sup>21</sup> (Mtobwa 1990: 144).

Dar es Salaam è la città delle prostitute, compagne di vita di Rukia. La lotta per la sopravvivenza induce alla mercificazione di ogni rapporto umano, costringendo in nome del danaro a dissimulare i propri sentimenti, e questo è ciò che accade alla sua amante. Peterson è consapevole che un tale ambiente porta a una forma di immobilità sociale: Rukia è una ragazza perduta, ancor prima della nascita destinata alla stessa professione della madre:

[...] la ragazzina, di bell'aspetto e vestita di stracci andava in giro per i bar in cerca di uomini per potersi guadagnare qualcosa. Il suo volto era tanto malinconico, gli occhi angosciati e quei vestiti così logori che anche quegli uomini ingordi esitarono ad accoglierla. Non il dolore che manifestavano i suoi occhi, e neanche la misera dei suoi indumenti li aveva fatti esitare dal procurarsi questa creaturina ad un prezzo irrisorio. Il

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<sup>21</sup> “Ni mpenzi wangu”.

Peterson aliduwaa tena. Lilikuwa jibu la kweli, jibu la mkato kama alivyotaka. Lakini bado hakutegemea kuwa Rukia angeweza kuwa na ushujaa wa kumjibu waziwazi kiasi hicho. Kwa ujumla alitegemea kudanganywa, kisha Rukia aanze kujitetea na kuomba radhi [...]

Peterson akamtupia jicho kijana huyo ambaye aliketi kwa utulivu kana kwamba hakuna kinachoendelea. Alikuwa mwingine kati ya vijana wengi wanaohangaika ovyo mitaani. Hayo yalikuwa wazi kutokana na mavazi yake duni, mwili wake ambao ungeweza kuwa mkubwa zaidi kama si kwa ajili ya chakula hafifu na macho yake ambayo yalitangaza kilio chake cha kuishi maisha ya dhiki (...). Kisha Peterson alihisi kuwa amepata kuona mahala sura hiyo. Wapi? Hakuweza kupakumbuka [...].

“Kwa nini usikae chini tuzungumze kama binadamu?” Rukia alimwambia kwa upole.

Ikamlazimu Peterson kucheka. “Tukae?” Mie na weewe? Sikiliza bi mdogo. Nimekuwa mwendawazimu mkubwa tangu nilipothubutu kuketi na mbwa kama wewe. Sijui shetani gani amenikumba. Lakini hayo sasa yamepita [...] uondoke mara moja katika nyumba hii. Nakupa dakika tano tu [...] (Mtobwa 1990: 144).

problema grosso era l'età. Certo ad ogni uomo piace avere una ragazza giovane. Ma non giovane come quella. [...] ma la ragazza non poteva accettare che la sua età fosse di ostacolo fra lei e la sua vita. Se avesse accettato, cosa avrebbe mangiato? Oggi era il terzo giorno che non metteva nulla in bocca. Sua madre l'aveva lasciata un'altra volta. E questa volta non sapeva se l'avrebbe più ritrovata, poiché si diceva che fosse stata vista salire sull'autobus per Nairobi in compagnia di un nuovo signore, un bianco. All'inizio l'aveva lasciata per alcuni giorni, due volte, ma fece ritorno e abbracciandola, fra le lacrime disse "Figlia mia... perdonami..." Questa volta pianse prima di andar via. Dopo i lamenti le sussurrò "Senti Rukia... Tu ora sei una donna adulta come me... per il tuo bene... per il mio, impara a vivere... Sei molto bella, e coraggiosa... vivrai bene, meglio che con me..." Queste furono le ultime parole che la bimba sentì da sua madre. Quando si alzò, si era dileguata con tutte le sue cose.

Quando giunsero i "clienti" della madre a cercarla e trovarono lei, la guardarono desiderosi tuttavia esitarono. Inibiti dalla sua giovinezza e dai suoi grandi occhi innocenti. Se ne andarono con l'acquolina in bocca<sup>22</sup> (Mtobwa 1990: 2-3).

Purtroppo per Peterson, questa realtà degradante e corrotta è l'unica con cui può confrontarsi, e non gli resta che opporre deboli tentativi di evasione che, nel suo caso, si riassumono nel cercare di preservare la sua relazione con l'amante. Sin dall'inizio egli cerca di crearsi dei luoghi per i suoi incontri con Rukia. Per lei prende una casa nella zona residenziale di Oyster Bay, facendo della ragazza la sua *nyumba ndogo* ('piccola casa') e inserendo così la sua relazione clandestina in una tipologia concreta, urbana e accettata socialmente<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> [...] msichana mdogo, mwenye sura nzuri na nguo mbovu mbovu alikuwa akipita katika mabaa kutafuta wanaume ili aweze kujipatia cho chote. Uso wake ukiwa umejaa huzuni, macho yenye msiba na mavazi hayo hafifu hata wale wanaume waroho walisita kumpokea. Si msiba uliokuwa wazi machoni mwake, wala uhafifu wa mavazi hayo ambao uliwafanya wasite kujipatia kiumbe hiki cha bei rahisi. Tatizo kubwa lilikuwa umri. Ndiyo, kila mwanamume anapenda sana kuwa na msichana kinda. Lakini si kinda kama hili. [...] Lakini msichana huyu asingeweza kukubali umri uwe kipingamizi kati yake na uhai. Akubali, ale nini? Leo ilikuwa ya tatu hajatia cho chote mdomoni. Mama yake alikuwa amemtoroka kwa mara nyingine. Wala safari hii hakuona kama angeweza kumpata tena, kwani ilisemekana alionekana akipanda basi la Nairobi, akiwa na bwana mpya, mzungu. Awali aliwahi kumtoroka kwa siku kadhaa, mara mbili, lakini alirejea tena na kumkumbatia huku akilia na kusema "mwanangu... nisamehe..." Safari hii alilia kabla ya kutoroka. Baada ya kulia alinong'ona akasema "Sikia Rukia... Wewe sasa u mwanamke mkubwa kama mimi [...] kwa ajili yako... na yangu, jifunze kuishi... Unayo sura nzuri na damu kali sana... Utaishi vizuri kuliko miye..." Hayo yalikuwa maneno ya mwisho ambayo mtoto huyo aliyasikia toka kwamama yake. Alipoamka alikuwa katoweka na kila kilicho chake.

"Wateja" wa mama yake walipokuja kumtafuta na kumkuta yeye walimtazama kwa tamaa lakini walisita. Utoto wake, na macho yake meupe yasiyo na hatia yaliwatisha. Wakaondoka zao huku wakimeza mate (Mtobwa 1990: 2-3).

<sup>23</sup> 'Nyumba ndogo' è un'espressione colloquiale per indicare la figura dell'amante di coloro che appartengono alla classe medio-alta. Benché non accettata dalla morale, di fatto essa riveste un ruolo significativo nel mondo cittadino tanzaniano: le *nyumba ndogo* appartengono alla sfera della relazione extraconiugale, clandestina e privata (Lewinson 2006: 90, 95).

### 3. Conclusioni

Dar es Salaam è il più grande centro urbano della Tanzania e pur non essendone la capitale, che è Dodoma, concentra in sé i maggiori servizi (porto, aeroporto, sede del Parlamento, vari ministeri, ambasciate, università e alberghi delle maggiori catene internazionali). Essa rappresenta il *luogo* per eccellenza: se lo spazio è un'entità astratta e infinita, nella pratica del vivere quotidiano l'uomo si relaziona al luogo, tale in quanto abitato e vissuto. Il luogo a sua volta, essendo un costruito sociale, può essere letto attraverso il testo letterario ed è anche possibile che lo influenzi, come è accaduto in Tanzania nell'ultimo trentennio del secolo scorso. La mancata pianificazione urbana che doveva attuarsi nel periodo immediatamente successivo all'indipendenza del paese ha contribuito alla trasformazione sociale dei quartieri cittadini. Se in epoca coloniale la città era suddivisa nelle tre grandi aree, *Uzunguni*, *Uhindini* e *Uswahilini* in cui le diverse comunità vivevano in uno stato di semi-segregazione razziale, sociale e politica, negli anni successivi si sperimenta una frammistione urbana e sociale che dà vita a nuove forme di riflessione e di confronto. L'altro non è necessariamente rappresentato dallo straniero, non ha necessariamente un colore di pelle diverso, e non parla necessariamente un'altra lingua. L'altro è "altro" semplicemente perché appartiene ad una classe sociale diversa. Riferendoci alla sfera letteraria, la scrittura sembra aver seguito il processo di crescita della città: immagini spaziali, funzionali alla descrizione sociale, si intersecano con immagini e categorie culturali. Più la città si trasforma in metropoli imponendo al resto del territorio il suo modello culturale, tanto più la sua scrittura domanda immagini: da *luogo* la città si trasforma in *spazio* creativo, le sue strade, i suoi quartieri divengono percorsi di vita e di morte, fisica e spirituale. Luogo di esperienza e spazio letterario si fondono nell'esistenza del personaggio, nel suo essere anti-eroe, dilaniato dalle condizioni oggettive della sua vita reale o dal conflitto interiore, nel suo percepirsi, di volta in volta, come immagine riflessa dello *slum* o del quartiere residenziale.

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## Astrologie alchemiche:

Ermetismi in transizione e culture occidentali

Ezio Albrile

Alchemy is the “sacred art” of the transmutation of metals or human beings, and often these two tendencies are expressed together in an allegorical mode infused with an astrological imager reflecting their mystical nature. The astrology is bound to alchemy in the search for the most favorable moment for commencing an enterprise (catarchic astrology) or in the form of the interrogational method, in which the horoscope of the precise moment at which a query is made to the astrologer is interpreted to provide an answer. Finally, the article illustrates these themes in some ancient manuscripts from Turin’s National University Library.

“...bisognerebbe che la mente fosse come una casa di cui potessimo chiudere le porte e le finestre per trattenerci non disturbati con chi ci piace; e invece è una casa aperta da ogni parte, senza battenti e senza imposte, come un edificio non finito, dove entra chi vuole.”

(E. De Amicis, *Cinematografo cerebrale*)

Durante il XIII secolo una nuova letteratura ermetica (Sannino 2000: 151) costituita dagli scritti di alchimia, medicina, astrologia e magia tradotti dal greco e dall'arabo, va ad aggiungersi all'Asclepio e a due apocrifi composti nella seconda metà del XII secolo, il *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* e il *Liber de sex rerum principiis*; una vasta produzione scritta che concorse a rendere ancora più complessa la ricezione degli *Hermetica* nell'Occidente medievale. Il vasto *corpus* di scritti attribuiti a Ermete Trismegisto e ai suoi discepoli, compulsati in età ellenistica, esercitò infatti sugli autori cristiani greci e latini un fascino che favorì la conoscenza e la diffusione delle dottrine ermetiche, ora utilizzate a fini apologetici ora aspramente rigettate. “Maestro di tutte le scienze” per Tertulliano (*Adv. Valent.* 15, 1), il mitico Ermete, profeta pagano della rivelazione cristiana o, per altri, ostinato inventore delle arti magiche, era conosciuto e citato da Arnobio (*Adv. nat.* 2, 13), da Lattanzio (*Div. inst.* 1, 6, 1; 2, 8, 68; etc.), da Cirillo d'Alessandria, da Agostino, che riprendendo brani estratti dall'*Asclepio* (*Civ. Dei* 8, 23-27),

arriverà a definire Ermete Trismegisto araldo del demonio (Gilly 1999: 171). Ma se il Medioevo non conosceva ancora i trattati filosofici del *Corpus Hermeticum* (tradotto da Ficino nel 1463), né i frammenti di Stobeo, e l'unico trattato filosofico conosciuto era l'*Asclepio*, citato da Teodorico di Chartres sin dal XII secolo e commentato da Abelardo, da Bernardo Silvestre, Alano di Lilla e, poi, da Guglielmo d'Alvernia, Alberto Magno, Bertoldo di Moosburg, circolavano numerosi trattati ermetici tecnico-pratici consacrati alle varie scienze occulte: astrologia, alchimia, medicina, magia, necromanzia.

Nel 1460 un monaco, Leonardo da Pistoia, giunse a Firenze con un manoscritto ritrovato in Grecia, per la precisione in Macedonia: il codice conteneva i quattordici trattati del *Corpus Hermeticum*, era la versione utilizzata secoli prima dal neoplatonico Michele Psello per commentare il verbo di Ermete Trismegisto. Aveva trovato il nucleo principale del *Corpus Hermeticum*, erroneamente chiamato *Pimandro*, dal nome del trattato che apriva la raccolta, e che assieme agli altri scritti astrologici e alchemici, andava a formare quel vasto sodalizio di testi afferenti alla gnosi ermetica fiorito tra il I e il III sec. d.C. ad Alessandria d'Egitto (Quispel 2000: 170; van den Broek 2000: 77 ss.). Una datazione che risale all'acribia filologica dell'ugonotto Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614).

Leonardo era stato incaricato da Cosimo de' Medici di scovare le testimonianze manoscritte in lingua greca e latina della sapienza antica, e ciò che aveva trovato era a dir poco eccezionale, poiché Ermete, identificato con l'egizio Thoth, era ritenuto da molti maestro e ispiratore di Platone e di Mosè. Immantinenti Cosimo ordinò al protetto Marsilio Ficino di interrompere la traduzione dei dialoghi platonici per dedicarsi interamente agli scritti del *Corpus Hermeticum*.

## 1. Scritture celesti

Nel 1945 a Nag Hammadi, nell'Alto Egitto, fu ritrovata un'importante biblioteca di codici manoscritti in copto; si trattava in gran parte dei testi utilizzati da gruppi religiosi comunemente descritti come gnostici, ma tra essi si scoprì anche un frammento dell'*Asclepio* ignoto alla traduzione latina, poiché proveniente da un perduto *Teleios logos*, il "Discorso finale" o "Discorso perfetto" (Mahé 1981-2: 304-327), uno scritto ermetico che conosceva molto bene Lattanzio (*Div. inst.* 4, 6, 4; Mahé 1981-2: 405-434), e nel quale, tra le altre cose si narrava con dovizia di particolari il destino delle anime nell'aldilà (Moreschini 2013: 591-592). Oltre a questo fu ritrovato un altro testo ermetico *L'Ogdoade e l'Enneade*, sino ad allora sconosciuto. L'opera rivelava come le cerchie ermetiche fossero configurate secondo gradi progressivi di iniziazione (Quispel 2000: 182-183).

L'adepto, dopo aver compreso l'intima natura degli astri, cioè trasceso la sfera dei sette Pianeti e il cielo delle Stelle fisse (l'Ogdoade), poteva contemplare Dio con i propri occhi. Un'esperienza con il



proprio io profondo, che già il *Corpus Hermeticum* descriveva come il conseguimento di una “beatitudine” (μακάριος); *Corp. Herm.* fr. 6, 18, in Ramelli 2005: 952-953) celestiale, una conoscenza acquisita con il “silenzio (σιωπή) e la soppressione di tutte le percezioni sensoriali”: chiunque avesse contemplato anche una sola volta questa visione non avrebbe potuto più volgersi ad altro, poiché essa “trasformava (μεταβάλλει) l’uomo intero nella sua essenza” (*Corp. Herm.* 10, 5-6, in Ramelli 2005: 258-259).

Gli astri, e la forza racchiusa in essi, erano dunque fondamentali per giungere a tale conoscenza sovrasensibile. Nonostante la lotta condotta da autori di età tardoantica, considerati ortodossi nella tradizione greca e latina, contro la persistenza delle credenze astrologiche, la disciplina ben radicata nella cultura latina classica e tardoantica che attribuiva agli astri un’influenza articolata e determinante sulla vita degli uomini si era trasmessa, praticamente immutata, nella cultura medievale, sia a livello iconografico (monumenti e facciate di chiese romaniche) che teoretico; ne è testimone Isidoro di Siviglia quando nella sua opera enciclopedica descrive gli astrologi come coloro che “leggono nelle stelle dei presagi, mettono i dodici segni celesti in relazione alle singole parti dell’anima o del corpo (*etiam duodecim caeli signa per singula animae vel corporis membra disponunt*) e cercano di vaticinare la nascita e il carattere degli uomini contemplando il moto delle costellazioni” (*Etym.* 3, 27, 2). La notizia di Isidoro è significativa, poiché la classica *melothesia* che legava i segni zodiacali a singole parti del corpo umano è estesa anche alle potenze dell’anima, un dettaglio che rivela come l’autore latino fosse avvezzo alle nozioni astromantiche.

Durante il XII secolo con l’arrivo in Europa dei testi aristotelici e in particolare con la traduzione dell’*Introductorium maius ad astrologiam* (= *Kitāb al-madkhal al-kabīr ‘alā ‘ilm aḥkām al-nujūm*) di Abū Ma’shar, meglio noto come Albumasar (Pingree 1985), scritto a Bagdad nell’848 e tradotto in latino prima da Giovanni di Siviglia, nel 1133, e in seguito da Ermanno di Carinzia, nel 1140 (Lemay 1962: XXVIII-XXIX), gran parte delle conoscenze astronomiche e astrologiche passarono nel mondo latino (Albrile 2017: 158-160). Un altro testo di valore inestimabile a riguardo è il *Liber astrologiae* di Georgius Zothorus Zeparus Fendulus, un chierico che nel XII secolo tradusse in latino un’antologia di scritti di Abū Ma’shar (*Albumasar philosophus*). Una copia riccamente miniata, opera di un maestro siciliano al seguito di Federico II Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), è conservata alla Biblioteca Nazionale di Parigi (Mss. lat. 7330)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bibliothèque Nationale. Département des manuscrits. Manuscrits enluminés d’origine italienne. 2. XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, edited by François Avril and Marie-Thérèse Gousset (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1984), 160-162, n° 189; cit. in Grenet and Pinault (1997: 1028).

L'*Introductorium maius* è un compendio di disciplina astrologica che lo stesso Abū Ma'shar probabilmente ricavò da una traduzione pahlavi degli scritti di Teucro di Babilonia (I secolo a.C.), nei quali era inclusa una versione del *Brhājātaka* di Varāhamihira, astrologo e astronomo indiano vissuto a Ujjani, presso la corte di Vikramaditya (Saxl 1985: 280-286). Il tutto, però, rivisitato in termini «sabei»: Abū Ma'shar riteneva che la religione astrale degli abitanti di Ḥarrān, la città del dio della luna, fosse la fede originaria, insegnata al primo uomo da Dio. La storia della disciplina astrologica confermava tale credo.

Secondo il perduto *Kitāb al-ulūf* di Abū Ma'shar, Ermete/Mercurio, il profeta di Ḥarrān, di tempo in tempo si sarebbe manifestato in triplice forma (*muṭallaṭ*; Carusi 1992: 179, n. 13): all'inizio prendendo le fattezze del primo eroe e legislatore iranico Hōšang (Shahbazi 2004: 491 b- 492 a), poi del patriarca ebraico Enoch (Ukhnūkh; Chwolsohn 1856: 637 ss.; 787 ss.) e infine del profeta islamico Idrīs (cioè Ἀνδρέας, il cuoco di Alessandro Magno che la tradizione riteneva avesse conseguito l'immortalità fisica; ma la tradizione coranica poteva aver attinto anche dalla figura dell'apostolo Andrea). In altre versioni, il primo Ermete era identificato con Enoch vissuto in Egitto; il secondo, babilonese, era il Mercurio dei Caldei (Nabu/Nebo); e il terzo, egiziano, padre dell'alchimia, era il «tre volte grande» Trismegisto, *summa* dei due precedenti (Pingree 1968: 14-18), le numerose scienze e tecniche conosciute prima del diluvio universale sarebbero quindi state salvate, scolpite in forma geroglifica sulle mura delle piramidi (Fodor 1970).

Verisimilmente, le dottrine astrologiche dalla Grecia erano passate al mondo iranico e da lì, attraverso la mediazione araba, arrivarono in Europa (cfr. Nallino 1922: 345-363 and Panaino 1997: 251). Secoli prima, infatti, il sasanide Šābuhr I (240-270 d.C.) compì una prima “secolarizzazione” degli scritti filosofici e astrologici greci disseminati nelle più remote province dell'ecumene mazdea. Si venne elaborando, così, una nuova versione dell'iranismo con intrecci romanzeschi degni delle *Mille e una notte*, oppure utilizzata come punto di partenza per nuove speculazioni. L'Islām avrebbe fondato questa assimilazione sull'identificazione di Ermete con Idrīs (cfr. *Corano* 19, 57) e con Enoch-Agatodemone, mantenendo i rapporti di parentela di questi con Seth. Ermete, cioè la “freccia” Tīr, sarebbe stato testimone dell'antico sorgere delle Pleiadi nel punto equinoziale, un fenomeno che tremila e cento anni prima della nostra era costituì effettivamente il punto di partenza del calendario egiziano. Infatti, il geografo e astromante al-Bīrūnī asseriva di aver letto in uno scritto ermetico che all'epoca di Ermete il punto vernale coincideva ancora col sorgere eliaco delle Pleiadi (Doresse 1977: 116). Secondo una consuetudine linguistica risalente al suo nome sumerico <sup>mul</sup>**KAK-SI-SA'**, Sirio (*α Canis Maioris*) era la “stella-freccia” (Panaino 199a5: 47) che si muoveva velocemente nei cieli, una singolarità che condivideva con il pianeta Tīr/Mercurio (Panaino 1995a: 71). In due passi del *Tīštar*

Yašt, l'inno avestico dedicato a Sirio, il movimento della stella è paragonato a quello della freccia lanciata da Ǝrəxša, il mitico arciere iranico (Bartholomae 1904-1906: 349). Il movimento di una freccia rappresenta in modo figurato la velocità dei corpi celesti (Kellens 1977: 198): in una sequenza cosmologica del *Bundahišn*, la velocità del sole, della luna e delle stelle è espressa mediante il lancio di una triplice freccia (Henning 1942: 234). L'identificazione tra la "freccia" Tīr ed Ermete è quindi una logica conseguenza.

## 2. Identità astrali

La disciplina astrologica è anche nota come apotelesmatica, poiché gli astri sono ritenuti ἀποτελεσματικοί, "che conducono ad un fine, produttivi", quindi gli astrologi sono anche noti come *apotelesmatologi* (De Falco 1922) e i trattati di astrologia prendono spesso il nome di *Apotelesmatika*, "Sull'influsso degli astri". La parola passerà nel mondo arabo (*tilsam, tilism, tilasm*; Ruska 2000: 536 a-538 a) e servirà da base etimologica e teorica per il "talismano". Questi influssi sono ritenuti molteplici e si esercitano sia alla nascita, determinando la formazione del fisico e del carattere (*nativitas*, l'attuale "tema natale"), sia determinando i momenti più propizi per intraprendere un'impresa (*electiones*), sia svelando avvenimenti futuri o segreti (*interrogationes*). Nei due ultimi casi abbiamo a che fare con una disciplina astrologica detta "catarchica" (dal verbo *κατάρχω*, "cominciare") indirizzata alla scelta del momento più adatto per intraprendere azioni importanti, e nella cui operatività si dà particolare importanza alle grandi rivoluzioni planetarie o cosmiche e all'influenza dei Decani, i 36 signori planetari della decade, uno per ogni dieci gradi dello zodiaco (Bouché-Leclercq 1899 : 215-235; Boll 1903: 336-337), tre per ogni segno (Albrile 2017: 164-169).

Sin dal XIII secolo si elaborarono quindi interpretazioni sottese a salvaguardare la disciplina astrologica, mostrandone la permeabilità con il verbo cristiano: il primo tentativo articolato in questo senso si trova nello *Speculum Astronomiae*, secondo alcuni scritto da Alberto Magno (Zambelli 1997), secondo altri da Campano da Novara (Paravicini Bagliani 2001: 158-60).

Un testo suggestivo che distingue fra immagini astrologiche lecite e immagini necromantiche illecite e detestabili, le prime sono le descrizioni figurate della volta stellata, dei pianeti, dei segni zodiacali, e dedotte geometricamente per i loro aspetti secondo l'astrologia del *Tetrabiblos* di Tolomeo: si tratta di immagini che in termini moderni definiremmo astronomiche e non sovranaturali, demoniche o necromantiche, oggetto di una magia cerimoniale nella quale si invocano gli "spiriti" planetari attraverso orazioni, suffumigi, disegnando o incidendo le figurazioni degli aspetti astrali. Nello *Speculum Astronomiae* si nega quindi l'uso delle tecniche necromantiche di invocazione degli spiriti delle figure e delle immagini dei Pianeti, tipiche della tradizione ermetica e dei vari interpreti

della disciplina magica delle *electiones* e delle *interrogationes*. L'autore dello *Speculum*, infatti, riteneva lecito soltanto lo studio delle immagini astronomiche dei cieli, in quanto fisico-naturali e non astromagiche.

Al contrario l'argomento è prediletto da uno tra i più celebri autori citati e tradotti nel mondo latino, Tābit ibn Qurra (826-901; Burnett 2007: 13-40), a cui era attribuito il *De imaginibus planetarum* o *Liber praestigiorum*, un testo fondamentale per la conoscenza dell'astromagia. L'opera, le cui origini rinviavano a Ermete, ebbe un grandissimo seguito nel mondo medievale: tradotta da Adelardo di Bath e Johannes Hispalensis, venne citata da Alberto Magno, da Pietro d'Abano, da Cecco d'Ascoli e, nel XV secolo, da Marsilio Ficino.

Secondo Tābit ibn Qurra, nella teoria delle immagini si univano astrologia e magia: la costruzione dell'immagine astrologica si fondava sulla corrispondenza delle configurazioni celesti con le cose terrene. Ma il passaggio dall'influsso astrale alla riproduzione fittizia della costellazione e quindi l'uso della stessa nella pratica astromantica, era dominio di una magia cerimoniale che ritrovava nella tecnica delle *electiones* e delle *interrogationes* l'intima giustificazione.

Si trattava in pratica di una serie di procedure e di azioni magiche indirizzate a invocare gli spiriti dei Pianeti tramite immagini e sigilli (Pingree 1992; Burnett 2001; sulla continuità di questa tradizione, cfr. Perrone Compagni 2001 e Lidaka 1998). Tali immagini erano le *facies*, *effigies*, πρόσωπα, i pianeti che avevano potere sui Decani, e cioè ciascuno sopra la terza parte di un segno zodiacale (Gundel 1940: 121-122; Gundel 1936). L'immagine liberata dal corpo della parola, grazie alla parola stessa, diventava figurazione vivente: attraverso l'orazione e la preghiera all'astro planetario, si poteva catturarne lo "spirito", nutrendo la fonte di ogni meraviglia che alberga in ognuno di noi, nello stupore di fronte al fatto che nessuna cosa è mai rivelata integralmente, o come dice di essere. Anche la medicina astromagica agiva seguendo tali parametri: esistevano i cosiddetti *dies* (o *horae*) *critici*, i momenti in cui la malattia, attraverso una "crisi", evolveva verso la guarigione o verso la morte; e, mediante la tradizionale corrispondenza fra i Segni Zodiacali e le parti del corpo umano (*melothesia*), stabiliva in base alla configurazione celeste il momento migliore per intervenire (*electio*), sia somministrando farmaci che eseguendo interventi chirurgici come la flebotomia (meglio conosciuta come "salasso").

Māshā'allāh ibn Atharī (ca. 740-815) astronomo e astrologo giudeo-persiano, latinizzato in Messahala e spesso confuso con Abū Ma'shar, è forse il primo a interessarsi attivamente alla disciplina delle *electiones*. Il *Fihrist* di an-Nadīm elenca ventun opere a lui attribuite, principalmente astrologiche, ma solo una minima parte di queste passerà nella cultura latina, e ciò grazie anche alle traduzioni di Johannes Hispalensis (Giovanni di Siviglia). Tra esse un *De electionibus*, conservato in un

*Liber Messahala*, che mi permetto di citare in una copia manoscritta, purtroppo mutila, posseduta dalla Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino (Ms. H. IV. 1; Pasini 1749: 292 a-b). L'incendio del 1904 ha danneggiato (Giaccaria 1986: 5-6) gravemente il manoscritto in questione, e nonostante il lavoro di recupero (Giaccaria 2007a: 448), i segni delle fiamme sono tuttora evidenti (fig. 1). Al f. 38r possiamo tuttavia leggere l'inizio del *De electionibus*, nel suo relazionarsi all'uso dell'immagine del cielo al momento più favorevole.

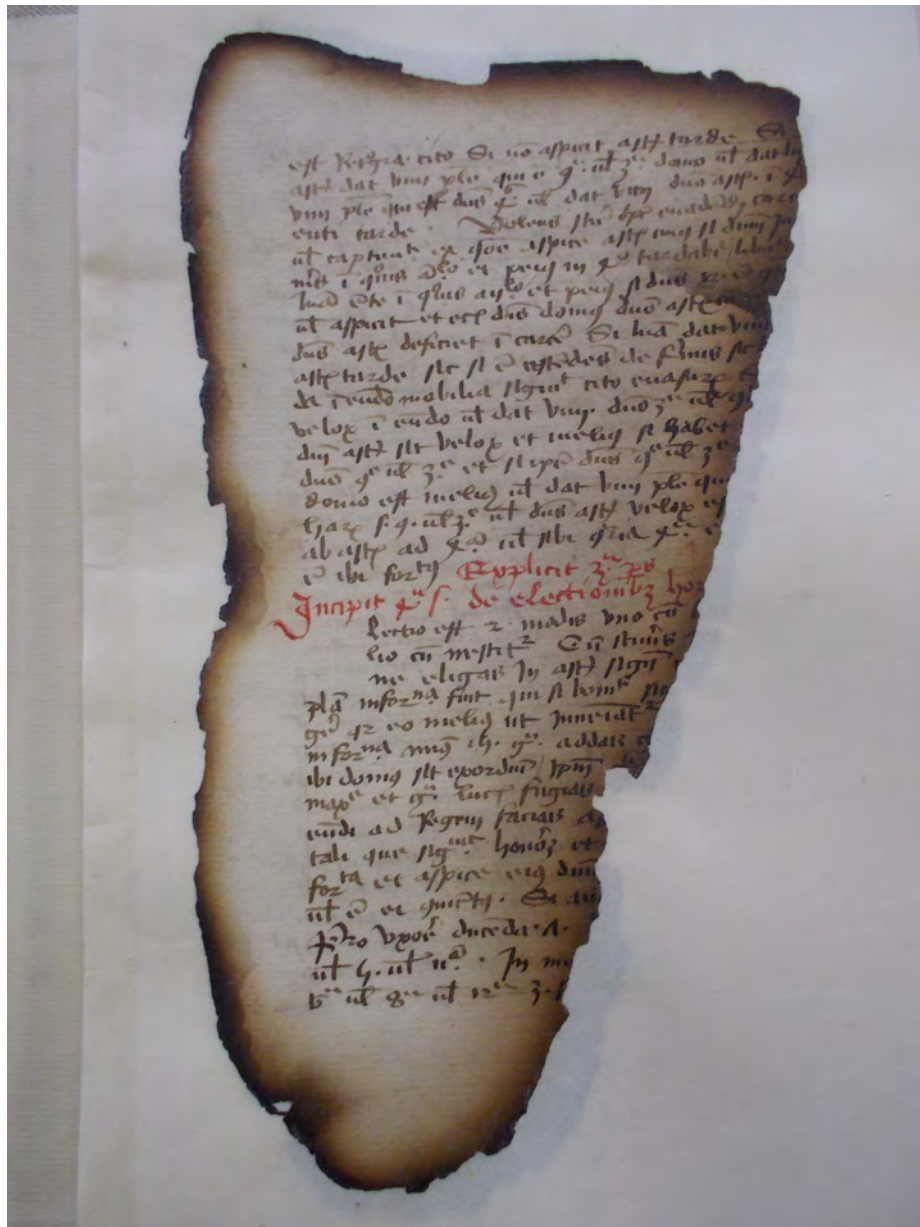


Fig. 1: Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino, Ms. H. IV. 1: *Liber Messahala* (= *Māshā'allāh*)  
*translatu*s a *Iohannes Hispalensis*, f. 38r.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Le fotografie sono dell'autore (su concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, che ne vieta l'ulteriore riproduzione). Si ringrazia il dr. Salvatore Amato, bibliotecario della Nazionale

Sempre di Johannes Hispalensis è la traduzione di un astrologo e astronomo siro-persiano, Sahl ibn Bish al-Israili (ca. 786-845), noto nel mondo latino come Zahel, il primo a tradurre la Μέγιστη σύνταξις di Claudio Tolomeo, la *Syntaxis mathematica*, in arabo la forma del titolo *Al-maǧīstī* sarà ricalcata sul greco, e a noi nota come *Almagesto*. Ma Zahel è anche e soprattutto autore del *Liber de electionibus* in cui introduce la tecnica della scelta del momento favorevole, “elettivo”, attraverso l’uso dell’astrologia oraria per individuare la configurazione astrale propizia (Zambelli 1997: 238). Zahel riporta la disciplina astrologica alle origini ermetiche, giungendo a precisare i tempi e i modi opportuni nei quali intraprendere l’opera alchemica (*electio in operibus alchimiae*): la luna dev’essere in un segno a lei consono, libera da influssi negativi, lo stesso dicasi quando si dovranno trasmutare i metalli vili in oro, dove sarà il Sole a godere di tali benefici astrali (Zahel 1533: 115). Curiosamente troviamo una notazione analoga in un manoscritto alchimico attribuito ad Alberto Magno (Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino, Ms. K<sup>2</sup>. IV. 6 = *Alchemia Alberti Magni*). Si tratta di una miscellanea di trattati (cc. 198), datati al sec. XV, e ascritti al *magister* domenicano, sicuramente parte delle ventotto opere alchimiche a lui falsamente attribuite (Giaccaria 2007a: 445). Orbene, in un segmento del manoscritto (fig. 2), che rivela una scrittura e un idioma (volgare) differente e più recente rispetto alla totalità del testo (f. 10v), leggiamo una precisazione analoga alle *electiones* astrologiche: l’opus alchimico dovrà iniziare in un momento propizio della Luna, in una condizione astrale ottimale affinché si realizzi la trasmutazione metallica.

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Universitaria di Torino, per il determinante aiuto nel reperimento di materiali e testi rari. Un grazie infine al prof. Giancarlo Mantovani, sempre prodigo di consigli.

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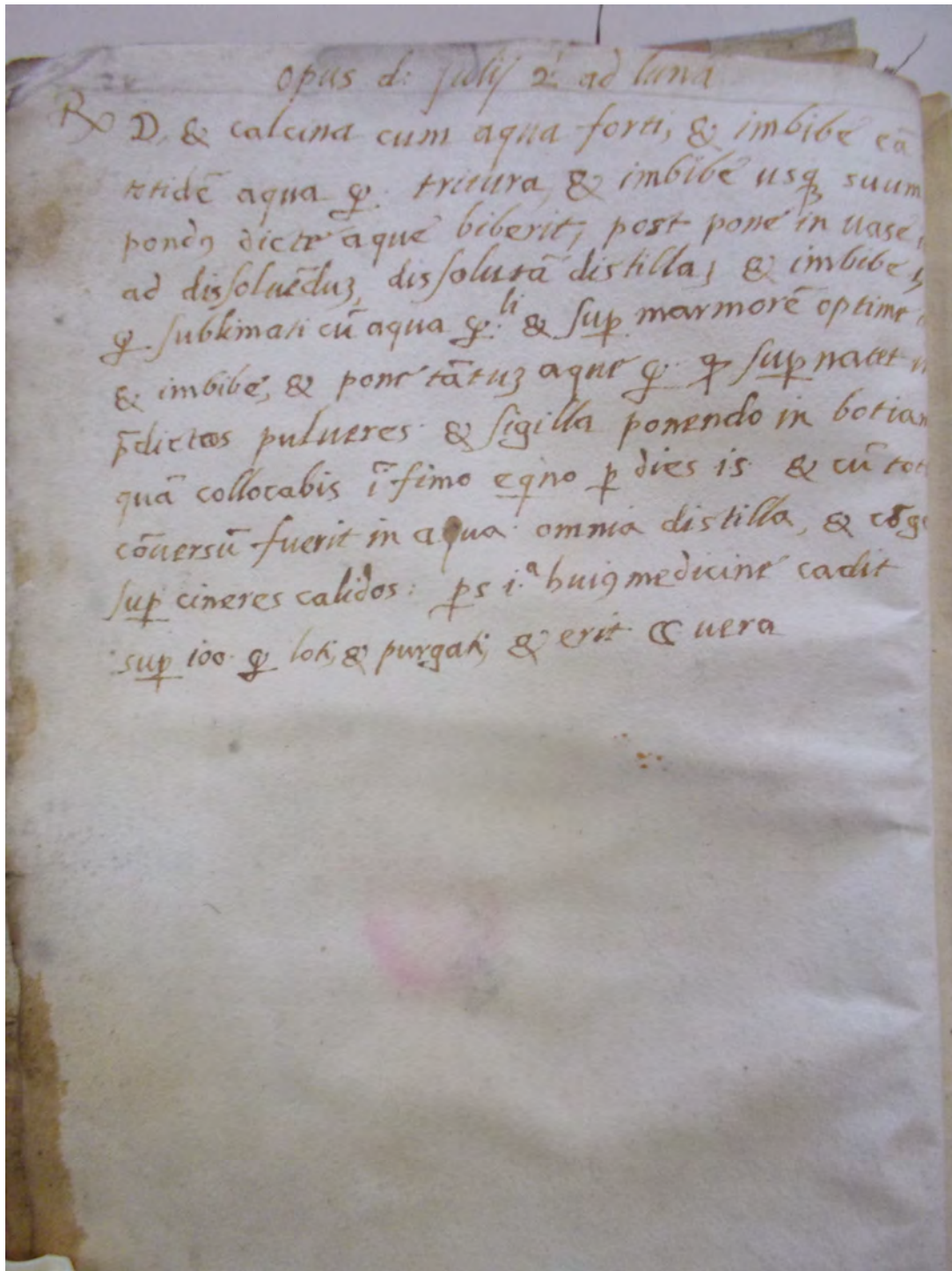


Fig. 2: Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino, Ms. K<sup>2</sup>. IV. 6: *Alchemia Alberti Magni*, f. 10v.

S'è detto, la tecnica delle *electiones* era intimamente legata a quella della *interrogationes*, e con un significato affine la ritroviamo in altro persiano, astrologo alla corte del califfo al-Manṣūr, 'Umar ibn al-Farrukhān aṭ-Ṭabarī (ca. 800) latinizzato in Omar Tiberiade (Omar Tyberiadis), noto per aver tradotto dal pahlavi in arabo il *Carmen astrologicum* di Doroteo Sidonio (Pingree 1976: XIV-XVI; cfr. Brennan: 2014) e altre opere astrologiche, tra cui un *Liber de nativitatibus et interrogationibus* tradotto

nel 1217 dal *magistro Salamone hebreo* e pubblicato a Venezia nel 1524 da Luca Gaurico (1476-1558; Muccillo 1992: 67-93). Proprio in quest'opera si sottolinea l'opportunità di iniziare il *magisterio* alchimico secondo una specifica congiunzione astrale, favorevole alla produzione del *lapis rubeo*, la pietra di proiezione<sup>3</sup>. Ovvero, per citare un tardo *Tractatus aureus de lapidi physici secreto* (cap. III) attribuito a Ermete Trismegisto, manipolare la materia minerale seguendo dettami astromagici poiché *Regina sive filia Philosophorum rubea, est Luna. Non autem mireris, quod, quae alias caput et splendor est albedinis nunc rubea dicitur*<sup>4</sup>.

Noto per la vasta erudizione, nonché per la profondità degli interessi astromagici, Alfonso X el Sabio, re di Castiglia e di Leon (1221-1284; D'Agostino 1992; García Avilés 1996: 14-22) utilizzerà in maniera proficua la disciplina delle *electiones* unendola alla costruzione delle immagini astrali<sup>5</sup>. La magia astrologica agiva in dipendenza dei corpi celesti e delle loro emanazioni, e attraverso il talismano o *imago*, cercava di attrarre particolari influssi; la sua efficacia dipendeva dalla scienza dei luoghi delle stelle fisse, che determinavano le diverse configurazioni astrali come rapporti tra immagini, da cui derivavano strutture e relazioni terrene (Perrone Compagni 1975: 266). Il talismano esplicava la propria funzione attraverso la connessione della virtù astrale con quella terrena. Il rapporto astrologico univa virtù celeste e materia terrestre, per cui nell'immagine si compiva un fenomeno naturale manipolato dall'arte dell'uomo.

Queste tecniche di origine ermetica si rifacevano ai culti astrali dei Sabei di Ḥarrān, espressione di una tradizione sapienziale che nel IV sec. d.C. mescolava divinazione mesopotamica, neoplatonismo e astrologia greca (cfr. Tardieu 1986 e Green 1992). Nella disciplina arcaica insegnata dai Sabei, esisteva una parentela segreta tra le anime e gli astri: le anime erano originariamente stelle e avrebbero fatto ritorno alla loro stirpe astrale. Gli harraniani avrebbero quindi rielaborato la loro magia astrale, configurandola nello schema della teurgia neoplatonica e ponendola sotto l'egida di Ermete Trismegisto (Pingree 1980: 1-6), in un fluido universo apotelesmatico in cui la funzione dei pianeti era centrale.

Un credo astrale che presupponeva il variegato sfondo religioso mesopotamico della tarda antichità. Dalla Babilonia iranizzata, sasanide, provengono infatti alcuni materiali magici importanti

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<sup>3</sup> *Omar de nativitatibus et interrogationibus*, nuper castigatus et in ordinem redactus per D. Lucam Gauricum (Venezia: Lucantonio Giunta, 1524), 20v.

<sup>4</sup> *Hermetis Trismegisti. Tractatus aureus de lapidi physici secreto*, in *Theatrum Chemicum, praecipuos selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiæ et lapidis philosophici*, IV (Strasburgo: sumptibus heredum Eberh. Zetzneri, 1659), 662.

<sup>5</sup> *Alphonsus X Rex Castellae, Tabulæ Astronomicæ* (Venezia: Johannes Hamman, 1492), 9r (*Propositio Septima*).



per ricostruire la diffusione del verbo ermetico nel mondo aramaico-mesopotamico (van Bladel 2009: 25-26) e, segnatamente, nei Sabei di Ḥarrān. I primi testi che si propongono alla nostra attenzione sono due incantesimi in aramaico, pressoché identici, dipinti all'interno delle cosiddette coppe magiche, un fenomeno necromantico fiorito nella Mesopotamia sasanide dal IV al VII sec. d.C.

Espressione di rituali apotropaici, le coppe erano solitamente scritte internamente, a spirale, dal bordo verso il centro; sepolte a faccia in giù e pensate per intrappolare i demoni. Erano usualmente collocate sotto la soglia di un'abitazione, in cortili, in un angolo di una casa di un defunto o nei cimiteri. Alle coppe magiche fa riferimento una committenza variegata: ebrei, cristiani, mandei, manichei e zoroastriani; e testimonia il formarsi di un pensiero magico-ermetico all'alba delle prime conquiste islamiche.

Le due coppe evocano la potenza di alcune entità angeliche e di “Ermete, Signore eccelso” (*hyrmys* [var. *'yrmys*] *mry' rb'*; Montgomery 1913: 146, testo n. 7 [CBS 16007], r. 8; pl. VIII)<sup>6</sup>. Queste coppe, che nei nomi e nei titoli dei fruitori rivelano una committenza sostanzialmente iranica, mostrano un'impronta ermetica anche da un punto di vista iconografico. Alcune di esse recano infatti dipinto al centro (Montgomery 1913: 54; pl. XVI, testo no. 15 [CBS 16087]) oppure ai margini (Moriggi 2014: 67, bowl n. 10 [BM 91712]) un Ouroboros; uno dei protagonisti dell'iconografia ermetico-alchimica e figura centrale di tutta la simbolica trasmutativa (Reitzenstein 1916), il serpente ciclico, avvolto su se stesso, eternato nell'atto di inghiottire e divorare la propria coda.

Immagine del moto circolare degli astri attorno al polo celeste (Hopfner 1974: 519-520, figg. 21-22) e, di conseguenza, del fluire ciclico del tempo, inteso quale successione ininterrotta di istanti (Stricker 1953: 7-10), l'Ouroboros fa una delle prime e più importanti apparizioni nei manoscritti di alchimia greco-egizia (Sheppard 1962: 85-86). L'Ouroboros è l'amalgama che si trasforma per decomposizione (σῆψις), mutando in una serie di forme cromatiche che richiamano una specifica serie planetaria: Venere (Verde), Sole (Giallo), Marte (Rosso); mentre Luna e Saturno corrispondono al bianco dell'occhio e al nero della pupilla, colori che esprimono la corporeità indefinita del serpente ciclico.

Sempre di una committenza iranica si legge su un amuleto vergato in siriano, l'aramaico di Edessa. Si tratta di un incantesimo scritto su un rotolo di pelle animale, entro il quale Ermete è evocato quale soppressore di Argo, il gigante dai cento occhi custode di Io, sacerdotessa di Hera bramata da Zeus e trasformata in mucca. Per esaudire il desiderio del signore dell'Olimpo, Ermete ammansisce con il suono del flauto di Pan il mostro polioculare e quindi lo uccide; estirpati, gli occhi

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<sup>6</sup> Nelle stesse lettere si può anche riconoscere il nome del dio iranico Ohrmazd (< avestico Ahura Mazdā).

finiranno quali “gemme stellanti” sulla coda del pavone, animale sacro a Hera, dalle valenze cosmiche e astrali (Ovid. *Metam.* 1, 667-723; Gignoux 1987: 30, testo II, 25-26; 40, comm.; 32, II, 33). Probabilmente a ragione di ciò Ermete nel nostro incantesimo è invocato come “Signore del tutto” (*mr’ kl hrms*; Gignoux 1987: 32, testo II, 27; 40, comm.).

Certo non si può parlare di una esperienza e di una realtà ermetiche, organicamente strutturate nel mondo aramaico-mesopotamico (van Bladel 2009: 26), ma i riferimenti sono sicuramente importanti per comprenderne e seguirne lo sviluppo in seno all’impero sasanide. Proprio i Sasanidi sono cruciali nella trasmissione dei testi astrologici ermetici al mondo arabo e quindi a quello latino. Sin da Šābuhr I (240-270 d.C.) ci fu una prima acquisizione di materiali filosofici e astrologici greci. Tale opera di traduzione fu vastissima, ma incidentalmente delle versioni pahlavi non è rimasto più nulla. La storia della disciplina ermetica ha quindi subito una fatale cesura, colmata solamente dalle traduzioni arabe sopravvissute. Tre esse è sicuramente da menzionare il *Kitāb asrār an-nujūm*, noto nel mondo latino come *Liber de stellis beibeniis*, “Libro delle stelle fisse” (Kunitzsch 2001: 9-81); *beibeniis* è la resa latina dell’arabo *al-biyābāniya*, calco dell’aggettivo medio-persiano *awiyābānīg*, “non-vagante” “fisso”, che a sua volta traduce il greco ἀπλανής per designare le Stelle fisse (Henning 1942: 232, n. 3; van Bladel 2009: 27, n. 21), che nella cosmologia zoroastriana hanno un ruolo rilevante poiché non compromesse con l’abominevole *gumēzišn*, il “miscuglio” fra tenebra e luce (MacKenzie 2002: 398 b-399 b).

Secondo il *Bundahišn*, il principe delle tenebre Ahriman irruppe nella creazione perforando la volta celeste da Nord, in corrispondenza dell’Orsa maggiore, lì dove erano legati i *kišwarān*, le sette regioni del cosmo. È l’origine del “miscuglio”, il *gumēzišn*, in cui l’Avversario contamina le creazioni ahuriche mescolando la tenebra alla luce, il male al bene. Secondo la cosmologia iranica, i cieli erano il campo di battaglia di una lunga guerra combattuta fra astri buoni (le stelle fisse e le costellazioni non eclitticali) e astri cattivi (le stelle “mescolate” e quelle “erranti”, cioè i pianeti).

I testi zoroastriani non consideravano il sole e la luna pianeti, ma astri creati direttamente da Ahura Mazdā ed elevati al rango di guida delle Costellazioni<sup>7</sup>. Essi erano parte dei tre “passi” (stelle fisse, luna, sole; cfr. Duchesne-Guillemin 1962; Walter Burkert 1963; West 2002) che nell’escatologia iranica conducevano verso il *garō.dəmāna-*, il Paradiso (Panaino 1995b: 206). Nella più antica cosmografia iranica, i dodici Segni dello Zodiaco e le altre stelle e costellazioni erano schierati per contrastare l’attacco demonico dei pianeti (Brunner 1989). Quattro astri custodivano i quadranti della

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<sup>7</sup> *Bundahišn* 2, 1-2 (*The Būndahishn. Being a Facsimile of the TD Manuscript No. 2*, edited by Ervad Tahmuras Dinshaji Anklesaria [Bombay: British India Press, 1908], 5, 11-12).

volta celeste agli ordini della Stella Polare (*Bundahišn* 5, 4; cfr. inoltre De Menasce 1945: 45-49), secondo questo schema (Panaino 1998: 72):

**Nord** = Haftōring (*Ursa Major*)

**Est** = Tištar ( $\alpha$  *Canis majoris*, Sirio)

**Centro del cielo** = Mēx ī Gāh (*Polaris*)

**Sud** = Sadwēs (*Piscis austrinus*, Fomalhaut)

**Ovest** = Wanand (*Vega*)

Invisibili lacci legavano i *kišwarān* alle stelle dell’Orsa maggiore, a Nord (*Bundahišn* 2, 7; Henning 1942: 231), lì dove si trovava il foro, il passaggio attraverso il quale Ahriman era penetrato nella creazione, contaminandola. La funzione di Haftōring era quella di contrastare l’attacco ahrimanico, regolando il moto delle 12 stazioni zodiacali (*Mēnōg ī xrad* 49, 15-21; Sanjana 1895: 70; Bausani 1964<sup>8</sup>: 155-156)<sup>8</sup> e trattenendo sulla soglia dell’inferno le 99.999 creazioni diaboliche con l’aiuto di un egual numero di Frawahrān (< avestico Fravaši; Panaino 2002), le angeliche custodi dell’umanità.

Di fatto il *Liber de stellis beibeniis* si intrattiene sulle virtù e sui difetti degli individui nati sotto gli auspici di determinate stelle fisse, collegate alla *complexio* (< arabo *mizāj*, greco κρᾶσις) dei pianeti nel momento in cui quelle stesse stelle occupano specifiche astrotessie, relate in particolare a due dei quattro angoli del cielo, i *cardines* (greco κέντρα), cioè l’“ascendente” (il punto all’orizzonte a Oriente), e il *medium caeli* (lo zenit), corrispondente all’inizio della decima casa. Le “complexioni” o “temperamenti” delle stelle fisse sono esaustivamente spiegati nel manuale apotelesmatico di Claudio Tolomeo (*Tetrab.* 1, 9). Mentre il legame tra stelle fisse e pianeti rimanda alle origini mesopotamiche della disciplina astrologica e alle mutazioni cromatiche che gli astromanti babilonesi registravano nelle loro tavolette d’argilla. Il *Liber de stellis beibeniis* vanta quindi ascendenze molto antiche, basate sulle stesse fonti da cui dipende Tolomeo (Kunitzsch 2001: 11, n.1).

### 3. Trasformazioni

Il *Carmen astrologicum* di Doroteo Sidonio, tradotto da ‘Umar ibn al-Farrukhān aṭ-Ṭabarī, raccoglie nella versione araba alcuni riferimenti a Ermete Trismegisto (van Bladel 2009: 28-29), Re d’Egitto (*al-*

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<sup>8</sup> Testo in TITUS: *Mēnōg ī xrad*, data entry by David N. MacKenzie, Göttingen 1993; corrections by Thomas Jügel, Frankfurt 2007-2008; TITUS version by Jost Gippert, Frankfurt a/M, access August 17, 2008.

*mušarraḥ al-maḥmūd bi-ṭalāt ṭabā'i' Hirmis Malik Miṣr*), nonché a un Ermete babilonese. Il primo è il personaggio a cui è dedicato il libro, figlio di Doroteo l'egizio (*Carm. astr.* I, 2; Pingree 1976: 161), mentre il secondo è il celebrato Ermete dalle tre nature, che ha scritto un libro sul moto dei pianeti nelle case (*Carm. astr.* II, 20, 1; Pingree 1976: 224).

Quanto raccontato nel *Carmen astrologicum* era circostanza già nota a Platone, quando nel *Fedone* (108 c-110 b) parlava di una “vera terra” collocata più in alto, simile ad una sfera composta di dodici frammenti colorati e situata nell'etere, dove gli dèi visibili, cioè i pianeti, avevano templi e dimore (111 b), ossia le case zodiacali o domicili planetari.

Il moto e il posizionamento dei Pianeti nelle case è determinante nel fissare i destini individuali, e scegliere il momento propizio per un'azione.

Se l'ascendente costituisce il punto di partenza per suddividere lo Zodiaco in dodici parti o “luoghi”, “case”, esiste una tecnica per determinare in base alle posizioni relative dei pianeti e dei cardini la posizione delle «sorti», quasi una serie supplementare di pianeti virtuali. Nei temi natali, cioè gli oroscopi alla nascita, le case e le sorti presiedono ai diversi campi dell'esistenza, come la prole, il patrimonio, i viaggi e le malattie. Altra prova di come il fato dell'uomo fosse simpateticamente correlato al moto circolare degli astri. Ciò si riverbera anche nelle manipolazioni alchimiche, che dovevano seguire specifiche complessioni astrali. Nell'alchimia ellenistica, si parlava di “tinture occasionali”, cioè di operatività combinatorie che agivano solo in concomitanza di determinate congiunzioni stellari.

In un lontano passato, prima del Diluvio, sarebbero esistiti procedimenti di “tintura naturale” attraverso i quali gli uomini avrebbero avuto accesso ai segreti delle trasmutazioni. In seguito ad un complotto dei “demoni vigilanti” (cfr. Delcor 1987: 122-123), già sconfitti dalle Potenze celesti, tali arcani caddero nell'oblio: accuratamente nascoste, queste ricette vennero raccolte e crittografate in alcuni trattati attribuiti all'antico Ermete. In sostituzione di queste “tinture naturali” i demoni avrebbero introdotto con l'inganno procedimenti ricalcati sulla tintura delle stoffe. Stando al riassunto di Zosimo, queste tinture, cosiddette “occasional”, avrebbero avuto la peculiarità di agire solo durante certe congiunzioni astrali e di rimanere inattive in qualsiasi altro momento, secondo la volontà degli angeli malvagi (Tonelli 1988: 120).

Gli angeli decaduti, si innamorarono delle figlie degli uomini e le sedussero insegnando loro le principali arti: la vicenda, raccontata nel «Libro dei Vigilanti» dell'*Enoch etiopico* (II, 6, 1-7, 1; Sacchi 1990: 60-61), rivela la sua antichità nei frammenti aramaici ritrovati a Qumrān (Milik 1976: 151-154; Milik 1971). La tradizione prosegue in un altro pseudepigráfico giudaico (Sacchi 1993: 348), i *Testamenti dei Dodici Patriarchi*, un testo che mostra una stratificazione piuttosto complessa (Sacchi 1993: 341-

348). La presenza di molti frammenti aramaici provenienti prima dalla Genizah del Cairo e in seguito dalle grotte di Qumrān (Milik 1955), presuppone infatti un testo originariamente giudaico (Dupont-Sommer 1959: 313-318) in seguito interpolato con materiali gnostico-cristiani (Philonenko 1960).

Nella nona parte del *Libro dell'Imouth* (forse contrazione di Ἰμούθης, forma grecizzata di Imhotep, il famoso cortigiano e architetto della III dinastia egiziana; Mertens 1995: XCV) Zosimo affermava come Ermete menzionasse nei Φυσικά la tradizione secondo cui una razza di demoni discesa dal cielo si sarebbe unita alle figlie degli uomini e avrebbe insegnato loro queste manipolazioni (Mertens 1995: XCIV = Syncell. *Chron.* 23-24 [Mosshammer 1984: 13, 22-14, 14]). Zosimo aveva forse tratto di qui l'introduzione a una rivelazione alchemica da lui riprodotta con il titolo di *Lettera di Iside a Horus*<sup>9</sup>. In tale opuscolo, Iside avrebbe ceduto al desiderio dell'angelo decaduto Amnaele per ottenerne in cambio la rivelazione di alcune prassi alchemiche. È probabile che alla base vi sia una tradizione giudaica compendiata nel *Libro di Enoch*, anch'esso citato a più riprese da Zosimo (Fraser 2004), e rivisitata in vesti "egizie" (Albrile 2015: 198-200; Martelli and Rumor 2014).

L'alchimia, quindi, sin dalle origini presupponeva un sincronismo astrale che era alla base di ogni operatività. Un motivo costante, persistente nei secoli, nel configurarsi di quella che – a torto o a ragione – può definirsi una "tradizione" (Pereira 2001: 189-207).

Alcuni testi sono rappresentativi.

L'idea della trasmutazione dei metalli giunge in Europa con la recezione dei *Meteorologica* di Aristotele: è l'alba dell'alchimia latina e il primo interprete è certamente Alberto Magno (1193 ca.-1280; Kibre 1994: 205-209). Segue il suo discepolo Tommaso d'Aquino che *In libros Meteorologicorum* (lib. III, lect. IX) assimila lo zolfo e il mercurio alle due esalazioni di Aristotele, quella secca che produce le rocce e quella umida che produce i metalli<sup>10</sup>.

Secoli dopo, Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) nelle sue lezioni sui *Meteorologica* si addentra nella disciplina alchemica legandola a problematiche astromagiche. Egli non soltanto si mostra al corrente delle discussioni scolastiche, ma anche dell'esistenza di testi della tradizione alchemica (Ermete e Ortolano, ma anche autori recenti), nonché di pratiche contemporanee (Crisciani e Pereira 2001: 910 a). Tuttavia egli mantiene la cautela mostrata in proposito da Alberto Magno e Timone Giudeo; come quest'ultimo, e con motivazioni simili, appare incerto sul giudizio da dare riguardo a quest'arte.

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<sup>9</sup> In realtà si tratta di un'opera a sé stante raccolta in *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, edited by Marcelin Berthelot and Charles Émile Ruelle, Voll. II-III (Paris: Steinheil, 1888), 28-33 (testo); 31-36 (trad.); cfr. Mertens 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Aristot. *Meteor.* 3, 6, 378 a; S. Thomae Aquinatis, *In libros Meteorologicorum*, cum Francisco Vatablo interprete (Venezia: apud Hieronymum Scottum, 1561), 210-213.

Ma proprio il fantasmatico Timone (Pereira 2001: 135-136) è oggetto di interesse da parte di un contemporaneo di Pomponazzi, lo scozzese George Lockhart (1485 ca.-1547). Nelle *Quæstiones et decisiones physicales*, disserta infatti su un *Thimonis in Quatuor libros Meteororum*, precisando i termini in cui gli spazi concettuali tra astrologia e alchimia sono reciprocamente interdipendenti *ergo si quis esset simul astrologus et alchimista ipse posset melius* (Quæstio XXVII)<sup>11</sup>. La contiguità fra astri e alchimia porta a una riflessione: guardiamo alle stelle per trarne informazioni e la disciplina astrologica ci aiuta a disvelare quelle configurazioni che rimandano a realtà future, a frammenti di esistenza virtuale. Di conseguenza il procedimento alchimico permette di assemblare il dato astrale e la sua apertura verso il possibile, il noto e l'ignoto, l'immagine visibilmente determinata e l'attesa di un rinnovamento, la perfezione di un *elixir* capace di recare ai corpi viventi l'incorruttibilità propria del metallo perfetto, l'oro.

Agli albori delle grandi sillogi che caratterizzeranno l'alchimia barocca, un *De alchimia opuscula complura* trascrive il *Clangor Buccinae* o «Suono della Tromba», un trattato poco noto, citato dal medico e musicista rosicruciano Michael Maier (1568-1622) nella *Atalanta Fugiens* (discorsi 11 e 50) e nella *Septimana Philosophica* (enigma 40), riguardo alla condensazione e rarefazione degli elementi (Cerchio 1984: 269). Orbene, il testo esordisce presentando l'*opus alchimicum* come una riproduzione dell'opera demiurgica, manipolazione di un Dio che crea *Ideo sunt angeli Sole Luna et Stellis lucidiores*<sup>12</sup>. Per il pensiero alchimico i pianeti sono entità mentali, in un cosmo animato dove gli angeli dell'antica teologia sono angeli planetari, confermando l'interazione fra manipolazione metallica e configurazioni astrali.

#### 4. Caos planetario

Ancora, i Pianeti sono all'origine dei rapporti fra gli elementi e della solidarietà che si stabilisce fra la terra e il cielo attraverso il regno vegetale, così una *Collectanea chimica curiosa* attribuita a un non ben identificato J. D. Thom. A. descrive in un quadro terapeutico il *septem planetarum terrestrium spagyrica recensio* (Thom 1693: 186). Per la precisione, la parola "pianeta" (Gundel 1973: 614 a-623 b), o più precisamente  $\pi\lambda\alpha\nu\eta\tau\acute{\alpha}$  ἄστρα, "stella errante", si ritrova per la prima volta in Democrito attorno al

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<sup>11</sup> *Quæstiones et decisiones physicales insignium virorum*, Regognitæ rursus & emendatæ summa accurate & iudicio Magistri Georgii Lokert Scoti (Parigi: impensis Iodoci Badii Ascensii & Conradi Resch, 1518), 204r, col. a.

<sup>12</sup> *Clangor Buccinae tractatus mirabilis, simul et attentissimus, ex quadam vetustissima scriptura excerptus*, in Anonimo, *De alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum, quorum catalogum sequens pagella indicabit* (Francoforte sul Meno: ex Officina Cyriaci Iacobi, 1550), 26r.

400 a.C. Il nome vuole esprimere la natura “errabonda” di corpi celesti che, pur essendo simili alle stelle fisse, si distinguono da esse perché si muovono con movimenti irregolari nella fascia dello zodiaco, i cosiddetti anelli di sosta e le regressioni.

Si tratta delle cosiddette “cinque stelle” (πέντε ἀστέρες, *quinque stellae*) unite al sole e alla luna, i “due luminari” (δύο φῶτα, *duo lumina*), il che porta il numero a sette: i loro movimenti hanno luogo infatti nella stessa zona celeste dei pianeti propriamente detti, senza tuttavia presentare anelli di sosta o regressioni (Cumont 1935).

Plasticamente significative per la loro stranezza, sono una serie di incisioni che illustrano gli *Elementa chemiae* di Johannes Conrad Barchusen (1666-1723) farmacista e insegnante di chimica all’Università di Utrecht. Si tratta di 78 disegni che descrivono simbolicamente la progressione dell’*opus* e la fabbricazione della pietra filosofale, che il Barchusen dice copiati da un “manoscritto benedettino svevo” (Barchusen 1718: 503), ma che in realtà sono stati identificati in un manoscritto di un anonimo alchimista inglese, intitolato *The Crowning of Nature* e illustrato con 67 acquerelli (British Library, Ms. Sloane 12; Fabricius 1997: 239 b-c; McLean 2014). La serie delle miniature illustra la *prima materia* racchiusa in una ampolla e in continuo cangiamento nelle alterne fasi dell’*opus*. In una di esse (fig. 3) troviamo un sistema planetario, una stella a sette punte coincidenti con i simboli dei pianeti: l’amalgama originario, il caos della *prima materia*, è vivificato e trasformato dalla colomba-spirito che giunge dall’alto (Barchusen 1718: 507, tav. 24). Lo “spirito” suscita la morte nel metallo, il corpo originario che si rigenererà in una futura e più perfetta forma di vita (Sherwood Taylor 1930: 131). L’esito dell’intera manipolazione sarà il conseguimento di una nuova identità metallica, luminescente e imperitura, alchimicamente definita “oro”.

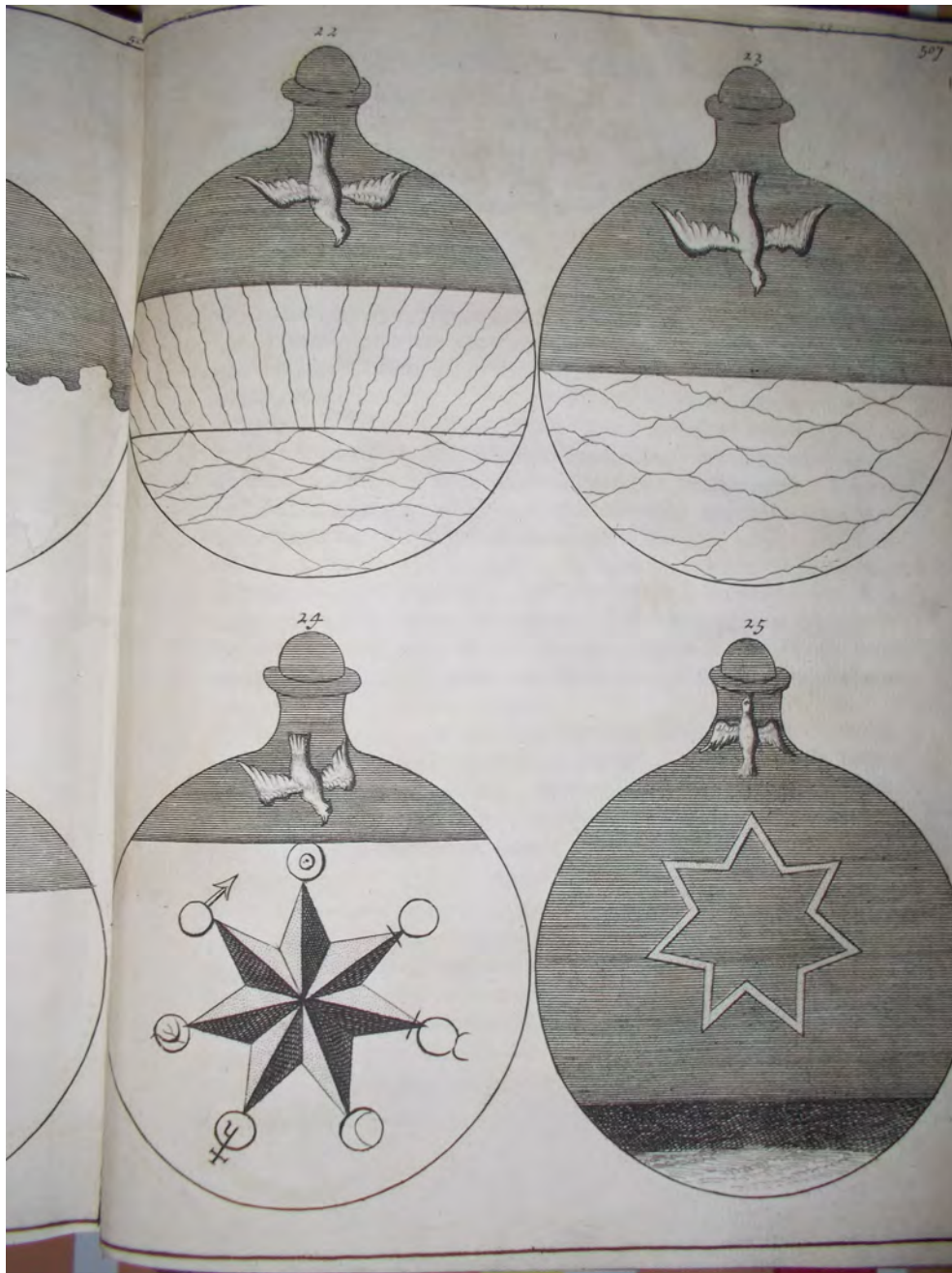


Fig. 3: Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino, J. C. BARCHUSEN, *Elementa chemiae quibus subjuncta est confectura lapidis philosophici imaginibus representata*, Leida 1718, p. 507, tav. 24.

Il corpo minerale è “ucciso” affinché perda le iniziali proprietà planetarie metalliche, cioè la sua identità astrologica (Albrile 2017: 23-28). Tale morte o dissoluzione è ottenuta attraverso la cottura o incenerimento del metallo, cioè attraverso un processo di sublimazione. La sostanza volatile, ritenuta l’“anima”, è separata dal “corpo”. Il residuo secco, la massa cinerea sul fondo del recipiente, è per gli alchimisti la vera *prima materia*, il caos primigenio oggetto della manipolazione, il corpo minerale che privo di vita giace come morto. Questa massa cadaverica è rianimata grazie all’acqua “divina”,



sulfurea, la rugiada che discende dal «cielo». Nell'acqua è racchiusa una forza trasmutativa, lo "spirito di luce" capace di tingere e "colorare" i metalli. L'operazione mette in fuga lo "spirito di tenebra", ovvero provoca una mutazione sostanziale all'interno del nero e maleodorante agglomerato metallico, arrecando nuova vita.

Tale esistenza rigenerata non è il metallo perfetto, ma quel corpo trasfigurato grazie all'azione dell'"acqua divina" (Pereira 2001: 59-61), che gli alchimisti greci ritenevano capace di trasmettere la propria perfezione a tutti i metalli sui quali veniva "proiettato". L'alchimista vuole ottenere una sostanza attiva, capace di trasmettere l'incorruttibilità, l'"immortalità" agli altri corpi. L'oro metallico è un obiettivo dei potenti, dei principi, di coloro che credono di servirsi dell'alchimia per ottenere ricchezze e potere, l'alchimista al contrario cerca un *elixir* capace di recare ai corpi viventi l'incorruttibilità propria del metallo perfetto, l'oro, oltre che di produrre metalli artificiali superiori a quelli naturali poiché capaci di moltiplicarsi, moltiplicando all'infinito la propria perfezione (Pereira 1993: 96 a-b).

Sempre dalla Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino proviene un manoscritto alchimico riconosciuto e ricostruito da Gustavo Vinay (Vinay 1947: 226-227, n° 96), per la I parte, e più recentemente da Angelo Giaccaria (Giaccaria 2007b: 344), per la seconda parte, nel quale troviamo effigiata una sorta di Fontana della Vita o dell'Immortalità (Casari 2003), che presenta singolari caratteristiche planetarie e "mercuriali". Si tratta di un manoscritto anonimo (Ms. L. VI. 14 [I parte]), risalente al XV sec., nel quale sono raccolti una serie di testi di astrologia e di alchimia in francese e in latino, parzialmente in versi; nonostante i danni dell'incendio e dell'acqua di spegnimento, che distrussero e scompagnarono parte del testo, è sopravvissuta la miniatura citata. Al f. 61r osserviamo infatti una suggestiva fontana (fig. 4) con sei draghi alati dalla testa canina, identificati nei sei Pianeti (dal basso verso l'alto) Luna e Venere, Sole e Giove, Marte e Saturno. Gli astri-draghi, appaiati secondo una scansione polare e astrologica, rigurgitano dalle rispettive bocche un liquido scuro che si raccoglie alla base della fontana. All'appello manca Mercurio, che probabilmente coincide con la figura femminile posta all'apice della fontana. La dama reca nella mano sinistra un fiore e dai suoi piedi sgorgano due getti di liquido che si riversano anch'essi nello specchio d'acqua sottostante.



Fig. 4: Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino, Ms. L. VI. 14 (I parte): *Collectanea astrologica et alchemica in lingua gallica et latina partim carmina scripta sunt*, f. 61r .

La presenza di Mercurio sta nella sua assenza e trascendenza; un'ambiguità e un'oscillazione di significati che fondano il linguaggio segreto degli alchimisti: l'"acqua sulfurea" (ὕδωρ θεῖον) in cui è racchiuso il "mercurio" degli alchimisti greci, è anche una "acqua divina" (Viano 1997; Martelli 2009), poiché nella frase è racchiusa l'ambiguità di significato tra l'aggettivo θεῖος, "divino", e il sostantivo θεῖον, "zolfo" (Mertens 1995: 163). L'androgino mercuriale è il possente "spirito aureo" celato nell'"acqua divina", efficace nel legare indissolubilmente il corpo maschile, il rame (Venere), con

l'anima femminile, l'argento (Luna). Non a caso un sale mercuriale, il solfuro di mercurio, il cinabro<sup>13</sup>, κιννάβαρις, il “sangue del drago” dal caratteristico colore rosso porpureo, è ritenuto sinonimo sia della *prima materia* che dell'Uovo filosofico (Turcan 1961: 22).

La disciplina alchemica è un indugiare sulla morte apparente degli oggetti, la loro disgregazione entropica in frammenti (Appiano 1999: 141). Il loro destino di alchimica trasformazione è controbilanciato dalla mortificazione dell'adepto, artista dell'*opus*, che fruga tra le scorie, tra piccoli pezzi come tra i residui dei propri sogni, alla ricerca della pietra filosofale, o meglio, della ferraglia esistenziale, di una nascosta interiorità presente in ogni frammento, ricca di vitalità e verità annunciate nel suo stesso ventre, *diva matrix* riciclabile, eterna quanto imprevedibile. È un predisporre alla morte come in un sogno, nella necessità di dissolversi (Appiano 1999: 142), di annullarsi, di mimetizzarsi attraverso il ritorno a uno stato pre-natale, per un innato bisogno di immortalità.

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<sup>13</sup> Theophr. *Lap.* 58-59; Diosc. 5, 94-95; Plin. *Nat. hist.* 33, 111-122.

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