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The Triple Leak by the Gandharvas: How to Read the Magic Formulae of Immortality¹

ABSTRACT

At the moment which appears to finally conclude the long and passionate love story of a mortal prince and an immortal woman, the love-sick prince Purūravas is given a chance to transcend his human condition in order to secure his final re-union with his elusive otherworldly lover Urvaśī. As a result of a clever stratagem, Gandharvas – the celestial musicians – are forced to leak to him a secret formula of immortality, something that had never been known to a human. In order to work efficiently, the formula has to be put to proper use by the seeker. As the Gandharvas proceed to articulate it, the formula turns out to be unintelligible to Purūravas. They try for a second time, reducing the complexity of the wording. When this fails too, they try for a third time when it finally dawns on Purūravas how to make use of it. Is this so for the listener/reader/user of the text passage of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* that claims to have preserved the formula?

KEY WORDS

magic formulas, formulaic language, speech acts, performatives, rituals, immortality, Veda, Brāhmaṇas, Vedic India

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Language does not convey meaning.
 It stands in place of meaning.
 But perhaps ... this means the same thing.

Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*²

The magical use of words – as Roy Rappaport wanted to tell us – falls into the class of performative speech acts characteristic of ritual in general. This by no means entails that performatives happen exclusively within ritual contexts. “When [...] the publican [...] says ‘the bar is closed’ it is thereby closed, and you are not likely to get another drink.”³ And yet – says Rappaport – while “performatives are not confined to ritual [...], there is a special relationship between ritual and performativeness.”⁴ Can we safely say so of magical texts? In the midst of the likely myriad of differing answers to that question, let me focus on a short case study in an attempt to articulate a variety of such a relationship.

The performative I am about to deal with here occurs in a Vedic text named the *Brahmana of One Hundred Paths*, or *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (ŚB), and it looks like a veritable formula for a rite of immortality:

Cook for a whole year a mess of rice sufficient for four persons; and taking each time three logs from this Aśvattha tree anoint them with ghee and put them on fire with verses containing the words “log” and “ghee”: the fire which shall result therefrom will be that fire (which is required) [to make you one of the Gandharvas, celestial beings and musicians].⁵

A formulation like that may and indeed does appear mysterious if not unintelligible. And this is exactly what the Gandharvas say to the future beneficent of its alleged magic who probably showed bewilderment towards its convoluted diction (ŚB 11.5.1.15): “but this indeed is somewhat beyond

² J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, London–New York 1990, p. 6.

³ R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 115.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 117. See also Rappaport’s ideas on magical power of words earlier on the same page: “it may be suggested that the performativeness, and more especially the factiveness of ritual acts and utterances provide a basis for occult efficacy in general, including the magical power of words in particular.”

⁵ ŚB 11.5.1.[14]: *te hocuḥ samvatsaram cātuṣprāśyam odanam paca sa etasyaivāśvatthasya tistrastisraḥ samidho ghr̥tenānvajya samidvatībhir ghr̥tavatībhir r̥gbhir abhyādhatāt sa yas tato ’gnir janitā sa eva sa bhaviteti* (*The Śatapatha Brahmana according to the text of the Madhyandina School*, trans. by J. Eggeling, Oxford 1885).

visibility” (*paro ’kṣam iva vā etad*) said the infatuated prince Purūravas. So it looks like that this is the reason why the Gandharvas must reformulate it thrice for Purūravas, each time making it a bit less convoluted, in order for it to become intelligible (or feasible) enough for its recipient to make it work. In fact what the ŚB tells us in another passage (ŚB 3.1.3.25) is that any true rite of sacrifice transcends one’s ability to understand (or see through it): “[the sense of] sacrifice lies beyond visibility” (*paro ’kṣam yajñah*).⁶

As we learn from the story in which the formula has been located, it appears in the diction of the ŚB to be a rather close-guarded secret of the Gandharvas, mysterious beings themselves, otherwise known to be celestial musicians, and probably for that very reason familiar with the mystery of time and the means of transcending it (by means of the discipline of rhythm cycles?). After all is it not Gandharvaveda that is known as the veda of music and dance? From the same story we learn also that this closely guarded secret had been revealed to a mortal being only a result of a clever stratagem. The whole formula is embedded in a rather well known narrative seemingly focused on the love affair between a mortal prince Purūravas and a heavenly nymph Urvaśī.

It had been reworked by and inspired a whole range of later authors, the best known example being probably the classical drama *Vikramorvaśīya* by Kalidāsa.⁷ Only some versions do underscore a love relationship between a mortal male and an immortal woman and the dire consequences of such a union with a climax of a transformation rite that turns a mortal partner into an immortal lover. Others opt for transforming Purūravas into a self-controlled yogi who finds eventual peace in understanding the futility of such relationships.⁸ In the form it takes in the eleventh book of the ŚB (ŚB 11.5.1.1 = 11.3.3.1), the story of Purūravas and Urvaśī not only follows but actually quotes extensively from its supposedly earlier Ṛgvedic version in the shape of a versified dialogue between two lovers (RS 10.95).⁹ This is

⁶ Cognate formulations from the ŚB concern also the gods as conceived in the realm of Vedic sacrifice and include: “Indeed beyond [the power] of visibility are gods” (*paro ’kṣam vai devāḥ*, ŚB 3.1.3.25) and “Gods indeed are fond of the invisible and hidden” (*paro ’kṣā kāmā hi devāḥ*, ŚB 4.1.1.13).

⁷ Other versions include among others BŚS, BrD, MbBh, VP, VDhP, MP, BP, BDP.

⁸ See, for instance the version of DBhP.

⁹ What the ŚB itself says is that the verses it quotes belong to the tradition of Bahuvṛcas (the knowers of many ṛc-verses). It has been noted quite time ago that the number of stanzas given by ŚB differs from that of the RS. I leave a discussion on that matter for another occasion.

by itself rather strange when we take into account that the ŚB belongs to the Yajurveda and by principle should revolve around and comments on rituals and mantras known to its Yajurveda saṃhitā, not that of the Ṛgveda which must have remained in a sense foreign and sometimes rival to it.¹⁰ In fact the ṛgvedic verses (*rks*) to be seen in the ŚB are embedded in its own commentary-like diction which makes the otherwise incomplete versified version not only more intelligible (almost each stanza is supplied with a short gloss) but also fit for purposes intrinsic to the world and purposes of the ŚB as commentary and ritual text. ŚB 11.5 has the two lovers living together upon a contract stipulated by Urvaśī, the otherworldly being, who makes several strict conditions upon which she agrees to stay with him in his mortal world. The very axis of the plot is the inescapable vulnerability of the union between a human and a celestial rendered only more conspicuous and indeed more unintelligible by the nature of the conditions set by Urvaśī: she is to be fed by liquid butter only and approached thrice a day but never against her will; she is going to keep tied by her bed a pair of lambs, as if they were a pair of her own baby kids, whom nobody may take away from her; and most puzzling of all – she is not supposed to see Purūravas naked... All in all, the number and nature of the conditions do not but underscore the impossibility of their union to continue. But Purūravas becomes infatuated indeed. And yet, against all odds, the impossible union seems to carry on and thrive, driven by their apparently exceptional love. This makes the dwellers of the better worlds jealous of sorts and induces them to bring the things back on their natural track and put an end to this unheard-of union. As a result of a trick the Gandharvas have the two lambs stolen, with Purūravas jumping naked after the thieves, and Urvaśī sees him naked in the flash of a lightning bolt... Thus the conditions set by Urvaśī are broken and she disappears, driving Purūravas mad. In this state of mind he sets for a journey to find and redeem her. He goes through all sorts of painful delirium states of mind but he insists so much that eventually he finds her and succeeds in moving her seemingly rock-like heart. As a result she indicates the only possible way for them to continue: he has to become one of the Gandharvas, which means that he is to transcend his human nature with its inevitable limits. This might be easier said than done. However, Urvaśī conceives a stratagem through which the Gandharvas, obliged by the promise of a boon, have no option but to betray a formula for transformation to Purūravas. And this is

¹⁰ For an idea of Brāhmaṇa as commentary, see T. Lubin, *Brāhmaṇa as Commentary*, [in:] *Forms and Uses of the Commentary in the Indian World* [prepublication version], eds. F. Grimal, N. Dejenne, Pondhéry, Institut Francais de Pondicherry (forthcoming).

where our performative text occurs. More importantly, what is repeated at the end of the Chapter is a short and generalized version of the same directly pointing to its formulaic and magical character:

Therefore let one produce a fire by making the upper stick of Aśvattha tree and the lower stick of Aśvattha tree. The fire that will be generated that way shall be that very fire. By offering with it he will become one of the Gandharvas (ŚB 11.5.17).¹¹

The ŚB dates probably from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. while the sources it itself draws from or links to can be traced even to circa 1500 B.C. This complex work in Vedic Sanskrit over three thousand year old tracks, elaborates and speculates on the meanings of the sacrificial ritual of the public domain (*śrauta*). The type of textuality which the ŚB represents allows for taking it as a ritual text as well as a text on ritual.¹² It happens to quote or to refer to a variety of liturgical formulas to be ritually performed in a number of contexts suggesting action that might from a certain point of view be labeled magic or at least allow for the detection of the magical power of word as an important supposed component of action. Indeed its very principle happened to be taken as such by early 20th century scholars, Stanisław Schayer one among them.¹³ And yet, magic did not make it to the top of the list of fashionable topics among those struggling at first with unearthing and then interpreting the vast corpus of Vedic canonical texts. Most early Vedic scholars tended to relegate what they believed magic to the margins of the mainstream Vedism considered as expressing the allegedly elevated spirit of Aryan noblemen. By the same, magic had to fall prey to those who chose to bother themselves with the untidy world of Atharvaveda or a corpus of texts believed to represent the knowledge of the sorcerers and healers i.e. magic and conjuring formulas. A long argument among early indologists and orientalist over what is magic and what is ritual seems today rather outdated if not misformulated.¹⁴

¹¹ *tasmād āśvatthīm evottarāraṇiṃ kurvītāśvatthīm adharāraṇiṃ sa yas tato 'gnir jāyate sa eva sa bhavati teneṣṭvā gandharvāṇām eko bhavati* (The Śatapatha Brahmana according to the text of the Madhyandina School, op. cit.).

¹² A general opinion has it that Brāhmaṇas stand rather outside the ritual arena representing a genre best to be styled as commentary. Cf. T. Lubin, op. cit.

¹³ S. Schayer, *O filozofowaniu Hindusów*, ed. M. Mejer, Warszawa 1988.

¹⁴ On the argument among scholars of Vedic religion and literature, see, for instance, J. Gonda, *History of Vedic Literature*, Wiesbaden 1975, p. 142 – “It is true that the proper place of ‘magic’ texts is the Atharvaveda, but it is not less certain that *mandala* X contains many atharvanic elements.”

A few words of clarification are needed to sketch the immediate historical context for the type of formulas that I am addressing here. They belong to the language called Vedic by some and Vedic Sanskrit by others, a language conceptualised once by Europeans as Indo-German or Indo-European *per se*. They belong to a cultural formation that would hold in highest esteem the art of proper pronunciation of words believed to be efficacious in a religious/ritual context while at the same time tending to leave the treasure of its sacred texts to the exclusive custody of professionals. Unlike other ancient civilisations, not only did the Vedic not practise the art of writing but for a long time actually abhorred it and, later on, when writing was in wide use throughout the Indian subcontinent the practitioners of the Veda still shunned it until probably approximately the 10 century AD. This, however, must have varied regionally. By the same Vedic magic formulas would not be written on material objects, though this changed to an extent in the middle ages. There is one more thing to stress along with a substantial difference of context: while most, if not all, religious traditions developed within ancient civilisations that left us written magical formula do not exist anymore, the Vedic tradition, albeit in a limited scale, lives on, transforming along the way while claiming to retain its unchanged core. But, being extremely rich, it continues rather in what is taken for granted to be its mainstream variety, that is to say in the form that survived due to the strength of particular local communities whose collective memory and cultural reproduction proved to be strong enough over time. Those of their neighbours must have perished in the process, while others survived in a fragmentary form only. Over centuries of transmission and many different re-appropriations, Vedic formulas became fossilised utterances believed to work magic almost exclusively through their sound and rhythm rather than their semantic contents. This result must have had its roots in the early speculation and ritual practices of the later Vedic era.

Why is that the ŚB chose to comment upon the foreign *ṛk* verses and use them for its own purposes instead of mantras of Yajurvedic provenance? Strangely enough, the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa proposes a magic formula made of stanzas not of its family stock but borrowed from another, alien, not to say rival Veda. To wit, it is not the *yajus* formulae, i.e. the text type proper for the White Yajurveda to which ŚB belongs but stanzas named *ṛk*. The latter ones represent the variety of sacred utterances collected within the compendium (*saṃhitā*) of the Ṛgveda. As such, they used to be imagined as feminine in gender and were composed according to the aesthetic principle, proper for the world of the Ṛgveda (the Knowledge of the Hymns) rather than that of efficacious ritual power – a principle proper for the realm of the Yajurveda, or the Knowledge of the Sacrificial Formulae.

In fact, the Yajurveda tradition knew a version of the story and we meet at least once with the motive, albeit in TS belonging to the Black, or Kṛṣṇa, branch of Yajurveda while the ŚB remained within the orbit of the White or Pūre (Śukla) Yajurveda. TS 1.3.7 h-m contains a formula for the kindling of sacrificial fire conceived as the offspring of a loving couple and named Ayuṣ:

Thou art the birthplace of Agni.
 Ye are the two male ones.
 Thou art Urvāci, thou art Ayu, thou art Pururavas.
 Anointed with ghee, do ye produce a male.
 Be born with the Gayatri metre, with the Tristubh metre,
 be born with the Jagatī metre.¹⁵

And it is this very formula, and not that of the ŚB, that actually finds its implementation in a magical text *per se*, i.e. the Kauśika Sūtra 69.20 which I am going to comment on shortly.

In fact the ŚB version rests upon the Ṛgvedic dialogue put into a mantra language that by principle (not necessarily in each and every case) should be ascribed a ritual implementation (*vinīyoga*) as liturgically pronounced recitation believed to encapsulate efficacious power. This principle, however, works only with a limited number of Ṛgvedic stanzas and these are generally commented by the brāhmaṇas. The dialog of RS 10.95 is an exception in that not only is it commented upon but also that it is commented not by one of its own but by an alien Brāhmaṇa. In the modern standard editions the hymn is accompanied by a 14 century commentary which provides it with running gloss and explanation and an introduction. In the case of the hymn in question the commentator says rather shortly: *gato vinīyogaḥ*: “the [memory of its ritual] implementation has been lost.”¹⁶ This might be due to a hypothetical possibility – as noticed by early Indologists – that the ŚB might have known a different recension of Ṛgveda saṃhitā from that which made it down to our times. Be that as it may, the concluding verse of ŚB 11.5.1 makes it rather clear that whoever kindles a fire in the way Purūravas did and properly recites what he recited is going to transform himself into an immortal Gandharva. The order of ideas, however, does not always have to follow exactly the order of speech acts. Does ŚB actually reveal a ready made *prêt-à-porter* formula to

¹⁵ TS 1.3.7 h-m (*The Veda of the Black Yajus School Entitled Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, trans. A. B. Keith, Cambridge, Mass. 1914, p. 34).

¹⁶ *Rig-veda-saṃhitā. The Sacred Hymns of the Brāhmins Together with the Commentary of Sāyanāchārya*, ed. F. Max Müller, Varanasi 1983 (originally published in 1890), Vol. IV, p. 637.

be put to use. Does ŚB actually contain a performative that could be labeled a magical text? Had it been conceived so as to actually reveal what seems like a formula of immortality?

What I propose here is to read the passage concerning the formula as an enunciation with an embedded formula, that is a speech act performed by a competent functionary – in this case, the figure of a knowledgeable musician (Gandharva). This implies perhaps that music as a knowledge system, with its discipline of time in the form of rhythm cycles holds out a promise to teach us how to control and master time and its unimpeded flow. In this sense, music may conceal a key to immortality or at least a hint on how to transform indiscriminate time flow into a recurring rhythmic cycle that lends itself to control and mastery. Leaving this preliminary assumption let us notice that the narrative itself is embedded within the world of Vedic ritual of the *śrauta*, or public, variety. Now, most if not all, Vedic *śrauta* rituals are in fact fire rituals, that is to say, they are focused on some form of fire offering rather than anything else, with fire oblation remaining probably most frequently mentioned form of sacrificial ceremony and focal point of liturgy. Let's have a look what sort of fire is said to be the one that may become an instrument of immortality in the story of Purūravas. We have no option but to suppose that the fire presented by the Gandharvas to Purūravas was a sacrificial fire, i.e. a specific sacrificial tool with the help of which Purūravas was supposed to make an offering to the gods. In fact the ŚB appears to speak not of one but of two varieties of the same sacrificial fire with a transforming capacity. The first is the one that Purūravas received as a special gift, or rather a boon, but he shamefully failed to realise its importance and lost it. The ŚB qualified this first fire as: *sthālya*, or “something fit for / placed in a pot or cauldron” in contradistinction to the second one which was a formula for kindling the same fire at the right moment through a prescribed procedure. Here an inevitable set of Vedic associations with sacrifice probably comes into play: the sacrificial fire may be dangerous; you must be careful with it as it may hide itself away from the sacrifice rendering it impotent or overspill and run havoc so as to become the fire of destruction. It seems that, additionally, the fire of love and desire in Purūravas needs to be tamed and put under control so that it may not overspill and deprive him of his senses as it did while he rambled along the lake mumbling to himself and talking to birds on the water thinking he was talking to his beloved and her maids. In other words the formula entails some sort of discipline and rule to abide. This being clear we are still left in doubt as to what was exactly the formula in its full shape. It might seem that it is enough to read the text carefully. After

all, it represents an early genre of commentary, that is a text which feeds on and sheds light on other texts.

What the ŚB brings us is not the formula itself given through quotation, however. It records and testifies to a collective memory forming a sort of a complex living library with often copious texts tagged by a hypertext or metalanguage in order to facilitate intertextual relations, shortcuts and reference. From a point of view it seems that one needed to know the key to a rebus like principle of decoding the actual voicing of the formula. In our case the ŚB refers to another text, or a compendium of texts, using a reference system not quite visible to an eye unfamiliar with the Vedic world: in a 19th century translation the passage is rendered into English as: “verses containing words «ghee» and «log.»”¹⁷ What sense are we to make out of it? A careful reading of the original reveals that what a translation may render as “verses” are actually a particular form of verse, namely, the *rks*, and what a translation may render as ‘log’ is not any indiscriminate wood but refers to a specific type of wood considered fit for fuelling the sacrificial fire, here rendered as fuel-sticks. What can we do with these findings yet? How to read formulas like that? What sense are we to make of them?

Of course there is no obvious general answer to such question, especially in terms of how to extract a practical meaning from the words of the formula of alleged magical efficacy. But a careful reconstruction of their logic put against the socio-historical context may shed some light on what their users may have imagined this efficacy to be. The kind of immortality promised by the formula does not seem to represent a general concept of an absolute transcendence of time but rather a concept addressing the type of imagination that allows for a multitude of time orders and parallel worlds. One such world could be imagined to offer a form of immortality proper to that known to at least some musicians – the immortality experienced by those familiar with the discipline of time put to cyclical patterns musically. In other words an experience or taste of immortality promised by music. The formula of the Gandharvas seems to be addressed to everybody. The ŚB puts it in the third person singular implying that anybody who acts according to its prescription shall attain the status of the immortal Gandharvas. While this might sound misleading from a historical point of view, it may hold a promise for the contemporary reader who should, however, remember that what it really promised was a capacity to experience or to taste immortality rather than to enjoy a perpetual state suggested by the modern English word: the capacity to experience immortality within the context

¹⁷ *The Śatapatha Brahmana according to the text of the Madhyandina School*, op. cit.

of ritual performance. We may regret this, but on the other hand what is the use of immortality if not through experiencing it one way or another?

Taking a closer look at the ŚB passage one notes a rather convoluted diction hinting at some mysterious conundrum: Purūravas has to recite verses that are called specifically to be *ṛks* (the verses that we may expect to find within the RS) and that they are somehow threefold in nature and contain the words *samidh* and *ghṛta* (ŚB 11.5.1.13). Is this enough to identify them? If we are to go so far as to attempt to identify the actual verses that the ŚB text recommends Purūravas to recite, the most probable candidate appears to be either RS 6.16.11:

<i>tāṃ tvā samidbhir aṅgiro</i>	So, with the fuel-sticks, oh Angiras
<i>ghṛténa vardhayāmasi</i>	we make you strong and with liquid butter
<i>bṛhác chocā yaviṣṭhya</i>	Grow big with flames, oh youngest one

or RS 8.44.1¹⁸

<i>samidhāgnīm druvasyata</i>	Worship Agni with the fuel-sticks
<i>ghṛtair bodhayatātithim</i>	Wake him as guest of honour with liquid butter
<i>ásmin havyá juhótana</i>	In him place your oblations

RS 6.16.11 above forms a part of an extremely long hymn to Agni, the fire-god, made of as many as 48 stanzas. In the classical *śrauta* ritual, only some of them find practical implementation in the so called Prataranuvāka, a morning *śastra* recitation and in the eulogy to the twin gods Aśvins, the celestial healers. Both ritual recitations belong to the Hotar priest – the chief functionary representing the realm of the Ṛgveda within the sacrificial arena. Sāyaṇa in his introduction to the hymn mentions another implementation, this time in the area of the Sāmavedis or the specialists in liturgical music: six stanzas of the hymn make a melodeclamation of a Sāmaveda priest in the form of a *sāman* chant during a ceremony called *Viśvajityāgnimārute* or the *All-conquering pair of Agni-and-Marut*. But in this case it is six stanzas only out of forty eight that are actually prescribed to be ritually implemented and no stanza 6 among them.¹⁹ The *Rigvidhāna* – a post-Vedic compendium

¹⁸ This stanza happens to be indicated by Harisvamin in his *bhāṣya*-commentary on ŚB 11.3.3.14 (*The Śatapathabrāhmaṇa according to the Mādhyandina Recension with the Vedārthaprakāśa Bhāṣya of Sāyaṇācārya Supplemented by the Commentary of Harisvāmin*, ed. Yugalakiśora Miśra, Delhi–Varanasi 2004, p. 127).

¹⁹ See Sāyaṇa's intro to RS 6.16 (*Rig-veda-samhitā. The Sacred Hymns of the Brāhmanas...*, op. cit., p. 637).

classifying supposed magical effects of the use of selected stanzas from RS – does not prescribe any magic use of RS 6.16.11 verse either. But the second candidate, i.e. RS 8.44.1 does find an implementation procedure in the *Ṛgvidhāna* which makes it a more probable candidate for successful decoding and identification. *Ṛgvidhāna* II. 169cd – 170 prescribes the very stanza as a formula suitable for a rite which it understands as prolonging life and gaining success:

Whoever will offer into the fire [oblations of] liquid butter [while reciting] verse by verse the hymn beginning with *samidhā* [RS 8.44] he will attain unequalled success and live a full hundred years.²⁰

Here, as in many other instances from later Vedic texts, a hundred-year life span stands probably for a full, complete and self-actualised life, a concept specific to the later Vedic concept of a human being in the world and probably a functional equivalent to a heaven of sorts.

It is probably futile to answer the questions proposed above from within a general theory of magic possible in Hubert and Mauss' or Malinowski's time and probably difficult to construct today, especially with reference to a civilisation which, like the Vedic one, would have on offer its own theories and which would suffuse its ritual practice with a probing self-reflection. If we can read the magical formulas or the type of magic we deal with in a particular situation historically and culturally, the type of magic we encounter can offer a window to the culture that produced it. Admitting that should not by any means be taken as a typical way Indian texts dealt with or claimed to produce magic. It is just one among a rich variety of magical thinking at work and magical practice fulfilling a particular social function while adding up to the wealth of cultural if not civilisational heritage of South Asia.

We should perhaps remember that ritual must have been an essential component of either individual, family or public life of the time. The enigma of fire ritual proper for domestic use and suitable for public ceremonies remains one of the elements comprising traditional ritualistic knowledge, the access to which used to be claimed by representatives of often rival communities be it religious or scholarly. The vague memory of this knowledge in the following centuries became an excuse for claims to ritual power on the part of those who believed to have exclusive access to it.

²⁰ *samidheti juhoty agnau sūktena pratyrcam ghṛtam sa siddhim atulām prāpya samānām jīvate śatam* (RVidh II.169cd–170a).

Coming back again to the ŚB version of the story of Purūravas and his celestial lover let me comment briefly on its immediate textual context. The story fills one whole chapter (*brāhmaṇa*) of Book 11. There seems not very much to be said in terms of continuity either between this chapter and the preceding one which concludes Book 10 or the following chapter of Book 11. Neither of them features anything like a narrative to boast of. One idea, however, stands out conspicuously as pervading all three: this is the idea of the fire sacrifice (*yajña*) as a vehicle to transcend the limits of human world and reach some sort of heavenly abode, either that of the “world of Gandharvas” (*gandharvaloka*, ŚB 1.5.1.17) or that of “luminous heavens [of gods?]” (*svargaloka*, ŚB 1.4.4.12 and ŚB 1.5.2.10). This vehicle needs, however, knowledge to work. It is the knowledge of the right procedure deriving from the knowledge of the networks of *bandhu* or hidden correspondences allegedly operating in the triple world of the humans, Gandharvas and gods. And this sophisticated knowledge proves not only something that the ŚB claims to possess a key to but also something that the ŚB holds as a promise to work magic independently of the ritual action entailed by it:

[...] he who knows [how to bring about] the successful effect of this sacrifice [...] (*sa yo haivametām yajñasya samṛddhiṃ veda* [ŚB 11.4.4.12], or shortly: *sa yah ...evem veda...*).

Is it enough, then, to know the formula for immortality? Within the world-view of the Vedic Śatapathabrāhmaṇa of yore, the answer perhaps could be “yes.”²¹ But this was not necessarily so in the case of entirely distinct horizons of understanding adopted by later authors who apparently took the same story as a perfect vehicle for altogether different ideas than those dominating the world-view of the composers and editors of the ŚB and other Brāhmaṇas. The story found a multitude of adaptations in later history, becoming the vehicle for quite different ideas than that of the transforming power of sacrificial fire. We find it among others in BŚS, MhBh, the Purāṇas of Vāyu, Matsya, Vāmana, Padma and Bhāgavata, as well as in the later Devībhāgavatapurāṇa

²¹ If a common ideology could indeed be admitted for most of the Brāhmaṇa-commentaries then one of the aims of the Purūravas and Urvaśī story to be included within the ŚB would be to justify the use of particular mantras as essential part of successful procedure for a rite. One of the strategies to do that could be to locate and indicate a word of the mantra to be used and connect it to the prescribed action. Here the words indicated are that of *samidh* (“fuel-stick”) and *ghṛta* (“clarified butter”). For a more general concept of Brāhmaṇa as commentary, see T. Lubin, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

1.12.1–14. At least two among them, however, that of Viṣṇu Purāṇa and that of Bhagavāta Purāṇa, retain, though deeply transformed, the motif of the fire of immortality as a rather important dimension for their plots. The VP concludes with a stress on the *vidhi*, or a rule, thus connecting at least theoretically to the concept of *vidhi* (a rule, injunction, magical formula) as exemplified in the whole class of late Vedic/post Vedic *vidhāna* texts suggesting magical effects to the incantations of Vedic mantras. Thus we have R̥gvidhāna for the R̥gveda and Sāmavidhānabrāmaṇa for the Sāmaveda...²² Devībhāgavatapurāṇa 1.13 quotes, although distortedly, the R̥gvedic verses and in DBhP 1.14.7–13 and DBhP 1.14.1 it is Vyāsa, not Gandharvas who, after becoming infatuated with her, removes the curse from Urvaśī. He also grants her a boon in form of *yauvanam uttamam* (utmost youth/manhood [for Purūravas]?) (DBhP 1.14.35). This is, however, to be gained through *śivasya ārādhana* (adoration of Śiva, DBhP 1.14.34). Viṣṇupurāṇa IV.6 which preserved a version quite close to that of the ŚB has Gandharvas offering to Purūravas a vessel of fire with a short instruction to divide it, according to the precepts of the tradition, into three parts and make an offering in a proper way. The text does not bring a readymade formula for the rite, but Purūravas somehow knows that he should prepare firing sticks as long as the number of syllables in Gāyatri metre and that he was to recite a Gāyatrī verse. Whether the famous RS 3.64.10 or other Gāyatrī was intended we do not know. We also do not know how the VP conceived it to be actually recited, according to what pattern of recitation. Neither do we know what exactly Purūravas had on his mind when he resolved to produce a fire out of two sticks in order to perform an *upāsti* (“worship, adoration”) which was probably a different idea than that meant by the original Vedic context of the story.²³ The Mahābhārata (Harivaṃśa 1.26.45–46) goes only that far as to advise Purūravas to make one fire threefold and make an offering with it. According to its version Purūravas actually made a number of offerings and eventually entered the world of the Gandharvas. Again we are not told any details concerning the procedure of the “triple fire” (*tretāgni*) for that purpose. The very act of dividing the single fire into three suggests that the procedure should follow a rule for *śrauta* ritual rather than a domestic one. Another

²² See M. S. Bhat, *Vedic Tantrism. A Study of R̥gvidhāna of Śaunaka with Text and Translation*, Delhi 1987, p. 16.

²³ VP IV.6.43–45: *evam eva svapuram upagato ‘rañīm cakāra ||43|| tatpramāṇaṅcāṅgulaiḥ kurvvan gāyatrīm apaṭhat | paṭhataścākṣarasamkhyāny evāṅgulāny arany abhhat ||44|| tatrāgniṃ nirmmathyāgnitrayam āmnāyānusārī bhūtvā juhāva, urvvaśīsālokyam ceha phalam abhisamhitavān | tenaivāgnividhinā bahuvīdhān yajñān iṣṭvā gandharvalokān prāpya urvvaśyā saha viyogam nāvāpa ||45||*

version in Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa I.130–137 appears to be the closest to that of Kālidāsa's story with a motif of Urvaśī cursed by the god Brahma for her inattentiveness while performing as an actress in a drama. The Bhāgavatapurāṇa IX.14 contains a version tinted with Tantra flavour with Purūravas visualising through meditation (*dhyāyan*) his heavenly consort Urvaśī as the lower fire stick while imagining himself as the upper one (BP IX.14.45). While the image itself appears to have been taken from TS 1.3.7, here it is rather Purūravas own power of meditation than a boon from the Gandharvas which brings him a formula of immortality and reunion with Urvaśī. BP IX.14.45 holds that Purūravas meditated with the help of mantras (*manrataḥ*), rubbing two fire sticks against each other, he generated their offspring in the form of a fire named Jatāvedas with the help of which he made an offering to the Supreme Lord (Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa) and eventually attained the heaven of the Gandharvas.²⁴ All versions seem to retain some memory of Vedic mantras as utterances laden with power, even if in the final resort they strive to overcome it with their own supposedly more efficacious ones. The pattern remains the same powerful paradigm with extremely rich potential for generating cultural meanings and functions.

Whether the Vedic mantras could bring immortality is not as sure as that Vedic mantras proved over history to be rather immortal themselves. And this testifies perhaps to an important trait of the character of civilisation that produced and secured them – even early modern and contemporary printed books reproducing the type of discourse believed to have the capacity to do things to people use an ideology that prizes memory over writing and printing: an Indian type of printed book named *pothi* that emulates manuscripts not only in form but also in ideology still uses magical formulas of immortality. Now it is not humans but texts that are concerned:

Whatever errors of shortage or surplus I happened to make due to failures of hand or unstable mind all that shall be rectified by the noble ones. So let the scribes be forgiven.²⁵

²⁴ BP IX.14.44b–47: *tena dve araṇī kṛtvā urvaśīlokakāmyayā ||44b|| urvaśīm mantrato dhyāyann adharāraṇim uttarām | ātmānam ubhayor madhye yat tat prajananam prabhuḥ ||45|| tasya nirmanthanāj jāto jātavedā vibhāvasuḥ | trayyā sa vidyayā rājñā putratve kalpitas trivṛt ||46|| tenāyajata yajñeśam bhagavantam adhokṣajam | urvaśīlokamanvicchan sarvadevamayaṃ harim ||47||*

²⁵ *hastasya doṣān mativibhramād vā nyūnātiriktaṃ likhitaṃ mayātra || tatsarvam āryaiḥ pariśodhanīyaṃ prāyeṇa muhyanti hi ye likhanti ||* Colophon at the end of MS No. 33 in the Descriptive Catalogue of the Tanjore Sarasvati Mahal Library containing the first Adhyāya of the Ṛgvedasamhitā.

This type of utterance that made a common stock formula inscribed in colophons of many handwritten copies of Vedic texts in pre-modern India resurfaces with an undiminished vigour in early modern modern printed versions of the Ṛgvedasamhitā also testifying to a specific and complex relationship between the oral and the written and printed orders of cultures in the orbit of Indian civilisation. A performative speech act thus remains in the heart of a now modern ideology of print whose authority remains rooted in the memory of proper articulation:

[...] if by a mistake caused by a slow mind something contrary to the established truth might have crept in here, let the noble-minded hide away their dissatisfaction and show their favour by correcting [whatever mistakes need to be corrected].²⁶

ABBREVIATIONS

BhP	–	Bhāgavata Purāṇa
BŚS	–	Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra
DBhP	–	Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa
MhBh	–	Mahābhārata
MP	–	Mātsya Purāṇa
RS	–	Ṛgvedasamhitā / Ṛksamhitā
ŚB	–	Śatapathabrāhmaṇa
TS	–	Taittirīya Samhitā
VDhP	–	Viṣṇu Dharmottara Purāṇa
VP	–	Viṣṇu Purāṇa

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4. *Ṛgvedasamhitā with the Commentary of Sāyaṇācārya*, ed. N. S. Sonatke, Poona 1933.
5. *Ṛgvidhāna*: text acc. to Bhatt, M.S., Vedic Tantrism. A Study of Ṛgvidhāna of Śaunaka with Text and Translation, Motilal Banarsidas 1988.

²⁶ *pramāṇasiddhāntaviruddham atra yat kiṃcanābhūn matimāndyadoṣāt mātsaryam utsārya tad āryacittāḥ prasādam ādhāya viśodhayantu* | (Colophon to the: *Ṛgvedadaśagrantha*, ed. by Vinayaka Ghaisasa, Pune 1986). More on the relationship between the orders of the oral and the written in the early modern India print cultures, see C. Galewicz, *The Power of the Printed Veda*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Fifth International Vedic Workshop, Bucharest 2011*, eds. J. E. M. Houben, J. Rotaru, M. Witzel, Bucharest 2013.

6. *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa: Śrīmadvājasaneyimādhyandinaśatapathabrāhmaṇam śrīmattra-yībhāṣyakāra-sāyaṇācāryaviracita-vedārthaprakāśākhyaabhāṣyasametam...*, ed. several learned persons, Bombay 1940.
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