SACRIFICING HIS ONLY SON

Śunaḥśepa, Isaac and Snow White[1]

FERENC RUZSA[2]

Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guess-es, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses.[3]
Clifford Geertz

The earliest still extant texts of ancient Indian prose are the *Brāhmaṇa*s, books 'related to spell'. They contain priestly analyses about the correct performance, the expected effects and the proper remuneration of the ritual that descended from the Vedic sacrifice but by this time it was largely reinterpreted as magic. Occasionally some myths are also told as explanatory material to a feature of the sacrifice; these are the earliest examples of Indian narrative literature. The legend of Śunaḥśepa is one of the oldest[4] and most important. It is noteworthy not only for its literary merit, it is also relevant to some fundamental questions of the history of religions. It occurs in the *Aitareya Brāhmanzṇa* at 7.13–18. The *Aitareya* is the longer and generally earlier of the two *Brāhmaṇa*s of the *hotṛ*-priests whose responsibility was to recite the hymns of the *Ṛgveda*.

The legend of Śunaḥśepa aroused considerable interest in Europe as soon as it came to be known. Although the much later version of the story in the *Rāmāyaṇa*

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[3] Clifford Geertz, Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture, in C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, 20.

[4] Keith suggested a date before 600 BCE for the older part of the *Brāhmaṇa*, not giving a guess for the later part where the Śunaḥśepa story belongs. Arthur Berriedale Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas: The Aitareya and Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇas of the Rigveda,* Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1920, 42–50. According to Bronkhorst the *Brāhmaṇa* is approximately contemporary with the grammarian Pāṇini (*ca.* 350 BCE) and the final redaction might be even somewhat later. Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the culture of early India,* Leiden, Brill, 2007, 182 and 197–198.

epic (1.61.5–62.27) was noticed earlier, it was in 1850 that Horace Hayman Wilson read a paper to the Royal Asiatic Society in which he gave an English rendering and an analysis of the original myth.[5] In the same year appeared Rudolf Roth's German translation.[6] Then the text was edited comparing it to the almost identical parallel in the *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* by Max Müller, also giving a translation.[7] Otto Böhtlingk included it in his Chrestomathy suggesting numerous emendations.[8] The complete *Brāhmaṇa* was edited first by Haug (accompanied by a translation),[9] then by Aufrecht;[10] and we have Keith's standard translation with copious philological notes.[11] The probably most recent English rendering of the story was prepared by Wendy Doniger,[12] while my Hungarian translation appeared last year.[13] The legend was analysed in many papers, some of which will be referred to below.[14] Since all the translations mentioned above are readily available (also on-line, excepting Doniger's) it seems sufficient to present only an outline of the myth as it occurs in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*.

THE LEGEND OF ŚUNAḤŚEPA

King Hariścandra of the Ikṣvāku clan had a hundred wives but no son. He asked (in verse) Nārada living in his house, what the use of a son is. The sage replied in ten stanzas: it is a duty and a joy to have a son, and it sends the father to heaven –

[5] Horace Hayman Wilson, On the Sacrifice of Human Beings as an Element of the Ancient Religion of India, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 13 (1852), 96–107.

[6] Rudolf Roth, Die Sage von Çunahçepa, *Indische Studien* 1 (1850), 457–464.

[7] Max Müller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, So Far as it Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1860², 573–588 and 408–421.

[8] Otto Böhtlingk, *Sanskrit-Chrestomathie*, St. Petersburg, Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1877², 22–26.

[9] Martin Haug, *The Aitareya Brahmanam of the Rigveda, Containing the Earliest Speculations of the Brahmans on the Meaning of the Sacrificial Prayers, and on the Origin, Performance and Sense of the Rites of the Vedic Religion*, Bombay, Government Central Book Depôt, 1863, I., 178–184 and II., 460–471.

[10] Theodor Aufrecht, *Das Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, Mit Auszügen aus dem Commentare von Sāyaṇācārya und anderen Beilagen,* Bonn, Adolph Marcus, 1879, 195–202.

[11] Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas,* 299–309.

[12] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, 19–24.

[13] In Ruzsa, *Egyfiát áldozza,* 46–56.

[14] For further bibliography see Asko Parpola, Human sacrifice in India in Vedic times and before, in Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The strange world of human sacrifice,* Leuven and Dudley, MA, Peeters, 2007, 165.

asceticism is useless. In the son the father is reborn, his wife becoming his mother. Even birds and animals know how important it is; that's why a son mounts even his mother and sister. "Seek king Varuṇa's help, saying: Let a son be born to me so that I may sacrifice him to you."[15]

Hariścandra did so, and the god agreed; so Rohita was born. Varuṇa demanded the sacrifice, but Hariścandra said that a too young victim is unfit for sacrifice and the god accepted the delay. This happened five times, and they always agreed on a new terminus: the boy will be sacrificed when he is ten days old; when his teeth appear; when they fall out; when they appear again; when he bears arms.

When at last Hariścandra told his son that he would be sacrificed, "he said no, took his bow and went to the wilderness and wandered there a year. Then Varuṇa seized Hariścandra and he grew a belly." On hearing this, Rohita returned to the village, but Indra went to him in human form as a Brahmin and dissuaded him with a verse, praising the wandering life and its fruits. This happened five times and Rohita always roamed for another year.

In the sixth year he found the hungering ṛṣi Ajīgarta in the wilderness with his three sons, Śunaḥpuccha, Śunaḥśepa and Śunolāṅgūla; Rohita bought one of them as a ransom for himself for a hundred cows. Since the father would not give his eldest and the mother the youngest, he took with him the middle one, Śunaḥśepa, and went back to his father. Hariścandra asked for the god's consent and Varuṇa accepted the substitution "saying, a Brahmin is more than a warrior, and told him this royal consecration ritual. At the anointment ceremony he sacrificed with this human victim."

At the ceremony four famous ṛṣis officiated, the hotṛ-priest being Viśvāmitra, but there was no-one to bind the boy: so his father did it for another hundred cows, and for the same price volunteered to kill his son. Whetting his knife he approached, but Śunaḥśepa started to praise several gods with hymns and with the last three verses to the goddess Dawn his three bonds fell off and at the same time Hariścandra's belly returned to normal. At the other priests' request Śunaḥśepa finished the interrupted ritual with the new "instant soma-pressing."

Then the boy sat on Viśvāmitra's lap. Ajīgarta wanted him back, but "Viśvāmitra said no, the gods have given him to me. He became Deva-rāta (God-given), Viśvāmitra's son, and the Kāpileyas and the Bābhravas are his descendants."

The rest of the story is basically a ballad in śloka verses. Ajīgarta called his son back but Śunaḥśepa refused: "They saw you with a knife in hand – this has never happened even among śūdras (non-Aryans). You chose three hundred cows over me." The father admitted his sin and offered him in compensation "the hundreds of

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[15] Unless stated otherwise, all translations in this paper are mine. The originals are given in the footnotes only when a text is either philologically difficult or not easily accessible.

cows", but in vain. Then Viśvāmitra adopted him as his oldest son inheriting both kingship over the Jahnu tribe and the sacred knowledge of the Gāthins (Singers). As his sons agreed to this, Viśvāmitra blessed them all.

There is an inserted prose passage stating that fifty of the hundred sons of Viśvāmitra disagreed and their father cursed them to live in the bordering lands; they became the ancestors of various non-Aryan peoples.

After the story a short instruction follows about the performance of it. "The *hotṛ* priest tells this to the anointed king", but "a king may have it told to him even without the sacrifice. … Also those who want a son should have it told – they get sons."

PERPLEXING DETAILS

At first reading the baffling and revolting elements in the story are most apparent. The great saint Nārada refers to the crudest incest without the slightest reservation: "the son mounts his mother and sister", adding that birds and cattle do the same. (This caused such an embarrassment to some early translators of the legend, Wilson and Müller, that they simply omitted any hint at incest from their version.[16]) To the king's question, what people get from sons, Nārada fails to mention the common-sense answer, i.e. support in old age; neither does he refer to the important Brahmanical concept that after death you need nourishment and only your own sons' and grandsons' *śrāddha* offerings can give you that. Of course there is a reason for these omissions: if the king follows Nārada's advice and sacrifices the son to be born, his offspring will not be there in his old age to help or to offer *śrāddha* later. For the suggestion of incest, however, there seems to be no motivation. Hariścandra already has a hundred wives, no need to involve his mother or sister. It is as unnatural as the recurrent topic of the story, fathers trying to destroy their sons.

And clearly this is the focus of the whole narrative. Viśvāmitra disinherits his fifty sons and curses them to live among the barbarian tribes. Hariścandra is ready to have his only son killed, although only following the divine command and delaying it as much as possible. And Ajīgarta simply sells Śunaḥśepa as a sacrificial animal and for some extra fees he is willing to cut his son's throat himself.

The very starting point of the whole complication is blatantly absurd. The god does not demand the human sacrifice out of an unexpected whim: it was Nārada's original suggestion to the childless Hariścandra that he should ask Varuṇa to give him a son *so that he can sacrifice the boy to him*! Quite incomprehensibly,

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[16] Wilson, Sacrifice of Human Beings, 97–98; Müller, *History,* 410.

Hariścandra thought that this was a good idea and followed it, and the god again accepted it without hesitation.

Śunaḥśepa's mother, who is the only female character in the legend, also behaves in a way difficult to visualize. When Rohita is about to buy one of her sons from her husband in order to sacrifice him, her only remark is that she will not give the youngest. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* she elaborates somewhat: "Usually the oldest one is dear to the father, the youngest to the mother – that's why I protect the youngest."[17]

Some of the names seem utterly out of context. The main hero is called Śunaḥ-śepa, his brothers Śunaḥ-puccha and Śuno-lāṅgūla; these names according to Doniger's literal translation mean Dog-prick, Dog-arse and Dog-tail.[18] These are as unusual and inappropriate in the Indian tradition as they appear to us, especially considering that they are Brahmins and Śunaḥśepa is a seer of Vedic hymns.

Many more aspects of the text demand an explanation. Why did Śunaḥśepa praise eight different gods instead of praying to Varuṇa only? Why did he sit on Viśvāmitra's lap, quite an impossible behaviour for adult males? Why did Viśvāmitra, having already a hundred sons, adopt him? Why did Śunaḥśepa accept the adoption? After all, Viśvāmitra was an officiating priest at the intended human sacrifice! How did the promised sacrifice of the king's son turn into a royal consecration? What makes the telling of this legend an appropriate magic to cure the lack of a male offspring?

Some of these questions have been asked in previous scholarship, but for most of them an entirely new answer is attempted in the following.

Although the narrative is strictly linear, the text is quite complex. Its three parts seem relatively independent of each other: first, the story of Hariścandra and Rohita, which is absent in the *Rāmāyaṇa* version; then the sacrifice of Śunaḥśepa; lastly, Śunaḥśepa's adoption. In all of them we find inserted verses. In the first story the wisdom verses of Nārada laud the begetting of sons instead of asceticism and withdrawal from society, while Indra's advice to Rohita praises the life of the lonely wanderer. Inserted into the second story we find the extremely long quotation (a hundred verses) from the *Ṛgveda*. Although in the written text the hymns are only named, at an oral performance they were probably duly recited; Sāyaṇa, the great commentator of the Vedic corpus explicitly says so in his introduction to the seven hymns of Śunaḥśepa. "At the royal consecration, on the day of the anointment, when the Marutvatīya libation has been completed, the seven hymns starting with this should be told by the *hotṛ*-priest in front of the anointed king

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[17] I.61.18, translated from T. R. Krishnacharya, *The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, According to the Southern recension* (Sri Garib Das Oriental Series 2), Kumbakonam, 1905.

[18] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Textual Sources,* 22.

surrounded by his sons."[19] The balladic part of the third story is again coming from some previous sources since it does not match perfectly with the prose text. It knows nothing of Viśvāmitra's hundred sons, only four are named; and they all accept the adoption and their father blesses them. These three stories and the related verses are all fitted into the external frame of the royal consecration rite.

The verses are all earlier than the prose text, in the case of the *ṛgveda* the distance is more than a half millennium. Therefore it is fairly natural that the different layers do not fit flawlessly, one author does not grasp fully the other's intention. This is nothing unusual, we find a similar situation with all traditional tales and myths. The narrator has no knowledge of the origin of the story or of the process of its formation. At times he does not understand the motifs and symbolism or misunderstands them. This may lead to entirely new interpretations and more modern significance for the old story. Due to these factors it is always a serious challenge to look for the "original" meaning and we cannot expect absolute and final results here.

EARLIER REFERENCES TO THE LEGEND

The first detailed account of the Śunaḥśepa legend is the version in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, but it is clear that at least some parts of the story are immensely older. According to tradition, Śunaḥśepa is the poet of seven hymns in the first book of the *ṛgveda*, I.24–I.30, comprising 97 verses. (He is also the author of IX.3, but the *Brāhmaṇa* seems to be unaware of this.)[20] Although this attribution is not necessarily reliable, for the authors of the *Brāhmaṇa* it was taken for granted. In their story Śunaḥśepa saw these hymns when he was bound to the sacrificial post – for the Vedic seers, *ṛṣi*s, do not compose the hymns but see them. The hymns are parts of the magical texture of the universe and therefore they exist from eternity, like natural laws; but before they are seen by a *ṛṣi*, they are unknown to mankind.

Accidentally his supposed authorship explains why Śunaḥśepa praised eight gods instead of Varuṇa only: in the Śunaḥśepa hymns of the *Ṛgveda* these gods are praised, exactly in the order shown in the *Brāhmaṇa,* except for the short and frivolous hymn I.28. This latter text with its not-too-subtle hints about the movement of the pestle in the mortar is used in the "instant soma-pressing" *(anjaḥ-sava)*

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[19] Translated from Max Müller, *Rig-Veda-Samhitâ, The Hyms of the Brâhmans together with the Commentary of Sâyanâkârya,* London, Henry Frowde, 1890², 128.

[20] The authors of Vedic texts were given in separate lists, *anukramaṇī*s. All related material (including the authors' patronymics, giving either the father's name or that of the clan or both) in this paper is based on the data of the *Sarvânukramaṇī* as conveniently presented by Theodor Aufrecht, *Die Hymnen des Ṛigveda*, Bonn, Adolph Marcus, 1877, II., 463–513.

ritual that Śunaḥśepa "saw" and performed after his release. The authors succeeded in making a credible structure of these invocations, with Varuṇa standing out prominently in the middle, promising that in the end the gods would set the boy free. Since the last three verses (I.30.20–22) are addressed to Uṣas, the goddess of Dawn, with these the three fetters of the boy fall off. Fittingly, it is the beautiful maiden of Dawn that ends the nightmare of human sacrifice.

Śunaḥśepa appears twice in the *Ṛgveda* itself, and both are quoted in the *Aitareya*. First the part at I.24.12–13, close to the end of the first hymn is attributed to him:

> *May king Varuṇa release us,*
> *whom Śunaḥśepa called when he was seized.*
> *For Śunaḥśepa called the Son of Untying*
> *when he was seized, bound in three shackles.*
> *May king Varuṇa, who knows and cannot be deceived,*
> *set him free and release his fetters.*[21]

The second reference to his release is at V.2.7. Since in the Śunaḥśepa hymns there are but 97 verses, the authors of the *Brāhmaṇa* made up the number to a hundred by making the boy use at the end of the "instant soma-pressing" three other stanzas, this being the very last:

> *When Śunaś Śepa was tied down on account of a thousand,*
> *from the sacrificial post you released him, because he laboured –*
> *so release the fetters from us, o Fire,*
> *knowledgeable priest, sitting down here.*[22]

The word 'laboured' (*áśamiṣṭa,* from the root *śam*) in the *Ṛgveda* always refers to hard work in the ritual; when someone is bound to a sacrificial post, this ritual labour can be nothing else but inventing or reciting a sacred hymn or formula.

Analysing these references, Keith says that "neither of these passages seems in any way to accord with the account of the *Aitareya*" and "we can only dismiss the whole narrative as a later invention than the *Ṛgveda*".[23] We should carefully consider his reasons.

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[21] *śúnaḥśépo yám áhvad gṛbhītáḥ / só asmā́n rā́jā váruṇo mumoktu ||*
śúnaḥśépo hy áhvad gṛbhītás / triṣv ā̀dityáṃdrupadéṣu baddháḥ |
ávainaṃ rā́jā váruṇaḥ sasṛjyād / vidvā́ṅ ádabdho ví mumoktu pā́śān || RV I.24.12cd–13.
All *Ṛgveda* translations are based on the text in Aufrecht, *Ṛgveda.*

[22] *śúnaś cic chépaṃ níditaṃ sahásrād / yū́pād amuñco áśamiṣṭa hí ṣáḥ |*
evā́smád agne ví mumugdhi pā́śān / hótaś cikitva ihá tū́ niṣádya || RV V.2.7

[23] Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas,* 63–64.

Like all the translators of the *Ṛgveda*, he understands *triṣú drupadéṣu baddháḥ* in I.24.13b as "bound to three pieces of wood", so the picture is that of an exposed criminal, not a sacrificial victim bound to the solitary sacrificial post. But this is not necessary – the extremely rare word *dru-pada* (literally 'tree-foot') has been very plausibly interpreted by Sāyaṇa as three parts of the wooden sacrificial post.[24] It is not clear why none of the translators noticed this.[25] However the true meaning of the expression is "bound in three shackles". Surprisingly even Geldner who had already known the required meaning of *drupada*[26] still rendered it as "an drei Blöcke gebunden". That *drupada* means shackle is shown by two nearly identical passages in the *Atharvaveda*, 6.63.2–3 and 6.84.3–4; the latter, significantly, "is found used in a healing rite in the *puruṣamedha*,"[27] i.e. human sacrifice. The relevant parts are: "open the iron bond-fetters… you have been bound here in an iron *drupada*."[28] It is clear that the same object is meant; further the meaning of 'fetter, shackle, manacle' fits perfectly in both the Rigvedic context and the *Aitareya*. In the *Brāhmaṇa* it was clearly emphasized that Śunaḥśepa was bound with three fetters. But the Vedic hymn itself is clear enough: after the verse quoted (with the three *drupada*s) Varuṇa is requested to loosen our sins, and in the next, closing verse the three bonds are actually named:

> Loosen the fetters from us, Varuṇa, the topmost upwards,
> the bottom one downwards, the middle one away.[29]

We can visualize a man bound to the post at his neck, at his ankles and with his wrists behind him and the post.

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[24] *drupadeṣu: droḥ = kāṣṭhasya = yūpasya padeṣu = pradeśa-viśeṣeṣu*, Müller, *Rig-Veda*, I.133.

[25] Actually Ludwig did but thought this interpretation arbitrary: "drupadešu: S.[āyaṇa] an drei stellen des yûpa; willkürlich". Alfred Ludwig, *Der Rigveda oder die heiligen Hymnen der Brâhmana zum ersten Male vollständig ins Deutsche übersetzt mit Commentar und Einleitung*, Prag, F. Tempsky, 1876–1888, IV.84.

[26] His note to the expression: "*drupadá* (eigentlich wohl Fußgestell) ist der Block, in der Gefangene gelegt wurde (AV. 19,47,9; 50,1), in AV. 6,63,3 das Fußeisen." Karl Friedrich Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda, Aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche übersetzt und mit einem laufenden Kommentar versehen*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1951–1957, I.26.

[27] William Dwight Whitney – Charles Rockwell Lanman, *Atharva-Veda-Saṁhitā, Translated into English with Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, Cambridge, Massachusets, Harvard University, 1905, I.343.

[28] *ayasmáyān ví cṛtā bandha-pā́śā́n… ayasmáye drupadé bedhiṣa ihá*, AV 6.63.2b,3a = 6.84.3b,4a. Rudolf Roth – William Dwight Whitney, *Atharva Veda Sanhita*, Berlin, Ferd. Dümmler, 1856. Whitney, however, did not draw the conclusion like Geldner quoted in fn. 26, and translated as "Thou wast bound here to an iron post (*drupadá*)," Whitney–Lanman, *Atharva-Veda*, I.344.

[29] *úd uttamáṁ varuṇa pā́śam asmád / ávādhamáṁ ví madhyamáṁ śrathāya*, RV I.24.15ab

Exactly the same idea with slightly different wording is repeated in the last stanza of the second hymn to Varuṇa.[30] What is even more significant, here we can be relatively confident that these are the words of Śunaḥśepa himself, for two branches of the *Yajurveda* testify to this, as Lommel already pointed out in his careful analysis.[31] In the *Kāṭhaka Saṁhitā* we read:

> *"Loosen the fetters from us, Varuṇa, the topmost upwards" etc.: Śunaśśepa, Ajīgarta's son saw this verse when he was seized by Varuṇa. And with it he was released from the fetter of Varuṇa. One releases the very fetters of Varuṇa with it.*[32]

The similar text of the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* differs only in saying that a person releases *himself* with this magic spell.[33]

Keith's other argument for his position that in the Rigvedic verses Śunaḥśepa is not a sacrificial victim and the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) in V.2.7b must be a metaphor only, since *sahásrād yūpād amuñco* means "you released him from a thousand sacrificial posts", perhaps suggesting a thousand dangers. This seems to be the interpretation of Sāyaṇa as well: "from a thousand, i.e. several kinds of, posts."[34] However, since *sahasrāt* is the last word of a line, it cannot be easily combined with *yūpāt* in the next line. This is avoided in the most recent translation, interpreting it as "from his thousand (bonds),"[35] which corresponds to the *Ṛgarthadīpikā*'s comment "from a thousand fetters."[36]

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[30] *úd uttamám mumugdhi no / ví pā́śam madhyamáṁ cṛta / ávādhamā́ni jīváse,* RV I.25.21

[31] Herman Lommel, Die Śunaḥśepa-Legende, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 114/1 (1964), 138–141.

[32] *"ud uttamaṃ Varuṇa pāśam asmad" iti. Śunaśśepo vā etām Ājīgartir Varuṇa-gṛhīto ,paśyat; tayā vai sa Varuṇa-pāśād amucyata. Varuṇa-pāśam evâitayā pramuñcate.* KS 19.11, Leopold von Schroeder, *Kāṭhaka, Die Saṁhitā der Kaṭha-Śākhā,* Leipzig, Verlag der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1900–1910.

[33] *Śunaḥśepam Ājīgartiṁ Varuṇo ,gṛhṇāt. Sa etāṁ vāruṇīm apaśyat; tayā vai sa ātmānaṁ Varuṇa-pāśād amuñcad. Varuṇo vā etaṁ gṛhṇāti ya ukhaṁ pratimuñcata. "ud uttamaṁ Varuṇa pāśam asmad" ity āhâtmānam evâitayā Varuṇa-pāśān muñcaty.* TS 5.2.1,3–4, Kāśīnātha-Śāstrī Āgāśe, *Śrīmat-Sāyaṇâcārya-viracita-bhāṣya-sametā Kṛṣṇa-Yajurvedīya-Taittirīya-Saṁhitā,* Puṇyâkhya-Pattana, Ānandāśrama-Mudrālaya, 1940–1951, VII.2154. For a translation see Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Veda of the Black Yajus School entitled Taittiriya Sanhita,* Cambridge, Massachusets, The Harvard University Press 1914, II.404.

[34] *sahasrād = aneka-rūpād yūpād,* Müller, *Rig-Veda,* II.501.

[35] Stephanie W. Jamison – Joel P. Brereton,, *The Rigveda, The Earliest Religious Poetry of India,* Oxford etc., Oxford University Press, 2014, II.663.

[36] *pāśa-sahasrāt.* Lakshman Sarup, *Ṛgarthadīpikā, A pre-Sāyaṇa and hitherto unpublished commentary on Ṛgvedasaṁhitā by Mādhava, son of Śrīveṅkaṭārya,* Lahore–Banaras, Motilal Banarsidass, 1939–1955, IV.12.

But Griffith's solution, taking *sahasrāt* as a price, "for a thousand"[37] is more convincing even though prices are normally expressed with the Instrumental case, not the Ablative we find here. Geldner agrees ("Śunaḥśepa, der um ein Tausend angebunden war") adding in a note with a not easily traceable reference that one bought a person to be sacrificed for a thousand cows.[38]

Keith's further objection that the price is inaccurate has no weight, since in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.61.22) we have "for a hundred thousand cows", so the exact price is clearly not an essential part of the legend – as could be expected.

The verb used of Śunaḥśepa in V.2.7a, *ní-dita,* 'tied down' is among the rarest in the *Ṛgveda,* all forms of the root *dā* 'to tie' occurring eleven times, the participial form *dita* 'tied' only four times. Therefore the term immediately recalls its ubiquitous derivative *a-diti,* 'untying, boundlessness, infinity, freedom'. Most often this is a goddess with no clear personality, the mother of the Āditya gods of whom the chief is Varuṇa. It is therefore significant that in the most authentic Śunaḥśepa verse, which finishes the first Varuṇa-hymn, this is the last word:

> *Then in your order, oh Son of Untying,*
> *we would be blameless for Untying.*[39]

Or, in a less literal translation: "Then, according to your law, oh Varuṇa, we should be sinless and set free."

The whole hymn shows a very clear structure: it not only ends with gaining Freedom, it also starts with seeking it.

> *Now who is it, which god among the immortals,*
> *whose charming name we should think of?*
> *Who would give us back for great Untying?*
> *I would see both my father and my mother.*[40]

[37] Ralph T. H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda Translated with a Popular Commentary,* Benares, E. J. Lazarus & Co., 1889–1891, II.188. – In spite of giving in a footnote several references to differing opinions, Griffith fails to mention that he follows here Ludwig, *Rigveda,* I.368: "Çunahçepa, der für ein tausend angebunden war."

[38] "*sahásrāt* mit Ludwig ist auf Ind.St. 10, 68 zu verweisen. Man kaufte einen zu opfernden Menschen für tausend Kühe." Geldner, *Rig-Veda,* II.4. The reference is (through Ludwig, *Rigveda*, IV.328) to Albrecht Weber, Collectanea über die Kastenverhältnisse in den Brâhmaṇa und Sûtra, *Indische Studien* 10 (1868), 68, where we read: "Behufs des purushamedha kauft sich der Opfernde für 1000 Kühe nebst 100 Rossen einen brâhmaṇa oder kshatriya Çâñkh. [=Śāṅkhāyana-Śrauta-Sūtra] 16,10,10."

[39] *áthā vayám āditya vraté távā́/nāgaso áditaye syāma,* RV I.24.15cd

[40] *kásya nūnáṃ katamásyāmṛ́tānām / mánāmahe cā́ru devásya nā́ma |*
kó no mahyā́ áditaye púnar dāt / pitáraṃ ca dṛśéyam mātáraṃ ca || RV I.24.1

The unity of composition is definitely suggestive of one author, and quite a good poet for that. If he was called Śunaḥśepa or only recalled his image, we cannot tell; but the whole hymn is a coherent expression of the prayer and desire for freedom of a young person far away from parents and home, tied with three fetters.

We may conclude that from the scant references in the *Ṛgveda* and the *Yajurveda* the following elements of the legend are clearly recognizable: Śunaḥśepa the son of Ajīgarta as a young man was sold for a large herd of cows and taken away from home. He was intended as a human offering and bound to the sacrificial pillar with three fetters; however, he prayed to the gods Varuṇa and Fire with a powerful new hymn and they released him.

So this is only the central story of the *Aitareya* legend, and with an important difference: it is not his father who is about to kill the boy, although possibly it was the father who sold him.

THE NAMES IN THE STORY

In a fairy tale there are no names; at most the main hero has a name which is often descriptive like Little Red Riding Hood. Places are practically never named; this lends these stories an atmosphere of timelessness and general validity. In fact the tale is always about you, *de te fabula narratur*, the little child, who is now listening to it.

In contrast legends, which are stories for grown-ups, are normally very specific about the places and often give the names even of by-standers. This gives them the semblance of reliability, of real history and factual truth. Interestingly in the oldest Indian legends there are not many toponyms, in our story not even a single one. This may reflect the fact that the early Aryans in India were nomadic cattle-herders, slowly but constantly on the move from the West to the East.

This lack of any geographical reference in the *Aitareya* version is more than compensated for by the abundance of personal names. In addition to the real actors, four other *ṛṣi*s, four sons of Viśvāmitra, the two brothers of Śunaḥśepa and eight divinities are named, and altogether twelve clan or tribe names occur. In case of the three fathers, Hariścandra, Ajīgarta and Viśvāmitra, even their patronymic is given.

There is nothing remarkable about these superfluous names. The gods are the most important Vedic deities, and all the *ṛṣi*s as also Viśvāmitra's sons are well-known authors of hymns in the *Ṛgveda*. The sage Parvata who does nothing at all is still mentioned as living in Hariścandra's house besides Nārada; the reason for this is simply that these two *ṛṣi*s of Kaṇva's clan are the joint authors of two hymns, IX.104–105.[41] So all

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[41] Another association may be with the first part of the name Paruccepa (*parut+śepa*) – suggesting virility, as shown below. Grassmann suggested an etymological connexion: "párus…

these marginal characters are consonant with our story being a part of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa,* a book of the ritual speculations of the *hotṛ*-priests reciting the Rigvedic hymns and preserving their traditions.

On the other hand, the names of the main actors are suggestive. King Hariścandra, 'Flickering Yellow' and his son Rohita, 'Ruddy' recall the image of the midday sun when it is the strongest and the red sky at dawn when the new sun is about to be born. Nārada, who gives him advice on how to get a son, bears a name that can be understood as 'Offspring-Giver'. The name of Viśvâmitra, who curses his fifty sons, means in plain Sanskrit 'Enemy of the Whole World'.

The names of the main hero and of his family are most interesting. The father, Ajīgarta bears the patronymic Sauyavasi, so his father was Sū-yavasa, 'Having Good Pasture', probably the owner of a sizeable herd of cattle. Unfortunately Ajīgarta 'Ate It Up'. For this is the proper significance of the name, not 'without anything to swallow' as so far understood by everyone. There is no noun *jīgarta* in Sanskrit and there is no easy way to derive it from the root *gṝ,* 'to devour, swallow'. But *ajīgar(t)* is a perfectly regular past tense of the verb (reduplicated aorist third person singular) and it actually occurs in the *Ṛgveda* I.163.7. *Ajīgarta* could be the admittedly rarer middle (reflexive) form, or perhaps it was built with the normal suffix *-a.* Using a finite verbal form as a name is not a regular practice in Sanskrit, but we have a significant parallel. There is only one other story in the *Brāhmaṇa*s where a father sacrifices his son, and that is the story of Naciketa(s).[42] This name means 'I Don't Know', as DeVries convincingly showed in his important and pioneering paper.[43] He also notices that a "very close comparison is found in Russian *Neznajko* from *ne znaju* 'I don't know' (Afanaśev 1984, no. 295)."[44]

Now Ajīgarta's name also has an exact parallel in Russian *Ob″edalo,* 'Ate It Up,' occurring e.g. in Afanaśev no. 144, the tale of *The flying ship*.[45] He is the well-known figure of folk tales: *Vielfraß, der Dicke,* Eater, All-Eater, Gobbler, Hungry Man or Fat Man; he can eat enormous quantities, twelve or even three hundred

der unzweifelhafte Zusammenhang mit párvan, párvata macht es wahrscheinlich, dass der Grundbegriff der der Anschwellung ist." Hermann Günther Grassman, *Wörterbuch zum Rig-veda*, Leipzig, F. A. Brockhaus, 1873, 789.

[42] *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 3.11.8; a much more famous elaboration of the story is the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad.* In both versions in the end the boy returns alive from the house of Death equipped with profound knowledge.

[43] Larry DeVries, The Father, the Son and the Ghoulish Host, A Fairy Tale in Early Sanskrit?, *Asian Folklore Studies* 46 (1987), 241–243. He properly references Whitney, who – hesitatingly – first suggested this analysis. William Dwight Whitney, Translation of the Katha-Upanishad, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 21 (1890), 91.

[44] DeVries, The Father, the Son, 251, fn. 54.

[45] Aleksandr Nikolaevič Afanas'ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki,* Moskva, IzdateĺstvoNauka, 1984–1985.

oxen, has a huge belly and is always hungry. He is a "magical helper" of the hero who at one point in the story receives the "impossible task" of eating and drinking some gigantic quantity. This does change the picture not a little bit: perhaps Ajīgarta is not a poor emaciated Brahmin, but a huge, extremely fat person, who always thinks only of eating. (Interestingly his Greek counterpart Tantalus, who offered up his son Pelops as a sacrifice, now also suffers from eternal hunger in the underworld.) According to the *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra,* when Rohita met him, he was not only hungry, but he was about to eat his son (*putraṁ bhakṣyamāṇaḥ*). We will see later that this may have interesting connotations.

The most tantalizing question is about the names of the three brothers, Śunaḥ-puccha, Śunaḥ-śepa and Śuno-lāṅgūla, Dog's Arse, Dog's Prick, and Dog's Tail. Most unusual and less than flattering appellations, even if we don't consider that in India dogs are generally detested and considered unclean. In fact Śunaḥpuccha and Śunolāṅgūla appear only in those versions of the legend that follow the *Aitareya* very closely. In the *Rāmāyaṇa,* only the younger brother is named, and he is called by her mother Śunaka, Puppy (I.61.17d). And no other person in Sanskrit literature was ever called …-*puccha* or …-*lāṅgūla.*

But the rudest of the three, the name of the hero and also of the story (*Śaunaḥśepam ākhyānam,* the story about Śunaḥśepa) is present everywhere, and, as we saw, it is well-established already in the *Ṛgveda.* The names given to his brothers clearly show that the authors of the *Brāhmaṇa* understood it exactly as we do. Still, can it be the original meaning?

In the dictionaries we find only one other person called a part of a dog: Śunaskarṇa, Dog's Ear – and his story is also about his ritual death. He was a ṛṣi of the *Sāmaveda,* the chanting priests' tradition; and he "saw" and performed the *Sarva-svāra* sacrifice during which the sacrificer himself dies and goes directly to heaven.[46] This ritual where the voluntary death is caused by stopping the breath after a period of starving is curiously reminiscent of the *sallekhanā* vow of the Jains still practiced today by saintly monks and even lay followers for giving up the body. Since ritual death is quite unusual in the Vedic tradition, it seems probable that the supposed seer of the *Sarva-svāra* was named on the model of Śunaḥśepa, just choosing a less offensive part; after all, dogs hear quite well.

In an epic tale one more person's name starts with *śunaḥ:* Śunaḥsakha, Dog's

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[46] *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* II.167; *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* XVII.12.6. See Caland's comments to his translation. Willem Caland, *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa, The Brāhmaṇa of Twenty Five Chapters,* Calcutta, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1931, 467–468. A more detailed presentation of the ritual is found in the *Lāṭyāyana Śrauta-Sūtra* VIII.8.1–43, see (with translation) H. G. Ranade, *Lāṭyāyana-Śrauta-Sūtra,* Delhi, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts – Motilal Banrsidass, 1998, II.838–853.

friend, a fat wandering mendicant later revealed to be Indra.[47] This tale is actually a comic travesty of our story as we will show later. That it is in some way related to Śunaḥśepa was already suggested by David White, who also remarked that "the late and often corrupt *Skanda Purāṇa* (6.32.1–100) also relates the same story, but in this version, Indra… is disguised as Śunomukha (Dog-Face)."[48]

On the other hand, surprising as it may seem, Śunaka (Puppy) is the name of the ancestor of a very important clan of *ṛṣi*s, the *Śaunaka*s. The first of them is Gṛtsamada, the author of almost the whole of the second book of the *Ṛgveda*. His legend will give us the clue to these strange names. For he is said to be only the adopted son of Śunaka of the Bhṛgu clan; he was born to Śunahotra of the Aṅgiras clan (which also Śunaḥśepa belonged to by birth). But in fact Śunahotra, himself the author of two hymns, VI.33–34, belongs to the Bharadvāja clan according to the *Sarvānukramaṇī*. So there may be some confusion about clans here, and most probably Śunaka and Śunahotra, the "fathers" of Gṛtsamada, are the same person. Quite possibly it was he who changed his clan – then we would have another *Śuna-* person adopted; and his two names are but variants. Now Śuna-hotra means 'Plenty-Sacrifice', i.e. performing sacrifices producing prosperity. And therefore Śunaka is not 'Puppy', but 'Bounteous', as it was already suggested as a possibility by Mayrhofer.[49] The archaic word *śuna* is etymologically unrelated to *śvan,* 'dog' (of which the Genitive is *śunaḥ*); it can be derived from the verb *śvi/śū,* 'to swell, grow'.

Beyond the name Śunahotra there are only two compounds in the *Ṛgveda* built upon *śuna: śuna-pṛṣṭha* and *śunā-sīra.* The first, 'having wealth on his back' is said of a horse. For an Indian of the age of the *Brāhmaṇa*s, it must have appeared obviously that the Prakrit word *piccha, puccha* 'hind part, tail' comes from the Sanskrit *pṛṣṭha,* 'back' – as e. g. Pāli *pucchita* corresponds to Sanskrit *pṛṣṭa* 'asked'. And with this we would arrive at Śunapuccha as a folkish variant of the Rigvedic *śunapṛṣṭha.*

The second compound, *śunā-sīra* means 'Prosperity and the Plough', later sometimes identified with Indra. The related agricultural ritual, the *śunāsīrīya* is part of the royal consecration, taking place exactly after a year of the preliminary rituals and one month before the anointment day[50] (when Śunaḥśepa was to be

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[47] *Mahābhārata* 13.94–95. The *Mahābhārata* is quoted from R. N. Dandekar, *The Mahābhārata, Text as Constituted in the Critical Edition*, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1971–1976.

[48] David Gordon White, *Myths of the Dog-man,* Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, 94 and 95. So we have another dog-part name here, not listed in the dictionaries.

[49] Manfred Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen,* Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1992–1996, II.646 (under *śuna-*).

[50] Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and the Upanishads,* Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1925, II.341. For a description of the ritual see II.323.

sacrificed). "Keeping in mind the interrelation of ploughing and the sexual act it is easily seen that the śunāsīrīya intended to secure the efficient action of the powers of fertility."[51] A more frequent synonym of *sīra* is *lāṅgala;* the latter word also appears together with *śuna* but three lines before *śúnāsīrau* (IV.57.5a) in the *Ṛgveda: śunáṃ kṛṣatu lā́ṅgalam* (IV.57.4b), "let the plough plough prosperity", i.e. may our ploughing bring prosperity (IV.57.4b). Therefore *śunā-lāṅgala* would be equivalent to *śunā-sīra,* and since both *lāṅgala* (plough) and *lāṅgūla* (tail) can mean 'penis', we could easily get a variant Śunālāṅgūla.

So it seems that the names of our hero's brothers are priestly puns on the two Rigvedic *śuna-* compounds. This was easily done since all *hotṛ* priests to this day know all of the *Ṛgveda* by heart, and also as a text separated into isolated words. The inspiration for the reinterpretation from *śuna,* 'prosperity' to *śunaḥ,* 'dog's' comes of course from the name Śunaḥśepa where it is already present in the *Ṛgveda* itself. Now we turn to this name.

According to the dictionaries there are only three names ending in *śepa:* Śunaḥ-śepa, Paruc-chepa and Eka-śepa. The last one we can safely disregard: beyond the improbable meaning ('One-penis'), its source is also extremely unreliable and unimportant. It is the *Pravarādhyāya,* the eleventh appendix to the *White Yajurveda,* a lengthy genealogical listing of several hundred Brahmins' names.[52] As Weber, who edited a single transcript of a manuscript in the Bodleian Library, remarked, the manuscript is in horrible (*gräulich*) state with many mistakes and missing words. The string of letters *jñānahastikaikaśepaprātipeyapratiścavasā[ḥ]* is anything but clearly analysable; an emendation[53] into *Jñāna-hastikâika-śeṣa°* ('the sole remainder of the clan of Elephant of Knowledge') seems tempting, and then we have *eka-śeṣa* (a well-attested word) instead of the absurd *eka-śepa.*

So we are left with only one other person in Sanskrit literature having such a strange name, Paruc-chepa. And he is also a *ṛṣi* of the first book of the *Ṛgveda!* He was the son of Divodāsa and the author of the thirteen hymns I.127–139. The first part of the name, *parut* is unattested in the early language; later it means 'last year', and Mayrhofer accordingly understands Parucchepa as 'having a penis of

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51 Johannes Cornelis Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration, The Rājasūya Described according to the Yajus Texts and Annoted,* 's-Gravenhage, Mouton & Co, 1957, 33.

52 Albrecht Weber, *Verzeichniss der sanskrit-Handschriften* (Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek vol. 1), Berlin, Verlag der Nicolai'schen Buchhandlung, 1853, 54–62. The name is found on p. 58, line 23.

53 The emendation involves only the change of a single character, *pa* to *ṣa*, which are almost identical in the Devanāgarī script: प and ष.

last year (i.e. shrunken)'.[54] But the idea of 'Withered Penis', i.e. Impotent, does not really fit his myth as found in the shorter *Brāhmaṇa* of the *Ṛgveda*, the *Kauṣītaki*:

> *A demoness approached Indra, making vulvas at every joint. Indra, desirous of subduing her, made penises (śepa) at every joint (parus) – Indra indeed is Paruc-chepa. All does Indra seek to conquer. With her he had union. With her demonic magic, she was furious at him. He saw these verses with repeated lines; with them he was set free from all evil from every limb, from every joint.*[55]

Following this etymology, Böhtlingk and Roth suggested that the name is irregularly formed of *parus* (joint or knot, esp. of reed) and *śepa*.[56] Although it is not strictly impossible to call someone Knotted-Penis, there is another possibility. The Dravidian verb *paru-, parutt-* means 'to become large, swell'.[57] If we recall that *śuna-* is derived from *śvi* 'to swell', we see that the only two persons in India ever to have a name *-śepa* were both called 'Swelling Penis', i.e. 'Virile'. How appropriate this name is to the hero of our story, we will see below. Probably the Dravidian form[58] is earlier, translated into Vedic as *Śuna-Śepa,* but with a compulsory Dravidian doubling modified to Śunaśśepa. This form of the name does occur frequently, and according to Sanskrit phonetic rules it is equivalent to Śunaḥśepa. Although this latter form is thus secondary and less appropriate to the story, since the authors of the *Brāhmaṇa* clearly took this as the basis for the names of the two brothers, Śunaḥ-puccha and Śuno-lāṅgūla, we continue to use Śunaḥśepa.

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[54] "einen vorjährigen [d.h. eingeschrumpften] Penis habend", Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch,* II.95.

[55] *Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa* 23.4; Keith's translation (*Rigveda Brahmanas,* 477), modified. *asurÎndraṁ pratyakramata* (v.l. *pratyutkramata) parvan-parvan muṣkān kṛtvā. tām Indraḥ pratijigīṣan parvan-parvañ chepāṃsy akurutÊndra u vai Parucchepaḥ. sarvaṁ vā Indreṇa jigīṣitam. tāṁ samabhavat. tam ahṛṇād asura-māyayā. sa etāḥ punaḥ-padā apaśyat. tābhir aṅgād-aṅgāt parvaṇaḥ-parvaṇaḥ sarvasmāt pāpmanaḥ prāmucyata.* Bruno Lindner, *Das Kaushîtaki Brâhmaṇa,* Jena, Hermann Costenoble, 1887, 104–105.

[56] Otto Böhtlingk – Rudolph Roth, *Sanskrit Wörterbuch,* St-Petersburg, Eggers, 1855–1875.

[57] Thomas Burrow – Murray Barnson Emeneau, *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984², 354 (No. 3972). Interestingly Grassmann without knowing about the Dravidian word also arrived at the basic meaning 'to swell' for the root behind *parus*, see fn. 41.

[58] The second part of the name is not an Indo-European word, as its variants in Sanskrit (*śepa, śepha, śepas, śephas, śeva*) and Pali (*cheppā*) show; it does not seem to be Dravidian either, although Tamil *ceppam* 'straightness' sounds similar.

"HE SAT DOWN ON VIŚVĀMITRA'S LAP"

This little detail of abnormal behaviour, a man sitting on another's lap in public, confused many translators so much that they altered it, saying that Śunaḥśepa sat down by the side of the priest.[59] However, it is a stable element of the story, clearly present in all the three ancient versions.[60] Virpi Hämeen-Anttila in her very perceptive analysis seems to recognize here a regression under extreme stress: "Then follows the most human gesture so far: Śunaḥśepa sits on Viśvāmitra's lap, and the listener is reminded of the fact that this Vedic seer is a child."[61] It is an attractive idea, yet it seems untenable – Śunaḥśepa, although a young person still living with his parents, is clearly an adult both legally and mentally. He is a seer of hymns, entitled to conduct a ritual, fit to lead the clan of Viśvāmitra and decides freely about his fate: he rejects his father and negotiates the conditions of his adoption.

The meaning of this episode can be convincingly clarified. When Trisong Detsen, the future great king of Tibet, selected his new (maternal) family by sitting on the lap of his new uncle,[62] he was a toddler and therefore it seems quite natural to us. But the age is in fact irrelevant here, for this is the traditional rite of taking someone into a new family.

As Frazer already observed, many peoples "employ a simulation of birth as a form of adoption, and even as a mode of restoring a supposed dead person to life. If you pretend to give birth to a boy, or even a great bearded man who has not a drop of your blood in his veins, then, in the eyes of primitive law and philosophy, that boy or man is really your son to all intents and purposes."[63] Frazer brought up astonishingly similar rites from Greece and India for the enacted birth after assumed death. On the Indian side, the procedure is concisely described by the

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[59] "Çunahçepa sich an Viçvâmitra's Seite setzte" Roth, Die Sage von Çunahçepa, 463. "Śunahśephas placed himself by the side of Viswámitra", Wilson, Sacrifice of Human Beings, 101. "Śunahśepa then approached the side of Viśvāmitra (and sat by him)," Haug, *Aitareya Brahmanam* II. 468.

[60] In the *Brāhmaṇa*, *aṅkam ā sasāda*; in the *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra*, *upastham ā sasāda*. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *papātâṅke muneḥ*, 'fell into the sage's lap'; in translation, it was again smoothed away into "fell at the feet of the sage." Hari Prasad Shastri, *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, London, Shanti Sadan, 1952, I.118.

[61] Virpi Hämeen-Anttila, Back to Śunaḥśepa: Remarks on the gestation of the Indian literary narrative, *Studia Orientalia* 94 (2001), 198.

[62] McComas Taylor – Lama Choedak Yuthok, *The Clear Mirror: A Traditional Account of Tibet's Golden Age, Sakyapa Sonam Gyaltsen's Clear Mirror on Royal Genealogy*, Ithaca, New York, Snow Lion Publications, 1996, 227–228. I thank Mónika Szegedi for the reference.

[63] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion,* New York etc., The Macmillan Company, 1911–1922, I/1.74.

Old Manu (*Vṛddha-Manu*), quoted by the early seventeenth-century scholar of law, Mitra Miśra:

> *If somebody was away from home for twelve years, in the thirteenth year the funeral rites should be performed for him. If he returns alive, he should be put in a pot filled with ghee; then, taking him out and bathing him, the birth rituals should be performed. … Taking the bath [normally finishing the years of study] he should marry his wife, or, in her absence, another woman.*[64]

Accidentally this substitution of a jar for the womb in ritual birth explains the "miraculous" birth from a pot of Agastya *ṛṣi* and many other legendary persons.

The logic of the adoption ritual, as presented by Frazer, is analogous, although typically simpler. The adopted person may be pushed through the robes of the new mother, or he may crawl through between her legs, or the new father puts the child on his wife's lap. "In the Middle Ages [in Europe] a similar form of adoption appears to have prevailed, with the curious variation that the adopting parent who simulated the act of birth was the father, not the mother."[65]

We have clear traces of the custom with the Jewish patriarchs. Rachel after many years without giving birth said to her husband, Jacob, Isaac's son: "Here is my slave girl, Bilhah. Sleep with her so that she may give birth *on my knees*; through her, then, I too shall have children!"[66] When Joseph gave his two sons to his father, Jacob for adoption, he "took them from his lap." Therefore he had to re-adopt his own grandsons: they "were born on Joseph's lap."[67]

In India the widespread form of the ritual, surviving up to the present, is putting the child on the adoptive mother's lap. In Hindi, 'to adopt' is *kisī ko god baiṭhānā/lenā,* literally 'to seat/take on the lap'.[68] Analogously, according to Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-Kośa,* most gods don't have sex like humans, and their offspring sud-

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[64] *proṣitasya yadā kālo / gataś ced dvādaśâbdikaḥ |*
prāpte trayodaśe varṣe / preta-kāryāṇi kārayet ||
jīvan yadi sa āgacchet / ghṛta-kumbhe niyojayet |
uddhṛtya snāpayitvā tu / jāta-karmâdi kārayet ||
…snātvôdvaheta tāṁ bhāryām / anyāṁ vā tad-abhāvataḥ || … iti Vṛddha-Manu-vacanaṁ.
Viṣṇu Prasāda Bhaṇḍāri, *Vīramitrôdaya–Samaya-prakāśa, mahā-mahôpādhyāya-śrī-Mitra-Miśra-viracitaḥ*, Benares, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1935, 192.

[65] Frazer, *Golden Bough,* I/1. 74. fn. 3.

[66] *Genesis* 30:3. The Old Testament is quoted from Alexander Jones (ed.), *The Jerusalem Bible, Reader's Edition*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1968.

[67] *Genesis* 48:12 and 50:23.

[68] Hardev Bahri, *Learners Hindi–English Dictionary*, Delhi, Rajapala, 1989.

denly appears as a five- or ten-year-old child. "The divine youth or maiden will be the son or daughter of the god or goddess on whose lap he or she appears."[69]

A grown-up male has to sit on the lap of his father, not of his mother. The ceremony is performed in the presence of all relatives.[70] In perfect conformity to this, the adoption of Śunaḥśepa also happened in the presence of the king, summoning the whole clan of Viśvāmitra.

The only unusual feature of Śunaḥśepa's adoption is that the father, Ajīgarta objects to it – this would normally make it legally impossible. However it could still take place for three reasons. First, Śunaḥśepa comes of age. That's why he himself sits down on Viśvāmitra's lap instead of being taken on his lap and Ajīgarta can only try to persuade him to return to his old family. Second, as Viśvāmitra points out, Śunaḥśepa has been already given to the gods, and he received the boy from them. That's why his new name will be Deva-rāta, Divine Present. Lastly, elaborating somewhat the argument in Vasiṣṭha's Law Code,[71] king Hariścandra had purchased Śunaḥśepa as a substitute for his son, therefore as a son – so Ajīgarta's parental rights have terminated. After all, only this could explain why god Varuṇa accepted the substitution: he was not demanding a human sacrifice in general but specifically Hariścandra's son.

For the modern reader it is also curious that after his adoption Śunaḥśepa-Devarāta will be the heir of Viśvāmitra. In fact this seems to have been the most frequent motive for adoption, and in particular the position of a king or a chief in India from the epic to the modern age was fairly often not inherited by the biological son. "Some of the best-known Kṣatriya chiefs at the present day were adopted with the rites we have described."[72] Still, this happens normally when the chief has no son, and Viśvāmitra had a hundred and one. Even if most of them were actually only junior members of his clan (great-grandsons of his grandfather), as the balladic part of the text suggests, at least the four named sons were really his – in the *Sarvānukramaṇī,* the Rigvedic author-index, they all have the patronymic Vaiśvāmitra. This may have been decisive for the authors of the *Brāhmaṇa,* but

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[69] *yasya devasya devyā vā utsaṅge deva-kumāro deva-kanyā vā jāyate, sa tayoḥ putro bhavati, sā ca duhitā.* Abhidharma-Kośa-Bhāṣya on 3.70a-c, see P. Pradhan, *Abhidharm-Koshabhāṣya of Vasubandhu,* Patna, K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967, 169. I thank Mónika Szegedi for the reference.

[70] For examples from the Punjab and Gujarat, and from the Jaina tradition, see Sástrí Golápchandra Sarkár, *The Hindu Law of Adoption,* Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co., 1891, 454; and Sinclair Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-Born,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1920, 132–134.

[71] *Vāsiṣṭha-Dharma-Śāstra* 17.30–35. Text and translation in Patrick Olivelle, *Dharmasūtras, The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha,* Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2000, 418–419.

[72] Stevenson, *Rites,* 134.

these patronymics could always be simply clan names. So it is not impossible that "originally" Śunaḥśepa was adopted by a sonless man into the Viśvāmitra clan: either by Viśvāmitra (and then his "sons" were nephews or daughters' sons etc.) or by a descendant of Viśvāmitra.

The royal consecration, *rāja-sūya* is both the core and the frame of our legend. Hariścandra learns it from Varuṇa, and then he performs it, although in the end it gets significantly modified; this is the climax of the story. From the last paragraph it also appears that it is in the course of this ritual that the *hotṛ* priest recites the myth. So it is of some importance to understand what the purpose of this ritual was. At the time of its performance Hariścandra had already been a king for several decades, so it could not have been the equivalent of a coronation.

Rāja-sūya, if the second part of the term is derived from the verb *sū, suvati,* would mean 'vivifying the king'; if from *sū, sūte,* then it is 'royal procreation'. Heesterman suggested that originally it was a yearly agricultural fertility rite performed by the king.[73] However, in his seminal paper Harry Falk convincingly established that while the later form of the ritual served the purpose of designating the heir of the king from among his sons, "the older *rājasūya* as appears in Baudhāyana's presentation assumes that the childless king adopts a son."[74] In spite of their different interpretations, many of Heesterman's subtle observations support Falk's thesis.

"Hariścandra's belly inflated by Varuṇa may be considered as an image of Hariścandra's being pregnant… His belly diminishes to normal proportions at the moment of the sacrificial rebirth, when Śunaḥśepa's fetters fall off."[75] The three special garments worn at the anointment ceremony is said by the ritual texts to represent the womb, the umbilical cord and the amnion;[76] and the anointment itself (pouring on of water) "can perhaps best be compared with the bathing of the newly-born child." That the ritual "represents the new birth is already suggested by the word *rājasūya* ('bringing forth the king')."[77]

If we add that on our analysis, Ajīgarta as All-Eater also has a big belly, it seems that both the killer fathers are at the same time also pregnant with their son! With these symbolic elements we came back to Frazer's observation made more than a century ago: adoption is performed through a simulation of birth. By now it is clear that contrary to most analyses, the adoption of Śunaḥśepa is not an unrelated

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[73] Heesterman, *Rājasūya,* especially 222–224.

[74] "Das ältere, aus Baudhāyanas Darstellung zu erschließende Rājasūya geht davon aus, daß der kinderlose König sich einen Sohn adoptiert." Harry Falk, Die Legende von Śunaḥśepa vor ihrem rituellen Hintergrund, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 134/1 (1984), 124.

[75] Heesterman, *Rājasūya,* 161.

[76] Heesterman, *Rājasūya,* 91–92.

[77] Heesterman, *Rājasūya,* 117–118.

story, not an unnecessary appendix included with some external purpose but an essential and integral part of the legend. Somehow the whole myth is about royal succession and the adoption of an heir. That was the original function of the ritual as well. This is the normal relation of myth and ritual: as Malinowski observed, "myth… draws its power from magic. Magic is also dependent upon myth. Almost every type of spell and rite has its mythological foundation. The natives tell a story of the past which explains how this magic came into man's possession, and which serves as a warrant of its efficiency."[78] In this case where the *rājasūya* is both the centrepiece and the external framework of the legend, this interrelationship is especially apparent.

Having clarified so much, the confusion seems not to lessen but to increase. Why is Ajīgarta "pregnant" with his own son, whom he does not have to adopt, and why does he want to kill him? Surely a serious psychopath murdering his offspring for money is not a fitting subject for a myth. How does human sacrifice and filicide enter the picture?

HUMAN SACRIFICE

Many scholars saw in the Śunaḥśepa-legend a testimony of ancient human sacrifice. This would not be too surprising in India. One form of ritual death, suttee (*satī*), the supposedly voluntary burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyre was quite widespread and survives to the present day, although it is banned. Sacrificing a person to a divinity was also a more or less regular practice in some sects, most often to the goddess Kālī or Durgā. There are many examples of it in the literature; frequently the hero is about to cut off his own head with a sword in front of the idol when the goddess stops him in the last second.[79] The tale of Vīravara is quite close to that of Śunaḥśepa, for here the father cuts off the head of his son as the goddess demands, and the boy is later resurrected by her.[80] All these gods and rites, however, belong to the later Hinduism and seem to be absent from the older Vedic tradition.

The ritual books do describe a magnificent *puruṣa-medha,* human sacrifice, but the scholarly consensus[81] considers it symbolic only or even plainly a Brahmanic

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[78] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, London–New York, Routledge Classics, 2001, 95.

[79] Csaba Dezső, The Story of the Irascible Yakṣa and the King Who Nearly Beheaded Himself in Dhanapāla's Tilakamañjarī, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* Series 3, 22/1 (2012), 73–91.

[80] *Hitopadeśa* 3.8. M. R. Kale, *Hitopadeśa of Nārāyaṇa,* Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1967⁶, 78–79.

[81] With the sole exception of Albrecht Weber, Ueber Menschenopfer bei den Inder der vedishen Zeit, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 18 (1864), 269–270.

fiction to complete the system of rituals. On the other hand, the building sacrifice at the construction of the huge bird-formed fire altar (*agnicayana*) involving a human victim is believed to reflect actual practice, although the *Brāhmaṇas* say that it is no longer performed in this way – typically only a goat is killed. Although Parpola in his excellent summary thinks that it is "beyond reasonable doubt that Vedic texts do indeed attest to real human sacrifices performed within the memory preserved by the authors,"[82] the evidence is scanty and archaeological proof is lacking entirely. "The remains of the three Agnicayana altars, found in Jagatgram apparently do have the shape of a hawk, but whether they include human and animal bones remains as yet unknown."[83] Even with the cursory reference in the *Yajurveda* noticed by Falk ("If he would do black magic, he should take a human victim"),[84] there is precious little to suggest an actual practice.

Therefore it is understandable why an analysis of our legend takes up such a large part of the discussion in the scholarly literature on human sacrifice in Vedic times. However, the legend is not a record of actual history and does not even pretend to be. It belongs to the mythical past when the hymns were "seen," the gods walked on earth and bargained with men. Further, the ritual as described is not realistic as a Vedic sacrifice. At the animal sacrifice the actual killing is done not by a Brahmin but by a specialist, the *śamitṛ*, 'pacifier'. First the victim is asked to agree, then it is released from the sacrificial post and led away. At the time of the slaughter all the priests turn away. And it is not done with a knife or sword but normally the animal is strangled. It is considered important that it should not cry out and that its blood should not be spilt.[85]

At a Vedic animal sacrifice a little portion of the victim is actually burned; most of the meat is roasted on the fire and eaten by the priests and the sacrificer. Had everything happened as originally planned, the great *ṛṣi*s and Hariścandra should have partaken of the cannibalistic feast, the father actually eating the flesh of his son! This objection is not modern speculation: the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* directly mentions the taboo on eating human flesh as a reason for the impossibility of a real human sacrifice. At the primordial performance of the *puruṣa-medha,* right

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[82] Parpola, Human sacrifice, 161.

[83] Hans Bakker, Puruṣamedha, Manasarapuruṣa, Vāstupuruṣa, The Image of Man in the Sacrificial Context, *Journal of Indological Studies,* 20–21 (2008–2009), 10.

[84] *yady abhicaret, puruṣa-paśum kuryāt.* KS 29.8, Schroeder, *Kāṭhaka,* 178. See Falk, Śunaḥśepa, 134, fn. 53.

[85] Hermann Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda* (Tr. Shridhar B. Shrotri), Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1988, 202. Christopher Z. Minkowski, *Priesthood in Ancient India, A Study of the Maitrāvaruṇa Priest,* Vienna, Sammlung De Nobili, 1991, 165. Frits Staal, *Agni, The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar,* Berkeley, Asian Humanities Press, 1983, I.49.

before the killing, a voice spoke to Puruṣa, 'Man': "Puruṣa! Do not finish! If you finish it, man will eat man." So he set free all the victims.[86]

It is apparent that in our legend human sacrifice is viewed with utmost horror and disgust. Beyond the general tenor of the story it is explicitly stated. The officiating priests refuse to do it, Viśvāmitra and Śunaḥśepa call it a barbarous crime, and even Ajīgarta himself admits that it is a sin and says that he repents it.

Since the sacrifice is not completed but modified into a harmless soma-pressing, quite logically several scholars considered this legend as documenting the abolishment of the previously accepted heinous practice.[87] Such stories do exist, also in India. In the *Vikrama-carita,* king Vikramāditya offers himself as a substitute for a poor man as a sacrifice to the fearful goddess Śonita-priyā (Fond of Blood). Seeing his valour the goddess stays his sword and gives him a boon. The king asks her to stop the murderous custom and she agrees.[88] The 'abolition' interpretation would fit especially well into Frazer's theory according to which the original ritual murder of the king was first modified into killing the king's son; later a stranger was substituted for the royal offspring; and the last step is the giving up of the custom entirely.[89] Here also first the king is seized by Varuṇa; then his son is to be sacrificed; then Śunaḥśepa, an outsider replaces Rohita; and in the end nobody is killed.

Even if Frazer's theory had general validity, it seems extremely improbable that a single legend would incorporate the whole historical process. The *Brāhmaṇa* does not hint at giving up an old custom: according to it this was the very first *rāja-sūya* ritual and nobody was killed. Still, there is the divine demand in the story to sacrifice the king's child – surely this must have some ground in reality?

Not necessarily. Van Baal's example from South New Guinea nicely illustrates the point:

One section of the tribe periodically celebrated an initiation ritual called ezam-uzum, husband-wife. Before the beginning of the rites a contraption was constructed consisting of a long tree-trunk, resting on the ground with one end, and with the other at man's height on a simple scaffolding. Toward the end of the rites all the neophytes had to copulate one after another with a certain girl lying on a mat under the elevated end of the trunk. While the last of the neophytes was

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[86] *puruṣa, mā saṁtiṣṭhipo! yadi saṁsthāpayiṣyasi, puruṣa eva puruṣam atsyati… tān pary-agni-kṛtān evôdasṛjat.* – ŚBr 13.6.2.13. *Shrimad-Vajsaneyi-Madhyandin-Shatpath-Brâhmanam*, Bombay, Laksmivenkatesvara Press. Repr. Delhi, Nag Publishers, 1990.

[87] See Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas,* 62–63.

[88] *Vikrama-carita* 28. Franklin Edgerton, *Vikrama's Adventures or The Thirty-two Tales of the Throne* (Harvard Oriental Series 26–27), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1926, I.219–224 and II.201–206.

[89] Frazer, *Golden Bough,* especially III. 9–195.

doing his duty the scaffolding was suddenly torn down, and the trunk crushed the copulating pair who were roasted and eaten. …

Later research confirmed the truth of the construction of the elevated tree trunk and also that at a certain moment the scaffolding was torn down, but not of the story of the copulating pair. All that was crushed were two coconuts, roughly decorated as a man's and a woman's head, and this did not even happen under the tree but a little way off. The story of the pair killed under the tree is the story told to the non-initiated. … These stories were veritable myths giving significant information on the cosmological meaning of the rites. The non-initiated were allowed to know them, but not how the death of the deities concerned was operationalized by means of a perfectly innocent symbolism. …

There is ample reason to keep this in mind when studying ancient records of human sacrifice. These sacrifices might have occurred less frequently than these records suggest.[90]

ISAAC

Practically everyone writing on the Śunaḥśepa legend remarks that it is similar to the story of Isaac's sacrifice in the Bible at Genesis 22. Not surprisingly, Biblical scholars are generally unaware of the Indian parallel.[91] Unfortunately beyond a short remark of one or two sentences no analysis has been attempted, with the sole exception of David Shulman who wrote a complete book on the Indian analogues of the Aquedah (Isaac's 'binding'). Although a full chapter is devoted to Śunaḥśepa, Shulman's main interest lies in the theological and religious questions and therefore he gives no comparison at all of the surprisingly many matching details.[92] For not only the general subject of the stories is similar but many minor details are identical and even the apparent differences disappear on closer inspection.

Hariścandra was a king while Abraham was a patriarch, but these traditional appellations refer to the same thing: head of a clan. Hariścandra seems to have been ruler of a single *grāma,* village, while Abraham could gather 318 warriors and with them he defeated the joint invading army of four kings.[93]

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[90] Jan van Baal, Offering, Sacrifice and Gift, in Jeffrey Carter, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice, A Reader,* London–New York, Continuum, 2003, 290.

[91] Although Wellisch does mention it in a strikingly inexact footnote of three lines. E. Wellisch, *Isaac and Oedipus, A Study in Biblical Psychology of the Sacrifice of Isaac, The Akedah*, Oxon, Routledge, 2007, 63, fn. 1.

[92] David Shulman, *The Hungry God, Hindu Tales of filicide and Devotion,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 87–107.

[93] Genesis 14:14–15.

Let us first survey the common script of the two stories. The elderly chief has no children; he asks a divinity for a son and the god promises it.[94] When the child reaches the age of adolescence, the god demands that the father sacrifice the boy to him, and the father complies. The ritual is new, and the god gives precise instructions on how to perform it. When the father has already bound the boy and approaches him with a knife to cut his throat, another divinity stops the sacrifice.[95] The ritual is completed in a modified form with a substitute offering. The boy will be an important leader of a clan, ancestor to a great people.

Of course in the *Brāhmaṇa* we have two fathers and two sons, but this is secondary and in many respects inessential. Doubling of motifs is quite frequent in the world of authorless literature. Actually in the Bible we also have a doubling: for upon God's word Abraham drove out into the wilderness his first son Ishmael together with his mother Hagar, the maidservant of Sarah. There they would have died of thirst but for the intervention of God's angel.[96] There are many other motifs repeated in the stories of the patriarchs, sometimes even thrice. Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel (the wives of Abraham, Isaac and his son Jacob) are all barren for several decades, two of them sending in their maidservants, Hagar and Bilhah to their husbands to get children through them. The story of the patriarch lying about his wife to a king that she is but a sister also appears three times.[97] In the *Aitareya* it is clearly visible that we have a secondary duplication, not an original complexity: in the first story there is only Hariścandra and Rohita, while after the substitution they are no more mentioned, only Śunaḥśepa and Ajīgarta are seen. Also in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and similarly in the most ancient version, that of the *Ṛgveda,* Hariścandra is absent, whereas in the later Hariścandra legend popular in Hinduism, there is no Śunaḥśepa.

Abraham obeys God's command without argument, whereas Hariścandra is reluctant and bargains for a long time with Varuṇa for the life of his son. In fact, we have exactly the same thing in the Bible, although a little displaced. The same day Abraham is told that in a year the ninety-years-old Sarah will give birth to Isaac, Yahweh announces that he is going to destroy the sinful city of Sodom – and Abraham argues with him. "Perhaps there are fifty just men in the town. Will you really overwhelm them, will you not spare the place for the fifty just men in it?" When Yahweh yields, Abraham starts to bargain, and in the end they go down to

[94] Genesis 15:2–4.
[95] In Genesis 22:1–2 it is God (Elohim) who demands the sacrifice and "the angel of Yahweh" stops it (22:11–12). In the Indian story Varuṇa demands the sacrifice and Śunaḥśepa is liberated by Uṣas. Also in the first part it is Indra who prevents Rohita from returning, directing him to find the substitute, Śunaḥśepa.
[96] Genesis 21:9–19.
[97] Genesis 12:11–19, 20:1–18, 26:6–11.

only ten just men, and the god agrees. "I will not destroy it," he replied, "for the sake of the ten."[98]

In truth Abraham was not fighting for the sinful city, but for his nephew, Lot, who lived at its gates. Lot was his only relative in the land of Canaan. Since his father, Haran, Abraham's brother died early, he joined Abraham's family and together they wandered from Mesopotamia to Canaan; for many decades they herded their flocks together. Since Abraham had no son, all this time Lot was his heir. So for the life of their successor both the Indian and the Jewish chief bargained with a high god successfully, telling him what is proper to do in religious matters…

The oedipal relation of son to mother mentioned by Nārada in two of his gnomic verses also appears as an unusual hint in the Bible. At the age of forty, three years after his mother's death Isaac married her niece, "and Isaac led Rebekah into his tent and made her his wife; and he loved her. And so Isaac was consoled for the loss of his mother."[99]

The abusive behaviour of Śunaḥśepa's mother, sending his older son to die in order to protect her youngest is like Sarah driving away Ishmael, who, although not a biological son, was still her child.[100] Rebekah conspired with Jacob to disinherit her older son, Esau.

Śunaḥśepa opposes god Varuṇa's command and gets a new name God-Given. He moves to Viśvāmitra's family (according to the Rāmāyaṇa 62.2f, Viśvāmitra is his maternal uncle, *mātula*) and inherits both his this-worldly and sacred possessions. Jacob wrestles with God and he is renamed Strong-Against-God (Israel). He goes to his maternal uncle Laban, lives there twenty years marrying his two daughters and then takes his inheritance, a large herd and Laban's gods (the household idols).[101]

Isaac's sacrifice takes place in an uninhabited place far away, in the land of Moriah, whereas with Śunaḥśepa it happens in or near the village. But the motif is there, although split into two: Rohita flees to the wilderness from his intended fate, while Śunaḥśepa is far away from home when his father tries to kill him. In both legends the mothers are distant, with no chance even to wail for their sons.

Unsurprisingly the children are never cooperative: Rohita runs away, Śunaḥśepa successfully prays for the gods' help. Isaac is only suspicious and asks his father, "here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Since Abraham does not tell him his fate and cheats him ("God himself will provide the lamb"), he has no chance to refuse, while at the sacrifice Abraham binds him.

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[98] Genesis 18:20–32.

[99] Genesis 24:67.

[100] So Sarai said to Abram, "…go to my slave girl. Perhaps *I shall get children* through her." Genesis 16:2

[101] Genesis 29–31 and 32:26–30.

The most conspicuous from among all the parallelisms is the essential similarity of the gross absurdity of the whole situation. God gave Isaac to Abraham in order to make him the father of a multitude of nations – and then commands him to kill him! And Varuṇa is willing to give an offspring to Hariścandra – on condition that he kills him!

Actually there is an exact and perhaps historical parallel to Hariścandra's strange compact with Varuṇa in the Old Testament in a non-murderous form. So the sonless Hannah prayed: "Yahweh Sabaoth! If you will take notice of the distress of your servant… and give her a man-child, I will give him to Yahweh." And a son was born to her, dedicated for his life to the service of god: the prophet Samuel, the last judge of Israel, who anointed king David.[102]

Probably no more proof is needed to show that the two legends cannot be independent of each other. Although Israel is far away from India, the story of the deluge is found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* as well. As is well known, myths and tales can travel very far both in space and time.[103]

We don't have to investigate who borrowed from whom, Aryans from Jews or the other way round; both would have been possible. In any case, the interesting question is not where a story was picked up, but rather why it was taken over. Why was it remembered and passed on? Now in the present case the central motifs are very well known all over the world, they are almost universal; and we will soon see why it is so.

SNOW WHITE

In Europe perhaps the best known example of a father sacrificing his son is king Tantalus. In this archaic version he cut up his son Pelops, cooked his flesh and served it to the gods. They refused the gruesome meal and revived the boy by boiling his flesh in a magical cauldron. Agamemnon, his grandson also sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia to Artemis, although in many variants of the legend the goddess substituted a deer for the girl in the last moment. There are many more examples in mythology; in the Bible we also have another story where the judge Jephthah sacrifices his only child, his daughter to Yahweh.[104] But the motif appears most often in folktales, and in fact the two most marked features of our story

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[102] I. Samuel 1.

[103] For a fascinating analysis of the wanderings of a single tale, see Jamshid J. Tehrani, The Phylogeny of Little Red Riding Hood, *PLoS ONE* 8/11 (2013), e78871.

[104] Judges 11:29–40.

– total absurdity and incredible cruelty portrayed as normal – should have recalled at once the Grimms' fairy tales.

In many of these tales the parent tries to kill the child or sends it to almost sure death. In the well-known standard version[105] the evil mother always appears as a stepmother, but this is the result of editorial modifications according to the tastes of the age and the supposed needs of children.[106] For the tale of Snow White[107] "the earliest known text is in a manuscript of 1810… Here the handsome queen is the girl's natural mother, who first wishes for her and is then dismayed by her ever-increasing beauty. It is the mother herself who takes Snow White to the forest."[108] In the first edition of 1812–15 she is still the biological mother, who cannot bear her daughter's superior beauty.

> She summoned the huntsman and said: "Take the child out into the forest to a spot far from here. Then stab her to death and bring me back her lungs and liver as proof of your deed. After that I'll cook them with salt and eat them."
>
> The huntsman took Little Snow White and led her out into the forest, but when he drew his hunting knife and was about to stab her, she began to weep and pleaded so much to let her live and promised never to return…
>
> Just then a young boar came dashing by, and the huntsman stabbed it to death. He took out the lungs and liver and brought them to the queen as proof that the child was dead. Then she boiled them in salt, ate them, and thought that she had eaten Little Snow White's lungs and liver.[109]

Beyond filicide we see here the wilderness, the knife ready to kill, the long prayer for life, the substitute victim and leaving the family for ever. The cannibalistic motif so dominant in the Tantalus myth is also emphasized. In the *Brāhmaṇa* it is suppressed, although the huge bellies of Hariścandra and Ajīgarta that we first interpreted as signs of pregnancy could also suggest that the fathers have devoured their sons. It also appears in the curious travesty of the legend in the *Mahābhārata* (13.94–95) where most elements of the story are present (underlined below) but all are mixed up unrecognisably.   —

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[105] Jakob & Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen,* Berlin, Wilhelm Hertz, 1888.

[106] Maria M. Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales,* Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987, 3–38.

[107] Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 53.

[108] Kay Stone, Three Transformations of Snow White, in James M. McGlathery (ed.), *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1991, 57.

[109] Jack Zipes, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: the Complete First Edition,* Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2014, 171–172.

The king gives his son to the seven Ṛṣis as sacrificial fee. In a famine, the boy dies and the sages put him in a cauldron to cook. The king passes by and offers to the sages cattle and gold, but they refuse. As the corpse is still not cooked they go digging roots. The king invokes a demoness to kill the Ṛṣis, but Śunaḥsakha, a fat wandering hermit they have accidentally met in the wilderness saves them by killing her in a ritual contest and then hides the poisonous vegetable dish she prepared. The sages curse the vegetable thief who introduces himself as Indra and they all go to heaven.

Notice also the magical cauldron in which the dead boy although he is not revived at least cannot be cooked.

The demoniac being(s) to whom the child is given over is also present in a variant of Snow White:

In the forest seven dwarfs live in a cave and kill any maiden who comes near them. The queen knows this, and since she herself doesn't exactly want to kill the maiden, she hopes to get rid of her by driving her out to the cave, where she tells her: "Go inside and wait there for me until I return."[110]

Surprising as it may seem, it is not an important difference that the tale is about a girl, not a boy. "German female Cinderellas did not outnumber male Cinderellas until the eighteenth century… [there are] male Cinderellas and Snow Whites in modern Turkish folklore… Russian folklore has a male Sleeping Beauty."[111] And in many tales we find the motif with a son, just these are not so well-known today, perhaps on account of patrilocal marriages and a stronger prohibition on male Oedipal rivalry.

In the European folktales the heathen gods are no longer present so a sacrifice is not possible, still, in some cases the idea is still recognisable.

Faithful Johannes as a "magical helper" gets the king his dream wife and protects them both from sure death, but in consequence of the king's mistrust turns into stone. The stone statue asks the king to cut off his twin sons' heads and to smear it with their blood. Then the statue comes to life and resurrects the boys.[112]

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[110]   Zipes, *Grimm First Edition,* 494.
[111]   Tatar, *Hard Facts,* 47.
[112]   Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 6. It has a close and a more distant Indian variant, *The Eighth Key* and *Untold Stories.* A. K. Ramanujan, *Folktales from India, A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages,* New York, Pantheon Books, 1991, 312–318 and 4–5.

Usually the motif is distorted in one way or the other. Often the supernatural being is absent and the parent kills or sends the child to die out of jealousy or anger, or perhaps on account of their unbearable poverty as with *Hansel and Gretel*.[113] The other possibility is that the parent merely gives the child to some ominous creature: a lion, the devil, the Bear Tsar, the nixie of the pond or Death itself, but it is assumed that it means the end for the kid. Interestingly this wondrous being is usually connected to water, as Varuṇa is the god of waters. The Bear Tsar lives in a well, the nixie of the pond and the Sea Tsar are underwater beings, and the devil in the tale of *The girl without Hands* has power near a brook.[114]

The essential absurdity of our story is also felt in the fairy tale. The question why the wondrous being wants the child is seldom answered, but in a tale it cannot be expected. Sometimes it can free him from some evil magic, as with Faithful Johannes or the lion in the tale of *The Lilting, Leaping Lark*.[115] On the other hand it is always explained why the father gives the child. Untypically simply for wealth as Ajīgarta did.[116] More often the being seizes the father, as Varuṇa did to Hariścandra, and sets him free only for the promise of the child.[117] But most frequent is the Jephthah motif: the father does not know what in fact the promise refers to. He will give what first greets him on return, or what he does not know of in his house.

As it is becoming increasingly clear, all the elements of the legend of Śunaḥśepa can be found in the tales built around the filicide motif. Often the father tries to avoid fulfilling the promise as Hariścandra did.[118] Sometimes the boy's recital of some magic text turns his fate.[119] There is an example even for rejecting the father.[120] And in a fairy tale it is almost automatic for the hero to get into a new clan as the heir, for with the hand of the princess he receives also the land of the old king.

Lommel already called attention to the important parallelisms of our legend and the folktale.[121] Unfortunately he failed to mention that all his material was taken from Charmet's very informative 1935 paper.[122] Charmet could quote more distant versions even from Africa; however the closest parallels were all taken from

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[113] Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 15.

[114] Afanaśev no. 201; Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 181; Afanaśev no. 219; Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 31.

[115] Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 88, a variant of *The Beauty and the Beast.*

[116] Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 29 (*The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs*).

[117] As the Bear Tsar, or the fairy in *Rapunzel,* see Zipes, *Grimm First Edition,* 37 (= Grimm, *Märchen,* no. 12).

[118] E.g. in *The Bear Tsar* or *The Nixie of the Pond.*

[119] Grimm, *Märchen,* nos. 33 and 47 (*The Three Languages* and *The Juniper Tree*).

[120] *The girl without Hands.*

[121] Lommel, Śunaḥśepa, 157–160. He also referred to the legends of Jephthah, Idomeneus and Agamemnon.

[122] Raymond Charmet, La Légende de Çunaḥçepa et les contes populaires, in Georges Dumézil, *Flamen-Brahman*, Paris, Guethner, 1935, 97–112.

a collection of Greek and Albanian tales by J. G. von Hahn.[123] It was him who in his scholarly introduction clearly identified the relevant motif (*Gelobungsformel,* 'Pledge-formula') that both Lommel and Charmet used with slight modifications (without referencing Hahn), and he gave a list of the relevant tales both in his collection and others, including the Grimms'.[124] (Writing in 1864, he was as yet unaware of the Indian legend.) In one of his examples we have an exact version of the pointless Hariścandra–Varuṇa contract: "Once there was a king that got no children and he was so sad about it that once he called out: I wish I had a child, even if the devil would devour it!"[125] The son when he learns of his intended destiny, simply says "No!" like Rohita and runs away from home.[126]

RITUALS AND ANXIETIES OF MATURATION

All the elements could be found only scattered through several tales, but this is not a weighty objection for two reasons. First, all the elements were organically related to the basic motif, and all our examples were taken from tales of the type 'the parent kills the child or gives it over to a supernatural being'. Second, in his deservedly world-famous 1928 study *Morphology of the Tale* Vladimir Propp convincingly showed that there is but one fairy tale.[127] To be more exact, the underlying plot of all 'wonder tales', as he preferred to call them, is identical. It consists of blocks with clearly identifiable functions (he gave a list of 31, from *absentation* through *difficult task* to *wedding*), and they are organized in a predictable order. In the actual tales, some of the functions may be absent and some may be repeated, but their structural relations and order remains fixed. By now it can come as no surprise that the legend of Śunaḥśepa also belongs here, although it is not a folktale but a myth. But this difference is not about the contents of the story but about its social status. A myth is taken seriously, more or less believed in. It is part of the religious tradition of the community and it is connected to the rituals.

[123] Johann Georg von Hahn, *Griechische und albanesische Märchen*, Leipzig, Wilhelm Engelmann, 1864.

[124] Hahn, *Griechische Märchen,* I.47–48.

[125] "Es war einmal ein König, der bekam keine Kinder, und war darüber so betrübt, daß er einstmals ausrief: »ich wollte, ich hätte ein Kind, und möchte es auch der Drakos fressen.«" Hahn, *Griechische Märchen,* No.5 (*Vom Prinzen, der dem Drakos gelobt wurde*). Similarly in No. 41 (*Vom Sonnenkinde*).

[126] Also in his (Hahn, *Griechische Märchen*) No. 4, *Vom eisernen Derwisch und dem Prinzen mit den drei Zwiebäcken* and No. 54, *Der Jüngling, der Teufel und seine Tochter.*

[127] Vladimir Âkovlevič Propp, *Morfologiâ skazki,* Leningrad, Academia 1928, translated by Laurence Scott (revised by Louis A. Wagner) as *Morphology of the Folktale,* Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968².

We now have the key to the interpretation, it only needs to be used. For Propp continued his analysis of the folktale in his brilliant and quite entertaining book, *The Historical Roots of the Wondertale*.[128] Although translated to all major languages from German to Japanese, inexcusably it has no English translation.[129] Looking at an impressive number of (mostly Russian) tales he conclusively demonstrates that the single plot underlying them does not preserve the memory of some murder, human sacrifice or ritual cannibalism: it is the inheritor of the rituals and related origin myths for the initiation of adolescents into adulthood.[130] Initiation rituals have many variants and a complex symbolism; it was first considered in an adequate theoretical framework by van Gennep.[131]

With hunter-gatherer tribes the central element of these puberty rites is the ritual death of the child: the spirits of the ancestors or an animal, the totem of the tribe, kills the adolescent and often devours it. Then the child is revived and reborn as an adult, having been initiated into the secret myths, songs and dances of the tribe. (In India, the Aryan after initiation is 'twice-born', *dvi-ja,* although the death logically preceding rebirth is no longer portrayed.[132]) After initiation a man can marry, which, due to the rules of exogamy leads him into a new clan within the tribe. Since this is the unavoidable fate of every child, ever since its birth it has been promised to the divinity, as Baptism still reminds us. But the actual handing over and being devoured is delayed till the child becomes fit for it, till puberty (cf. Confirmation). For the start of the rites the children are taken away from their family and village, often robbed by the spirits, the masked fathers. They go to the wilderness where they stay for long schooling and painful tests. Often circumcision takes place at this time.

In contrast to folktales, the relation of myth to ritual is still clear. All the examples mentioned above contained a sacrifice, and the Śunaḥśepa legend is explicitly connected to the *rāja-sūya* – the consecration, i.e. coming of age of the young king. In the Biblical *aquedah* we also see the clear signs that it is about the ritual stages

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[128] Vladimir Âkovlevič Propp, *Istoričeskie korni volšebnoj skazki,* Leningrad, Izdatelʹstvo Leningradskogo Universiteta 1946.

[129] Only the first and last chapter is included in a compendium of his papers: Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, 100–123.

[130] That some folktales reflect initiation was first suggested by Pierre Saintyves, *Les Contes de Perrault et les récits parallèles, Leurs origines (Coutumes primitives et liturgies populaires)*, Paris, Librairie Critique, 1923.

[131] Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage: Étude systématique des rites*, Paris, Émile Nourry, 1909.

[132] Perhaps significantly in the simple initiation ceremony described by Prasad, from among the eight Rigvedic mantras to be recited, three were used by Śunaḥśepa in the legend (IV.1.4–5 and I.24.15). R. C. Prasad, *The Upanayana, The Hindu Ceremonies of the Sacred Thread,* Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1997.

of growing up. Isaac was the first newborn to be circumcised at the proper age of eight days; and he is the only person in the Bible where we hear of the banquet celebrating his weaning. He remains for the rest of his life the paradigmatic case of all rites of passage, since we hear of his marriage, prayer for offspring, divining the fate of the foetus, giving his paternal blessing before dying, then his death and burial.

The legends we discussed are clearly not simply somewhat vague memories of some earlier initiation. They speak about the initiation of great heads of clans and men of god with rites previously unheard of. So they must be survivals of the origin myths of initiation, and quite possibly of the special initiation for future shamans or kings.

Although we are still in the age of myths, the key elements of the legend are obviously no longer understood by the tradition. What can be the explanation for this? Clearly it is the same reason that later in the folktales leads to a complete change of function: fundamental changes in the way of living, and following upon that, in beliefs, customs and rituals. Both the legends of Śunaḥśepa and Isaac come from pastoral cultures, not from hunter-gatherers. So the natural context of the totemic animal ancestor, the hard trials of the future hunter, the forest school, all are lost and forgotten. Instead of the old initiation, we have a sacrifice.

> *Sacrifice and initiation stand in an inverse ratio to each other: where there are elaborate initiatory rituals, sacrifice seems relatively undeveloped; where there are complex sacrificial cycles and ideologies, initiation seems relatively undeveloped. Indeed, I am tempted to suggest that initiation is for the hunter and gatherer and primitive agriculturalist what sacrifice is for the agrarian and pastoralist.*[133]

Interestingly our legends still recall the hunting past. Abraham's first son, Ishmael "made his home in the wilderness, and he became a bowman", and Isaac's first son, "Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the open country. … Isaac preferred Esau, for he had a taste for wild game."[134] And Rohita "took his bow and went to the wilderness", while Śunaḥśepa lived there.

This is not the first time filicidal sacrifices are explained as survivals of initiation legends. It was Cornford who first observed that "this rite with the death and resurrection of Pelops can hardly leave a doubt that the Feast of Tantalus was in essence a ceremony of New Birth, of mock death and resurrection, and also, in some

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[133] Jonathan Zittell Smith, The Domestication of Sacrifice, in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, (ed.), *Violent origins, Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation,* Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1987, 198.

[134] Genesis 21:20 and 25:27–28.

sense, of Initiation."[135] Bunker reached the same conclusion.[136] Burkert showed a similar connection to initiation ritual of the festival Lykaia and its foundational myth about king Lycaon of Arcadia serving his son's flesh to Zeus.[137] And Bloch associated also Abraham's sacrifice with initiation:

> *The similarities between the story of Iphigenia and that of Isaac are very striking and have often been pointed out. Furthermore, the connection between these two stories of sacrifice and the Orokaiva practice of initiation is clear. In all three cases we find the same elements.*[138]

For the interpretation of myths and fairy tales, however, there is a completely different approach. Ever since Freud offered his famous psychoanalytic understanding of the Oedipus myth, this tradition successfully explains many stories as representing symbolically the different phases of the psychosexual maturation of the growing child. Bettelheim's justly famous *The Uses of Enchantment* quite convincingly shows this on several well-known tales of the Grimms'.[139] Who is right, Propp or Bettelheim? Is the fairy tale (and the myths belonging to this pattern) a survival of forgotten initiation ritual, or is it a projection of infantile psychic conflicts?

Once the question has been asked, it is easily seen that we do not have to choose, "the contrast is more one of perspective than of substance."[140] The initiation ritual is found around the globe because at a former age hunter-gatherers were everywhere. Their ritual had very important practical functions, such as making the boys leave the paternal home, teaching them the traditions of the tribe and preparing them for the hardships a hunter may have to survive. On the other hand, the symbolic elements of the ritual could become so stable and universal only because they expressed both the adolescents' psychic experiences and the grown-ups perceptions of them. This emotional adequacy resulted in the associated stories long surviving the tribal past and its initiation ceremonies and, indeed, being enjoyable and important to the present day.

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[135] Francis Macdonald Cornford, The Origin of the Olympic Games, in Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis, A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion,* Cambridge, University Press, 1912, 248.

[136] H. A. Bunker, The Feast of Tantalus, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 21 (1952), 355–372.

[137] Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans, The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (tr. Peter Bing), Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, University of California Press, 1983, 84–93.

[138] Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter, The Politics of Religious Experience,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 27.

[139] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales,* New York, Knopf, 1976.

[140] Burkert, *Homo necans,* 25.

An element of these stories is the change of generations, the conflict between fathers and sons. Where the aspect of sexual rivalry is dominant, we get a parricidal Oedipus story;[141] these also start with an attempted filicide, usually the exposure of the infant son, because of a prophecy foretelling that he will replace his father. In our stories sexuality is downplayed, but not absent. We saw Isaac's adoration for his mother, and the rivalry between Hagar and Sarah is clearly expressed. Jacob's eldest son actually committed incest: "Reuben went and slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Israel learned it."[142] In the *Brāhmaṇa,* beyond Nārada's explicit Oedipal law, we have Śunaśśepa's telling name – Swelling Penis. (Oedipus' name, 'Swollen Feet', may be a variant on the same idea.) It is not difficult to see in the fathers' approaching hand with the knife a castration move, or, ritually transformed, circumcision. On another reading, the knife could be a phallic symbol.

In a sense this is the most archaic aspect of these legends: the drama of the father attacking and driving away his already virile sons is enacted by gorillas and lions as well. With humans the problem arose probably with relatively closed households, presumably in the neolithic. Its traumatized unfolding is the Oedipus myth, while the healthy solution is the Śunaḥśepa legend: at the right time, the son is sent away (forcefully, to be sure) to another family to live and marry without incest.

But probably this is not enough to explain the attempted filicide; and in the tribal rituals, it is not the father but the tribal ancestor or the spirits of the dead who kill the neophyte. The folktales show more clearly that it is in the far-away land of the dead that the hero acquires his magical skills. At initiation the boy is given over not to another family but rather to the tribe. Men are temporal, the tribe is eternal, in its existence, in its culture and language. It is God. The myths belong to the past, to the spirits of the forefathers, to the deathless realm. To get there, you have to die, to become one of the spirits (whom you will often embody as a masked dancer), and learn their ways. Only this way you could become a true part of the immortal whole, a true inheritor of the sacred traditions; and, if need comes, be prepared to die for it again. Of course now this is only a temporal death: the monster that swallowed you will vomit you up or give birth to you, or the spirits boil you again in the cauldron and you rise again whole.

It seems therefore that our legends are compressed and split forms of an earlier myth, all the forefathers appearing partly condensed into the solitary figure of the father, partly as the more distant god demanding the sacrifice. Still we feel

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[141] There are many such stories, also in India and even in Oceania. See Lowell Edmunds – Alan Dundes (ed.), *Oedipus,. A Folklore Casebook,* Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995².

[142] Genesis 35:22.

that the little boy dies to resurrect as a responsible representative of the tribe, as a father of nations.

The last question to clarify relates only to the Śunaḥśepa story of the *Aitareya*. Harry Falk persuasively reconstructed an original legend for the *rājasūya*, quite different from what we found here. According to this, Hariścandra was seized by Varuṇa and therefore became impotent. As he had no son, he prayed to the god to remedy the situation, and Varuna then taught him the *rājasūya,* the ritual to adopt an heir.[143]

Although Falk did not address the question, we can now clearly see how the sacrifice of the new son, Rohita, came into the picture: as a new member of the clan, he had to undergo initiation, ritual death – he had to be given to god. With this the Rohita- and the Śunaḥśepa-story became quite close, so they could be harmoniously joined. The motive for this joining was probably what Falk suggested: the Rigvedic Brahmins wanted to appropriate the kingly ritual thereby strengthening their political and ritual prerogatives.[144]

The doubling of the motif in the legend can be explained sufficiently this way. But we may add that here this duplication is suggestive of a more original logic. The father drives away the son to a new family, a new father – who also has to drive away his son. And exactly this is what we find in the *Rāmāyaṇa*-version: there Viśvāmitra not only adopts Śunaḥśepa but also commands his sons to take his place in the sacrifice. And when they refuse, he curses and disinherits them.

As so often seen, a later form can preserve more original elements.

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[143] Falk, Śunaḥśepa, 128.
[144] Falk, Śunaḥśepa, 131–134.

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