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7

Resisting and justifying changes II

Testifying and legitimizing innovation in
Indian and Ancient Greek Culture

ed. by
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Volume pubblicato con il contributo dell'Università di Pisa - Dipartimento di Civiltà e forme
del sapere

Resisting and justifying changes II : testifying and legitimizing innovation in Indian
and Ancient Greek culture / ed. by Elisabetta Poddighe and Tiziana Pontillo. - Pisa
: Pisa university press, 2023. – (Nuova biblioteca di Studi classici e orientali; 7)
306 (WD)
I. Poddighe, Elisabetta II. Pontillo, Tiziana 1. Evoluzione culturale - India 2.
Evoluzione culturale - Grecia antica

CIP a cura del Sistema bibliotecario dell'Università di Pisa

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Polo editoriale - Centro per l'innovazione
e la diffusione della cultura - Università di Pisa
Piazza Torricelli 4 - 56126 Pisa
P. IVA 00286820501 · Codice Fiscale 80003670504
Tel.+39 050 2212056 · Fax +39 050 2212945
E-mail press@unipi.it · PEC cidic@pec.unipi.it
www.pisauniversitypress.it

ISBN: 978-88-3339-766-5



Pubblicazione realizzata con il contributo dell'Università degli Studi di Cagliari e del Dipartimento di Lettere, Lingue e Beni culturali – Fondi FFABR (Fondo di finanziamento per le attività base di ricerca)



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il protocollo UPI

*To the Memory of
Alexander Dubyanskiy, Peter John Rhodes, Jaroslav Vacek*

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PERCEPTION OF VEDIC RITUAL SEMANTICS IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

Abstract

The present paper addresses the preliminary results of a lexical evaluation concerning the instances in the *Mahābhārata* of some *lemmata* of Vedic rituals, by relying primarily on the dictionary of Vedic rituals provided by Renou 1954 and secondarily on Chitrabhanu's 1976. The religious semantic area selected for the inquiry involves lexical entries relating to rituals, i.e. ritual offerings, purification and atonement rites, funerary rituals and *soma*-related ceremonies. It thus attempts to illustrate cases of studies that demonstrate how the *Mahābhārata* perception of Vedic ritual semantics changes, according to a theoretical background that considers some clues in the Epic as indicating a cultural stage independent from the *Śrautasūtra* orthopraxy. Scholars often debate the cultural reconstruction of the *Mahābhārata* according to the pros and cons of acknowledging references to Vedic sources in the MBh in terms of a continuum, and, moreover, it is discussed in accordance with the supposed adherence to ritual technical literature. However, to the best of my knowledge, the specific question regarding the perspective of MBh religiosity in terms of continuity with the Vedas, perceived as a revealed text, still needs dedicated research work.

1. *Introduction**

Throughout a half-century of inquiries into religious studies of the *Mahābhārata* (henceforth MBh), the crucial turning point presented by Hildebrandt 2001 advanced the idea of considering the MBh as a whole¹. In particular, one of the key fields of research mainly favoured by scholars regards the pros and cons of the acknowledged references to Vedic sources in the MBh, in terms of a continuum (Fitzgerald 1985; Feller

* My sincere gratitude goes to Raffaele Torella for his critical observations. Special thanks are due to Sally Davies for the English revision. A draft of this paper was delivered at the Cagliari seminar under a slightly different title (*Mahābhārata's perception of Vedic religiosity: lexical evidence*). Unless otherwise stated, the translations are by the author.

¹ Further endorsed by Tieken 2004, Adluri 2013, Wulff 2014 and Brodbeck's 2013 perspective on the "analytic" and "synthetic" approach.

1999) and the supposed adherence to ritual technical literature. This is discussed according to narrative structure and from a literary point of view (Brockington 1998; Feller 2004; Witzel 2005; Reich 2010; Feller 2014) and debated according to theories of ritual performance analysis that rely on cultural background (Minkowski 1989; Reich 2001). The problem is part of a broader cultural-historical context concerning the interpretation of *Śrauta*-liturgy “as the outcome of a clash between different cultural matrices” (Pontillo *et al.* 2015: 2; cf. also Bronkhorst 2016), the consequences of which are therefore detectable in the MBh, given its reliability as a historical source.

In this sense, the present inquiry considers philological approaches that establish an invaluable starting point, in order to understand contextual involvements regarding religious semantics. For instance, Hara’s 1979² monumental lexical research of the 3,000 instances of the term *tapas* in the MBh paved the way for a better understanding of the intricacies linked to theoretical contexts. Likewise, Sutton (2000) attempted to gather general information on how the MBh deals with teachings regarding the Vedic scriptures. He did indeed draw attention to MBh passages concerning criticism of the Vedas and systematically observed how the MBh tackled specific theological matters. Moreover, Austin’s 2008 evaluation of the ritual subject in MBh 17 and 18 can be considered paradigmatic: his examination of the merits and limits of reading the end of the MBh through the Vedic *sārasvata yātsattra* ritual stems from Oberlies’ encouragement to analyse the Vedic ritual framework in the MBh (2008: 302). However, Thite (2014, 2015) reportedly doubts such an approach. As a matter of fact, he postulates the existence of fictitious rituals in the Epics, highlighting discrepancies in both the MBh and *Rāmāyaṇa* representations of the Vedic ritual, especially as concerns the *aśvamedha* sacrifice. His work undoubtedly constitutes a significant turning point in the discussion focusing on the MBh’s adherence to ritual technical literature.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to which motifs beyond the liturgy prompt sacrificial acts that are so different from traditional *śrauta* orthopraxy. There are, in fact, clues of an emerging pattern of depictions of an unorthodox faith that hints at a divergence in MBh religiosity from the Vedic religious framework. In this context, for instance, Vassilkov’s lexical study on the instances of use of the compound *deva-putra* in the Epics and the Buddhist Canon suggests that the epithet could refer to a “particular class of celestials” (2014: 438) and opens the

² The paper was published in Japanese; however, it contains an *index locorum* on pp. 497-503 and an English summary on pp. 504-518.

discussion to further considerations on their divine status. Above all, this may contribute to a broader understanding of a synchronic evaluation of the ritual adherence of the MBh textual context of an unorthodox religiosity in MBh *kṣatriya*-based contexts.

2. Targeting ritual semantic layers: methodological approach of the lexical evaluation

Given this premise, the present survey will address the preliminary results of evaluating a selection of rite-based lexical entries recorded by Renou's 1954 and Chitrabhanu's 1976 dictionaries. Of all Renou's registered *lemmata*³, roughly 400 occur variously in the MBh, which records thousands of instances. The relevant lemmas were thus arranged in five major semantic areas, i.e., a) Formulation (*mantras* and formulas uttered in specific situations); b) Rituality and c) Sacrifice (about rites and *yajñas* in general); d) Officiant (relating to sacrifices and performers of the rites) and finally e) Limbs (mainly belonging to animals employed in *yajñas*). Unsurprisingly, the enormity of the amount of collected data entailed a further breakdown that is shown in the following preliminary chart:

Table 1: Semantic areas with the corresponding estimated number of lemmata included in Renou's dictionary and their frequency of occurrence in the MBh.			
SEMANTIC AREAS		NO. OF LEMMATA	TOTAL OF MBH INSTANCES
A) FORMULATION		<100	<10000
B) RITUALITY	1. Instrument	<100	>1500
	2. Rite	50	<5000
	3. Food	<30	>500
	4. Fire		<1500
	5. Space	<20	>2000
	6. Pressing		<1000
	7. Time		<500
	8. Libations		>200

³ The collected data include an estimated number of MBh-recurring lexical entries registered in Renou's dictionary that may differ from Chitrabhanu's. Namely, Renou records a total of at least 900 entries, while Chitrabhanu's are considerably higher. Of course, more accurate calculations will be carried out in the course of a further planned detailed comparison of both dictionaries.

C) SACRIFICE	1. Sacrifices	>20	>3000
	2. Oblation	20	>1000
	3. Sacrificial Grass	<10	>150
D) OFFICIANT		<20	>1500
E) LIMBS		<10	<200

As the chart shows, the semantic areas are sorted from the most numerous word group to the least numerous⁴. In particular, the Rituality category (b) includes lexical entries related to the rite itself (2); tools, equipment (1) and specific food employed in rituals (3); Agni-related ceremonies (4); ritual spaces such as specific altars or delimited sacred areas (5); *soma* pressing-related *lemmata* (6); period of the day/month or year in which proper liturgies take place (7) and, eventually, the ritual libations offered during ceremonies. In the same way, the Sacrifice semantic area (c) was also further divided into sub-categories of lemmas that specifically characterise a *yajña* (1); oblations offered in sacrifices (2) and, lastly, the various kinds of sacrificial grass employed in liturgies (3).

In particular, the ritual semantic area was selected to conduct a preliminary evaluation that attempts to primarily envision what the MBh perception of Vedic ritual semantics is. To do so, the discussion focuses firstly (§2.1) on presenting lexical entries relating to rites of atonement (e.g., *prāyaścitta*), purification (e.g., *avabhṛtha*) and ritual offerings for all deities (e.g., *vaiśvadeva*). These lemmas recur approximately 80 times in the MBh, establishing a moderate frequency of occurrence. Secondly (§2.2) the paper addresses lemmas related to *soma* ceremonies (e.g., *ātithya*, *atirātra* and *āpyāyana*) which totalise roughly 50 occurrences. Thirdly (§2.3), *lemmata* connected with funerary rites (e.g., *pitṛya*, *pitṛmedha* and *dahana*) which recur in the MBh for an estimated number of 30 times. Finally, considering the preliminary configuration of the present assessment, conclusions cannot be drawn yet, although one may advance final observations on the survey conducted and present the future perspectives of the research.

⁴ For the sake of brevity, the ritual-related Sanskrit keywords of which there are well over 100 instances in the MBh (e.g., *karman* [2956], *vrata* [771], *dakṣiṇā* [253], *sattra* [147], *rājasūya* [104]), which scholars have frequently and thoroughly dealt with will not be taken into account herein. However, they will be addressed and covered in the broader research to which this paper pertains.

2.1. Atonement, Purification and “all-gods” rituals

The first selection addressed herein involves MBh instances of the Vedic rituals of *prāyaścitta* ‘atonement’, *avabhṛtha* ‘purificatory bath’ and *vaiśvadeva* ‘[offerings to] all-gods’. Scholars have addressed and examined all of the intricacies regarding the concept of *prāyaścitta* ‘[rite of] atonement’ (Renou 1954: 116; Chitrabhanu 1976: 93) mainly according to Vedic and *dharmasāstra* sources⁵. As a matter of fact, there are 43 instances attested in the MBh, sometimes in the general sense of ‘expiation’⁶, but it is also mentioned in different textual contexts in accordance with its inherent meaning. For instance, a rite of reparation is recommended when a *kāraṇa* ‘action’ does not have a positive outcome⁷, and Mārkaṇḍeya mentions the Vedic atonement rite when providing an etiological myth regarding different kinds of fires and their employment in sacrifices and practices, such as the *pāvaka*s required in the *agniṣṭoma* (3.211.23):

[*agraṇīr vahnir* 22d] *imān anyān samasṛjāt pāvakān prathitān bhuvi |*
agnihotrasya duṣṭasya prāyaścittārtham ulbaṇān ||

‘[The Agraṇī fire] spread on earth these others *pāvaka* fires powerful for the rite of atonement of a faulty *agnihotra*.’

Moreover, the one who seeks to be a good ruler should regularly perform the ritual (5.33.97). In the same way, Yudhiṣṭhira – well-skilled in all the expiatory rites (*prāyaścittāni sarvāṇi* 14.2.19) – convinced of his guilt in pursuing the war, insists on performing expiation (12.34.12; 38.3). Therefore, he must complete the *aśvamedha* sacrifice (12.34.26), which is the ultimate expiation, according to *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā* and *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (Gonda 1983: 35). Furthermore, life is shortened as a result of evil actions, according to *śruti* (5.37.12); consequently, specific rituals of expiation must be carried out, even to make amends

⁵ For further elaboration on the matter see Gonda 1980; 1983, Krishan 1983, Chemburkar 1989, Brick 2018 and Aktor 2021.

⁶ MBh 3.32.17; 89.11; 165.6; 5.28.5; 12.34.24; 259.12; 262.10, 12; 280.11; 13.12.4; 61.34; 148.31; 14.80.10, 12.

⁷ The following poignant figures promote it: Draupadī (3.33.39); Karna (8.29.39); Vyāsa (12.32.23-24; 36.41, 46); Prajāpati (12.37.12-13). According to Schreiner (2017: 662-665) *prāyaścitta* is listed in the MBh as a device to modify the effects of actions, although Aktor (2021: 166) highlights that the underlying soteriological concept is consistent with early Upaniṣad doctrines.

for inappropriate actions (12.35-36)⁸. In particular, a *dhārmika* ‘just man’ is forbidden from having contact with the ones not enacting expiatory rites (*prāyaścittam akurvāṇair* 12.159.38). In another context, Bhīṣma explains that performing a particular atonement rite will neutralise any possible dangers arising from entering into a war (12.103.4)⁹. Further on in the text, Kṛṣṇa is mentioned as the primary recipient of the prayers of peace and well-being (*śāntimaṅgalavācākāḥ*) that are recited in *prāyaścittas* (14.53.10). Finally, only one deterrent impedes expiation, namely a brahmin’s murder (12.36.39)¹⁰.

As regards rites of purification, the present survey considers *avabhṛtha* (Renou 1954: 21) which has the literal sense of ‘pushing down’ (*ava-√bhr̥*). It is attested in the Śrautasūtras as the purifying bath taken at the end of a sacrifice. According to Chitrabhanu, it is also certified as a type of Agni funerary rite “consisting of throwing the fire of the dead into water” (1976: 43). The MBh registers 32 occurrences, primarily in the general sense of ‘purification’¹¹; it is also referred to as ‘ablution’¹², and occasionally it indicates the performers, e.g. the ‘purifiers’¹³. Only once is it mentioned as the proper Vedic funerary rite, on the occasion of Pāṇḍu’s death (1.117.1):

pāṇḍor avabhṛthaṃ kṛtvā devakalpā maharṣayah |
tato mantram akurvanta te sametya tapasvinah ||

‘After those great ṛṣis performed the funerary ablution rite for Pāṇḍu, then, after coming together, those ascetics performed the prayer.’

Other instances entail the *śrauta* ritual, namely, it is recommended after performing a sacrifice: just as Janamejaya did (15.43.9); after an

⁸ Eating food *abhakṣya* ‘inedible = forbidden’ (12.35.21); *śukramokṣa* ‘semen emission’ (35.26); visiting someone *agamya* ‘unfit to be approached’ (36.31).

⁹ The text employs the compound *prāyaścittavidhi-* that Fitzgerald (2004: 424) translates as ‘rite of expiation’ implying *vidhi* pleonastically as ‘act’ when it occurs *in fine compositi*. However, in order to enhance adherence to the prescribed ritual, the translation of ‘rite of expiation [according to] the rule’ could be adopted.

¹⁰ Although on one occasion it is said that bathing at the *tīrtha* Madhusrava liberates (*√muc*) from the *brahmahatyā* ‘murder of a brahman’ (3.81.132).

¹¹ In order to see *deva* Nārāyaṇa (12.323.22); Purification must not be missing after sacrifices (13.59.18), in *tīrthas* (13.90.23).

¹² MBh 1.53.13 and *460.1 after 1.53.13; App. I, no.52.43 after 1.88.12; *867.3 after 1.88.16; App. I, no. 108.35 after 1.199.26ab; 2.49.1; 5.195.17; 7.58.15; 12.329.32.

¹³ Yayāti’s relatives (5.119.13) and Arjuna (7.77.18). See Candotti, Pontillo 2019: 43 for a technical definition of the *avabhṛtha* with respect to the agent of the ritual action of accepting (*prati-√grah*).

*aśvamedha*¹⁴ and, above all, a *rājasūya* sacrifice, as completed by Yudhiṣṭhira (2.42.34-35; 12.8.35; 14.91.29) and in which Draupadī also participated (2.60.23). Furthermore, ṛṣis and brahmins purify themselves after performing sacrifices in the waters of the Sārasvatī (3.88.3; 129.14), and Vidura performs an *avabhṛtha yathāśāstram* ‘according to rule’ and *yathākramam* ‘according to order’ (3.242.23).

Notable mentions of the ritual are found in passages where complex metaphors are employed. For instance, one occurrence is found in Karna’s well-known description of the conflict in terms of a grand *śastryajña* ‘weapon-sacrifice’ (5.139.29-44), and the example has caught the attention of many scholars¹⁵. In this *locus*, *avabhṛtha* is employed as the object of comparison (*upamāna*) for the women’s weeping and mourning that takes place at the end of the war (5.139.51). Another mention of *avabhṛtha* as ‘purificatory bath’ is found in a different complex metaphor where the weapons and the battlefield are the subjects of comparison (*upameya*) for a sacrifice and also its vessels and altar (12.25.26-27). An analogy is further reiterated later, where a river is the *upamāna* for a battlefield, where warriors perform the purifying bath after the *mahāyajña* ‘great sacrifice’, i.e. the war (12.99.30-34). Similarly, it is referred to weapons in the compound *śastrāvabhṛtham* (9.4.35), which could be interpreted as a *tatpuruṣa* compound, i.e. ‘purification of weapons’¹⁶.

The last ritual-related lemma of the present category is *vaiśvadeva*, the ‘[offering] to all deities’ (Chitrabhanu 1976: 159). It is also sometimes associated with the festivity celebrating the start of spring sacred to Agni Vaiśvānara (Renou 1954: 143). However, apart from one occurrence in the etymological sense of [relating to] *viśva* ‘all’ *deva* ‘deities’ (13.100.9), mentions of *vaiśvadeva* are frequent in sections characterised by normative topics regarding householder’s duties (cf. Gonda 1980: 101): Draupadī recommends that Yudhiṣṭhira should first offer the evening meal to guests, after performing the *vaiśvadeva* (3.31.13);

¹⁴ MBh 12.36.6; 79.30; 148.26; 13.105.41; 14.90.16. See Gonda (1980: 9) who states that the recitation of mantras equates the purificatory bath.

¹⁵ I am referring mainly to Zaehner (1969: 145) and, more extensively, to Hildebeitel (1976; 2011 [1980]: 77); Sullivan (1994: 387); Minkowski (2001: 175), and Bronkhorst (2016: 80-81). More recently, Dokter-Mersch (2020: 85).

¹⁶ However, in light of the abovementioned instances, one could postulate that both elements are co-referential, therefore interpreting the compound as a *tatpuruṣa* of the *karmadhāraya* type, i.e. ‘the weapons [which indeed are] purification’, indeed a *samastarūpaka*. This latter interpretation certainly modifies the *śloka*’s sense. Still, it seems consistent with similar contexts of metaphorical identifications of weapons as sacrificial vessels to be purified after the war/sacrifice.

Yudhiṣṭhira's observance of Dharma is praised as he is capable of honouring his duties even in exile (3.2.57).

Other occurrences are found mainly in didactic sections of MBh 13, where Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhira on the normative dimension: i.e. in the Law of gift-giving as part of the general teachings on *dharmaśāstra* (Sutton 2000: xii), where the *pitāmaha* states that if a *brahmacārin* receives a *vaiśvadeva* from a *mūḍha* 'a foolish man', the action will result in inauspicious worlds (13.23.23); or when the *vaiśvadeva* is enumerated amongst the proper evening offerings to be made (13.59.17); finally, it is appropriate to offer it after performing rites for the ancestors (13.100.16). To sum up, the ritual protocols about the correct reception of guests seem to be consistent with the prescriptions included in Vedic textual references (cf. Gonda 1980: 210).

2.2. King Soma is praised: soma-related rituals lemmata

Regarding lemmas relating to *soma* rituals, the present survey has selected *ātithya*, *atirātra* and *āpyāyana*. The first one, *ātithya*, can literally be translated as 'hospitality' (cf. Gonda 1980: 307) but it is also attested in the *Śrautasūtras* as the rite for the reception of the *soma* stalks (Renou 1954: 27; Chitrabhanu 1976: 46). It recurs 33 times in the MBh. Sometimes the instances refer to the hospitality generally paid to *ṛṣis* or brahmins, as suggested by *Ṛṥhivī*, the Earth (13.100.6); or it is mentioned as a welcome to seven *ṛṣis* in an extraordinary forest (14.27.15). Moreover, a *vipra* 'sage' belonging to Soma's *anvaya* 'lineage', who wishes to learn how to pursue the supreme *dharma*, offers hospitality to a brahmin (12.344.7) who, in turn, is later honoured with the ritual by a serpent-demon (12.346.6). Lastly, another brahmin is the recipient of *ātithya* from one of Sarasvatī's personifications, i.e. Oghavatī (13.2.49).

As concerns the welcoming of specific characters with the ritual, the MBh mentions passages where Nārāyaṇa presents a proper *ātithya* to Nārada (12.331.34); Kubera acknowledges the *ṛṣi* Aṣṭāvakra as being worthy of receiving a special hospitality rite from the *apsarases* (13.20.18) who is later honoured with *ātithya* by Kubera's son (13.20.18). Even the female mendicant Sulabhā is celebrated with the ritual by King Janaka (12.308.190). Sometimes, *kṣatriyas* are the recipients of the ritual: for instance, the *ātithya* is performed when the *asura* king Ilvala hosts a group of kings led by the sage Agastya (3.97.2), and Vyāsa's son Vidura invites Dhṛtarāṣṭra to offer Kṛṣṇa an *ātithya* that must be *priya* 'expensive' (5.85.14) and which is further correctly performed (5.87.19-24; 88.4). Moreover, the Pāṇḍavas are often presented with the rite, such as when hermits welcome them in the forest (3.180.1); Arjuna is mainly shown hospitality on three occasions i.e.,

yathāvat ‘properly’ by Jamadagni (14.29.7), in Maṇipūra (14.79.7), and by king Meghasandhi after *aśvamedha* (14.83.7). One passage lists good actions *kṣatriyas*, brahmins and *vaiśya* ‘commoners’ must perform to attain heaven. Commoners in particular must perpetuate the *dharma* of *dānātithyakriyā* ‘gifts, hospitality and rites’ (3.149.51 tr. van Buitenen 1975: 508), a concept similarly reiterated in 12.78.31. On some occasions, homage is paid to a divinity (cf. Hildebeitel 2011b: 317), when *ṛṣis* paid tribute to Śākambharī’s sacred ford (3.82.13), or in a passage where Brahmā is the recipient of the *ātithya* performed by a crane (12.167.15) in an *upākhyāna*, which Hildebeitel (2005: 487) acknowledges as one of a number of “puzzle pieces” about Dharma in disguise, as part of Bhīṣma’s instructions to Yudhiṣṭhira.

Unusual contexts of performing *ātithya* are also mentioned. In an excised passage, the renowned conflict between the two *ṛṣis* Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha is mentioned (cf. Sathaye 2007). The latter excludes the possibility of giving him his cow¹⁷, Viśvāmitra therefore threatens to deprive him of his honours (*1759.1-3 after 1.165.20):

[vasiṣṭha uvāca] [kuru 1.165.20] *atra havyam ca kavyam ca prāṇayātrā
tathaiva ca |
āyattam agnihotram ca ātithyam ca na samśayaḥ |
bahunā kiṃ pralāpena na dāsyē kāmadohinīm |*

‘Then, [provide] the oblation to the gods, the oblation to the ancestors, as well as the subsistence, the effort, the oblation to Agni, the [rite for] soma stalks reception without hesitation; what is the point of talking so much? I will not give you the yielding desires [milk cow]!’

Similarly, the ancient king Dambhodbhava asked Nara and Nārāyaṇa for a *yuddha* ‘battle’ as a guest gift (5.94.20) and the same request is repeated by Droṇa’s son Aśvatthāman to Arjuna (8.12.19). Finally, general rules on proper hospitality performances are given: the appropriate treatment of guests is addressed in the so-called *Kapota-Upākhyāna*, the ‘Pigeon Subtale’ (12.142.25)¹⁸; hospitality is part of one’s *dharma*¹⁹. However, it seems to be attested only once as a qualifying adjective of

¹⁷ Chitrabhanu 1976: 46 reports that *Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra* 10.30.1-31 and 31.6-7 lists the cow as one of the many offerings one should present to king *soma* considered as a guest.

¹⁸ For narrative considerations regarding this subtale see Hildebeitel (2007: 112, 135 n.6).

¹⁹ MBh 13.128.54-56; 129.15, 50; 131.28, 33, 40.

jana ‘people’ who must be *prasāda* ‘generous’ and *ātithya* ‘hospitable’ (13.105.30).

The second lexical entry of interest is the *atirātra* ‘overnight *soma* ritual’ (Renou 1954: 7; Chitrabhanu 1976: 35)²⁰. The lemma recurs only 10 times in the MBh, often registered in *dvandva* compounds with *agniṣṭoma* ‘praise of Agni’²¹. However, the Epic documents two *śloka*s that share a parallel verse explaining how performing an *atirātra* in certain conditions ensures favourable outcomes (*sam-up-√ās*)²². On both occasions, the lemma *atirātra* is employed in the text as an adjective of *yajña*, with the meaning of ‘sacrifice [which is] performed overnight’. The first mention is found in a normative context of the thirteenth book involving ecological ethics. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma what the *phala* of possessing *ārāma* ‘garden’ and *taḍāka* ‘tank’ is, Bhīṣma then responds by enumerating the *guṇāḥ* ‘qualities’ of building a well-crafted tank for all circumstances, which guarantees positive consequences for general *yajñas* and in particular for *soma* sacrifices *atirātra* included (13.99.14):

taḍāgam sukṛtaṃ yasya vasante tu mahāśrayam |
atirātrasya yajñasya phalaṃ sa samupāśnute ||

‘The one who [has] a well-made and well-endowed tank in spring enjoys the fruit of the sacrifice performed overnight.’

Later in the text, Bhīṣma recounts when Aṅgiras instructed him on the *vidhi* ‘precept’ about specific types of *upavāsa* ‘fast’. Above all, fasting for one year by taking food only once a day – i.e., *ekāhāra* – affects the *atirātra*’s *phala* (13.109.38) positively:

²⁰ The translation is Brereton’s 2016: 107, who devoted special mention to the *atirātra* ritual in the R̥gveda.

²¹ Occurrences of the compound are included in a section where the ṛṣi Pulastya lists several *tīrthas* which guarantee the *phala* ‘fruit’ of both the *agniṣṭoma* and the *atirātra*, namely Pāriplava (3.81.10); Dṛṣadvatī (3.81.73); Kṛttikā and Maghā (3.82.46). The compound also occurs in an excised *locus*, where the genealogy from Saṃvaraṇa to Śaṃtanu is reported (*893.4-5 after 1.89.55).

²² According to the lexicon, the verb – composed of the prefixes *sam-* and *upa-* – seems to be only attested in the MBh, where it occurs for a total of eight times, always conjugated in the third person of the singular present indicative (i.e., *samupāśnute*). Apart from the abovementioned occurrences, the other six mentions regard similarly constructed *padas* which suggest a formulaic employment of the verbal root. The recurrent concept conveyed is to enjoy something as a consequence of an exceptionally meritorious act: a *śarīra* ‘body’ (12.194.18); *sarva* ‘everything’ (12.194.19); the *phala* of a sacrifice (*vājapeya* 13.109.41) or a divine one (*devarṣicaritaṃ* 13.110.112), and finally the *svarga* ‘heaven’ (13.130.47; 133.54). The simple form of the verb *√ās* may also be mentioned once in the *Kauśikasūtra* 1.7.15; however, this requires further verification.

yas tu saṃvatsaram pūrṇam ekāhāro bhaven narah |
atirātrasya yajñasya sa phalam samupāśnute ||

‘The man who is only able to take food only once a day for an entire year enjoys the fruit of the sacrifice performed overnight.’

The focus of the discussion on the *atirātra*’s *phalas* is ultimately reached. Bhīṣma is asked about the precepts which can accommodate the budget of a *daridra* ‘poor [person]’, to ensure merits equal to the ones of the *yajñas* – which require many instruments (i.e. *bahūpa-karaṇā*) and different types of large equipment (i.e. *nānāsambhāra-avis-tarāḥ*). Finally, a deprived man is granted the *anuttamam phalam* ‘ultimate fruit’ of the *atirātra yajña*, if he keeps a fire going for twelve years while eating a meal every three days (13.110.13-14). Another instance recurs at the end of the afore-mentioned Karṇa’s foretelling of the sacrificial roles in the *śastryayajña* (§ 2.1). In fact, there is mention of an *atirātra* where Ghaṭotkaca, Bhīma’s son, will act as *śamitr*, i.e. the one who cuts up the sacrificial victim (5.139.43):

ghaṭotkaco ’tra śamitraṃ kariṣyati mahābalaḥ |
atirātre mahābāho vitate yajñakarmaṇi ||

‘Then, o strong-armed one, when the overnight sacrificial rite is prepared, the mighty Ghaṭotkaca will act as the *śamitr*.’

From a technical point of view, Ghaṭotkaca playing the role of a sacrificial priest seems to be a technical discrepancy, similar to the one highlighted by Thite (2014: 422), i.e. Karṇa performing the *soma* sacrifice. Indeed, Ghaṭotkaca is a half-*rākṣasa* son to Hidimbā the *rākṣasī* (Feller 2012: 79; Shin 2019: 65).

The survey on a *soma*-related selection of *lemmata* concludes with the mention of the *āpyāyana*, namely the *soma* ‘swelling’ rite (Renou 1954: 28; Chitrabhanu 1976: 46). The MBh registers it three times, and it does not seem attested in the Vedic sense but with a different meaning. For instance, van Buitenen translates it once in the sense of ‘satiety’ (1975: 379) when Rāma begs the ancestors’ forgiveness for having massacred the warriors (3.81.26). Secondly, *āpyāyana* occurs in the sense of ‘healing’ literally ‘increasing [one’s] wellness’, when the ṛṣi Aṅgiras compares the joy of a meritorious person attaining the heaven to an ill person recovering their health (13.109.55). However, only in the last occurrence does it seem to maintain its original meaning, i.e., where Kṛṣṇa reckons up everything he identifies with through the anaphoric formula *sarvam etan madātmakam* ‘everything [is] consist-

ing of myself'. The enumeration involves several rituals and sacrificial sequences that are his personifications, including the *tridaśa* 'thirty deities' contained within the *āpyāyana* sacrifice (14.53.8):

omkāraprabhavān vedān viddhi mām tvam bhrṅūdvaḥ |
yūpaṃ somaṃ tathaiveha tridaśāpyāyanaṃ makhe ||

'Know that the Om-derived Vedas are Me, son of Bhrṅu: so that the [sacrificial] post, the Soma, the satisfaction of the thirty gods here in the sacrifice are Me.'

2.3. Mourning the dead: funerary rite-related lemmata

The last selection of lexical entries delves into the funerary rites such as *pītrya*, *pīṭṛmedha* and *dahana*. The first one is *pītrya* the 'obsequious ceremony to the Fathers' (Renou 1954: 100)²³. The MBh records 21 occurrences in various contexts, as a noun and once as an adjective. For instance, it recurs as qualifying a *vrata* 'vow' in a portion of the text where Nārada recounts the moment when Bhīṣma paid tribute to Pulastya during a pilgrimage. Here, it is said that Bhīṣma underwent (*sam-ā-√sthā*) the *pītrya vrata* a 'vow sacred to the Fathers' *vidhidṛṣṭa* 'prescribed by the rule' (3.80.12b, 14):

[*bhīṣmaḥ* 12a] *pītryaṃ vrataṃ samāsthāya nyavasan munivat tadā ||*
[...] *sa pīṭṛṃs tarpayām āsa devāṃś ca paramadyutiḥ |*
ṛṣiṃś ca toṣayām āsa vidhidṛṣṭena karmaṇā ||

'Then, [Bhīṣma] after undertaking the vow sacred to the Fathers, spent the time like a hermit. [...] He of highest splendour satiated both Fathers and Gods and satisfied the *ṛṣi*s with the rite prescribed by rule.'

However, it recurs more frequently as a noun, sometimes paired with *daiva* '[religious offerings] for the gods', for example in a passage where Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma about the adequate *vidhi* 'rule' according to which one must perform proper worship to gods and Fathers (12.321.2). Moreover, the Supreme Spirit Puruṣa ordains rituals

²³ Chitrabhanu (1976: 85) registers it under *pītryajña*. Sayers (2008: 91-114) offered a detailed description discussing the Vedic ritual *piṇḍapītryajña*. Among other evidence, he underlies the basic paradigm of the worship of Vedic ancestors, adopting a comparative perspective of the Fathers' worship in Vedic and Buddhist sources.

appropriate for gods and ancestors (12.321.32)²⁴, which are also *vi-jñāya* ‘known’ to each of the twenty-one personifications of Prajāpati (12.321.35-36). Normative prescriptions regarding proper performances are also given: in fact, practising the *daiva* and the *pitrya*, the gift-giving, and performing *tapas* are all actions that propitiate Viṣṇu (12.335.86-87). Finally, single instances of the lemma are referred to some individuals performing it, such as the Pāṇḍavas’ *purohita* ‘chaplain’ Dhaumya (3.26.3).

Notable characters also perform the rite, such as Nārāyaṇa himself (12.336.13), or the *devaṛṣi* Nārada (12.321.21 and more specifically in 12.333.10). There is even one instance in which Govinda fulfils the *pitrya yathāvidhi* ‘by the rules’ in the shape of a wild boar (12.333.14). On the contrary, the implications of a *pitrya* performed improperly are also mentioned. For instance, if the *pitrya* is performed by a wicked man or the offering is damaged, *rakṣas* will become the actual recipients of the ritual (13.24.8). Similarly, one is not allowed to touch offerings with certain parts of the body or must be careful to not make contact with specific body parts while performing different kinds of rituals, among which the *pitrya* is listed (13.107.97, 102, 113). Lastly, a correct performance guarantees rightful *phalas*: for example, one should carefully choose the phases of the moon so as to obtain numerous progeny or a worthy life (13.89.8). However, the *viprāḥ* ‘sages’ who lost their merits are *patitāḥ* ‘fallen [from heaven]’ and therefore undeserving of being invited to rituals (13.24.13). Eventually, one occurrence excised from the Critical Edition explains that the merits derived from the recitation of and the listening to the MBh shall also apply to the performing of *pitrya* (App. I, no. 32.32-33 after 1.56.29-32):

*yaś cedam śrāvayet pitrye brāhmaṇān pādāntataḥ |
akṣayyam annapānam tat pitṛiṃs tasyopatiṣṭhati ||*

‘He who causes a brahmin to hear this verse within [a stanza] at the obsequious ceremony to the Fathers, undecaying food and drink will come to the possession of his ancestors.’²⁵

A brief mention must be devoted to the *pitṛmedha* ‘funeral rites [for] the ancestors’ (Renou 1954: 100; Chitrabhanu 1976: 85). Unlike the *pit-*

²⁴ An occurrence of *pitrya* is also registered in verse 30, although with the meaning of ‘ancestor’ and not conveying the sense of ‘Fathers’ worship’.

²⁵ The structure of the *śloka* appears to be of formulaic nature. Especially when ceremonies are mentioned in the locative case (MBh 1.1.207; 1.56.29).

rya whose frequency is quite well established in the MBh, this lemma is registered only twice, namely when Pāṇḍu's funeral rites take place (1.117.31):

*pretakārye ca nirvṛtte piṭṛmedhaṃ mahāyaśāḥ |
labhatām sarvadharmajñāḥ pāṇḍuḥ kurukulodvahaḥ ||*

‘While the obsequial rite is accomplished, the very glorious Pāṇḍu, who knows all the Dharma, Kuru's descendant, shall receive the funeral rites [for] the ancestors.’

And when Śukra's son's funeral is depicted (16.8.23):

*[22a devyas] yas tu deśaḥ priyas tasya jīvato 'bhūn mahātmanah |
tatraīnam upasaṃkalpya piṭṛmedhaṃ pracakrire ||*

‘[The queens] performed the funeral oblations, after having put him [= Śukra's son] [= on the funeral pyre] in the place which was dear to that high-minded one [when he was] alive’.

The overview of burial-related *lemmata* draws to a close with a Vedic cremation ritual known as *dahana* (Renou 1954: 76), which regards the incineration of an expiring person (Chitrabhanu 1976: 73). Mentions of the lemma often occur in the MBh, mainly conveying the sense of ‘burning [someone] alive’ and frequently in topics characterised by a gruesome tenor. Only once does it seem to convey the ritual sense, such as when Bhīṣma vehemently reprimands his opponents for having treated Kṛṣṇa as a mere servant and takes an oath on his own life if they do not rightfully acknowledge him. In particular, his utterance regards him being prepared to die *paśuvat* as a ‘sacrificial animal’ or burned alive in a *dahanam* ‘fire’ *kaṭāgninā* ‘kept up with straws’ (2.41.31a):

paśuvad ghātanaṃ vā me dahanam vā kaṭāgninā | [kriyatām 31b]

‘Let the slaying [of me] like a sacrificial animal be done or [let] the [ritual] incineration by means of a straw-fire [be done] [...]’.

Other *loci* mainly refer to the Kaurava's attempt to murder the Pāṇḍavas by setting the forest on fire. For instance, when Kṛṣṇa acknowledges Karṇa as the *mūla* ‘root’ in the sense of ‘culprit’ of the arson attack that would have burned the Pāṇḍavas alive (8.51.60):

dahane yat saputrāyā niśi mātus tavānagha |

dyūtārthe yac ca yuṣmāsu prāvartata suyodhanah |
tatra sarvatra duṣṭātmā karṇo mūlam ihārjuna ||

‘Arjuna, Karṇa is the culprit of everything: in [the attempt at] burning²⁶ [alive] your mother with her children, o fault-less one; [he is] the reason behind the dice game that Suyodhana played against you.’

Or when Yudhiṣṭhira confronts Duryodhana – who had previously ceased to fight and conjured up a powerful *māyā* ‘magic’ (9.30.3-4) – about the fact (9.30.66):

dahane hi kṛto yatnas tvayāsmāsu viśeṣataḥ |
āśīviṣair viṣaiś cāpi jale cāpi praveśanaiḥ |
tvayā vinikṛtā rājan rājyasya haraṇena ca ||

‘You especially made an effort in burning us²⁷ [alive], through venomous snakes or by luring [us] into the water, you, King, damaged us taking away [our] kingdom.’

Moreover, the fire of the Khāṇḍava forest is addressed in four *loci* excised from the Critical Edition: the first passage is included in a broader section that summarises all MBh *adhyāyas* and gives an account of the book which tells of the fire (*93.7-8 after 1.2.71). Two *śloka*s mention the death of Duryodhana’s minister Purocana by his own hands in the fire they had set to kill the Pāṇḍavas (*98.1-2 after 1.2.83; App. I, no. 86.57-58 after 1.137.16). In another passage, Bhīma’s bride-to-be Hiḍimbā tells Kuntī about the events leading up to the fire (App. I, no. 87.9-10 after 1.143.15).

3. Technical discrepancies or cultural divergence? Final observations and future perspectives

The present assessment has attempted to present a brief selection of some of the *lemmata* related to Vedic ritual semantics. This is part of the broader objective of exploring the possibility of reconstructing religiosity in the MBh by considering the existing connection between the MBh and the Vedas in terms of a *continuum*, and, in particular, by

²⁶ The critical apparatus registers the accusative *dahanam* as *varia lectio* found in manuscripts belonging to the central group and the southern recension.

²⁷ The critical apparatus indicates the instrumental *dahanena* as *varia lectio* found in two manuscripts of the central group.

analysing through a lexical evaluation the extent to which the MBh actually perceives the Veda as a revealed text²⁸. Therefore, the preliminary results reported so far are not conclusive yet. To sum up, one can make the following relevant observations:

1) As regards the first triad of lexical entries (§2.1), it emerges that the narrative contexts in which rites of atonement and purification are employed can vary from normative to liturgical ones, which more or less match the *śrauta* sources, but are also intertwined with philosophical and ethical problems (Schreneir 2017; Aktor 2021). Therefore, a shift in the meaning could “silently” justify a change in perception of the ritual themselves. Above all, it is notable how, in the case of *avabhṛtha* the lemma is employed in a stylistic dimension which highlights the rhetorical device of the metaphorical identification, i.e. *rūpa-ka* (9.4.35; 12.25.26-27; 99.30-34). On the contrary, the analysis of the instances of *vaiśvadeva* in the MBh demonstrates that there has been a significant distancing from the Vedic ritual. Nonetheless, there seems to be no attestation in the MBh of the *vaiśvadeva* as the Agni-related rite in the *śrauta* ritual.

2) As regards *soma*-rituals (§2.2), some of the most interesting occurrences of the *lemmata* involve divergences and discrepancies from the orthopraxy, for instance, a) the conflict between the two *ṛṣis* Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha, which has often been addressed as an example of the conflict over the brahmin’s individuality²⁹. In light of this, the excised passage (*1759.1-3 after 1.165.20) regarding the *ātithya* could be interpreted as a key instance of the ritual being invalidated especially because of the cow – i.e., a crucial sacrificial offering in the rite; b) Ghaṭotkaca as the performer of the *atirātra* (5.149.43): according to Chitrabhanu’s definition of *śamitr*, his identification “is a matter of controversy [...] he may be a brahmin or a non-brahmin” (1976: 110). Fundamentally, the *śamitr* is a “low status officiant” (Hiltebeitel 2011 [1997]: 137) portrayed as a butcher, someone who needs ruthless force to suffocate or strangle the victim, so that Ghaṭotkaca’s character could perfectly fit the description. Therefore, Ghaṭotkaca’s role as a *śamitr* could be

²⁸ According to digital *corpora*, the term *veda* occurs a total of 1,483 times in the MBh., 47% of all the occurrences are found in MBh 1 and 25% in MBh 12. Four books register an occurrence under 10% (MBh 13, 3, 5 and 14) compared to 1% in four others (MBh 6, 9, 2 and 7) while it is rarely mentioned in the rest, that is, once in MBh 18, three times in MBh 8, 10, 11, 6 times in MBh 4 and 4 times in MBh 15. Finally, it seems not attested in MBh 16 and 17.

²⁹ I refer mainly to Sathaye 2007 and to Greg Bailey who recently delivered a paper under the title of *On Brahmin Self-criticism in the Mahābhārata* in DICSEP 9, Dubrovnik (September 2020).

detected as a cultural divergence from traditional rituals, as a result of him being depicted even lower, i.e. as one who “hated brahmins and sacrifices and violated dharma” (Hiltebeitel 2011 [2007]: 427)³⁰.

3) Finally, with respect to funerary ceremonies (§2.3) especially the *pitṛya* and *pitṛmedha*, it could be highlighted, according to Sayers 2008, that only a householder can perform the *yajñas* related to the Fathers and, apart from the Pāṇḍavas, Dhaumya and the other characters mentioned are not one. Therefore, powerful ascetics performing the *pitṛya* could be a case for debating the supposed cultural divergence from orthopraxy. However, the matter requires further analysis.

Given these final remarks, the aim underlying the present preliminary assessment is the inquiry into the following issues. First, can any evidence of faith be inferred from the text? Indeed, a lexical evaluation of the instances of the use of ritual-related technical terms and the mentions in the Epic of the Vedas as a revealed text may perhaps infer a background pattern of faith at a literary level as the expression of a cultural stage independent from the Śrautasūtra. Second, if a pattern does emerge, who are the actual beneficiaries of this faith? The Vedic pantheon is reported as being considerably diminished and, apart from Indra’s prominence, it is noteworthy that for the most part, divine activity is polarised between Devas and Asuras (Brockington 1998: 235). This permits us to envision intricacies concerning the coexistence of various layers of old and new patterns, as Reich 2011 stated. We can observe how ancient deities—recipients of ritual performances and protagonists of extended didactic portions of the text—coexist alongside heterodox divine figures involved in ascetic and renunciant practices (Vassilkov, 2014: 439). Moreover, the objective is to demonstrate a general awareness and use of technical terms relating to ritual within the MBh itself. This may contribute to the understanding of an emerging pattern of depictions of an unorthodox faith that triggered a divergence in MBh religiosity from the Vedic religious framework.

³⁰ Shin (2020) recently focused on the demonic genealogy of two dynasties in pre-modern Northeast India. He argues that these dynasties underwent a process of legitimization of *kṣatriyas* as descendants of demons, among which Ghaṭotkaca figures as founder. He explains that “ambiguity of Ghaṭotkaca’s character as half-human and half-demon was removed from the new genealogy by putting more emphasis on his paternal side [...]” to perhaps establish “a mythical connection with the kṣatriya lineage to which Bhīma belonged, [...] not openly manifested in their official records.” (ibid. 69). Although the subject of Shin’s work takes us far forward in time, he argues that this redefinition of lineage is indeed a political device against a Brahminic legitimization model, suggesting the extension of demonic ancestry to a pre-Vedic Indus civilisation.

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Pubblicato nel mese di marzo 2023 da
Pisa University Press - Polo Editoriale CIDIC - Università di Pisa

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