

Sexuality as a Promotion of Power:

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1 *Aśvamedha*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ṛgveda 5.37.3

vadhūr iyám pátim ichánty eti yá īṃ vāhāte máhiṣim iṣirām |

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

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

Ṛgveda 5.2.2

kám etám tvám yuvate kumārám péṣī bibharṣi máhiṣi jajāna |

“Young woman, who is this child whom you carry as his wet nurse? The *mahiṣī* has given birth to him⁵ [Agni].”

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

Atharvaveda Śaunaka 2.36.3

*iyám agne nārī pátim videṣṭa sómo hí rājā subhágāṃ kṛṇóti |
súvānā putrān máhiṣī bhavāti gatvā pátim subhágā ví rājatu ||3||*

“O Agni, may this woman find a husband; indeed, Soma the king makes her wealthy.

Generating progeny, may she become *mahiṣī*; going toward [her] husband, may she shine/rule with prosperity!”

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

⁴Cf. Brereton, Jamison 2014, II, 703.

⁵Cf. Brereton, Jamison 2014, II, 663.

Also in the *Khila* 5.13.6, the *mahiṣī* is not clearly linked with the king, but with “the one who goes to battle”, *yúdhīgamáh*. The first attestation where the *mahiṣī* is with no doubt described as the king’s wife is the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*, then also in the *Kāṭha Saṃhitā*, both the versions belonging to the Kṛṣṇayajurveda tradition. The context for action is the Rājasūya rite. However, in the *Khila-sūkta* containing the *āhanasya* verses (5.22) the *mahiṣī* is called *mahānagnī*, lit. “great naked” (Vasilkov 1989-1990, 390 ff.; Witzel 1997b, 397), *nagnā*, who is either the “harlot” of the horse, a “ritual prostitute”, according to most scholars⁶, or the “naked earth” according to others (Dange 1971, 68-82). A possible transition may, thus, be hypothesized in the *Khilāni*. The reason for the semantic transition between the *Ṛgveda* and the *Khila*-hymns might be due to the conflicting times of composition. Probably a semantic shift occurred after the *Ṛgvedic* times, since from the linguistic point of view, the *Khila*-verses are generally considered to be composed later than the *Ṛgveda*, in the same period as the *Yajurvedic* collections (Witzel 1997a; Bhise 1995). If we assume the chronological proximity between the *Khila-sūkta* 5.22 and the *Taittirīya* prose-texts on the *Aśvamedha* rite, a question arises: at the time of the *Yajurvedic* and the *Khila* codification, what instigated the priests’ interest for the chief wife’s sexuality, which was not so relevant at the time of the *Ṛgvedic* composition?

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

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

⁷ *Mahābhārata* VIII.67.1-3.

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

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

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

Taittirīya Samhitā 7.4.19.1-2

*ambe ambāly ambike nā mā nayati kās canā | sasāsty aśvakāḥ || sūbhage kāmpilavāsini suvargé
loké sám prórṇvāthām | áhám ajāni garbhadhām á tvám ajāsi garbhadhām | táu sahá catúraḥ
padáḥ sám prá sārāyāvahai | vṛṣā vāñ retodhá réto dadhātūt sakthyòr grdám dhehy añjím
údañjimm ánv aja | yá strīṇám jīvabhójano yá āsām ||1|| biladhávanaḥ | priyá strīṇám apīcyàḥ |
yá āsām kṛṣṇé lákṣmaṇi sárdigrdim parāvadhīt || ámbe ambāly ambike nā mā yabhati kās canā |
sasāsty aśvakāḥ || ūrdhvām enām úc chrayatād venubhārám giráv iva | áthāsya mādhyam
edhatām śíté vāte púnann iva || ámbe ambāly ambike nā mā yabhati kās canā | sasāsty aśvakāḥ ||
yád dhariṇí yavam átti ná ||2||*

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

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

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

It is absolutely clear from the words mentioned above that the chief wife ought to get her vulva in contact with the dead horse’s penis – or its “hind quarter near the anus”.⁸ Several scholars had considered this passage as *merely a description* or a fantasy of the authors (Malamoud 1996; Puhvel 1970; Eliade 1958; Keith 1925; Oldenberg 1894). But I do not agree with this reading of the passage because a singular detail allows us to think that it was not a fantasy at all. According to the Vedic prescriptions,⁹ animals were killed by asphyxiation, but it is known that a slow suffocation of males can produce penile erection (Jamison 1996, 68). I am tempted to interpret this ritual technique not *merely as an attempt* to stress the fertile character of the ritual¹⁰, rather as an “empirical” practice to exhibit the fertilising attribute of the sexual contact with the dead horse, being the representation of the empowered king. It is undeniable that this performance might have appeared very suggestive in the eyes of the participants; it may be added that, from an ethological perspective, the engagement in a costly ritual labour recalls the “conspicuous consumption” theory by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), recently rethought by Gustavo Benavides in the field of the history of religions: the costly display of the physical attributes is a well-known phenomenon for many animal species to promote or to make visible their rank, role, strength, and function (Benavides 2013; 1989). Indeed, the purpose of the ritual was to exalt the king’s sexuality as an exhibition of his high power (Jamison 1996; Roy 1994; Doniger 1980); therefore it seems appropriate to say “the end justifies the means”,

⁸ MW, *s.v. gr̥da*.

⁹ *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 20.17.8–9. See Jamison 1996, 68 and 274 n.114; Heesterman 1985, 87 n.27.

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

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

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

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

~ *Kāṭha Saṃhitā* 5.4.8

ámbyámbike ámbālike ná mā nayati káscaṇá | sásasty aśvakáḥ súbhadrikāṃ kāmpīlavāsínim | gaṇānāṃ tvā gaṇapatiṃhavāmahe priyāñāṃ tvā priyāpatiṃ havāmahe nidhīnāṃ tvā nidhīpatiṃ havāmahe vaso mamáhāmajāni garbhadhámá tvámajāmi garbhadhám || tau mahá catúraḥ padáh saṃprásārayāvaḥ svargé loké prórṇuvātāṃrvṣā vāmásvo retodhā réto dadhātu ||

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

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

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

¹¹ Cf. Jamison 1996, 67.

¹² Cf. Dumont 1927.

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

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

We could begin by wondering if it is just a matter of style. Frankly, I do not think so; furthermore, some arguments are provided by the political context. For instance, Hermann Kulke, who examined all the passages where a Rājasūya – the other solemn rite to promote kingship – is prescribed, holds that “large parts of the ceremony appear to have served the very purpose to stop the population from running away and to accept the ‘royal’ *sūamāna*, the sacrificer, as their ruler” (Kulke 1992, 195). Indeed, it is a matter of fact that frequent migrations, suggested by linguists and historians of ancient South Asia¹³, had most likely impacted the forms of cohabitation. This instigated the formation of new leaderships or at least the modification of the old ones, urging an adequate ritual labour to preserve a state of existent order or a particular hierarchy. Also, we should not underestimate the fact that when populations are on the move, other strategies are required to support the local authority – and the related hierarchy and leadership. These may be different from the strategies that construct a political and social order related to the control over a territory or

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

throughout a centralized and settled authority¹⁴. However, the *Aśvamedha* was addressed to promote the expansion of the power over territory and to legitimise war beyond the boundaries of the kingdom. For that reason, many scholars agree with the idea that when the prose-texts had been composed the political organisations in the northern lands of South Asia were stratified and centralised¹⁵.

3.2. *Rājasūya*

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

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

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

¹⁴ See, for instance, Miller 2011, 97 ff.; Rüstow 2014, 100 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Proferes 2007; Witzel 1997c; Witzel 1995a; Scharfe 1989; Rau 1957.

¹⁶ Cfr. Bourdieu 1982a.

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

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

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

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

¹⁷ Cf. Kazzazi 2001.

¹⁸ Cf. Rau 1957; Horsch 1966; Rocher 1986: 54 and ff.

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

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

Taittirīya Saṃhitā 1.8.10

yé devá devasúva sthá tá imám āmuṣyāyaṇám anamitrāya suvadhvam mahaté kṣatrāya mahatá ādhipatyāya mahaté jānarājyāya | eśá vo bharatā rājā sómo 'smākam brāhmaṇānāmrājā prāti tyán nāma rājyám adhāyi svām tanúvaṃ varuṇo asísrec chúcer mitrásya vrátyā abhūmāmanmahi mahatá rtāsya nāma

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

4. Conclusions

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

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

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

¹⁹ Cf. Keith 1914.

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

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

Taittirīya Samḥitā 6.6.4.2-3

*yáṃ [...] suvargá kāmasyátha hrásiyāmsam ākrāmaṇam evá tát sétuṃ yájamānaḥ kurute
suvargásya lokásya sámaṣṭyai ||2||*

*yád ékasmin yúpe dvé raśané parivyáyati tásmād éko dvé jāyé vindate yán náikāṃ raśanáṃ
dváyor yúpayoḥ parivyáyati tásmān náikā dváu páti vindate*

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

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

²⁰ Cf. Keith 1914.

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

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

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

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

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

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Sociocultural Constructions of Sexuality in South Asia

Sexuality as a promotion of Power: How the Chief Wife becomes a Means of Persuasion in the Vedic Rhetoric on Kingship

Marianna Ferrara

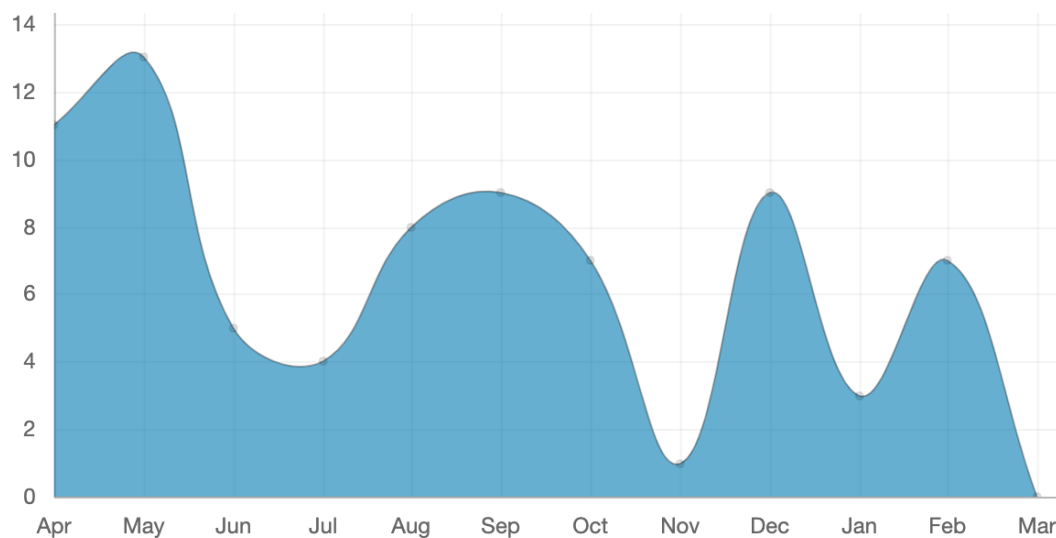
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13135/1825-263X/2257>**Keywords:** mahiṣī, yajña, aśvamedha, rājasūya, ritual, sexuality, fertility, power, brāhmaṇa, sovereignty**ABSTRACT** In the ancient South Asian texts about ritual known as *Samhitās*

and *Brāhmaṇas*, the wives of the king play an interesting role in terms of bodily actions and ritual rhetoric. Especially the so-called “chief wife” (*mahiṣī*) is described as a central and liminal player who serves as a sexual counterpart of the king at the main solemn rituals, i.e. Aśvamedha and Rājasūya, involving the travel of a horse in unconquered lands and the royal consecration, respectively. In this essay I suggest that the construction of female sexuality is a crucial point to fix the boundaries around the notion of authority, not only that of the king, but also that of his practitioner, i.e. the *brāhmaṇa* or *purohita*. From this starting point I suggest also that the chief wife of the king may be reconsidered as one of the most strategic actor on a ritual and

political stage. I will try to show that the *mahiṣī's* sexual function in the ritual exegesis had gained value, in connection with the attempt to deify the human *primus inter pares* of the political organisation, i.e. the king. More specifically, I will deal with the ritual language and codification concerning the *mahiṣī's* sexuality in order to illustrate the formulation of her body in the rituals prescribed in the Brāhmaṇas about solemn rites. I will discuss how the persuasive force of description and prescription about her bodily actions served as a means of persuasion in displaying the king's power. Finally, I suggest rethinking the role of gender in royal rituals from the perspective of literary criticism.

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