
Proferes’ book is based on the pivotal idea that the liturgical hymns of *Ṛgvedasamhitā* were also an instrument to negotiate political claims. The author goes through the main motifs of sovereignty showing how this concept is working underneath the pure religious attitude, and analyses the central features of the ideal of power in the Vedic culture.

Before entering into the core of the speculation, Proferes outlines the historical background. Notwithstanding the shortage of data and the impossibility of reaching something more than a hypothesis as to the actual chronology of this period, the relative chronology, according to Witzel’s (1997: 257–345) theory, lets us single out three moments: that of Bharata-Pūru, the following one of Yadu-Turvaśa, and after these individual lineage periods the Kuru hegemony, when the canon of *Ṛgvedasamhitā* was produced. Two are the elements of this time-period that the author underlines as the most important: the tribal\(^1\) political organization and the segmentary structure of the society, these two features enable the Vedic society to switch between alternating moments of *kṣema* ‘fix habitation’ and mobilizations through the *yoga* ‘unification between clans’. This dynamics has

1. As to the different words to indicate the clan and the tribe in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā* (*viś/jana; grha/dam*), Proferes tries to individuate a hierarchy between them which will be functional for the analysis he is about to propose.
been studied by anthropologists who called it “fission and fusion”: the political structure exists potentially within the lineage system, even though it is only actualized when the society as a whole is faced with a challenge from outside itself. Proferes then goes on speculating a correspondence between this alternation and that proposed by Oberlies as an interpretation of the relation between Indra and Varuṇa: the swinging of these two deities and their system, one of the main features of the Vedic pantheon, is mirroring the political dynamics on which those tribes were founded.

In the following three chapters, Proferes analyses the featuring motifs of sovereignty within the Vedic period, namely the fire, connected with the solar ideal, the waters and the embryonic gestation.

II

In the second chapter, the focus is on fire, an essential means of the ritual performance and a central element in the Vedic representation of the world. According to Proferes, the periodic exchange between *kṣema* and *yoga* occurs against the stable backdrop of the perennial cult of fire. It is not only a symbol of sovereignty, but also of the specific political process by which sovereignty was constituted. As in the Iranian tradition, the fires cult conveys a threefold hierarchy: the *grhapati* ‘single domestic fire, hearth fire’, the *viśpati* ‘courtier fire’ and the *samrāj* ‘king’s one’, and they all mingle in the monolithic common Agni, representing the fusion process. Agni is, thus, the poetic symbol and the concrete ritual locus of power. The imagery of motion from the periphery to the centre, featuring the consolidation of power of single groups in one’s own, and the idea of light ascending over the Five People, representing the projection of power across the regions, are two themes commonly featured, as it can be seen in the sacrifice of Agni *Pāñcajanya*. At the same time, Proferes shows very clearly that Agni is not only a nexus on a synchronic level, expressed by special and hierarchical relations, but also on a diachronic level, underscored by the primal kingship, as long as all fires come from the ancestral fire of *ṛṣi*. Moreover, the fire, as Agni *Vaiśvānara*, is identified with the sun, that is itself an image of the king, and it is the place where the *vrata* ‘vows’, representing the commitments of the priest and the *yajamāna*, are deposited during the *Tānūnaptra* rite. Within the connection

2. The aetiological myth refers to the gods who divided and left the centre unprotected, creating a void. The Asura were going to win, so they eventually united in the centre, forming what resembles the shape of the sun.
between the fire and the sun, Proferes reckons also the liturgy of Agni Rohita, the most poetically complex exploitation of the identification between the king and the sun, as well as other rites where the sun itself is anointed by the gods, becoming then the universal king. Through the connection between the king, the fire and the sun as centre of the universe, once more the “mundane” domain is homologized with the cosmological one, and the holistic vision of world and society always pervading the Vedic culture is achieved.

Deeply connected with this motif is that of the waters where the fire hides itself. Proferes obviously focuses on the abhiṣeka ‘ritual unction of the king’, as it is described in Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 8.6–10: waters from different sources are brought, including substances treated as forms of water such as honey and milk, they are gathered and purified and then decanted in the unction cup. The sacrificer is anointed with this liquid and this gives him the kṣatra ‘power to rule’. The waters are indeed often connected with the four gods of sovereignty, Soma, king of waters, Agni, dwelling in water, Varuṇa, god of water, and Indra who let them loose from Vṛtra. Switching again to the social-political attitude, Proferes speculates that if the king is mapped onto the domain of fire and sun, what might be mapped onto the domain of the water are the clans. In the clans as in the waters abides the essential element of power, the varcas ‘splendour’ from which the king is endowed: in the very Rohita ritual the king is said to come out of the water to get his dominion. This nexus between waters and royal power is indeed to be found in many verses of the Ṛgvedasamhitā and in many parts of the following Vedic texts. In Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa 2.25–26 the waters give the sun the power to traverse the entire extent, and the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 5.3.4.10 makes an analogy between the relationship of the sea to the rivers and that of the kings to the clans. Both are sources of food, that is of economic means: water makes land grow, the clans cultivate it.

Proferes’ conclusion is almost an equation: the clans consolidate their fire in the king’s tribal fire (= sun) as unction waters (= clans) consolidate splendour (varcas, the power to rule) in the king, identified with the sun, in his turn.

The author then proposes to use what has been said above to shed some light on the well-known Ṛgvedic hymn 10.124 depicting Indra’s assumption of universal dominion. The great difficulty in the hymn is understanding the relationship between Indra and Varuṇa. What Proferes underlines represents, in my opinion, the peculiarity of his approach to the text. He points out that, above the implication for the Vedic cosmogony of the problem, it has yet to be noticed that the fundamental theme of the hymn is that of Indra’s royal unction. Indra’s first goal is the acquisition of the necessary components of
sacrifice, fire, water, the soma plant and Varuṇa—whose role in the cosmo-
gonic institution of sacrifice is to measure out the many establishments of
Truth, that is also ritual rules and role. Prior to Indra’s rule, the sacrifice did
not exist at all. Indra establishes it and the introduction of sacrifice is here
equivalent to a cosmogonic act. Afterward Indra is consecrated as supreme
king through a process that has as formative paradigm that of the unction.
Once more the igneous and aquatic themes merge to give birth to the king.

The fourth and last chapter concerns the embryonic gestation and the
generation of the king, eventually focusing on the Agnicayana rite where
all the motifs met with so far are synthesized. The trope that the performer
of the rite becomes an embryo and he will born from the water after a ges-
tation period, decisively informs the structure of the rite of royal consecra-
tion. Here again the different motifs overlap and the king is not only the
embryo of the water, but also that of the clans (viśāṁ gārbhaḥ ‘embryo of
the clans’). This theme has already been studied in detail by many scholars
as Heestermann (1957) and more recently Tsuchiyama (2005), nonetheless
Proferes suggests a different approach, that is to consider these concepts
mainly as political concepts indeed with regards to the terminology that
informs and characterizes them: in the Sautrāmani rite, for instance, as the
body of the king is the incarnation of political unity, it is through the sacred
waters and its ritual bath that the particular royal body takes its shape.

Among the rites the book deals with, the Agnicayana is the one that
is analysed most carefully and precisely. The author proceeds step by step
tackling many of the passages involved in the building up of the fire altar.
Out of all this material, Proferes can then argue that the Agnicayana seems
to be an elaborated Royal Consecration and that the solar symbolism at
the heart of the whole liturgy is an integration of two distinct but closely related
ritual complexes. The first is the rite by which multiple clans acknowledged
central rule through joint kindling and communal worship of a tribal fire
(Agni Vaiśvānara or Agni Pāñcajanya, analysed in first part of the book);
the second is the rite of the abhiṣeka ‘royal unction’ by which a solar king
is born from the varcas ‘splendour’ of the waters, being his very body in-
formed by this procedure. Finally, the projection of political power was ex-
pressed already in the Ṛgevdaśaṃhitā in term of “winning the sun” that, as
Oberlies has argued, becomes a symbol for the king conquering new territo-
ries. Proferes goes further speculating on the development of those symbols:
if the basic idea shareb by all of these tropes is the lack of any boundaries, if
the imagery underneath the royal symbolism was characterized by the idea
of unlimited freedom, then it follows that the symbolism of the Agnicayana,
in its turn, was developed with the intent to give full expression to this idea
of complete freedom on an cosmogonic and thus spiritual level. The proto-
Agnicayana would originally have been restricted to powerful kings as is also suggested by the links of the Agnicayana with the ascendancy of the Kuru kings (examined in Proferes 2003b). What had happened was the uncoupling of the ideological underpinnings of the rite from its social context, and the generalization of the values to all twice-born males, who longed to overcome their limitations. The early history of the Agnicayana is of course murky and the scenario Proferes depicts is highly speculative, however the extension of the royal ideals into a more generalized religious domain is already present in some hymns of the Ṛgvedasamhitā (as the hymn 10.121) and indeed the Agnicayana is eligible, not only by the king or the one who is about to become a king, as the other rites of the same type, but also by everyone who can perform a Soma sacrifice.

Moreover, taking into account some peculiar terms, as rāṣṭram bha-
vati and idam sarvam bhavati, Proferes suggests that certain themes of the speculative mysticism of the early Upaniṣads were developed directly from motifs central to the ideal of kingship in the earlier Vedic period. The Upaniṣads do appear to preserve a vestige of the growth of esoteric spiritual ideas from early speculations concerning the relation between the king and his dominion. The paradigm of sovereignty was thus formative for a language of spiritual aspiration, but the political aspect faded, and was preserved only in certain key metaphors employed in what became a discourse of spiritual freedom. As the author says at the end of the book “Thus it might even be said that late Vedic and Early Hinduism spirituality reflects the popularization of the ideals of an ambitious king”.

III

The researches and methodology of Proferes ³ are indeed characterized by a very interesting approach: he really goes beyond the text and beside it, taking into account the historical context where this text was composed. His book stands as an excellent effort to use the text as source of data as to the culture that created it; from the methodological point of view, it shows a path to read the hymns of the Ṛgvedasamhitā under a new perspective. The right example is the analysis of the Agnicayana: all the researches and studies on the texts regarding this rite are pointing to set the rite in its

³. As it can be seen in his analysis of the use of the Ṛgvedic hymns within the śrāuta ritual, cf. Proferes (2003a and 2003b).
historical development; therefore, while reading and interpreting, he is always aware of the links and echoes between the installation of the fire altar and the fire rites of the pre-śrauta period. Due to this attitude Proferes can look at the Agnicayana as a development of the Ṛgvedic rites connected with fire and especially with Agni Vaiśvānara. He can thus outline a bridge that connects the first Vedic ritualistic and the latter one, whereas this bridge, though mentioned, has often been avoided, being slippery and misleading. This book is entirely focused on “Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Powers”, though it is possible to catch overall the work something else that represent the main focus of Proferes research in the last years. Comparing the texts of the late Vedic tradition with the hymns of the Ṛgvedasamhitā, the author sometimes takes notice of the substantiality of the choice of the redactor quoting that particular verse within the rite; elsewhere he shows the relation between the content of a hymn or a verse and the role it plays in the moment of the rite where it is inserted. The problem he is addressing is at the heart of his former articles: namely “the question as to the degree of social, political and religious change undergone by the Vedic culture throughout the course of its history. Is it possible to identify a radical paradigm shift between the RV and the later Vedic texts, or is it more accurate to emphasize elements of continuity?” (Proferes 2003b: 1).

Regarding the complex of post-Ṛgvedic literature as a whole, Proferes’ question is if there are hints in those texts pointing to a consciousness of the anonymous redactor as to the former creative devices, although the way of constructing the liturgy is different, being based on memorizing and composing instead of creating. It will maybe happen to be a “life-time” question.

REFERENCES