

# Circulation of Fire in the Veda

*Atsushi Hayakawa*

The work summarized here has a twofold aim. The first is to trace the development of the Vedic myths concerning the exchange of fire between heaven and earth. The second is to provide an answer to the question regarding the meaning of rituals, which was presented by Frits Staal, by observing the historic rituals in which the relevant myths are told.

As is well known, Staal says that a ritual is a pure activity without meaning or goal. It is true that this statement points out the essential characteristic of rituals. However, to say that ritual is an activity without meaning does not seem to be exactly the same as to say that ritual is meaningless. Let us examine his arguments to make this point clear.

Staal's discussion consists of two lines: that concerning the syntactic structure of rituals, and the other concerning the meaninglessness of rituals. His aim is to present the syntactic structure as the only authentic object of the ritual studies, and the strategy he uses to reach it is to show that the other candidate for the object, namely the meaning of rituals, does not actually exist.

Staal presents enough examples of the syntactic structure from Vedic rituals. However, when we see his discussion in the context of the earlier studies by Stanley Tambiah and Maurice Bloch, his own perspective becomes clear. He is giving yet another answer to the problem of ritual repetitions. At the same time, it also becomes clear that Staal's ingenious presentation of this problem conceals the essentially important point indicated by Tambiah: that the ritual actions are repeated to fulfill external demands. The ritual is supposed to last a considerable length of time, because of its participants tend to think that its effects are enlarged in proportion to its size. And the simplest way to limit its costs is to repeat certain actions. What Staal calls 'the syntax of ritual' is also motivated by this necessity. However, is it then really correct to use the term 'syntax'? In fact, the examples he presents are the patterns of repetition. And the fact that these repetition patterns produce no meaning does not appear to be a good reason to abuse the linguistic term 'syntax' to denote it.

In addition, Staal's discussions about the meaninglessness of rituals are themselves not very convincing. One of his most important arguments is that animals also have rituals. Animals do indeed have rituals and they precede the symbolic systems. But the animal rituals certainly have communicative meanings. In other words, the meaningfulness of animal rituals cannot be the

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grounds to prove the meaninglessness of human rituals. His other argument concerns the irrelevance and the formal absurdity of the verbal procedures in the Vedic rituals. He shows that some verbal procedures do not agree with the corresponding non-verbal procedures, and also that some of the verses recited are mechanically fabricated from the fragments of different verses. However, the verbal procedures do not necessarily have to agree with the non-verbal procedures in order to be meaningful. As to the mechanical fabrication of the verses, this does not happen everywhere in the Vedic ritual system and thus cannot be generalized.

The above points would appear to be enough to put a question mark on the approach proposed by Staal. In any case, we cannot accept the idea that the syntactical analysis is the only authentic approach to rituals. However, this only means that his discussions about the meaninglessness of rituals are untenable, and do not mean that we can approach the so-called meaning of rituals in a simplistic way.

The author proposes to understand the phenomenon called ritual in connection with language games, a concept introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Imagine that you are playing a game, such as a game of football. You take various actions during the game, and the meaning of your actions is obvious to you and all the other players, as long as you follow the rules of the game. You are communicating with other players in this environment. Now imagine another situation. You reconstruct the game you just played as a bundle of executable rules such as 'player A takes action X', 'player B takes action Y', 'player C takes action Z', and so on. When these rules are executed, it appears to mimic the game you just played, but you will notice that this is not a game, but a ritual. The first situation you imagined is the world of the language games. The second one is the world in which no language game exists. In other words, ritual is a special space in the world where no language game takes place.

The ritual world is in itself meaningless in the sense that no communication is possible within it. However, before we make any judgments about the meaninglessness of rituals, we have to consider what the symbolic system actually is, because it is usually believed to determine the meaning of the ritual. As to this point, Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Fraser's Golden Bough* presents an interesting view. He takes the example of a rain charm which takes place when the rainy season is near, and argues that the people who are carrying out this ritual cannot actually believe that they can make rain by doing so, because otherwise they would do it during the dry season. They know that it does not have any effect, and they do not intend at all to make rain by means of the ritual. This can be easily attested to by our own experiences. Everyone has once written the name of an unpleasant person on a puppet and has broken it. Did you do it to kill the person? If you wanted to kill a person, you would not use a doll, but a knife, for example. There is a subtle but deep difference. In other words, the symbolic system of a ritual is disconnected from the meaning which the participants experience. We can focus on this point, we can duly appreciate Staal's statement

that ‘ritual is a pure activity without meaning or goal’. If ritual can be said to be meaningless, it is important to point out this difference.

It is in itself possible to analyze and interpret the symbolic system of a ritual, but the ritual is in fact not connected to the real life of the participants. It is a world in itself. So now we can finally ask our question. Is it totally meaningless to study the symbolic system?

It is at this point that the significance of the theory of Dan Sperber is revealed. According to Sperber, we have an ability to deal with information which we do not really understand. For example, many of us cannot follow the reasoning that justifies the formula ‘ $e=mc^2$ ’, but normally we put it into the formulation ‘ $e=mc^2$  is valid’, and treat the statement as the truth. This ability is quite important, because without this ability we could not deal with the information which we do not understand. However, on the other hand it makes us susceptible to the development of the mysteries of which the meaning is totally unintelligible. When we see the symbolic system of rituals from the viewpoint of Sperber, we get a perspective to connect it to meaning. Many rituals are more or less unintelligible, and they appear to be more like a riddle. In other words, what a ritual presents is a question, not an answer. A ritual asks you, ‘What is the meaning of this ritual?’ and waits until you give an answer yourself. So when such a riddle is presented, it is difficult for us to suppress our desire to give an explanation of it. It absorbs you and urges you to provide an answer to the question, which in fact has no answer.

The philological part of this work describes how this process appears in the historicity. What we observe here is the historical development of two Vedic myths within the Vedic ritual system.

In **Chapter 1**, we consider the Vedic cremation. We start from the invocations of the three manifestations of the fire god, namely Agni, Agni Jātavedas and Agni Vaiśvānara. Our question is whether these manifestations have different mythological functions. To answer it, we compare the contexts in which Agni Vaiśvānara appears and those in which Agni Jātavedas appears in the *Rigveda*. As a result, we succeed in drawing the image of the total spatial structure of Agni, and discerning the functions of the three manifestations in the cremation. The cosmic Agni consists of the sacrificial fire on earth, the sun in heaven, and the spoke which combines them. This total structure of cosmic Agni can be called with the name Vaiśvānara, but this name can also be used to denote the sun. Agni Jātavedas has the function of bringing offerings between heaven and earth. In other words, the invocations of Agni, Agni Vaiśvānara and Agni Jātavedas in the cremation are based on this mythological concept, and present the image in which the dead sacrificer is burned by the sacrificial fire, is brought upwards by Jātavedas, and is born again in heaven through the sun.

In **Chapter 2**, we look into the mythological background of the Rigvedic hymn 3.3, which is recited during the ritual procedure called the Third Soma

Pressing. We see here that this hymn consists of two threads, and that the hymn as totality tells the myth of the ejaculation of the sun.

In **Chapter 3**, we consider the formation of the Five Fire Doctrine from the late Vedic period, which explains the derivation of an individual. We presuppose as its prototype a simple form of the water doctrine, in which King Soma in heaven falls to earth and becomes sperm and eventually a baby is born from it. This prototype is influenced by the myth of the ejaculation of the sun, and finally the stream of fire joins that of the water. This downward movement is complemented by the upward movement of fire in the cremation. With this last step, the circulation of fire is completed. The circulation of water already existed before it, but that of fire is perhaps more important in the history of the Indian philosophy because fire represents the implicit motif of 'self'. In other words, the formation of the circulation of fire prepared the way to the process of birth and rebirth across heaven and earth. It is also very important that this archaic doctrine is told in the context of the Agnihotra ritual, namely the daily evening and morning offering, because it obviously presents a correspondence between the daily movement of the sun and the cosmic circulation of fire. The development of the ritual-myth complex gave a new meaning to the Agnihotra, which now comprises the whole universe and the entire history.

The philological part of this study shows that the symbolic system of rituals can acquire its meaning through history. The Agnihotra is one's life and death themselves. The Agnihotra is experienced differently by those who know it. The life of the sacrificers after the formation of the Five Fire Doctrine was different from the life of those who lived before it. Ritual is indeed an activity without meaning or aim, but cannot be said to be meaningless because it generates meanings historically. And this result implies that we need to presuppose a historical ritual process which contains innumerable numbers of the ritual instances when we think of rituals.