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Competitiveness in Sacred Learning Traces of Indo-Aryan Oral Competition in the *Mahābhārata*

ABSTRACT: The current notion of the Vrātyas aggressivity seems to be mainly based on certain Vedic texts that record a biased account of their history. It is usually assumed that relevant passages refer to the aggression displayed by the Vrātyas during verbal confrontations with their opponents in order to determine the correct stance on ritual matters. However, even outside the Vrātya context, competitive hospitality and violent verbal exchanges may be found in the sapiential sphere, often in the form of riddles—the so-called *brahmodya*. Among the sections in the *Mahābhārata* that demonstrate epic traces of competitiveness in the field of sacred knowledge, this paper will primarily examine the *Aṣṭāvakra-Ūpākhyāna* (MBh 3.132–134), which features the sole *Mahābhārata* reference to the term *brahmodya*.

KEYWORDS: Vrātya, *Mahābhārata*, Aṣṭāvakra, *brahmodya*, competitiveness

1. Introduction

Opinions as to the identity of the Vrātyas have varied, especially since the emergence of scholarly debate on the subject whereby different views regarding the character of the group have been proposed. Some

scholars have focused on the secular aspects characterising the group and considered Vrātyas to be a tribe of nomadic cattle rustlers of either Indo-Aryan or non-Indo-Aryan descent (Aufrecht 1877; Hopkins 1889; and Winternitz 1925). Others, instead, foregrounded the religious aspects and viewed the Vrātyas as forerunners of the proto-Śaiva ascetics (Charpentier 1911), placing them at the same level as the *brahmacārin* (Hauer 1927). Meanwhile, some other studies have tried to demonstrate that the apparent violence linked to the Vrātyas is most probably associated with those who imitated them, possibly after the alleged second wave of the Indo-Aryan and Brahmanical culture (Falk 1986; Pontillo and Sudyka 2016). In this regard, attempts have also been made to demonstrate how violence ascribed to the Vrātyas is heavily influenced by the anti-Vrātya propaganda conveyed in Brahmanical texts (Hock 2016). On several occasions, scholars have pointed out the presence of the Indo-Aryan *substrata* in the Vrātya phenomenon in the Vedic and particularly the epic sources.

More specifically, verbal aggression is one of the forms of agonistic visitation that can be seen as a manifestation of systemic violence within the context of competitive hospitality and violent verbal interactions in the area of wisdom. This is regarded in the texts as an archetypal and intrinsic aspect of the Indo-Aryan universe and frequently associated with the Vrātyas. Indeed, some passages are believed to allude to the Vrātyas' aggression in verbal confrontations with their opponents in order to determine the correct stance on ritual matters. However, even outside the Vrātya context, there is evidence of competitive hospitality and violent verbal exchanges in the sapiential sphere, often in the form of riddles—the so-called *brahmodya* (Renou 1949, Thompson 1997), the contest ending with the head of the loser being cut off or the aggressor being cursed (Witzel 1987; Insler 1989–1990).

Several passages within the *Mahābhārata* depict competition for sacred knowledge. For example, the dispute between the *asura* Prahlaāda and Sudhanvan, a brahman of Aṅgiras' race, described in section 2.61.60–79, is noteworthy since neither of them ends up being killed (Hegarty 2007). Other instances of quarrels or verbal contests related to

competition appear in dialogues throughout Books 2–5 and 12–14, such as when Yudhiṣṭhira interacts with the Yakṣa / Dharma (3.297–298), or when he is disguised as Kaṅka the Brahman during a confrontation with Virāṭa (4.6.12); also as the exchange between Vidura and Dhṛtarāṣṭra in section 5.33.89–91; and again in dialogues between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma (12.69.19–22); between King Ikṣvāku and a Brahmin (12.192.16); and finally, between Vālmīki and Yudhiṣṭhira (13.18.7). Other references include two instances of Indra attempting to gain secret knowledge—once by disguising himself as an ascetic and conversing with the *asura* Śambara (13.36), and again by quarrelling with some *ṛṣis* (14.94.18–22). However, these references will not be considered in this paper which will exclusively concentrate on the *Aṣṭāvakra-Ūpākhyāna* (MBh 3.132–134), narrated by Lomaśa to Yudhiṣṭhira during the “Tour of the Sacred Fords” (Hiltebeitel 2005). To the best of my knowledge, this segment contains the only recorded instance of the term *brahmodya* in the *Mahābhārata*.

Different stories involving the same characters, but with different outcomes feature prominently in the Upaniṣadic narrative in the episode regarding Śvetaketu (Olivelle 1999) and in the Buddhist *Ambaṭṭha-sutta* from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, which is considered a retelling of the Upaniṣadic episode (Black 2011: 138; 2017). The main difference between the Upaniṣadic and the MBh episode is that Śvetaketu and Ambaṭṭha, the young Brahmins who quarrel in the *vivāda*, are defeated, while a young Aṣṭāvakra triumphs over Bandin. In addition, the *Aṣṭāvakra Gīta*, which is considered a major work of the Advaita Vedānta philosophical school, focuses on the dialogue between Aṣṭāvakra and King Janaka (Stroud 2004: 48–49).

The Upaniṣadic Śvetaketu and the Aṣṭāvakra of the *Mahābhārata* share commonalities, indicating that the two traditions have intermingled certain elements that can also be found in Buddhist literature. More specifically, a prevailing theme is the arrogance shown by young Brahmins which, in the case of Śvetaketu, is coupled with feelings of envy (Olivelle 1999: 67; Black 2011: 137; 2017).

In particular, the passages referenced from the third book of the *Mahābhārata* appear to demonstrate how the epic text, as a Brahmanic

source, depicts sacred competition. Firstly, the paper will present two types of competition that could be viewed as part of a Vrātya background (§ 2.1). Subsequently, the onset of the conflict will be examined, including the formal proclamation of *brahmodya*, the violent fate of the victim, and the resulting reward for the victor (§ 2.2). Finally, tentative conclusions will be drawn and textual details that concern narrative indications of a wider Vedic imagery acknowledged (§ 3).

2. Competitiveness in sacred learning

The narrative context sees Lomaśa recounting the tale of Aṣṭāvakra to all the Pāṇḍavas, except for the absent Arjuna, during their pilgrimage to the *īrthas* (van Buitenen 1975, Hildebeitel 2005). While still in his mother's womb, Aṣṭāvakra had criticised his father Kahōḍa's knowledge and had thus been cursed with crooked limbs and named accordingly (Feller 2012). When Kahōḍa's wife, Sujātā, was about to give birth, Kahōḍa sought patronage from King Janaka by participating in a debate but was defeated and ultimately drowned by the *sūta* Bandin. Twelve years later, Aṣṭāvakra accompanied his maternal uncle, Śvetaketu, to King Janaka's court to challenge Bandin in the *brahmodya* from which he emerged victorious (MBh 3.132–133). In conclusion, Bandin identifies himself as Varuṇa's son and asserts that the sacrifice of drowning the defeated is in line with the twelve-year sacrifice offered to his father. Aṣṭāvakra subsequently commands that Bandin be drowned. The Brahmins, including Kahōḍa, who had been defeated and drowned by Bandin, are revived and Aṣṭāvakra receives honour.

An overview of the main characters in the Upākhyāna is provided below (van Buitenen 1975: 472–473):

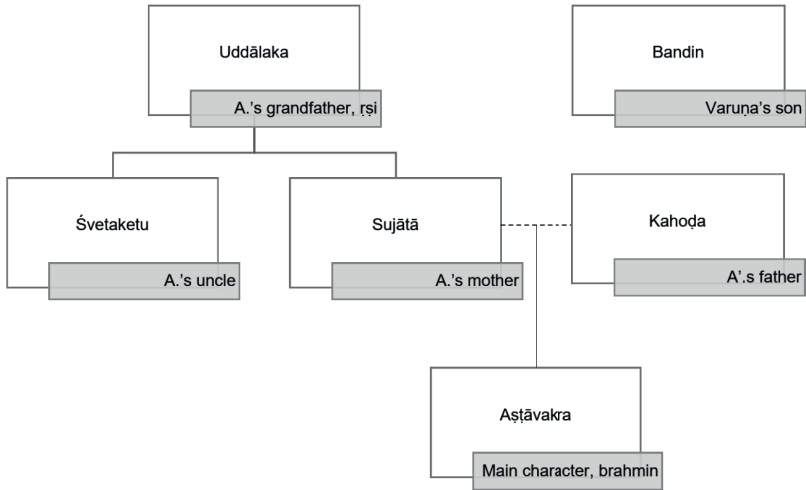


Figure 1. Overview of main characters

2.1. A comparison between two kinds of competitiveness

A close reading of the *Aṣṭāvakra-Ūpākhyāna* reveals two distinct competitive tendencies: while Kahōḍa is engaged in a competition for wealth, Aṣṭāvakra and Bandin are competing for knowledge. This dynamic seems to reflect the background of the Vrātya community (Candotti and Pontillo 2015: 199; Pontillo and Dore 2016: 10).¹

¹ A critical analysis of the orthodox approach to the *saṃhitā* has made it possible to outline an ancient society based on the *Männerbund* (Falk 2002). An anthropological definition of the *Männerbund* comprises a group of men united by a common social status, which underpins a raid-based social economy (Falk 1986: 51–54; 2002; Jamison and Witzel 2003 [1992]: 46–47). The group elects a leader who is consecrated through special sacrifices. His duties include the equitable distribution of spoils of war among members of the community. The singular noun *vrātya*, along with *ekavrātya*, appears solely in the 15th book of the *Śaunaka Atharvaveda*, specifically in the *Vrātyakāṇḍa* (and in the 18th book of the *Paippalāda Atharvaveda*) and in the *Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa* 3.21. In Vedic orthodoxy, particularly in the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Kalpasūtras* that address

For example, in MBh 3.132.12–13, Sujātā encourages her husband Kahoḍa to approach King Janaka and ask for wealth (*vitta-*)² to maintain their unborn child:

*katham kariṣyāmy adhanā maharṣe māsaś cāyaṃ daśamo vartate me |
na cāsti te vasu kiṃ cit prajātā yenāham etām āpadam nistareyam ||
uktas tv evaṃ bhāryayā vai kahoḍo vittasyārthe janakam athābhyaga-
cchat |
sa vai tadā vādaividā nigrhya nimajjito bandinehāpsu viprah ||*

“What shall I do, bereft of wealth, O great ṛṣi? For the tenth month is approaching and there is no wealth from you with which I, after giving birth, can overcome this misfortune!”. Then Kahoḍa, [who] had been informed by his wife [about the birth of his son], approached Janaka with the aim of obtaining wealth. After being defeated, the sage was indeed drowned in water by the speech-knower Bandin.

Two fundamental details can be gleaned from this passage: the reason for participating in the contest and its result. In fact, the Brahman contender, Kahoḍa, enters the *brahmodya* to acquire wealth (*vittasyārthe* 13b). This is in line with Desnitskaya’s (2020: 156) assertion that participants in *brahmodyas* engage in verbal competitions to demonstrate the superiority of their knowledge and acquire wealth,

it (see Pontillo 2007: 425–427; Candotti and Pontillo 2015: 155), the term *vrātya*, inflected as a plural, usually has a rather negative connotation. It reflects a non-institutionalised figure in the Indo-Aryan society. This Indo-Aryan society deviates from the established tradition in the Vedic canon. It is plausible to retrace a period where the *Vrātya* persona was connected to a community distinguished by the concept of a “group” and expeditions conducted by the military. However, this practice was later criticised by Brahmanic orthodoxy and referred to in the texts as a cause of contamination, to the extent that the *Vrātya* was identified with the outcast (Candotti and Pontillo 2015: 163; Dore and Pontillo 2016: 5,15).

² From a wider Vedic stance, this juncture in the story can be viewed as the earliest pivotal facet. Indeed, the textual references to Sujātā’s pregnancy and her need for wealth align with the ancient Vedic progeneration myth linked to the goddess Uṣas (see Kuiper 1960: 234–236).

depending on whether they are Brahmins, sages or *kṣatriyas*. Nonetheless, the verbal contest has an adverse result: Kahoḍa is punished by drowning for having lost the contest to Bandin.

Twelve years later (*varṣe dvādaśe* MBh 3.132.16a), Aṣṭāvakra takes on the task of confronting Bandin, although his intentions are quite different from his father's. In fact, he wants to demonstrate his superiority in the field of knowledge. Aṣṭāvakra and Śvetaketu then decide to participate in verbal competition at the sacrifice hosted by King Janaka (MBh 3.132.19–20):

gacchāva yajñam janakasya rājño bahvāścaryaḥ śrūyate tasya yajñah |
śroṣyāvo 'tra brāhmaṇānām vivādam annam cāgryam tatra bhokṣyāvahe ca |
vicakṣaṇatvam ca bhaviṣyate nau śivaś ca saumyaś ca hi brahmaghoṣah ||
tau jagmatur mātulabhāgineyau yajñam samṛddham janakasya rājñah |
aṣṭāvakraḥ pathi rājñā sametya utsāryamāṇo vākyam idam jagāda ||

“Let us go to King Janaka's sacrifice, his sacrifice is said to be full of wonders. We shall listen to the debate of the Brahmins and eat excellent food. There, the status of sages will arise for us, and the murmur of prayers will be kind and friendly.” Those two, the maternal uncle (i.e., Śvetaketu) and the nephew (i.e., Aṣṭāvakra) came to King Janaka's successful sacrifice. After meeting the king on the road, Aṣṭāvakra delivered this speech, challenging him with words.³

There are two main points to consider here, one linguistic and one cultural. Firstly, it is worth noting the use of the word *vivādam* which I have translated as “debate.” The lemma is part of the technical lexicon of oral contests. According to Kuiper, *vivāda* is a later derivation of the verbal root *vi-√vad-* “to declare,” “to announce.” This root is only found in ancient Vedic texts and subsequently fell out of use. It means “a dispute, quarrel, contest,” and later specifically “a contest at law, legal dispute, litigation, lawsuit” (Kuiper 1960: 273).

³ I regard *vākyam* as an *apokoinou* of two verbal roots, *ut-√sr-* and *√gad-* respectively.

Culturally and ritually speaking, King Janaka's sacrifice is of the potlatch type. It clearly contains typical features attributed to the *sabhā*, a social institution traditionally associated with the Vṛātyas (Held 1935).⁴ It is said to be filled with wonders (*bahvāścarya*)⁵ and Aṣṭāvakra hopes that it will bestow the status of sages on them (*vicakṣaṇatva*).⁶ He displays confidence as to being granted entry to the king's sacrifice. However, he presents a challenge to King Janaka by using language unbecoming for his young age. In *adhyāya* 133, Aṣṭāvakra's superior eloquence is acknowledged, granting him access to the sacrifice where he publicly declares his intention to confront Bandin (3.133.14, 17):

draṣṭāsy adya vadato dvārapāla māṇīṣibhiḥ saha vāde vivṛddhe |
utāho vāpy uccatām nīcatām vā tūṣṇīm bhūteṣv atha sarveṣu cādya ||
 (...) *vidvān bandī vedavido nigrhya vāde bhagnān apratiśaṅkamānaḥ |*
tvayā nīsrṣṭaiḥ puruṣair āptakṛdbhir jale sarvān majjayatīti naḥ śrutam ||

“Today, O Guardian of the Entrance, you are witnessing the superiority and inferiority of the one who speaks together with the sages, when the discourse was well underway, while the others are silent. (...) We have heard that Bandin the Learned, devoid of fear, having seized the knowers-of-the-Veda, defeated by him in a debate, drowns them in the water by means of trustworthy men, sent by you.”

The text shows Aṣṭāvakra openly opposing Bandin, juxtaposing two contrasting patterns of competition for knowledge: a young, arrogant Brahmin versus a violent competitor.

⁴ For deeper and more recent reflections on the *Mahābhārata* as a representation of the so-called *sabhā* “society,” see (Vassilkov 2015: 231; 2016: 187; Pontillo 2016: 205, cf Edholm 2017: 8).

⁵ Apart from this reference, the lemma occurs three other times in the *Mahābhārata*, always only in the third book and always qualifying idyllic and supernatural places (MBh 3.79.13; 3.87.6; 3.141.25).

⁶ This abstract noun derived from the adjective *vicakṣaṇa* is apparently a *hapax* and only occurs here.

2.2. The *brahmodya* and the reckoning

The text then presents a technical passage in which the *brahmodya* is formally declared (MBh 3.133.18, 20, 27):

[*aṣṭāvakra uvāca* 16]

*sa tac chrutvā brāhmaṇānām sakāśād brahmodyaṃ vai kathayitum āgato
'smi |*

kvāsau bandī yāvad enaṃ sametya nakṣatrāṇīva savitā nāśayāmi ||

(...) vivādito 'sau na hi mādrśair hi siṃhīkṛtas tena vadaty abhītaḥ |

sametya mām nihataḥ śeṣyate 'dya mārge bhagnaṃ śakaṭam ivābalākṣam ||

(...) rājovāca |

*na tvā manye mānuṣaṃ devasattvaṃ na tvaṃ bālaḥ sthaviraṃ tvaṃ mato
me |*

na te tulyo vidyate vākpralāpe tasmād dvāraṃ vitarāmy eṣa bandī ||

[Aṣṭāvakra said:] “Having heard this in the presence of the Brahmins, I have come to discuss the *brahmodya*. Where is this Bandin? After meeting him, I will simply wipe him out, as the sun wipes out the stars.⁷ (...) He has never, in truth, entered into a debate with equals like me; in truth, transformed into a lion by such a situation, he speaks without fear. After meeting me today, he, once felled, will lie on the road like a broken chariot with a broken axle.”

(...) The King said: “I do not think that you are a man, but that you have the nature of a god; you are not a child, you are an elder, this is what I think: I do not know anyone equal to you in eloquence, so I go through the door, here is Bandin.”

⁷ The proposed simile (*upamā*) seems to be unique within the *Mahābhārata*. The implied common property (*sādhāraṇadharmā*) between the subject (*upameya*) and the object of comparison (*upamāna*), that is the brightness of sunlight, causes the dim light of the stars to disappear (√*naś-*) as night turns into day. However, if we consider the use of the verbal root √*naś-* together with the comparative particle *iva* and the sun as the subject of comparison (*upameya*), the existing similes are different. To my knowledge, however, there seems to be only one instance where √*naś-* is used in a concept similar to the one under discussion, namely in MBh 7.138.23ab, where the army of Pāṇḍavas is likened to the blazing sun (*yathā prabhā bhāskarasyāpi naśyet*).

This excerpt reveals the only occurrence of the lemma *brahmodya* in the entire *Mahābhārata*. The formal declaration found here is in line with the Upaniṣadic style of *brahmodya*. The fervour with which Aṣṭāvakra asserts his superiority certainly qualifies him as a charismatic and positive figure.⁸ At this point, King Janaka acknowledges Aṣṭāvakra’s divine nature. His eloquence is unparalleled, and upon his introduction to Bandin, he is able to carry out the planned final reckoning (MBh 3.134.6):

lomaśa uvāca |
aṣṭāvakraḥ samitau garjamāno jātakrodho bandinam āha rājan |
ukte vākye cottaraṃ me bravīhi vākyasya cāpy uttaraṃ te bravīmi ||

Lomaśa said:

“O king, Aṣṭāvakra!” Thundering in the assembly, inflamed with anger, addressed Bandin: “After I have spoken my words, give me an answer, and I will answer your words.”

The *śloka* outlines the procedural stages of the *brahmodya*, where the participants take turns in posing a series of challenging riddles to each other. It is worth noting the reference to the *sabhā* context in the account of King Janaka’s sacrifice as well as the use of the term *samiti* to formally address the assembly where the sacrifice takes place. Indeed, as Kuiper (1960: 240) observes, the *samiti* / *sabhā* is not only a preferred location for the *brahmodya*, but it can also be associated with a Vrātya context.⁹

⁸ I refer to what Desnitskaya (2020: 163) asserts about Upaniṣadic competitions: “In upaniṣadic competition, justification is usually not through rational argument, but through the participant’s charisma and association with nondiscursive knowledge.”

⁹ Rossi (2015: 117) defines *sabhā* as “the space of human speech, especially in a tribal cultural context.” From a literary point of view, the assembly takes on a special connotation in the context of *Śaunaka Atharvaveda* 13.4 which deals with the *brahmacārin* and the *ekavrātya* and their attainment of a higher status (I am referring to Dore’s contribution in Pontillo, T. et al. 2015: 56–57). See Mucciarelli 2015 for further reflections on Vrātya poetry.

In fact, a sequence of riddles is presented in the remaining sections (134.1–20),¹⁰ until Bandin decides to stop answering (*vi-√ram-* 20a). Aṣṭāvakra then concludes the last sentence, and the silence of his adversary serves as the means of determining the winner of the contest.

Let us now proceed a little further in the text to the moment when Bandin admits defeat and reveals his identity as Varuṇa’s son. In fact, the very purpose of the *sattra* in honour of his father Varuṇa which Bandin performed at the same time as King Janaka’s sacrifice took place, was to drown the Brahmins, and thus Kahoḍa as well (MBh 3.134.24–25):

bandy uvāca |
ahaṃ putro varuṇasyota rājñas tatrāsa sattraṃ dvādaśavārṣikaṃ vai |
satrena te janaka tulyakālaṃ tadarthaṃ te prahitā me dvijāgryāḥ ||
ete sarve varuṇasyota yajñam draṣṭuṃ gatā iha āyānti bhūyah |
aṣṭāvakraṃ pūjaye pūjanīyaṃ yasya hetor janitāraṃ sameśye ||

Bandin said: “I am the son of King Varuṇa! There (i.e., at Varuṇa’s place) the Twelve-year *sattra* was conducted, at the same time as yours, O Janaka. That is why these excellent twice-borns were sent by me (there)”.

Two primary considerations may be inferred from this series of *ślokas*. From the technical point of view, a direct connection to the Vṛātya context is established by the explicit reference to the *sattra* in the text.¹¹

¹⁰ For the sake of brevity, the content of the riddles will not be dealt with here (see Shulman 1996: 165–166).

¹¹ Studies by Falk (1986), Heesterman (1962; 1964; 1982; 1993; 2012), and Candotti and Pontillo (2015) have shown how the ritual of *sattra* is characteristic of the Vṛātya groups. In particular, scholars have acknowledged some affinities between the *sattra* and the *vṛātyastoma* in the way the ritual is conducted (Biswas 1955; Heesterman 1962: 3). The *Śrauta* ritual is highly systematised, but this does not mean that it is free of contradictions, which can be seen as evidence of a process of preserving—without eradicating—obsolete practices that diverge from the tradition in the making. Heesterman’s assessment of the *vṛātyastoma* is in terms of this “generational clash” between old and new rites that would have been successive within the same Brahmanic religion. In this context, he emphasises the

Secondly, Bandin's association with Varuṇa is key to the secondary interpretation of the whole Upākhyāna from a parallel standpoint. This echoes a Vedic image that appears to be implicit throughout the text and only becomes explicit at this point in the narration, even in the language. The repetitive use of the emphatic adverb *uta* in *pādas* 24a and 25a provides the text with a Vedic veneer.¹²

Aṣṭāvakra twice recounts Bandin's aggressive competitiveness, which resulted in the violent deaths of his former opponents. (MBh 3.134.23, 26):

*aṣṭāvakra uvāca |
 anena vai brāhmaṇāḥ śuśruvāmsō vāde jtvā salile majjitāḥ kila |
 tān eva dharmān ayam adya bandī prāpnotu grhyāpsu nimajjayainam ||
 (...) viprāḥ samudrāmbhasi majjitās te vācā jitā medhayā āvidānāḥ |
 tāṃ medhayā vācam athojjahāra yathā vācam avacinvanti santaḥ ||*

Aṣṭāvakra said: "In fact, after he won the debate, he drowned the Brahmins in water: So I have heard. But let this Bandin get the same *dharmas* today. After catching him, drown him in water. (...) The wise were drowned by you in the waters of the ocean: Though endowed with knowledge, they were overwhelmed by the word through intelligence. Now I have raised the word by means of intelligence: That the wise may examine it."¹³

need to make a methodological distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The conceptual difference between the two definitions lies in the hypothesis of conversion implied by the former, and the need for purification that restores the individual from a previous state of contamination implied by the latter.

¹² Lüders (1951: 9–12; 41–56) in particular has extensively recognised Varuṇa as a god traditionally associated with water. Since the sacrifice offered by Bandin is strictly and violently associated with water, this is even more significant.

¹³ The verbal root *ud-√(d)hr* appears 123 times in the MBh, predominantly with the sense of "to elevate (something)." Only five occurrences are in the perfect tense, found in MBh 1.16.7; 1.73.22; 3.134.26; 5.29.35; 12.333.11. The most commonly preferred meanings, based on various textual contexts, involve lifting or raising something (followed by an accusative case, e.g., MBh 1.16.7), pulling something out from somewhere (with ablative case, e.g., MBh 1.73.22), and once, freeing or saving someone from something (accompanied by both an ablative and an

In fact, since Aṣṭāvakra is the victor, he has the power to determine Bandin's fate. Therefore, he can punish him in any manner he sees fit, in this instance, by condemning Bandin to death by drowning (MBh 3.134.29–30):

janaka uvāca |
śṛṇomi vācam tava divyārūpām amānuṣīm divyārūpo 'si sākṣāt |
ajaiṣīr yad bandinaṃ tvaṃ vivāde nisṛṣṭa eṣa tava kāmo 'dya bandī ||
aṣṭāvakra uvāca |
nānena jīvatā kaś cid artho me bandinā nrpa |
pitā yady asya varuṇo majjayainaṃ jalāśaye ||

Janaka said: "I hear your speech; having a divine, superhuman form, you are evidently a divine being in a bodily form. You who defeated Bandin in the debate, now, according to your wish, Bandin will be granted to you." Aṣṭāvakra said: "O King, there's no point in my letting Bandin live. If Varuṇa is his father, let him be drowned in the lake!"

This closing phrase is technically in line with the principle that the loser's inadequate knowledge in *brahmodya* warrants the application of violence (Parpola 2015: 139). In fact, as demonstrated by the Upaniṣadic and Buddhist models, the loser faces death. Ultimately, all the defeated Brahmins are resurrected along with Kahoḍa, while Bandin enters the water as the final sacrificial victim to fulfil once and for all the sacrifice for Varuṇa (MBh 3.134.37).¹⁴

accusative, e.g., MBh 5.29.35). Therefore, considering the *usus scribendi*, I have opted for the translation "raised the word."

¹⁴ As Shulman (1996: 165) previously noted: "(...) both rites achieve conclusion, an end to the riddles, only when the 'crooked' twelve-year-old boy [i.e., Aṣṭāvakra] completes the thirteenth verse. By doing so, he propels the earthly ritual to superior status, as the defeated riddlers returning from the sea announce (...)."

3. Concluding remarks: An echo of Vedic imagery and the two opposing Vrātya models

The current article presents a preliminary study of the *Aṣṭāvakra-Īyāna* (MBh 3.132–134) and offers its interpretation based on various patterns that are probably associated with a Vrātya context, both ritually and historically. Furthermore, an effort is made to explore a similar perspective from the point of view of a wider Vedic imagery.

In relation to the Vedic background, certain aspects of the story appear to stem from the Vedic representation of the creation myth, such as progeneration, death and rebirth (Kuiper 1960). References to the Vedic imagery of the creation myth may possibly be observed in the pregnant Sujātā, who could symbolise Uṣas' progeneration, seeing that the goddess is closely linked with the concept of prosperity (see MBh 3.132.13b). Especially since Uṣas is also recognised by Kuiper “as the goddess of the [potlatch] contest.”¹⁵ From this perspective, it could be argued that the successful hero, Aṣṭāvakra, corresponds to Indra “as the prototype of the competing hero” (Kuiper *ibid.*: 236). Finally, the key piece of evidence in favour of the current interpretation dwells in the fact that the text explicitly and unambiguously identifies Bandin as Varuṇa's son.

As for the technical passage regarding the *brahmodya*, it can be argued that there are two opposing models of Vrātyas in the knowledge competition between Aṣṭāvakra and Bandin. Indeed, Aṣṭāvakra may be seen as representing a “positive” Vrātya, whereas Bandin appears to embody a “negative” one. Aṣṭāvakra's heroics of reviving defeated Brahmins are accepted by Brahmanic orthodoxy, while his arrogance is overlooked. In contrast, Bandin is considered a negative Vrātya due to his violent competition for knowledge. His aggressive Vrātya approach is condemned, and this leads to his demise.

¹⁵ According to Kuiper (*ibid.*: 234–236) Uṣas “is implored to bestow vital strength and sons,” but she is also associated with the bestowal of wealth, which is implied as “a divine blessing, a gift.” Moreover, “this wealth is also won in strife, in contests which are fought with the traditional weapons of the Aryans, viz. with races and word duels.”

The slaying of Bandin by Aṣṭāvakra may resemble Indra's slaying of Vṛtra and the subsequent transfer of Varuṇa's duties to safeguard the cosmic law, as depicted in the Vedic myth.¹⁶ Varuṇa, through his son Bandin, is also greatly impacted by the outcome of this contest. After Aṣṭāvakra's victory, he has the task of bringing back to life all the Brahmans who had been drowned by Bandin and sent to Varuṇa's simultaneous and rival sacrifice.¹⁷ Indeed, the ritualised debates in the Hindu and Buddhist philosophy inherited the agonistic nature of ancient verbal contests. The outcome of these debates was often described using metaphors such as "life" and "death," and the participants were known for their emphatic, theatrical aggressiveness. In both traditions, the victorious speaker was praised for their prowess and likened to the god Indra, whose voice was said to rumble like thunder. It is worth mentioning that Aṣṭāvakra, who commences his argument with Bandin, is already "thundering" (*garjamāna*) in a manner akin to that of Indra.

To sum up, the *Mahābhārata* reflects the post-Vedic scenario of Sanskrit literature. Although the text presents itself as a Brahmanical manifesto, it also includes elements of archaic social organisation as defined by Brockington (1998: 214) and previously identified by Held (1935) as belonging to the Vrātya phenomenon. The *Mahābhārata* may possibly serve once again as a reliable source for understanding the Vrātya socio-cultural context (Hiltebeitel 2001; Vassilkov 2016).

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¹⁶ See Kuiper *ibid.*: 219: "[after Indra slayed Vṛtra,] to Varuṇa (...) a new function is now assigned as guardian of the cosmic law (*ṛtā*), which remains hidden in the nether world." For a thorough and detailed discussion of Varuṇa and *ṛtā* see also Lüders 1959.

¹⁷ Thanks to one of the reviewers for having drawn my attention to this subject.

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