

AFTERWORD

Mitra-Varuna: The Ongoing Life of a Concept

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If the criteria of success and failure may be applied at all to the intellectual life of a concept, then the success of Dumézil's writing on Mitra-Varuna¹ lies, not so much in resolving problems once and for all, but in the influence it continues to wield on reshaping questions in contemporary discussions on sovereignty across many disciplines. I single out three issues: the problem of sovereignty and how to think of it beyond the right to kill; the tripartite division of functions that are seen to constitute the underlying ideology of the Indo-European world; and the significance of multiplicity of gods that bypasses the standard classification into monotheism, polytheism, or pantheism. The importance of the pairing of gods is evident everywhere in the Indo-European world, as Dumézil says, but I have been able to give attention only to the missing female figures, though it remains an important question as to how pairs and couples relate to larger groupings of gods. I do not claim that there are any definitive answers to how we should receive a book like *Mitra-Varuna* today, but if anthropology has any conceit that it is hospitable to other modes of thought and their salience for "provincializing Europe," the texts we allow into the canon must be raked for their potential for the future they might have as much as for their past. My discussion is

heavily oriented to the Indian texts that I know best, but Dumézil shows us that the relevance of these texts is not confined to the local.

The opening paragraph of the first edition of *Mitra-Varuna*, from 1940, states:

This essay investigates a certain bipartite conception of sovereignty that appears to have been present among the Indo-Europeans, and that dominated the mythologies of certain of the peoples who spoke Indo-European languages at the time of the earliest documents. In my earlier work, mostly devoted to the mechanisms and representations of sovereignty, I had already encountered some of the elements that interest me here; but I had previously understood their relations only very imperfectly. In this work, it is the broad system of those relations that I try to elucidate.

Dumézil then goes on to say:

The system is truly inherent in the material. It may be observed, always the same, in the most diverse sets of facts – in all those sets of facts, one might say, that fall within the province of sovereignty ... there has been no need for me to reconstruct or to interpret anything whatsoever: those who used the myths, rituals and formulas were quite conscious of the system; my sole task has been to make clear its scope and its antiquity.²

It is interesting to see the steps by which Dumézil came to see what he describes as the transparency of the system³ informed by the tripartite division of the social world into three functions, viz., the priestly function combining the juridical and magical, the warrior function, and the function related to production of material prosperity and fecundity. Of these three functions, it is the first and the second which influenced the discussion on sovereignty in later literature. In the book on *Mitra-Varuna* and the series of lectures on this theme at the Collège de France from 1938 and 1939, Dumézil drew attention to other pairs, such as Numa and Romulus, Tyr and Odhinn, comparing them to *Mitra-Varuna* to establish an ideology of the dual character of sovereignty as expressed in the mythology of the Indo-European world. Although his earlier work on the relations between Centaurs, Gandharvas, and Luperici, which he published in 1929, as well as on the correspondences between Ouranos and Varuna, in 1934, or on the similarities between Brahman and flamen,

in 1935, did not receive the same attention as *Mitra-Varuna*, these earlier works contributed to his stunning breakthrough on the internal partition in the domain of sovereignty. Conceptually important in *Mitra-Varuna* was that the two gods were seen to represent a *relation*, rather than being treated as a collection through aggregation. Equally significant is the fact that the second warrior function represented in the mythology of the Vedic god, Indra, was seen as lying “outside” the domain of sovereignty. As the representation of the warrior, Indra is a transgressive figure who sometimes violates the law of the sovereign in the domains of sexuality and economics, but also offers a different picture of justice than that represented in the penal power of Varuna. We shall see that the idea of “outside” is not a simple one. We may ask, for instance, if Indra’s being outside the split domain of the sovereign is symmetrical to the *śūdra* being outside the *varna* system. Indra in his warrior function challenges the force wielded by Varuna as much as he disrupts the pact-making functions of Mitra, whereas, lying outside the tripartite functions, the *śūdra* seems to disappear from the text. Does Dumézil’s method of constructing hierarchy as a succession of binary oppositions rather than a linear distribution through application of a single measure help determine what lies inside a domain and what falls outside? Let us look at Dumézil’s mapping of the tripartite partition of functions on the *varna* hierarchy, which he takes to be equivalent to social hierarchy.

The Indians’ social hierarchy, like the system of ideas that sustains it, is linear in appearance only. In reality it is a sequence, rather Hegelian in character, in which a thesis summons an antithesis then combines with it in a synthesis that becomes in turn a further thesis, thus providing fresh material enabling the process to continue. For example, *brāhmna*, *ṣatriya* and *vaiśya* (priest, warrior and herdsman-cultivator) are not to be numbered “one, two, three.” The *brāhmna* is defined at the outset in opposition to the *ṣatriya*; then the two are reconciled and collaborate in a new notion, that of “power” (*ubhe virye*, “the two forces,” is the eloquent dual expression in some texts), which is then immediately defined in opposition to *vaiśya* (e.g., Manu, IX, 327), an opposition itself resolved by a synthesis into the *dvija*, “the twice-born,” which is then confronted by the appearance of the *śūdra*.⁴

It is to be noted that, while the first function, referring to the sovereign, has two occupants or figures, and the warrior function receives attention

as the figuration of force outside the control of the sovereign, there is not much discussion on the *vaiśya* as the one who sustains the material order. This is at least partly due to the fact that the category of the householder as the one who sustains everyday life and maintains the sacrificial fire receives no attention because of the kinds of texts that are excluded from consideration (e.g., the *Grhya Sūtras*) and partly because once the śūdra is excluded from the “twice-born” status, it is assumed that he is excluded from religious life altogether. The elaboration of what it would mean to say that the category of the twice-born is *confronted* by the category of the śūdra is left hanging in the air. While I cannot elaborate this point further here, I simply note that the theme of the extinction of the kṣatriyas as a varna is explicit in the epics, and the possibility of śūdra kings, their purification, and the legitimacy they acquire through the ritual participation of some Brahman castes is a matter of discussion in the mythic register.⁵ Would a further discussion on the dilemmas posed by śūdra *kings* have illuminated other, darker aspects of sovereignty for the varna ideology and the tripartite functions? Let us turn to Louis Dumont⁶ for some questions on the double-headed hierarchy within sovereignty from a different angle, though Dumont pays very little attention to the non-normative kings who appear temporarily in myths such as Nahuṣa who replaces Indra as the ruler of heaven but is killed because of his sexual infringements against Indra’s wife.

In his magnum opus, Dumont (1998 [1970]) starts with the distinction between *jatis* and *varnas*, a distinction that M.N. Srinivas had mapped on the “field-view” of caste and the “book-view” of caste.⁷ But while Srinivas thought that there was a bias in Indian studies toward privileging texts over the messy empirical realities that accounted for the dominance of the varna model in scholarly literature on caste, Dumont detected an opposition between two different principles underlying the systems of *jati* and *varna*. In his analytical frame, inter-caste relations at the level of *jatis* were expressed in such practices as exchange of food, ritual services provided to higher castes, particularly with regard to removal of pollution, and the attribution of higher or lower rank to castes within the *local* hierarchy. Such relations of exchange, which lay at the heart of the *jati* system, he famously argued, were governed by the overarching opposition between pure and impure that provided the criteria for assigning higher or lower status to different castes, especially those in the middle rungs of the hierarchy. At this level there was consensus on the highest and lowest rung of the caste hierarchy, but disputes occurred on the middle level as specific castes strived to change their practices

for claiming higher status. The principle of hierarchy in the case of the varna system, despite its enumeration of *four* varnas, was much more concerned with the relation between priesthood and power, represented in the relation between the Brahman and the king. It is the intersections and overlaps between the two systems, that of *jati* and that of varna, and the positing of a structural homology between them that allows Dumont to resolve the vexing question of the place of power in determining caste hierarchy. After all, if it is the opposition of pure and impure that determines the position of a caste in relation to other castes, how would one account for the fact the Brahman caste, which is the purest, is dependent on the *kṣatriyas*, who wield temporal power? Dumézil's theory of a divided sovereignty became decisive in enabling Dumont to keep his theory of the dominance of the purity–pollution opposition intact against the challenge that was posed by material dependence of Brahmans on patrons who were lower on the criteria of purity but wielded power. If the opposition of pure and impure was primarily a religious opposition, Dumont asked, could one generate a theory of power that relied equally on religious principles? Here is a crucial citation from Dumont:

Once hierarchy has been isolated as purely a matter of religious values, it naturally remains to be seen how it relates to power, and how authority is to be defined. In the previous chapter, we linked the principle of hierarchy with the opposition between the pure and the impure. Now we cannot but recognize that this opposition, a purely religious one, tells us nothing about the place of power in society. On this question we must resort to a traditional Hindu theory which, while not dealing with caste (*jati*) *stricto sensu*, yet has an intimate bearing on it.⁸

Thanks to Hocart and more precisely to Dumézil the hierarchy of the varnas can be seen not as a linear order, but as a series of successive dichotomies or inclusions . . . the *Kshatriya* may order a sacrifice as may the *Vaishya*, but only the Brahman may perform it. The king is thus deprived of any sacerdotal function... It can be seen that the series of dichotomies on which this hierarchy rests is formally somewhat similar to caste hierarchy, and it is also essentially religious; but it is less systematic, and its principles are different.⁹

My interest in this Afterword is not to engage with the merits or the blind spots in Dumont's overarching arguments, on which I have offered my criticisms elsewhere.¹⁰ However I think it is important to pay some attention to the way Dumézil's work is incorporated to overcome

an impasse that sovereign power poses for Dumont and his claim that caste hierarchy is based on the religious principles of purity and impurity. Dumont was not interested in the representations of sovereignty through Mitra-Varuna or in what lay outside the domain of the sovereign through the figure of Indra, the warrior god. None of these themes play any part in his argument. His insistence that in India the religion of gods is secondary and the religion of castes is primary¹¹ causes him to miss the richness of Dumézil's discussion on sovereignty and power. Yet Dumont's demonstration that the principles underlying the jati system are different from the principles underlying the varna system invites us to think further on the transformations that happen to the figures of Indo-European mythology as they journeyed to other places and interacted with other ideologies. Though he expresses much admiration for Dumézil, Dumont does not engage with the Vedic gods as representations of sovereignty. In the field of religious studies and Indo-European Studies, these questions remain very much alive.

Mitra-Varuna and Their Traces

In a variant passage reproduced in Appendix II of the present volume, Dumézil noted:

Mitra-Varuṇa, and all related pairs, are strictly valid only when it comes to Sovereignty. There is nothing, at least at this point of our study, to suggest that they are still valid, that they still make sense at other levels of the social organism, for example in representations pertaining to non-sovereign warriors or agricultural pastoralists: on the contrary, some of the facts noted in Chapter VI (Indra against Varuṇa, the *nexi soluti*) suggest that the intervention of the "military" changes the perspective entirely, even in the domain of Sovereignty proper. In other words, far from being the primary, general framework of the world, this dualism is inserted as a subdivision in a completely different framework.¹²

Let us take the first part of this observation and ask how to take further the question "... [do] they still make sense at other levels of the social organism?" Bhrigupati Singh's compelling analysis of precisely this issue starts with the relation between current practices of devotion to a minor deity, Thakur Baba, by members of the Saharia community he

studied in a district in Rajasthan, India, a low-status group which occupies the fuzzy boundary between caste and tribe on the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy.¹³ Small wayside shrines of Thakur Baba and other minor deities or spirits dot the landscape of every village of the region, and when asked who Thakur Baba was, villagers often told Singh that he was a Rajput (a member of the warrior caste) who died in battle, continuing to fight even after his head was cut off. Singh takes Thakur Baba to be the sovereign over the area in which he presides and finds, in the Mitra-Varuna division of the sovereign function, the ambivalence and duality that Thakur Baba establishes with his devotees. Comparable to the great force exercised by Varuna, Thakur Baba sometimes strikes down those who defy him. But like Mitra, he also makes pacts with his devotees, receiving offerings and granting boons to resolve their difficulties or to fulfill their aspirations and desires.

For Singh, Dumézil provides an alternative that enables a much more nuanced model of sovereignty than the vastly admired and prevalent model based on the figure of *homo sacer* in Roman law. However a puzzle remains for Singh as it did for Dumézil, viz., that it is hard to locate the horse-bound heroic figure of the Rajput warrior in the current politics of India. As Singh writes: “Where could I locate the power that Thakur Baba expresses? Unless we look to the tourist brochures of Indian heritage hotels, it would be impossible to find a present-day Rajput who embodies the martial ethos of a horse-bound warrior’s death. And yet in many areas of Rajasthan and central India, the deified specter of Thakur Baba subsists among high and low castes, and tribes, former generations of whom may have lived under the rule of Rajputs. Why do these social groups preserve this ‘feudal’ figure among spirits, even though he is materially outmoded ... ?”¹⁴ Singh does well in answering this question to show that a bipolar notion of sovereignty allows one to think of sovereignty not as a unipolar concentrated power manifested in the right to kill, but as a negotiable contract between sovereign and subject.¹⁵ There are gradations of sovereignty, but Singh conceptualizes these gradations to become active over different thresholds of life rather than at different levels of social organization. Two questions remain. First, it is not entirely clear from Singh’s discussion whether the Rajputs dispossessed of their right to rule might not have moved into the category of the warrior, the second function in Dumézil’s tripartite division, which he places outside sovereignty. In that case, one would need to think of varna categories as mobile, and Singh’s discussion of the negotiations over offerings (through substitutions) whereby villagers have slowly shifted

to offerings which do not require the killing of an animal demonstrates the pact-making aspect of sovereignty.

This negotiation between deity and devotees not only bears the traces of Mitra but also nicely incorporates the dimension of time into contract. It also calls for the relation between the first and second functions to be fleshed out much more than is usual (on which more later). But Singh's ethnographic eye shows us how and where to find traces of the Vedic deities in current ritual and devotional practices, and this might be a very rewarding issue to pursue.

The Warrior Function

The complementary relation of Mitra-Varuna finds a new iteration in the discussion by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.¹⁶ Thinking of the war machine, the authors argue that the war machine is exterior to the State apparatus and that this exteriority is first attested to in mythology, epic, drama, and games, as Dumézil had shown through his method. The Mitra-Varuna opposition, Deleuze and Guattari argue, when set against the actions of Indra, who represents the warrior function, shows which kind of violence the State has at its disposal. The authors are emphatic that war is not contained within the State apparatus: “*Either* the State has at its disposal a violence that is not channeled through war—either it uses police officers and jailors in place of warriors, has no arms and no need of them, operates by immediate, magical capture, ‘seizes’ and ‘binds’ preventing all combat—*or* the State acquires an army, but in a way that presupposes a juridical integration of war and the organization of a military function.”¹⁷ As Dumézil had perceptively argued, Indra as war god has the opposite qualities of being the rogue god outside the laws of sexuality and of economics who could show both extraordinary cruelty and paradoxically extraordinary compassion. “And the warrior especially, because of his position either on the fringe of or even above the code, regards himself as having the right to clemency; the right to break, among other things, the mandates of ‘strict justice’; the right, in short, to introduce into the terrible determinism of human relations that miracle: humanity.” Deleuze and Guattari use this insight to develop a more elaborate theory in which the war machine remains exterior to the apparatus of the State but in some circumstances becomes confused with the two heads of the State apparatus. In their words, “[i]n short whenever the irruption of war power is

confused with the line of State domination, everything gets muddled; the war machine can then be understood only through the categories of the negative, since nothing is left that is outside the State. But returned to the milieu of externality, the state power is seen to be of another nature, of another origin.” The absolute irreducibility and exteriority of the warrior function is revealed only in flashes, since it becomes visible momentarily as it passes between the two heads, the jural and the magical force, the peaceful pole and the terrible pole, represented by Mitra and Varuna and other similar pairs within the Indo-European ideology. I cannot go into a detailed discussion of the specificity of Deleuze and Guattari’s argument here since the point is not to provide a measure of how close or distant their formulations are to Dumézil’s arguments but to show the various directions in which Dumézil’s insights could move social theory or philosophical thought. I will, however, allow myself one final thought, which complicates the already complex relation between sovereignty and the warrior function.

Force Inside the Law, Outside the Law

In section IV, Chapter VI of *Mitra-Varuna*, Indra is shown primarily in his battles against the bonds of Varuna. There are two myth fragments in which Indra steps in to prohibit the blind following of a law of sacrifice that would be legal but cruel and rescues the victims bound by Varuna for having broken the laws of sacrifice. In the first case, Manu is making preparations to sacrifice his wife. He is tricked into this act by the word he has given to two demonic priests. At that moment, Indra steps in, halts the sacrifice, and ordains that Manu will still get the benefits of the sacrifice.

The second case, as Dumézil tells it, is of Śunaḥśepa, in which a king has been seized by Varuna because he did not keep his promise to sacrifice his son to Varuna.¹⁸ The king is a righteous king, and though Varuna wants to release him from the obligation to sacrifice his son, he himself is bound by the law and cannot break it. However Varuna consents to a substitution of the victim by another human victim. A Brahman boy, the middle son of a highly regarded Brahman ascetic in the grip of poverty and hunger, is bought and substituted for the king’s son as the sacrificial offering. Terrified, the boy approaches various gods; each god expresses his own helplessness in the face of Varuna’s might and passes him to another in a kind of relay. Śunaḥśepa is finally released through the

force of a prayer given to him by the goddess Dawn. Though it is the goddess Dawn who finally gives him the *mantra* that releases him from the bonds of Varuna, Dumézil draws from other stories to suggest that this story is an instantiation of the compassion shown by Indra in his warrior function.¹⁹

Another allusion to this story, taken from an incident mentioned in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, is relevant here. It refers to the moment when Rama, having vanquished Ravana, the Brahman demon king of Lanka, returns victorious to his capital where he is crowned with great pomp and splendor. He wishes to perform the *rājasūya yajna* to proclaim his lordship over the entire earth. However Rama is dissuaded from performing this sacrifice by his two younger brothers, who urge him to perform the horse sacrifice instead, since the *rājasūya yajna* would entail the risk of extinguishing the entire kṣatriya race and could even destroy the earth. Rama praises his brothers for their wisdom and releases a black horse that would roam the earth unchallenged and thus proclaim Rama's sovereignty over the entire earth before being sacrificed in the *aśvamedha* ritual sacrifice. Dumézil comments that it is "that very *aśvamedha*, respectful of human life, that was originally instituted by Indra." Furthermore we have seen how Deleuze and Guattari, too, see the glimmer of a human sympathy that originates in the warrior's opposition to the cruelty of human sacrifice. However the story does not lend itself so easily to the interpretation of Indra the warrior as displaying here a great compassion and the miraculous advent of humanism to which Dumézil assumes it gives expression. So let us consider what Lakshmana says to Rama to persuade him to perform the horse sacrifice instead of the human sacrifice. It should be noted that Lakshmana speaks after his younger brother, Bharata, has spoken, and Rama has already been convinced by Bharata that performing the *rājasūya yajna* entails a great risk of extermination of the kṣatriya varna altogether. The implication is that, challenged by the humiliation of publicly having to accept Rama's overlordship, they might wage battle against him and die, and that the earth itself might be destroyed by continuing battles. So in speaking next, what has Lakshmana added to this conversation? Lakshmana says: "It is heard from the older texts that, sullied by the sin of killing a Brahman, Vasava was again purified by performing a horse sacrifice." The reference to Indra as Vasava here is an allusion to his being the head of the vasus and having killed Vritra by stealth. The evocation of this incident reminds us that Indra had committed the sin of killing a Brahman, perhaps the most heinous act; but Lakshmana's words are also aimed

at Rama, who was himself guilty of the same sin of *brahmahatyā*, the killing of a Brahman, for Ravana, though a demon, was also a learned Brahman.

Dumézil's discussion of this episode credits Indra for having instituted the sacrifice of a horse in place of the sacrifice of a human being: "And doubtless his [Indra's] intervention was more decisive still in the less 'priestly' forms of the story,²⁰ since later writings were to contrast the ancient ritual of royal consecration instituted by Varuṇa (the *rājasūya*), stained from the outset by human blood (as the Śunaḥśepa story presupposes and several details confirm), with that which has no human victim, instituted by Indra (*aśvamedha*). ... Rama yields to his brother's argument and unhesitatingly renounces 'the greatest of all the sacrifices (the *rājasūyāt krattutamāt nivartayāmi*),' because 'an act detrimental to the world ought not be performed by wise men (*Llokapīḍakararm karma na kartavyam vicakṣaṇaiḥ*) ...'. In its place, he celebrates the no less efficacious, no less glorious *aśvamedha*, that very *aśvamedha*, respectful of human life, originally instituted by Indra."²¹

Originally instituted by Indra? Respectful of human life? In both cases taken as instantiations of Indra's compassion, something is surely missing. First of all, it was the goddess Dawn (Ushas) who caused Varuṇa's bonds to dissolve and, second, Lakshmana's words were meant to remind Rama that not only did he not need any further affirmation of his dominion over the whole earth, but also that, having committed *brahmahatyā*, Rama was himself in need of purification *just as Indra had once been* in such need after the killing of Vritra. The evasion of the role of the female, whether as goddess Dawn in this story or as the grammatical and terrifying feminine that the act of killing a Brahman (*brahmahatyā*) releases,²² or the neglect of women who show compassion to Indra, including his wife, as Allen shows (see note 9), means that the question of the feminine in the pairings of the gods may need to go further in the direction of the she-gods. The relation between the warrior and the sovereign, the outside and the inside, is still open for discussion from the angle of the feminine.²³

That a book such as *Mitra-Varuṇa* can continue to open so many lines of inquiry, so many ways of inheriting it, shows its potency and unmatched creativity. The feminine enters in this text on *Mitra-Varuṇa* almost by stealth, but as a tribute to the possibilities of further expansion of the insights in *Mitra-Varuṇa*, one hopes that the elusive feminine figures of these early texts will find their own specificity and felicitous attention in years to come.