The Mudgala Upākhyāna (Mahābhārata 3.246–247) occupies a special niche in Alf Hiltebeitel’s map of the upākhyānas of the Mahābhārata: it provides him with a possible, a plausible agency behind the appearance of the first written text of our epic. Mudgala, the hero of the upākhyāna is the “Gleaner Brahman” (uñchavṛtti). He forages like a bird in the fields after harvest and not only subsists on the grains gleaned thus but also provides inexhaustible feasts to his guests. He is cast in the epic as a figure in a state of extreme Dharma, devoted to exacting adherence to the śrauta ritualism. His name possesses an independent resonance outside the epic: a distinct school of hauram rises in his name, the praxis of the Rgveda (ṚV) in śrauta ritual, based on its Śākala śākhā and thus in east Pāñcāla, south-eastern Pāñcāla, and Kosala (see below for discussion).1 Hiltebeitel sees them as a special group of Brahmans,2 attached to small Brahmanical kingdoms like the Śuṅga (ca. second century BCE)—perhaps “out of sorts”3 in the larger society, but in a sort of interface with Vyāsa and bringing out “at most through a couple of generations”4 the epic in its first written form. Can Mudgala be delineated further?

I attempt this, following another lead from Hiltebeitel, by envisioning him in the geography of the upākhyānas of the Mahābhārata, its various denizens, its different flora and fauna. His extreme dharma to śrauta ritualism already places him in a precise ecology. He might have been part of the exuberance of the hyper rituals5 of the period following the dissemination of the Kuru

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1 Max Müller, A History of Sanskrit Literature So Far as it Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmanas, rev. 2nd ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1860), 368, note 6. Mudgala is named as one of the five adherents of the Śākala Saṃhitā in the commentary to its prātiśākhya text.
3 Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, 19.
4 Ibid., 20.
5 During and after the development of the classical scheme of the soma rituals, starting with the Agniṣṭoma and ending with the Āptoryāma, Vedic ritualism seems to go into a high gear,
Pāñcāla orthodoxy-orthopraxy complex from a core Kuru center to the radically adjacent areas, especially in the Pāñcāla area and its east, toward Kosala and Videha and the emerging Magadha imperium (ca. sixth century BCE). Mudgala’s most immediate niche in this ecology is as a member of a patrilineal genetic group, bound twice by the well-known exogamy-endogamy regulations of the gotra institution, exogamy forbidding marriage to another Mudgala and endogamy, mandating marriage to only another gotra affiliate, as is ratified in the pravara list of the Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra (BŚS), ca. sixth century BCE.6 This makes Mudgala a “real” person, with what may be called a gotra narrative about a distinct identity, a human group defined in time—with a “before” into the Vedic past at its founding through the “present” of the epic to a future, as manifested in distinct historical Brahman groups.

The Vedic Origins of Mudgala

In continuing studies, I have shown that we can envisage the formation of a global Vedic oral agency from some forty-nine separate individual oral agencies, some of them the size of families, others comprising single individuals.7 The ten maṇḍala Ṛgveda captures a global collection of hymns, edited out of the individual family and personal collections, with a very precise index of the names of the ṛṣis or singers of the hymns, the Anukramaṇī list. Mudgala (Bhārmyśva) is an example of an individual singer, with a sole hymn in the corpus, at 10.102, engendering what becomes in time a gotra lineage—his hymn in fact making, even celebrating this point, in Brereton’s reading of the hymn.8 Brereton shows that “the hymn was composed to accompany a rite of niyoga,” a common way out of male infertility in marriages, so that the real race portrayed in the hymn is for “virility and fertility and the real prize is the offspring” engendering a new “race,” as Brereton puns on “race.” A new gotra label honors the “new” race, the line of the progeny that results from the niyoga, often a branch off the parental gotra lineage. As Brereton glosses “bahave janāya”

with the year-long gavamāyana and the years-long sattra rituals. Indeed the Mahābhārata presents itself to the world twice with the sattra-type rituals as the setting, first from Vaiśampāyana in Kurukṣetra and then by Śaunaka in Naimiṣa Forest.

