BRIAN K. SMITH

THE UNITY OF RITUAL

The Place of the Domestic Sacrifice in Vedic Ritualism

There is perhaps no religion more thoroughly dedicated to the theory and performance of rituals than that of ancient Indian Vedism. The Vedic sacrifice (vyāhā) has been described as "the richest, most elaborate and most complete among the rituals of mankind".1 Certainly by the time of the production of the ritual Śūtras (ca. 800–300 B.C.E.),2 if not before, the Vedic priests developed what J. F. Staal has dubbed a "science of ritual"3 and presented Vedic ritualism as what Marcel Mauss would have called a "total social fact". Appropriate rituals were prescribed for everyone from the king of kings and the learned Brahmin sacrificial expert, on the one hand, to the modest householders of the three "twice born" or initiated classes (Brahmins, warriors, and agriculturalists/merchants) on the other.

The enormous ritual repertoire was cataloged and organized in the Śrauta and Gṛhya Śūtras. These texts, testimonies to the systematizing instincts of the ritual "science", are not "manuals" or "handbooks" as much as they are taxonomies. It is the purpose of this paper to elucidate some of the guiding principles of the ritual classificatory scheme as it is found in the Śūtras. Specifically, I wish to explore here those principles that underlie the fundamental division made between the domestic sacrifice (gṛhya- or pākayajña) and the śrauta (sometimes called "public" or "solemn") sacrifice.

One major assumption made in the Śūtras, and not always recognized by Vedic scholars, is that there was what one text calls a "unity of ritual" (kalpaktatva) extending between the three great classes of sacrifice, each containing seven subclasses (saṃsthās): the domestic sacrifice, the śrauta sacrifice, and the sacrifice in which soma is offered and consumed (ŚGS 1.1.13–15). The Vedic ritual is thus conceived as a unity comprised of three hierarchically ordered and formally analogous levels.4 These three levels may, for our purposes, be collapsed into two by including the soma sacrifices under the heading of śrauta.5 For the point I want to emphasize here is that in the Śūtras the domestic sacrifice was included within a totalistic Vedic ritualism and participated in a web of relations linking together the components of the ritual "unity".

Before the Śūtras, the domestic ritual is largely undocumented. The Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas ignore it almost entirely, concentrating on the śrauta sacrifice, leading some to speculate that in this period the domestic cult was the province

of "popular piety" apart from the "elite" religion of the authors of the earlier Vedic texts. The Sūtras would then represent a kind of "domestication" of the essentially foreign domestic cult as the Brahmins incorporated it into their own corpus by systematizing it in conformity to the śrauta ritual. A. B. Keith argues for this position:

The priests... appear to have aimed, as time went on, at absorbing en masse the popular rites and deck ing them out with their own poetry and their ritual elaboration.... So far from the texts hinting at distaste for the popular ritual, they rather exhibit the priests determined to secure their participation in it to the fullest extent, at the expense of the field of action which first lay open to the head of the family as his own domestic priest.6

What few references to the domestic sacrifices we have in the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas, however, seem to indicate that already at this time a simplified form of Vedic ritual, formally similar to that of the Grhya Sūtras, was known.7 It is, I think, just as possible to posit an "Aryan" or "priestly" origin for domestic ritualism as not, but the question remains unresolved.

After the time of the Sūtras, on the other hand, the domestic rites were (again?) largely divorced from the ever diminishing and increasingly anachronistic śrauta cult. Such practices survived, and continue to survive, in Hinduism long after the śrauta rituals had been discontinued or relegated to peripheral and isolated areas of the subcontinent.

When detached from their relations to the śrauta sacrifice, the domestic rites could take on new functions and significances. But in the context of the "unity of ritual" established in the Sūtras, the domestic sacrifice cannot be properly understood other than in situ. There are two common generic names used in the Sūtras for the domestic ritual as a type or class compared to other classes: 1) the grhyayajña or "sacrifice of the house or household"; and 2) the pākayajña, which does not mean a "cooked sacrifice" as some have thought but rather denotes a "small" or "feeble" sacrifice. Both of these terms, I will argue, do not refer to a kind of ritual in itself, but rather one in relation to other typological categories. Two kinds of relations to other rituals suggest themselves in an analysis of the meaning of grhyayajña and pākayajña.

First, some of the ceremonies included under the heading of domestic ritualism were complementary to and/or prerequisites for the śrauta sacrifices. The saṃskāras of childhood and adolescence, and most especially the initiation (upanayana) and marriage (vivāha), were one component of the necessary qualifications for those who would engage in the śrauta cult.8 Other of the rituals included within the rubric of the domestic sacrifice — house-building ceremonies, rites relating to child-birth, domestic animals, and so forth — complemented the śrauta sacrifices and would be performed by the śrauta sacrificer as occasions came up.9 The domestic ritual within Vedic ritualism had domestic specialities, concentrated functions...