

# Minute Meditations on Combustive Transformations: Clues to the Ritual Agency of Fire and its Exegesis

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(Please note that this is a preliminary draft! It has not been thoroughly checked nor furnished with a satisfactory reference system. It is posted here for the sole purpose of facilitating the comprehension of my recorded speech, which was roughly based on this draft.)

**ABSTRACT:** A crucial means of improving the conditions of survival (such as nutrition, vision, and warmth), fire has remained a predominant engineering tool of the genus *homo* for at least 400.000 years. Seen from the vantage point of behavioural modernity, furthermore, fire also emerges as a perennial ‘tool of thought,’ not only as a focal point of ritual thought and action, but perhaps ultimately as one of the most suggestive clues to the human condition as such. To the same degree as fire is considered to be ‘tamed,’ created, recreated, transforming the environment and raw food supplies into something manageable and digestible, etc., the ritual use (and abuse) of fire is no less associated with creation and transformation, albeit within a much more transient and ambiguous social space.

The paper attempts to show how such general considerations might bear on the understanding of a discrete ritual case: a short piece of hieratic poetry associated with the lineage of the poet Vasiṣṭha in the Rigveda (7.9), a collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns from the 2nd millennium BC. This early specimen of religious poetry is selected in order to demonstrate the high degree of ingenuity and semiotic sophistication that has *always already* accompanied the ritual employment of fire, at least as far back in time as orally recorded poetry can bring us.

## Introduction

Claude Lévi-Strauss once appropriately distinguished between the nutritional value of animals and their cultural exploitation as tools of thought (‘animals are good to think with’). A similar distinction can be made with regard to fire as an agent of nutrition and an object of symbolic interaction. In addition to being fed by fuel and facilitating the artificial preparation of food, fire provides excellent food for thought. Although this is a familiar matter of fact that needs little empirical backup to prove valid, it seems worthwhile to ponder in what specific regard fire has served this cognitive end. When I was encouraged to talk here today, in this multidisciplinary setting, about the ritual use of fire, I decided to start from a few general assumptions and then explore the particular consequences of such assumptions by gradually constraining the subject matter to a limited set of examples. My presentation will proceed according to the following logic of progression: The natural properties of fire → the human control of fire → fire as an object of recognition and signification → the significance of ritual and the ritual use of fire → the ritual significance of fire according to a discrete textual datum.

## The natural properties of fire

Fire, or combustion, is a naturally occurring process through which light and heat is released in the form of flames and glowing. Its course has been described in simplistic scientific terms as the chemical transformation between fuels and oxidizers (substances that give off oxygen) which causes atoms to regroup and molecules to form new bonds with other molecules (Lieberman 2008: 53). Nevertheless, a more precise analytical description of combustion was not obtained until quite recently. The complexity of the process, ranging from the flames of candles and camp fires to the thermonuclear heating of stars and the light emitted by exploding supernovas, has required extensive interdisciplinary efforts. Many areas of science are involved in the subject today, such as hydrodynamics, chemical kinetics, thermodynamics, statistical physics, kinetic theory, and quantum theory. Scientific curiosity is certainly not the

only motivator of such in-depth investigations, because the prosperity of a high-technological civilization largely depends on its ability to maintain heat and propagation (through engines, explosives, power plants, and so forth) at low levels of economic and ecological expense. Before fire came under human control (of which I will come to talk soon), the association between fire and hominids was largely defined by the detection of stimuli caused by the natural incidence of fire. Lightning, volcanic eruption, sparks from rockfalls, and spontaneous combustion (usually due to microbiological activity in manure and decaying vegetation [peat fires]) are the four major natural causes of wildfire ignitions. Furthermore, the human perception of combustion implies a massive impact on the sensory systems. We perceive the light and movements of flames and glow, feel the heat, hear the crackle and hissing of the burning wood, smell the dispersed particles of carbon in the air, and may easily deduce the effects of thermal alteration through the taste of cooked meat and by touching its scorched crust.

It is easy to imagine numerous ways in which hominids and early hominins could have benefitted from naturally occurring fire long before they gained full control of it. The manipulative control of fire was surely a gradual process, possibly ranging from early ways of abetting natural outbreaks and of storing to refined forms of firefighting, cooking techniques, and tool manufacture. Since the details of this long-term process are neither achievable by any existing scientific methods nor of any great propositional importance for my own argumentation, I will confine myself to a few comments on the recent archaeological debate in order to determine the least idiosyncratic consideration of the evidence.

### **The human control and manipulation of fire**

Unlike the manufacture of stone tools beginning in the late Pliocene some 2.5 million years ago, the earliest control of fire can only be assessed by means of indirect inferences. There is no consensus of opinion among archaeologists as to how the traces of natural fire in the archaeological record should be distinguished from those attributed to hominids. Whereas unambiguous evidence of actual hearths only start to appear at the end of the Middle Pleistocene between 300,000 and 250,000 years ago, numerous archaeological sites in Africa, the Near East, and Asia are considered to exhibit strong and much earlier evidence of hominin fire. Even a few Lower Pleistocene sites in East Africa (1.5 million years B.P) have been reported to contain possible evidence, usually in the form reddened patches or pieces of clay in association with lithics and animal bones. Whatever such a scanty record might contain to exclude the fortuitous effects of natural fire (most archaeologists would probably say ‘nothing’), it does at least not suggest that *Homo erectus* was cooking on a regular basis. Analyses of butchering patterns on faunal remains from other Lower Pleistocene sites in the same region (the extensively researched Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania) did so far not yield any burned bones (James 1989: 4). This apparent lack of evidence (i.e. for ‘a trail of campfires associated with its bones and stone tools’ [Ann Gibbons, *Science* 316, 2007]) speaks against the hypothesis of primatologist Richard Wrangham, who has argued since the late 1990s that cooking and the reduced digestive efforts that went with it actually spurred the dramatic anatomical changes seen in *H. Erectus* (e.g. expansion of the skull, smaller teeth, jaws, and guts). A similar explanation more attuned to solid archaeological (and not merely anatomical) evidence, would rather be to associate cooking with the rapid expansion of the brain in Neandertals and anatomically modern humans in the past half-million years (cf. John Allman in Gibbons 2007).

In his useful, albeit somewhat hypercritical, review of the earliest evidence of hominid use of fire, Steven R. James (1989) was reluctant to accept even some of the most undoubted evidence from the Middle Pleistocene. One such case is his critical review of data from the

Zhoukoudian cave system in China (dated to between 0.4 and 0.5 million years B.P.), which is weighed against the possibility of lighting-caused cave fires. In 2004, one and a half decade after the publication of James' review, a team of Israeli scholars presented rather striking evidence from the site of Gesher Benot Ya'aqov in the northern Jordan Valley to suggest the burning of flints, seeds, and wood (including olive, wild barely, and wild grape) in clusters indicating hearths (or 'hearthlike patterns') about 0.79 million years ago. The archaeological data may thus be delineated according to the following criteria of typology and evidential certainty: 1) solid evidence for hearths, 'with stones or bones encircling patches of dark ground or ash' (250,000 to 300,000 years ago); 2) evidence for charred bones, stones, ash, and charcoal that may be assigned to hearths (300,000 to 500,000 years ago); 3) evidence for burned flints, seeds, and wood found in 'hearthlike patterns' (790,000 years ago) (cf. Gibbons 2007: 1559).

To these assemblages may be added a more recent South African case of pyrotechnology as a means of increasing the quality of the stone tool manufacture process (so-called flaking benefits). It is a technological advancement that deserves particular mentioning in this connection, because it roughly coincides with the earliest indications of symbolicity among anatomically modern humans (e.g. 75-80,000-year old perforated beads and engraved pieces of ochre found in the Blombos cave). The physical evidence of such capacities mark the archaeological gateway to that blurred and largely impenetrable space of behavioral modernity, in which secondary meanings (German scholars sometimes speak of *Sinnbedeutungen* or 'meaning of sense') transcend the primary purpose of things (their *Zweckbedeutung* or 'meaning of purpose'). While the further exploitation of fire has remained a technological challenge on purely pragmatic grounds, it was probably already in an early stage of its domestication that fire acquired such a secondary status. It is to such fleeting matters, to fire as signifier, that I will now turn my attention.

### **The recognition and signification of fire**

The American physicist John Archibald Wheeler assumed, in a prelude to his famous dictum *it from bit*, that 'every physical quantity, every it, derives its ultimate significance from bits' (Wheeler 1989: 309), more precisely from the elementary act of observer-participancy through which information gives rise to physics. I shall not pretend to have grasped all the subtleties of Wheeler's visionary report, suffice it to say that the age-old (even pre-Socratic) idea of deriving existence from the act of recognition still seems to inform the very foundations of scientific thought. If existence (the sum total of its) depends on the exchange of bits through observer-participancy, the contiguity of recognition and signification cannot be recognized as such — it cannot become apparent to itself — without an analogical intermediary in what is already physically recognized. Fire elicits some of those physical quantities (heat, luminous flux, energy, and so forth), some of those recognized its, that can be amplified and reconverted into bits of information so as to make the conscious establishment of meaning recognizable to itself. While this proposition may seem far-fetched, it requires further consideration and historical grounding before we can start appreciating its outcome as ritual exegesis. It is by paying attention to such features of ritual thought that we may hope to advance, if only by a fraction, the understanding of ritual both as a mode and an object of human theorizing.

Combustion is not just any object of ritual thought and action. As already intimated, the very process of thinking, to some extent even the ritual process as a whole, can be perceived analogically as forms of burning, heating, and cooking. Nothing seems better apt to increase the self-awareness of a speculating ritual subject than the workings of combustion. It is a process through which the physical properties of space and matter are transformed into

something manageable, translucent, and digestible. The analogy goes so far as to allow the explanatory properties of analogy itself to become highlighted *by analogy with* combustion. When the properties of one thing are mentally transformed into those of another, a partial similarity in the appearance of mental objects results from the same fiery fix, from the same unemployment of the hand in favor of automation. Just as fire adds no weight to the air in which it burns, thoughts are weightless transformers and transmitters of mental matter. Such circuits of analogical reasoning may feed back into the utilitarian employment of fire to inform the kind of costly, pretentious, and often highly routinized forms of behavior known as rituals. What, then, is a ritual?

### **Further remarks on the significance of ritual and the ritual agency of fire**

I believe that the question of ritual (what it is, what it does, *why* it is) can only be properly appreciated with reference to the question of domestication, i.e. to the acts of seizure through which humans have subjected themselves, and the unrestrained forces of nature, to careful management. Historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith has already made this point clear in his ‘rectification’ of the ritual category ‘sacrifice’. In the context of domestication and economy (words that are virtually synonymous), rituals cannot simply constitute failures to domesticate and economize. Since they are usually not very economical and rarely achieve any pronounced ambitions to seize unrestrained forces, it would therefore seem ill-advised to maintain them. In order to overcome this ill-fitting paradox, one might rather argue as follows: if culture at large suggests the transformation of an involuntary necessity into a state of being ‘fixed’ or ‘prepared’ (cuit), ritual is the quintessential second-order expression of that transformation. It is the process through which the process of domestication, of culture as a whole if you will, becomes apparent to itself.

By drawing on Wittgenstein’s witty critique of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, I strongly object to the notion that ritual practice ensues from a misinformed theory of how to control the natural world (the classical example would be rainmaking). To the extent that rites cause overt and lasting changes in the world, these will rather occur (and are mostly only expected to occur) in an already domesticated sphere of social institutions (e.g. through divinatory decision-making, the transformation of someone’s social status, the conclusion of a treaty, etc.). Rituals do not so much ensue from theorizing as they become means of theorizing. Ritual theory is always already a part of the ritual process, not its incentive. The most obvious example would be early Greek philosophy and the autotelic scientific endeavours that developed in its wake, for it was largely by extending and inculcating certain modes ritual through the practice of ascetism and ‘self-care’ (*epiméleia heautoû*) that the first philosophers maintained their pursuit of universal knowledge.

Another (and closely related) notion of ritual deserves critical attention in this connection. It suggests that rites are essentially forms of deception (the classical example would be the parable of the cave). Without contesting the benefits of ritual in contexts of social and political authority, it seems inaccurate to assume that rites are simply means of contrivance. People engage in such games of pretense by acting ‘as if’, by obeying complex forms of ‘as if-ness’ (e.g. rulers involved in make-believe labor, priests communicating with gods, charades and masquerades, statues addressed as volitional agents, even articles of faith), not because they are fooled into doing so by others, but because of the many secondary advantages (emotional, social, economic) that such participatory responses might entail (cf. Benavides 2010). ‘As if’ scenarios may certainly engender advanced forms of metacognition (e.g. what it *means* to be a good on the condition that gods exists, what a ritual agent essentially *intend* and how this intention originated, etc.), but this does not imply that such scenarios were originally designed as deceptive contrivers of veracity.

Now, if all this holds true, it should also mean that the method of *epokhê*, the anthropologist's suspension of judgement in situations of observer-participancy, was never just an outsider's means of gaining access to the complexities of ritual, but also the desirable mindset of the insider. Playing by the rules also involves playing well and convincingly.

Before I can turn to the discrete textual datum serving as my major example, I need to touch upon a final aspect of ritual that brings me back to the theme of domesticated fire: ritual's strong bearing on cooking and eating. One of the most widespread and familiar genres of ritual, rites of hospitality are usually seen to revolve around the preparation and consumption of food. Furthermore, what is done *in* most rituals involving food and drink (i.e. cooking and eating) seems to inform what the ritual does to its participants (i.e. preparing and consuming them, transforming them, purifying them). The guest *with whom one eats* may, for instance, turn into a temporary family member.

### The ritual significance of fire as exemplified by a Vedic hymn

While the highly specialised poetic terminology of the following six stanzas must remain surmise, their relative intelligibility and familiarity are improved by two fortunate circumstances: 1) the hymn is enmeshed in a comprehensive intertextual network of hieratic poetry from the same period, and 2) off-shoots of the hereditary vocabulary in cognate Indo-European languages, including modern English, provide diachronic gateways to its long lost past. References to classical Greek and Latin come particularly handy in this regard, because the classical languages still inform the conceptual matrix of modern scholarly parlance. Examples of English vocables with cognates in the present hymn are the deverbative nouns *caveat* and *hypostasis*, the combination forms *eu-* (as in *eupeptic*) and *-cracy* (as in *democracy*), and the indigenous suffix *-hood*.

I will now guide you through the hymn, verse by verse, trying my best to elucidate some of its less apparent details.

#### Rig Veda 7.9

1a. ábodhi jārā uśásām upásthād	dhótā mandráḥ kavítamaḥ pavākáḥ
1c. dádhāti ketúm ubháyasya jantór	havyā devéṣu dráviṇaṃ sukṛtsu
2a. sá sukrátur yó ví dúraḥ pañínām	punānó arkám purubhójasam naḥ
2c. hótā mandaró° viśám dāmūnās	tirás támo dadṛṣe rāmiyāñām
3a. ámūraḥ kavír áditir vivásvān	susaṃsán mitró átithiḥ śivó naḥ
3c. citrábhānur uśásām bhāti ágre	apám gárbhaḥ prasúva ā viveśa
4a. īléniyo vo mánuṣo yugéṣu	samanagā asucaj jātávedāḥ
4c. susaṃdṛśā bhānúnā yó vibhāti	prāti gávaḥ samidhānám budhanta
5a. ágne yāhí dūtíyam má riṣaṇyo	devāñ áchā brahmakṛtā gaṇéna
5c. sárvatīm marúto asínāpó	yákṣi devān ratnadhéyāya víśvān
6a. tuvám agne samidhānó vásiṣṭho	jārūthaṃ han yákṣi rāyé púramdhim
6c. puruñíthā jātavedo jarasva	yūyám pāta suastíbiḥ sádā naḥ

1. The suitor of the Dawns has awakened/arisen from the(ir) womb (lit. substance or essence); the excited priest (i.e. libator), the purified, supreme seer. He establishes the distinguishing mark of the two-sided tribe (i.e. gods and men), (bringing) libations onto the gods and movable wealth onto the benefactors.

Grammatical analysis:

**ábodhi** (ao. root 3. sg. mid.) √bodh (Mayr. II, 233: 'merken, bemerken, auf etwas achten, achtsam sein').  
**jārā** (nom. sg.) jārā- (Mayr. I, 588: 'Liebhaber, Buhle').

**uśāsām** (f. gen. pl.) uśās- (Mayr. I, 236: ‘Morgenröte, Morgen; auch Abendröte’).  
**upásthāt** (m. abl. sg.) upásthā- (Mayr. I, 221 [s.v. upás-]: ‘Schoß [der Mutter, der Gewässer, der Erde, usw.]’; Grass. 258: ‘Schoos’).  
**hótā** (m. nom. sg.) hótār- (Mayr. II, 821: ‘Hauptpriester, Opferpriester’).  
**mandrás** (a. nom. sg.) mandrá- (Mayr. II, 299 [s.v. √mad ‘sich erfreuen, sich berausen’]: ‘angenehm, erfreulich’; Grass. 1003: 1] erfreuend, angenehm, leblich; 2] froh, munter).  
**kavítamas** (nom. sg. of secondary superlative suffix –tama added to the m. nominal stem) kaví- (Mayr. I, 328 [s.v. kaví- ‘Seher; viel. auch ‘Aufseher, Hirte’; ‘Weiser, Dichter’]: ‘weistest’).  
**pavākás** (a. nom. sg.) pāvaká- (Mayr. II, 105 [s.v. √pav ‘rein werden, sich läutern’]: ‘lauter, klar, hell’ [metrisch \*pavāká-]).  
**dádhāti** (pr. 3. sg. act.) √dhā (Mayr. I, 783: ‘hinstellen, aufstellen, hinsetzen, machen, schaffen, jemanden zu etwas machen’).  
**ketúm** (m. nom. sg.) ketú- (Mayr. I, 399: ‘Erscheinung, Kennzeichen, Lichterscheinung’).  
**ubháyasya** (a. gen.) ubháya- (Mayr. I, 224 [s.v. ubhá- ‘beide’]: ‘beiderseitig, von beiderlei’).  
**jantós** (m. gen. sg.) jantú- (Mayr. I, 570: Geschöpf, Wesen, Mensch, Stamm, Geschlecht, Leute).  
**havyá** (n. nom. pl.) havyá- (Mayr. II, 808 [s.v. √hav ‘opfern, gießen, Ghee bzw. Opfertrank ergießen’]: Opfertrank’).  
**devéṣu** (m. loc. pl.) devá- (Mayr. I, 742: ‘Gott’).  
**dráviṇas** (n. nom. sg.) drávinas- (Mayr. I, 756: beweglicher Besitz, Vermögen, Hab und Gut’).  
**sukṛtsu** (m. loc. pl.) sukṛt- (Mayr. I, 307 [s.v. √kar ‘tun, machen, bewirken, handeln’]: ‘gut handeln’ (a.); Grass. 1527: ‘der gut handelnde, der Gute, Fromme’ [m.]).

Comm.: Agni is ‘excited’ (*mandrá-* from √mad ‘to intoxicate [oneself]’), because he is fed with libations, for instance the uncooked juice of the intoxicating Soma plant. Whereas *hotár-* designates the agent of libations, *kaví-* refers to the ritual specialist in his capacity to foresee and being perceptive. The word *ketú-* denotes a visually determined mark, sometimes a banner. Agni is occasionally characterized as the ‘mark of ritual’ (*yajñásya ketú-* [cf. 3.29.5, 5.11.2 etc.]). The semiotic sense of *ketú-* survives in a cognate Germanic suffix realized as German *-heit* and English *-hood* to denote a condition or quality. By bilaterally establishing the ‘-hood of the hood’ as it were, Agni installs sacrifice as a means of regulating the sacrificial economy of gods and men. Agni’s multimodality is further emphasized by the poet, who imagines the god as the mutual subject (*hotár-*) and object (*mandrá-*) of libations. While the latter notion (Agni as an object of libations) is only implicit in the stanza, the god is elsewhere referred to as *āhutam ghrītaiḥ* ‘besprinkled with clarified butter’ [5.8.7a]). The notion of divinity as the quintessential object of libations survived in the neutral Gmc noun *\*gūð-* (< IE *\*ǵ<sup>h</sup>ūto-*), which eventually produced the secondary masculine form *god*.

2. He, the well-tempered one, who (covers) apart the doors of the Paṇis, purifies for us the much enjoyable splendour/song. The excited priest, lord of the household, has gazed through the darkness of the nights.

Grammatical analysis:

**sás** (dem. pron. m. nom. sg.).  
**sukrátus** (m. nom. sg.) sukrátu- (Mayr. II, 407 [s.v. krátu- ‘kraft, magische Kraft, Siegeskraft, Herrscherkraft, Willenskraft, Geisteskraft, Energie’]).  
**yás** (rel pron. m. nom. sg.).  
**ví** (adv. prp.) (Mayr. II, 549: auseinander, abgetrennt, weg, fort). The preposition is used elliptically, probably implying *\*vivṛṇoti* ‘he covers up’.  
**dúras** (f. acc. pl.) dvār- (Mayr. I, 765: ‘Türe, Tor’ [älteste Belege nur Du. und Plur.]).  
**pañínám** (m. gen. pl.) pañí- (Mayr. II, 70: ‘Bezeichnung eines den Göttern feindlichen Dämons oder Oberhaupt der Götterfeindliche Gruppe der *pañáyas*’).  
**punānás** (Mayr. II, 105 [s.v. √pav ‘rein werden, sich läutern’])  
**arkám** (m. acc. sg.) arká- (Mayr. I, 114 [s.v. √arc ‘strahlen, glänzen; singen, lobsingeln, preisen’]: ‘Strahl, Licht, Glanz; Lied, Zaubersong’).  
**purubhójasam** (a. acc.) puru-bhojas- (Mayr. II, 276 [√bhoj<sup>2</sup>: Genuß schaffen, jemanden Nutzen schaffen, Genugtuung leisten, büßen’]: °bhojas- ‘Nahrung [gewährend]’).  
**nas** (pers. pron. dat. pl.).  
**hótā** (m. nom. sg.) hótār- (Mayr. II, 821: ‘Hauptpriester, Opferpriester’).  
**mandrás** (a. nom. sg.) mandrá- (Mayr. II, 299 [s.v. √mad ‘sich erfreuen, sich berausen’]: ‘angenehm, erfreulich’; Grass. 1003: 1] erfreuend, angenehm, leblich; 2] froh, munter).

**viśām** (f. gen. pl.) viś- (Mayr. II, 561: ‘Niederlassung, Ansiedlung einer Familie, Clansdorf, Hausgemeinschaft, Stamm, Mannschaft, Volk’).

**dāmūnās** (m. nom. sg.) dāmūnas- (Mayr. I, 698: ‘Hausherr, Hausgebieter, Herr, Gebieter’).

**tirás** (prp.) Mayr. I, 646: durch, durch — hin, über, abseits’).

**tāmas** (n. acc. sg.) tāmas- (Mayr. I, 626: ‘Finsternis, Dunkel; Verblendung, Wahn’).

**dadṛṣe** (pf. 3 mid.) √darś (suppletion of pr. stem √paś) (Mayr. I, 704: ‘sehen, Medium erscheinen, aussehn, sich zeigen’).

**rāmyāṇām** (f. gen. pl.) rām(i)yā- (Mayr. II, 448 [s.v. rāma- {a.}] ‘dunkel, schwarz’): ‘Nacht’).

Comm.: *Sukrātu-* has an exact parallel in the Greek adjective ἔυκρατος, meaning ‘well-tempered’ or ‘temperate’. The reference to the ‘doors of the Paṇis’ is incomprehensible as it stands. It encapsulates an elaborate mythic scenario with deep Indo-Iranian (possibly Indo-European) roots. References to the myth are also found in the Old Iranian Gāθās. [---] The song may be considered ‘much enjoyable’ from diametrically opposed angles because 1) it is enjoyable to listen to, and 2) because it (hopefully) secures a good salary for the poet. In Vedic society, this salary usually consisted of movable wealth, particularly cows. Agni is lord of the house (cf. first RV 1,1 — the paragon of domestication), a receiver of guests, reciprocity. Poets regularly used their poetry to negotiate with (and occasionally flatter) their patrons. The conflation of light and vision is notable with regard to fire and the verb √dṛś (< IE \*derk-). Fire was apparently imagined both as a ‘gazing’ subject and as an object ‘flashing’ (id.) from the gazing eyes. This is seen, for instance, in Od. 19.446: πῦρ ὀφθαλμοῖσι δεδορκῶς ‘flashing fire from his eyes.’ The god’s √dṛś was conceived in the double sense of a ‘gazing’ and ‘illuminating’ force.

3. The sharp-witted seer (is) Aditi, (is) Vivasvat, (is) Mitra of good company, (is) our amiable guest. (He) shines (as) the clear light at the peak of the Dawns. (As) the offspring of the waters he has entered into the fertile ones (= plants).

Grammatical analysis:

**āmūras** (a. nom. sg.) āmūra- (Mayr. II, 365 [s.v. mūra- ‘töricht, stumpfsinnig, m. Tor’]: ‘einsichtvoll, verständig, scharfsinnig’).

**kavis** (m. nom. sg.) kavī- (Mayr. I, 328: ‘Seher; viel. auch ‘Aufseher, Hirte’; ‘Weiser, Dichter’).

**ādītis** (f. nom. sg.) āditi- (Mayr. I, 63: ‘Ungebundenheit [als Freisein von Fesseln, die den Schuldigen bedrohen], Freiheit von den Fesseln der Finsternis [~ den Stricken Varuṇas]; personifiziert als Göttin Aditi).

**vivāsvān** (m. nom. sg.) vivāsvant- (Mayr. II, 560: ‘Name eines göttlichen Wesens, des Vaters von Yama [...] a. ‘aufleuchtend, morgendlicht’ [√vas<sup>2</sup>]).

**susamsād** (a. nom. sg.) id. (Grass. 1558: ‘schön vereint’).

**mitrás** (m. nom. sg.) mitrā- (Mayr. II, 354: [n.] ‘Vertrag, Kontrakt, Bündnis’; [m.] ‘Verbündeter, Freund’; ‘Name des Gottes Mitra’).

**ātithis** (m. nom. sg.) ātithi- (Mayr. I, 59: ‘Gast’).

**śivás** (a. nom. sg.) śivā- (Mayr. II, 640: ‘günstig, freudlich, hold, lieb, gütig’).

**nas** (pers. pron. gen. 1 pl.).

**citrābhānus** (a. nom. sg.) citrābhānu- (Grass. 453: ‘hellen [citra] Glanz’).

**uśāsām** (f. gen. pl.) uśās- (Mayr. I, 236: ‘Morgenröte, Morgen; auch Abendröte’).

**bhāti** (pr. 2 sg.) √bhā (Mayr. II, 259: ‘leuchten, strahlen’).

**āgre** (n. loc. sg.) āgra- (Mayr. I, 45: Spitze, äusserste Ende, Gipfel’).

**apām** (f. gen. pl.) āp- (Mayr. I, 81: ‘Wasser’).

**gārbhas** (m. nom. sg.) gārbha- (Mayr. I, 474: Mutterleib; Liebesfrucht, Embryo, Neugeborenes’).

**prasū-** (case?)

**ā viveśa** (pf. act. 3 sg.) √veś (Mayr. II, 585: ‘sich niederlassen, sich niedersetzen, eindringen, in etwas eingehen’; Grass. 1293 (ā viś): eingehen, eindringen’).

Comm. The passage from illumination and sight (in the previous stanza) to perception and insight is established by the second reference to Agni as ‘unfoolish’ (*āmūra-*) *kavī-*. The privative noun is exclusively used to denote gods as opposed to ‘sluggish’ (*mūrās* (pl.) humans (e.g. 830.4, 875.5, 322.7). Aditi, literally the ‘unconstrained, unchained’ (in an ethical sense), is the mother of a group of deities (esp. Varuṇa, Mitra, and Aryaman) collectively referred to as the *ādityās*. Vivasvat is a mythical being associated with Dawn and Yama (Ir. Yima), the first mortal to press Soma. The god Mitra is linked to the notion of contract (the noun *mitra-* could also denote ‘friend’), which prefigures the subsequent notion of divine hospitality. The reciprocal notion of Agni as guest evokes the triangular relationship between poet-priest, patron-king, and god. An archaic category of dithematic personal names, such as Mitrāitithi (the semantic ambiguity suggest either the determinative sense

‘having Mitra as guest’, or the possessive sense ‘Mitra’s guest’ [cf. also Greek, Slavic, and Germanic variations of the same type]), defines the aristocratic patron in his function as the good host of gods and poet-priests who anticipates a future existence in the company of gods. The guest is characterized through the adjective ‘amiable’ (*śivá-*) (cf. the Middle Indic appellative Śiva). Agni is the potency of the water passing into (‘has entered’ (*ā viveśa* [pf.]) the fertile (*prasū-* [here pl. a. f.] plants, causing them to grow and eventually turn into flammable matter. The verse contains an early sample of natural philosophy, according to which the circular transformation of fire into water into plants into fire is deduced from the apparent fact that water is immersed in (rather than put out by) water, water propagates growth, and fire is derived from dry plants.

4. Jātavedas (= who knows the beings), deserving your (= the cultic community) invocation among the tribes of Manu, (you) who goes to the battleground, has burst into flames. He who shines forth with appealing light. Let the cows turn their attention to the ignited one.

Grammatical analysis:

**īlényas** (fut. pass. pt. nom. sg.) īlénya- (Mayr. I, 204 [s.v. √īd ‘anrufen, durch Lieder preisen, verehren’]: ‘anzurufen, zu preisen’).

**vas** (pers. pron. 2 pl.)

**mánuṣas** (m. gen. sg.) mánu- (Mayr. II, 309: ‘Mensch, Menschheit, Manu’).

**yugéṣu** (n. lok. pl.) yugá- (Mayr. II, 412: ‘Joch, Gespann, Generation, Geschlecht, Stamm’).

**samanagás** (a. nom. sg.) samanagā (Mayr. II, 703 [s.v. samád- ‘Schlacht, Kampf, Treffen’]: Grass. 1479: ‘zum Versammlungsorte [sámāna] gehend’).

**aśucat** (aor. act. 3 sg. [jfr. ásthāt {Mac. 148.1a}]) √śoc (Mayr. II, 655: ‘leuchten, glühen, brennen’).

**jātávedās** (adj. nom. sg.) jātávedas- (Mayr. I, 583: [Bezeichnung des Agni — Wahrscheinlich] ‘der Kenntnis (védas-) von den Wesen (jātá-) hat’).

**susaṃdṛśā** (a. instr. sg.) susaṃdṛś (Grass. 1558: ‘schönen Anblick gewährend’).

**bhānúnā** (m. instr. sg.) bhānú- (Mayr. II, 260: ‘Licht, Strahl, Erscheinung, Glanz’).

**yás** (rel. pron. nom. sg.)

**vi bhātí** (pr. 1 sg.) √bhā (Mayr. II, 259: ‘leuchten, strahlen’).

**prāti** (adv.) (Mayr. II, 176: ‘gegen, entgegen, nach — hin, zur Zeit von, um’).

**gāvas** (m./f. nom. pl.) gāv- (Mayr. I, 478: ‘Rind, Stier, Kuh’).

**samidhānám** (part. acc. sg.) samidhāná (Mayr. I, 267: ‘entflammen, anzünden’; Grass. 211).

**budhánta** (inj. 3 pl.) √bodh (Mayr. II, 233: ‘merken, bemerken, auf etwas achten, achtsam sein’).

Comm. The personal pronoun *vas* (gen. pl.) denotes the cultic community (?). *Samdṛś-* may denote the familiar (mimetic) appearance (or co-appearance) of something/someone.

5. O Agni! Convey thy message — do not get hurt — by means of the conjuring community (of singers)! You shall honor Sarasvatī, the Maruts, the Aśvins, the Waters, all the gods, for the sake of obtaining riches.

**ágne** (m. voc. sg.) ágni-

**yāhí** (ipv. 2 sg.) √yā (Mayr. II, 407: ‘fahren, dahinziehen, sich bewegen’).

**dūtíyam** (n. acc. sg.) dūtýa- (Mayr. I, 738 [s.v. dūtá- ‘Bote’]: ‘Botschaft, Botendienst’).

**mā** (prohibitive negation)

**riṣaṇyas** (subj. 2 sg.) √reṣ (Mayr. II, 462: ‘Schaden nehmen’; Grass. 1168).

**devān** (acc. pl.) devá- (Mayr. I, 742: ‘Gott’).

**áchā** (adv.) (Mayr. I, 50: ‘zu, zu — hin, bis, gegen’).

**brahmakṛtā** (a. instr.) bráhma- (Mayr. II, 238: ‘Formung, Gestaltung, Formulierung’) + -kṛt (Mayr. I, 307 [s.v. √kar ‘tun, machen, bewirken, handeln’]).

**gaṇéna** (m. instr. sg.) gaṇá- (Mayr. I, 458: ‘Schar, Reihe, Gefolge, Anhang, kleine Heeresabteilung’).

**sárasvatīm** (f. acc.) sárasvatī- (Mayr. II, 709: ‘Name eines Stromes und seiner Gottheit’).

**marútas** (m. acc. pl.) marút- (Mayr. II, 322: ‘eine Gruppe von Sturmgöttern’).

**aśvínā** (m. acc. dual.) aśvín- (Mayr. I, 141: ‘die Rossenlenkenden, heilenden und rettenden Götterzwillinge’).

**apás** (f. acc. pl.) áp- (Mayr. I, 81: ‘Wasser’).

**yákṣi** (subj. 2 sg.) √yaj (Mayr. II, 392: ‘verehren, opfern’).

**devān** (acc. pl.) devá- (Mayr. I, 742: ‘Gott’).

**ratnadhéyāya** (n. dat. sg.) Ratnadhéya- (Grass. 1137: ‘Schatzspende, das Güterschenken’).

**viśvān** (a. acc. pl.) víśva- (Mayr. II, 562: ‘jeder, all, ganz’).

Comm. This is the first verse in which the god is addressed by his proper name. The *bráhmaṇ-* denotes the ritual formulation with special regard to its transformative capacity. Agni once again serves as the sacrificial subject. He is encouraged by the sacrificial community to sacrifice on their behalf.

6. When Vasiṣṭha ignited thee, o Agni, he killed Jarūtha. You shall honor Purandhi for the sake of wealth! Sing the coral hymns, o Jātavedas! Protect ye (gods) us always with blessings!

Grammatical analysis:

**tvām** (pers. pron. acc. 2 sg.)

**ágne** (m. voc. sg.) ágni-

**samidhānas** (part. nom. sg.) samidhāná (Mayr. I, 267: ‘entflammen, anzünden’; Grass. 211).

**vásiṣṭhas** (m. nom. sg.)

**járūtham** (m. acc. sg.) járūtha- (Mayr. I, 578: ‘Name eines von Agni besiegten Unholdes’).

**han** (inj. 3 sg.) √han (Mayr. II, 800: ‘schlagen, erschlagen, töten’).

**yákṣi** (subj. 2 sg.) √yaj (Mayr. II, 392: ‘verehren, opfern’).

**púrāndhim** (f. acc. sg.) púrāndhi- (Mayr. II, 145: ‘Segensfülle, Reichtum; auch Personifikation der Segensfülle, Name einer Göttin; Bezeichnung einer fruchtbaren Frau’).

**rāyé** (m. dat. sg.) rayí- (Mayr. II, 438: ‘Besitz, Reichtum, Eigentum’).

**puruṇīthā** (n. acc. pl.) puruṇīthā- (Grass. 829: ‘vielstimmiger Gesang, Chorgesang’).

**jarasva** (ipv. 2 sg.) √jṛ (Mac. 384: ‘sing’).

**yūyám** (pers. pron. nom. pl.)

**pāta** (ipv. 2 pl.) √pā (Mayr. II, 112: ‘schützen, behüten’).

**svastībhis** (f. inst. pl.) svastī- (Mayr. II, 796: ‘Heil, Segen, Wohlsein’).

**sādā** (adv.) (Mayr. II, 692: ‘stets, jedesmal, immer’).

**nas** (pers. pron. gen. 1 pl.).

Comm. J. is the name of a demon slayed by Agni. Due to the ambiguity of the of the killing subject (it is either V. or A.) in this verse, it may also reflect an event in the tradition of the Vasiṣṭhas (cf. Mayr. s.v.). P. is a goddess of victory and wealth, possibly invoked here as a sign of gratitude for a previous victory. The final verse occurs elsewhere in the same collection as a sort of signature of the Vasiṣṭha lineage.

Concluding remark:

Now, where does all this bring us? Creating meaning *in* ritual is not same as the meaning *of* ritual. The creative analysis of ritual was never just the job of contemporary scholar, but always an extension of the ritual process itself. Fire as a transformative ritual agent, constantly shifting roles as if embodying the very syntax and significance of ritual. Agni assumes the reciprocal roles of a priestly subject and a divine object of worship, of the good host and his guest, of the second- and third-person, of a message and its swift messenger. In his capacity as ‘sign’ or ‘mark’ (*ketú-*) he is not only the ritual engine burning in the midst of the sacrificial ground, but also the temporal marker of a proper ritual beginning at dawn.