Dogs for Dinner: Dogs and Food among the Sac and Fox and the Chandogya Upaniṣad

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Genesis of this Study

When I was working on the paper I gave at last year's Missouri Folklore Society conference, comparing examples of the "Vision Quest" in the texts of the Sac and Fox Indians of Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas and in an ancient text of India called the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, I came across another passage in the latter text that struck me as rather odd. I found a story about dogs singing a hymn in Vedic Sanskrit asking the gods for an increase in food. Moreover, I had just read several accounts of the "dog feasts" held on special occasions by the Sac and Fox Indians in which dogs were singed, scraped, boiled, and eaten as auspicious opening rites to various and sundry sacred ceremonies, mostly dances held by the various gens or hereditary groups.

The two images struck me as almost mirror-like reproductions of each other: dogs being eaten and dogs singing to be fed, dogs as food and dogs as eaters of food. It made me wonder what meaning dogs had in these two cultures separated so distantly in space and time. Were there resonances between the meanings of dogs in these two cultures that connected dogs with food and the sacred in each?

My encounter with dogs in the sacred traditions of each of these cultures surprised me. Why eat dogs, especially since they play such important roles in the lives of American Indians as guards, helpers in hunting, and pack animals? How is it that dogs were regarded as connected with the sacred in ancient India when dogs today there are considered sources of filth and polution and are generally driven off with sticks and rocks? Of course, part of my surprise in the case of India was the result of assuming that dogs in ancient India were veiwed in the same way they are today. One of the first things I learned as I began to explore these questions was that dogs are all over the ancient Vedas, the sacred texts of Hinduism, and had quite a different status in Vedic India. How could I have not noticed this before? In the case of the Sac and Fox Indians, their eating of dogs began to take shape not as an act of cruelty, or desperation in the face of hunger or starvation. It was more akin to holy communion in the Christian tradition or to eating prasāda, food made holy by being offered to the divine images in Hindu temples. They believed eating dogs connected them with the sacred powers of the world and transformed them in some ways.

Dogs in Vedas

In an essay now 122 years old, one of the great American Sanskrit scholars of the first generation, E. Washburn Hopkins, argues against the German Indologist Hertel Brunnhofer, that the many favorable references to dogs found in the Ṛg Veda were not out of place there. In his essay which is entitled "The Dog in the Rig Veda,"[1] Hopkins counters Brunnhofer's claim that since the dog does not appear to be despised in the Ṛg Veda, it must have been written in Iran where dogs are loved, long before the Indo-Aryans migrated into India where dogs are hated. In other words, Brunnhofer fell prey to the same presupposition in me that was the source of my surprise at finding a group of dogs singing a Vedic hymn in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad.

Hopkins argues convincingly that not only are dogs referred to favorably all over the Rig Veda, the earliest of the four Vedas, but they are found also

[1]Edward Washburn Hopkins, "The Dog in the Rig Veda," *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1894), pp. 154-163.

in the later Vedas (Sāman, Yajur, Atharvan) , Brāhmaṇas (commentarial expansions of the Vedas) and the great epics. These texts, spanning a thousand years, could not all have been composed in Iran! One of the sages who is recognized as the composer of six hymns in the Ṛg Veda (1.24-30) is named "Dog's Tail" (Śunaḥśepa). In one of the Brāhmaṇas (Ait. Br. 7.15) we find a good Brahmin naming three of his sons with different versions of "Dog's Tail" (Śunaḥpuccha, Śunaḥlāṅgūla, and Śunaḥśepa). One of the great sages of the Vedic period was named Śaunaka, "Son of a Little Dog," who was a great grammarian and to whom the authorship of many important books is attributed.[2] He or someone with his same name is also credited with establishing one of the two surviving recensions of an entire Vedic text, the Atharva Veda.

Hopkins summarises his view:

> "On investigatng the matter we learn that in the Rig Veda the dog is the companion and ally of man; the protector and probably inmate of his house; a friend so near that he pokes his too familiar head into the dish, and has to be struck aside as a selfish creature. He may have been employed as a steed—the chariot of the Maruts is pictured as one drawn by dogs; but he is, at any rate, used for hunting, and the gift of a kennel of a hundred dogs is gratefully acknowledged."[3]

From this characterization it appears that the dog in ancient India was related to humans in many of the same ways it was among the Sac and Fox. There is even a reference to eating a dog in the face of starvation.[4] There is no evidence, however, that eating dogs was considered anything but a desperate measure to avoid starvation. It was not regarded as an avenue of communion with the sacred world of powerful spirits as it was among the Sac and Fox.

Perhaps the best expression of the complete integration of the dog into the lives of humans in Vedic times comes from a lullaby from the Rig Veda:

> Sleep the mother, sleep the father,
> Sleep the dog and sleep the master,
> Sleep may all the blood-relations,
> Sleep the people round about.[5]

[2]ibid., 154.

[3]ibid., 155

[4]Ṛg Veda, 4.18.13: "Because I was in desparate straits, I cooked the entrails of a dog, and I found no one among the gods to help me. I saw my woman dishonored. Then the eagle brought the honey to me." (Doniger's translation) *avartyā śuna āntrāṇi pece na deveṣu vivide marḍitāram| apaśyaṃ jāyām amahīyamānām adhā me śyeno madhv ā jabhāra||*

[5]Ṛg Veda, 7.55.5. Hopkins translation. Ibid., 155.

Here the dog is portrayed as just another member of the family. sleeping along with the rest.

Apart from poets and sages with dog names, there are several dogs themselves mentioned in the Ṛg Veda, the most famous being the dogs of Yama, the Lord of Death. In an essay by Maurice Bloomfield, another great American Sanskritist of the first generation, entitled "Cerberus, the Dog of Hades,"[6] he argues that the sources, or perhaps better, the earliest manifestation of the Indo-European mythological dogs of hell or of death, known as Cerberus in the Latin and Kerberos in the Greek, are found in ancient India, and specifically in the Ṛg Veda. These are the two dogs of Yama named Śyāma (dark) and Śabala (spotted or bright). Bloomfield, in fact, was in favor of the idea that the name Śabala was the source of the Greek name Kerberos.[7]

The first mention of Yama and his dogs is found in a funeral hymn from the Tenth Circle or Book of the Ṛg Veda (10.14). Yama, among other things, means "twin or one of a pair of twins." Yama was one of a pair of mixed sex twins, the other, the female member, is named Yamī. Twins, of course, have great mythic or folkloric value and appear around the world. The Sac and Fox have several tales involving twins, one of which becomes a powerful visionary, a guide for his people difficult times.[8] Yama according to the hymn in question was the first human to die and the one who blazed the trail to the next world for the rest of us:

> The one who has passed beyond along the great, steep straits, spying out the path for many, the son of Vivasvān, the gatherer of men, King Yama—honor him with the oblation.
>
> Yama was the first to find the way for us, this pasture that shall not be taken away. Where our ancient fathers passed beyond, there everyone who is born follows, each on his own path.[9]

Yama's dogs are described a little later in the same hymn as having the contradictory roles of chasing away those who want to enter the afterlife and of guiding them along the path to the new home. In stanza 10 the dead man for whom the funeral hymn is being sung is advised:

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[6]Maurice Bloomfield, "Cerberus, the Dog of Hades," *The Monist*, vol.14, no. 4 (July, 1904), 523-540. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904)

[7]Ibid., 536-7. There is doubt about this connection today. See Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), and Daniel Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Dragons, serpents and slayers in the classical and early Christian worlds : a sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[8]

[9]Ṛg Veda, 10.14.1-2. Doniger's translation. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 43. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, ?)

> Run quickly down the good path past the two four-eyed dogs, brindled (and dark), sons of Saramā.[10] Join there the wise fathers who take pleasure in feasting with Yama.[11]

Here it is suggested that Yama's dogs try to prevent the dead from entering the next world by scaring them, chasing them away, or attacking them. Only those with courage, drive, and wisdom can get past them to the joyful pastures of the next world. Here the dogs are closest in function to the "dog of Hades" mentioned in Homer, the dog Hesiod named Kerberos and described as "the irresistible and ineffable flesh-devourer, the voracious, brazen-voiced, fifty-headed dog of hell."[12] Of course, there are two major differences between Yama's dogs and Kerberos: 1) Hades, the realm of the dead in the Greek imagination, was a dark, dreary, and unpleasant place, not at all like the pleasant pastures with their bountiful drinking feasts of the ancient Vedic imagination and 2) Kerberos keeps people from escaping from from that Hades whereas Yama's dogs try to prevent the dead, or at least some of the dead, from entering Yama's blissful kingdom, not stop them from escaping.

In the very next verse a very different view is given of the dogs. Instead of attacking those on the path to heaven, they protect and guide them, helping them reach Yama's realm safely:

> To your two four-eyed, road-guarding, human-watching guard dogs entrust him [the dead man], O King Yama, and give him prosperity and health.[13]

Here the dogs have become guardian dogs to protect and guide those on their way to heaven. In other words, they have become psychopomps for the dead.

The twelfth verse extends the dogs' powers even further. They are portrayed as no longer solely concerned with the dead and their journey to the next world, but also with the lives of the living. They become watchers of humans in the world, determiners of who goes to Yama's abode and who does not.

> The two broad-nosed, insatiable [breath-stealing?], copper-colored messengers of Yama follow after men. May they restore to us

[10] The female dog of Indra, king of the gods.

[11] Ṛg Veda, 10.14.10: *ati drava sārameyau śvānau caturakṣau śabalau sādhunāpathā | athā pitṝn suvidatrānupehi yamena ye sadhamādam madanti.* A version of Bloomfield's translation updated by me. Op. cit., 528.

[12] Quoting Bloomfield's rendering of the passage from Hesiod (Theogony 311 ff). Ibid., 523.

[13] After Bloomfield, p. 529. Ṛg Veda, 10.14.11: *yau te śvānau yama rakṣitārau caturakṣau pathirakṣī nṛcakṣasau| tābhāmenaṃ pari dehi rājan svasti cāsmānamīvaṃ ca dhehi||*

here and now the auspicious breath of life so that we may see the sun.[14]

Bloomfield argues throughout the rest of his essay that from these suggestive beginnings the dogs of Yama evolve in the later tradition and become identified with the moon and the sun; the dark one, Śyāma, becomes the moon and the brindled or bright one, Śabala, becomes the sun. As the moon and sun, they witness the lives of humans as verse 11 says (*nṛcakṣusau*). They also are the messengers of death in the sense that their movement throught the nights and days reveals the passage of time and the drawing near of death. They maintain their control over the fates of human beings, since, as the later texts tell us, if one dies in certain circumstances one goes to the moon and returns to earth for another life. But if under different circumstances one goes to the sun, one is guided beyond sun and moon by a person who is not human to the realm of the brahman.[15]

Dogs in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad is one of the oldest of the class of sacred Hindu texts called Upaniṣad. It dates to the 5th or 6th centuries BCE, according to the most credible scholars and seems to be the work of one or several editors who created an anthology out of stories and teachings that pre-existed the work separately.[16] Thus, the Chāndogya contains a number of stories and passages that do not appear to be connected with each other in obvious ways. They all, however, give us brief peeks into the speculative lives and ways of relating to the world of early Indic thinkers of those periods.

Among the many different ways of explaining the meaning of the term *upaniṣad*, which is the collective name given to this group of twelve or thirteen texts, the most likely is that suggested by Olivelle, et. al.[17] *Upaniṣad* means "connection." So an Upaniṣad records various attempts to discover and map the connections that bind together the various elements or spheres of the world we experience around us.[18] Moreover, these connections are not just found; they are found in connection with each other and ordered in hierarchies. To the authors and collectors of the Upaniṣads, knowing these interconnected hierarchies, especially knowing what stands at the head or

[14] After Bloomfield, p. 528. Ṛg Veda, 10.14.12: *urūṇasāv asutṛpā udumbalau yamasya dūtau carato janān anu| tāv asmabhyaṃ dṛśaye sūryāya punardātām asum adyeha bhadram||*

[15] At Chāndogya 5.10, for instance. Or, BU 6.2.9-16. Kauṣītaki U. Chap. 1.

[16] Olivelle, 95.

[17] In the introduction to his recent translation of the major Upaniṣads, lii-liii.

[18] ibid., lii.

top of these hierarchies was considered an empowering kind of knowledge. Since the connections are not obvious, but are instead hidden or elusive or subtle, the Upaniṣads came to regarded as bearers of a hidden or secret knowledge, knowledge that brings to those who know it great power and freedom.[19]

The name *chāndogya* is interesting as well. It comes from the Sanskrit word *chandoga*, "given to meter" or, "moving along by meter," or, in other words, "a singer." So the Chāndogya Upaniṣad is the Upaniṣad of those who sing. Of the four Vedas that stand as the source revelations of what later became the Hindu tradition, Sāma Veda is the Veda of song. The special sacrificial function of the priests of this Veda was to sing the Vedic hymns melodiously as the ritual proceeded. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad, then, represents the reflections on the hidden hierarchy of connections that the singers of the Sāma Veda considered meaningful and powerful.

The section of the Chāndogya involving dogs is in the first chapter, section 12, entitled "the High Chant Seen by Dogs (*Śauva Udgīta*)." Here dogs are regarded as the seers of a Vedic hymn. This is rather extraordinary since the seers or *ṛṣis* are the sources of divine revelation and wisdom in the Hindu tradition. The *udgīta* or "high chant" is recognized in earlier passages of the Chāndogya as the sacred syllable *oṃ*. The very first sentence of the Chāndogya is "Oṃ—one should venerate the High Chant as this syllable, for one begins the High Chant with *oṃ*."[20] The high chant of the dog begins with *oṃ*and ends with it. When pronounced properly and quickly it rather sounds like sounds a dog might make, growling or howling. Here is the whole passage from the Chāndogya using Olivelle's translation:

> Next comes the High Chant of dogs. One day, while Baka Dālbhya—or it may have been Glāva Maitreya—was on his way to perform his vedic recitation, there appeared before him a white dog. Other dogs gathered around the white one and said to him [the white dog]: "Please, sir, find some food for us by singing. We are really hungry." And he told them: "Come and meet me at this very spot in the morning." So Baka Dālbhya—or it may have been Glāva Maitreya—kept watch there.
>
> Those dogs then filed in, sliding stealthily in just the same way as priests slide stealthily in a file holding on to each other's back to sing the hymn of praise called Bahiṣpavamāna. They sat down together and made the sound "huṃ." They sang: "Oṃ! Let's eat! Oṃ! Let's Drink! Oṃ! May the gods Varuṇa, Prajāpati, and

[19]ibid., liii
[20]CU 1.1.1.

Savitṛ bring here food! Lord of food! Bring here food! Bring! Bring! Oṃ!"[21]

Two comments here may help us to understand the purpose of this passage. The first is based on a comment by Olivelle in a note on the way the dogs imitate priests "sliding stealthily in" to sing the Bahiṣpavamāna hymn. Olivelle points out that the peculiar way the priests enter the sacrificial enclosure is itself an imitation of the way deer are hunted.[22] So the dogs are imitating priests who are imitating the way deer are hunted: moving in stealthily so as not to scare them. This suggests that the dogs are performing a kind of sympathetic magic to gain success in hunting and thereby more food.

The second comment concerns the context of this passage. Śaṅkara in his commentary on this section connects it with section 10 of the same chapter in which we find a poor brahmin, Uṣasti Cākrāyaṇa, starving along with his wife in the land of the Kurus because the crops were destroyed by a thunderstorm and as a result a famine developed. He escapes starving by eating food from the plate of a neighbor who is an elephant-owner, a thing a good brahmin should never do, eat off another person's plate, but which they can do in desperate situations. So, the high chant of the dog is a response to famine, starvation, and the destruction of *dharma* or proper conduct. Scarcity of food is a recurring theme in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. In no other ancient Indic text is food so important. The sympathetic magic of the high chant of the dog was meant to enlist the supernatural powers named in the chant (Varuṇa, Prajāpati, Savitṛ, and Annapati) in an effort to make food abundant and drive away famine. These dogs are singing for their supper and everyone else's, whereas the dogs of the Sac and Fox Indians *are* supper, but only on certain sacred occasions as ways of connecting their eaters with sacred powers.

The Place of the Dog among the Sac and Fox

Dogs greatly enriched the world of the Sac and Fox Indian and extended their abilities to survive in a dangerous environment. The sharper senses of their dogs made them excellent protectors at home and on the road and superior helpers in the hunt. The strength, speed, and agility of the dog made them comrades in a fight and faithful carriers of burdens in a move. It is no wonder that the Sac and Fox regarded dogs as manitou. William Jones

[21] Olivelle, 107. Chāndogya U.: *om adāmoṃ pibāmoṃ devo varuṇaḥ prajāpatiḥ savitānnam ihāharad annapate 'nnam ihāharāharom iti*

[22] Ibid., 331.

gives us a sense of how Sac and Fox thought about manitou. Basically, any person or thing with extraordinary powers and abilities was considered a manitou. As Jones reported:

> An Indian had been to a circus and had seen a parrot. He heard it talk. He remarked that it must be a manitou.
>
> I was walking along the railroad track with an Indian when we met a train. I said: "Here comes a manitou." And he replied: "Yes, and a very great one at that."
>
> I was talking with a group of Indians about a certain man we all knew. The man was very intelligent and he had a way of learning things quickly. He spoke well, and he was quick at almost everything he did. An Indian remarked that the man must be under the influence of a manitou that enabled him to do so many things.[23]

The dog for the Sac and Fox was something of a special case. As Jones says:

> The dog is a manitou the eating of which by the people is highly pleasing to all the manitou. To eat a dog is the same as offering a prayer for pity, for long life, for whatever one greatly desires. It is not like eating common food. One eats in the usual way to satisfy hunger, gain strength of body, and for mere pleasure, but to eat dog is to get in touch with the manitous and to obtain things which cannot be got from ordinary food. It is but a way of letting the manitou inside one's self impart some quality of its nature. It makes one different in mind and body from what one would be otherwise; one passes into a friendly relation with the manitous.[24]

Jones gives a brief description of the dog-eating rite as part of the Buffalo Dance among the Fox. He says:

> Dog, corn, and pumpkin are eaten at this dance. Over the fire hang the kettles with dog and other things to eat in them. West of the fire is a dead dog whose head is pointed to the west. The dogs are killed during the evening before the dance. They are usually strangled, and a big fire is made over which the hair of the dogs is singed off.[25]

[23]Jones, 11.
[24]Ibid., 12.
[25]Ibid., 101.

There are other more detailed accounts of the preparation and eating of dogs in several of the Fox texts collected from informants and translated by Michelson. Take, for instance, a passage from a text Michelson translated native text on the Buffalo dance of the Bear gens in his *Contributions to Fox Ethnology II*:

> And eventually Those Who Have Short Tails, members of the Bear gens, kill their pets (i.e. dogs) that they may hold a buffalo dance. The leading head ceremonial attendant is John Leaf, and he is the one who clubs the dogs to death. On the east door (of the summer house) is where the ceremonial attendants are accustomed to strike down (the dogs). When they are knocked down some ceremonial attendants choke them. They use a stick which they place across (the dogs') necks. Two (men) do so. Then they go to singe (the dogs). And one also fetches fire, and they kindle a fire where a large log is. And some also bring oziers [baskets?]. When the fire blazes excellently they are accustomed to throw (the dogs) on it and burn (off) the hair. Then they continue to scrape their bodies clean (?). After they have carefully singed them, then they usually disembowel them. They also cut out the eyes and cut the eyes. Then they burn the guts. And when all are done the head ceremonial attendant tells them to wash (the dogs) in the river. They usually singe (the dogs) on the edge of the river. (That is) merely the way they have been doing. And knives are what they use when they scrape the bodies (of the dogs). And (the dogs) are very clean. Thereupon they fetch (the dogs and) when they have brought them yonder then they lay them down carefully. They lay them out exactly (in the order) they killed them. That is why the first one is laid on the east side, and (the others) exactly as they lay in a line. And they are supposed to remain on the south side (of the scaffolding) for one night.[26]

This is the way the dogs are prepared the day before it is cooked. They remain on a scaffold over night. On the day they are cooked, the dogs are cut up into equal pieces and boiled in several kettles, the first of which is cooked hurriedly and is to be eaten quickly. This is often in the form of a contest between four young men who compete with each other to eat the most pieces the fastest. They plunge their hand into the boiling hot water to grab pieces of dog and devour them quickly. This demonstrates, I suppose, a wholehearted willingness and enthusiasm to connect with the

[26]Michelson, *Contributions to Fox Ethnology II*, 9.

manitou world in spite of personal pain and torment and to demonstrate their brave spirit. There is no doubt, however, that the dogs are also considered to be offerings or sacrifices to the manitou who are being honored, in this case the buffalo manitou. In a prayer addressed to the Spirit of Fire and The-one-who-lies-with-his-face-in-the-smoke-hole, who are intermediary manitou, they are asked to convey the following message:

> Verily that is what those who boiled (food) for the buffalos who bestow blessings alike desire; and all who properly placed a bowlful of sugar, they also desire life from them; and those who sacrificed their pets (i.e. dogs), they also only (desire) that in return they be blessed with life. That, verily, is how we depend upon you to carefully interpret for us, my grandfather, Spirit of Fire, and you, Who-lie-with your-face-in-the-smoke-hole.[27]

The use of the word "pet" here is telling. It indicates that those who are sacrificing the dogs are sacrificing something dear to them, for it is their pets that are being sacrificed. They in effect are offering parts of themselves and, no doubt, are experiencing a deep loss because of it. They sacrifice what is near and dear to them for the sake of the blessing of life from the manitou.

Conclusion

So we see in both cultures, the ancient Vedic culture of India and the more recent Native culture of the Sac and Fox, that the dog was recognized as a savior, as a source of the blessing for continued life. Each culture expresses this in its own distinctive ways. In ancient India there was the challenge of frequent famines and starvation from which the dog through the High Chant of the Dog saves mankind. Baka Dālbhya was just an observer of the dogs as they chanted. He learned the chant through which food might be obtained by spying on them. The dogs of Yama, the Lord of Death, brought ancient Indians face to face with the problems and mysteries of death. What is death? Is there life after death? If so, what are the possibilities for that? Yama's dogs suggest that there are two possibilities, one dark and one bright. The dark one means eternal return to lives of sadness and disappointment, mixed to be sure with elusive periods of joy, no doubt. Nevertheless, it is an unending cycle. The bright means escape, freedom, no more return, the end of cycle of suffering. The dogs are transformed into the ideas of bondage and release in later Hinduism.

[27] Ibid., 13,15.

Among the Sac and Fox, the dog was the savior as the sacrificial victim. As a being with special powers, a manitou itself, the dog was believed to be pleasing to the more powerful manitou, those capable of preserving the lives and increasing the fortunes of human beings. They as food were also a conduit for the reception of abilities and qualities perceived as divine for mankind, a way for mankind to become better than it was before, stronger. I suspect that the place of dogs in these two cultures reflects a time, now long past, in the history of human development and culture when dogs were needed by human beings. Having the help of dogs was a distinct advantage in the struggle for survival. Today we no longer need dogs like that. We like them. We enjoy their company, but we no longer need them, at least not the way we once did.

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