

# Dogs of Death: dogs and the rites of death among the Sac and Fox and the people of ancient India

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## Genesis of this Study

This is the third consecutive paper I have presented at this conference exploring the similarities and differences between the ancient cultures of India and the culture of the Sac and Fox native Americans of Missouri, Iowa, Kansas and Oklahoma. The

first paper examined the vision quest practices of both peoples, practices of fasting, asceticism, and solitude aimed at gaining divine knowledge through visions of and communication with talking spirit-animals. The second paper was about the relationship in both cultures of food and dogs. Among the native Sac and Fox tribes dogs are eaten as part of several sacred ceremonies and celebrations. Dogs among the Sac and Fox have special sacred power and are pleasing offerings to the Manitou, the spirit beings who populate the world. In India, dogs are represented in the family names of many of the ancient and respected sages, the great sages Śaunaka (Son of Little Dog), Śunaḥpuccha (Dog Tail), and Śunaḥkarna (Dog's Ear) for instance. Moreover an interesting story from an old upaniṣadic wisdom text, presents a group of dogs acting as priests and creating sacred chants to alleviate a scarcity of food in times of famine. While I was working on that paper I came across another interesting connection between roles of dogs in both cultures. In both, dogs are somehow connected with death and death rites. This increased my curiosity about the meaning dogs have in these two cultures separated so distantly in space and time. Of course, the connection of dogs with food in both cultures is not unrelated to their connection with death. Without food death is certain.

**[Skip this para.]**

As I mentioned last in my last paper, 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 companions, guards, helpers in hunting, and pack animals? And how is it that dogs were regarded as connected with the sacred in ancient India? Dogs today in India are considered sources of filth and pollution and are generally driven off with sticks and rocks when they get too close. Of course, part of my surprise in the case of India was the result of assuming that dogs in ancient India were viewed

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. 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 partaking in *prasāda*, grace food made holy by being offered to the divine images in Hindu temples or house shrines. The Sac and Fox believed eating dogs connected them with the sacred powers of the world, the Manitu, and infused them with some of that power.

## Dogs of Death in Ancient India

The lord of the dead in ancient India was a fellow named Yama. He became the lord of the dead by being the first human to die. He blazed the path to the next world for all to follow. The oldest of the sacred writings in India are called the Vedas and the oldest of those is the Ṛg Veda (1500-1000 BCE). In the Ṛg Veda this is said of Yama funeral hymn (10.14.1-2):

The one who has departed to the great heights, who has shown to many the path, the son of Vivasvat, gatherer together of peoples, King Yama: present him with an oblation.

Yama was the first to find the way for us: nor is this pasture to be taken away. Where our first fathers have departed, by that way do their sons follow.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ṛg Veda, 10.14.1-2:

*pareyivāṃsaṃ pravato mahīr anu bahubhyaḥ panthāman upa-  
paśanam |  
vaivasvataṃ saṅgamaṇaṃ janānāṃ yamaṃ rājānaṃ haviṣā du-*

The dogs of death are Yama's dogs. In an essay by Maurice Bloomfield, a great American Sanskritist of the first generation, entitled "Cerberus, the Dog of Hades,"<sup>2</sup> he argues that the sources, or perhaps better, one of the earliest manifestations of the Indo-European belief in the 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 linguistic source of the Greek name Kerberos.<sup>3</sup> A major difference between Cerberus or Kerberos and the dogs of Yama is that the former are dogs of hell, the underworld, whereas Yama's belong to a heavenly paradise.

Later in the same hymn to Yama it is said (Ṛg Veda, 10.14.8-9):

Meet Yama, meet the Fathers, meet the merit of free  
or ordered acts, in the highest heaven. Leave sin  
and evil, seek anew your dwelling, and bright with  
glory wear another body. (8)

Go hence, depart you [demons], fly in all directions:

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vasya || 1 ||

yamo no gātum prathamō viveda naiṣā gavyūtir apabhartavā u |  
yatrā naḥ pūrve pitarāḥ pareyur enā jajñānāḥ pathyā<sup>3</sup> anu svāḥ ||  
2 ||

Translation by Walter H. Maurer, *Pinnacles of India's Past: Selections from the Ṛg Veda*, 249. (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986)

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Bloomfield, "Cerberus, the Dog of Hades," *The Monist*, vol.14, no. 4 (July, 1904), 523-540. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904)

<sup>3</sup>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, 1991), 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).

this place the Fathers have provided for him [the deceased]. Yama bestows on him a place to rest in, adorned with days and beams of light and waters.<sup>4</sup>  
(9)

Yama's dogs are described in the same hymn as having the contradictory roles, on the one hand, of guarding the path to Yama's paradise and chasing away those who want to follow it, and on the other hand of guiding them along the path to their new home. In stanza 10 the dead man for whom the funeral hymn is being sung is advised:

Run quickly down the good path past the two four-eyed dogs, spotted (and dark), sons of Saramā.<sup>5</sup> Join there the wise fathers who take pleasure in feasting with Yama.<sup>6</sup>

In the very next verse, however, 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:

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<sup>4</sup>Translation taken from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10014.htm> on 10-28-2017, has been compared with Doniger O'Flaherty's and slightly modernized.

*saṃ gacchasva pitṛbhiḥ saṃ yamaneṣṭāpūrtena parame vyoman |  
hitvāyāvadyaṃ punar astamehi saṃ gacchasva tanvā suvarcāḥ || 8*

*apeta vīta vi ca sarpatāto 'smā etaṃ pitaro lokam akran |  
ahobhir adbhīr aktubhīr vyaktaṃ yamo dadāty avasānam asmai || 9*

<sup>5</sup>The female dog of Indra, king of the gods.

<sup>6</sup>Rg Veda, 10.14.10:

*ati drava sārameyau śvānau caturakṣau śabalau sādhunā pathā |  
athā pitṛnt suvidatrā upehi yamena ye sadhamādam madanti || 10*

This is a version of Bloomfield's translation updated by me. Op. cit., 528.

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.<sup>7</sup>

Here the dogs have become guardian dogs to protect and guide those on their way to heaven.

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 here and now the auspicious breath of life so that we may see the sun.<sup>8</sup>

Bloomfield argues throughout the rest of his essay that from the beginning the dogs represented certain phenomena in the sky. He cites two stories from the Brāhmaṇa literature which are early (8th-5th cents. BCE) commentaries on the Vedas. In the stories a group of demons attempt to build a stairway to heaven by piling up bricks. The king of heaven Indra disguises himself as a member of the priestly class and places a brick in the stairway. When the demons are about to reach heaven, Indra pulls out his brick and the whole stairway above collapses

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<sup>7</sup>After Bloomfield, p. 529. Ṛg Veda, 10.14.11:

*yau te śvānau yama rakṣitārau caturakṣau pathirakṣi nṛcakṣasau |*  
*tābhām enaṃ pari dehi rājant svasti cāsmā anamivam ca dhehi ||*  
11 ||

<sup>8</sup>After Bloomfield, p. 528. Ṛg Veda, 10.14.12:

*urīṇasāv asutrṇā udumbalau yamasya dūtau carato janān anu |*  
*tāv asmabhyam dṛśaye sūryāya punar dātām asum adyeha*  
*bhadram|| 12 ||*

throwing all but the highest two back to the earth. The highest two according to the story become the dogs of Yama and all the others become spiders when they land back on the earth.<sup>9</sup> References to the dogs of Yama in the second story describe them as running through the sky and looking down on all beings.<sup>10</sup> The Black Yajur Veda of the Kaṭha branch speaks plainly about the dogs: “These two dogs of Yama, verily, are day and night.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the dogs were equated with day and night and their markers the sun and the moon; the spotted or bright one, named Śabala, was day and the sun, and the dark one, named Śyāma, was night and the moon. As day and night, they witness the whole lives of all humans as verse 11 says (*nṛcakṣusau*) in the Ṛg Veda hymn quoted before. They also are the messengers of death in the sense that their movements above as days and nights embody the passage of time and the inevitable drawing ever nearer of death. They maintain their power over the fates of human beings since, as witnesses of their lives, they choose different fates for humans, indeed for all living beings. As the rest of the passage from the Kaṭhaka branch of the Black Yajur Veda says: “Those two dogs of Yama, day and night, choosing among human beings, ‘you are a pillar, you are a noose,’ throwing them down from here, by those two indeed this one (the recently dead) is concealed.”<sup>12</sup>

As later texts, in particular the Upaniṣads, tell us, those who die with knowledge of the true nature of things go to the sun,

<sup>9</sup>*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, 1.1.2 and *Maitrāyaṇa Brāhmaṇa*, 1.6.9.

<sup>10</sup>*Atharva Veda*, 6.80.

<sup>11</sup>Cited from Bloomfield, 531: *skambho'si vleṣko'sity etau vai yamaśvā ahaśca rātrī ca tā idaṃ manuṣyān vṛñjānau pratyasyamānā itas tābhyām evainam apidadhāti*, “‘you are a pillar, you are a noose,’ thus do these two dogs of Yama, [who are] day and night, choosing among humans, throwing them down from here, by them is this one concealed,” *Kaṭhaka Black Yajur Veda*, 37.14, p. 371.

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.*

the dog Śabala, and those who die without true knowledge, but with good works, go to the moon, the dog Śyāma. Those who go to the sun gain freedom and never return to this world. Those who go to the moon become clouds and fall back to the world in the rain. They grow attached, trapped in food, are eaten, become semen, and are born again. This is the teaching of re-incarnation in its most primitive form. Later it becomes more refined.

Here is a passage from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* describing this process:

**[Skip this quote]**

Now the people who know this, and the people here in the wilderness who venerate thus: “Austerity is faith”—they pass into the flame, from the flame into the day, from the day into the fortnight of the waxing moon, from the fortnight of the waxing moon into the six months when the sun moves north, from these months into the year, from the year into the sun, from the sun into the moon, and from the moon into lightning. Then a person who is not human—he leads them to brahman. This is the path leading to the gods.

The people here in villages, on the other hand, who venerate thus: “Gift-giving is offerings to gods and to priests”—they pass into the smoke, from the smoke into the night, from the night into the fortnight of the waning moon, and from the fortnight of the waning moon into the six months when the sun moves south. These do not reach the year but from these months pass into the world of the fathers, and from the world of the fathers into space and from space into the moon. This is King Soma, the food of the gods, and the gods eat it. They remain there as long



as there is a residue, and then they return by the same path they went—first to space, and from space to the wind. After the wind has formed, it turns into smoke; after the smoke has formed, it turns into a thunder-cloud; after the thunder-cloud has formed, it turns into a rain-cloud; and after a rain-cloud has formed, it rains down. On earth they spring up as rice and barley, plants and trees, sesame and beans, from which it is extremely difficult to get out. When someone eats that food and deposits the semen, from him one comes into being again.<sup>13</sup>

## Dogs and Death among the Sac and Fox

Dogs greatly enriched the world of the Sac and Fox Indians 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. It is said in the mythology that dogs were given to humans as companions by the creator, the Great Manitou, in the beginning.<sup>14</sup> William Jones gives us a sense of how Sac and Fox thought of dogs:

The dog is a manitou the eating of which by the peo-

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<sup>13</sup>*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 5.10.1-6, translation of Patrick Olivelle. *Upaniṣads*, 141-142. (). One can find similar passages at BU 6.2.9-16 and Kauṣītaki U. Chap. 1.

<sup>14</sup>[The Great Manitou said:] “And I grant you this, every kind of a game animal to be with you. And I grant you the dog to be your pet here where you have your hearth.” Collected and translated by Truman Michelson in *Contributions to Fox Ethnology*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 85, 125. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1927)

ple 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.<sup>15</sup>

It should be pointed out that not many Native Americans ate their dogs. In fact, only a few of the mostly plains tribes did: Cheyenne, Dakota, Lakota, Kickapoo, Mexica (Aztec) and, of course, the Sac and Fox.<sup>16</sup>

A few words must be said, here, about breeds of dog Native Americans kept. The original Native American dog breeds seem to be mostly extinct now, replaced by dog breeds brought from Europe when the Europeans arrived. However, a breed called the Carolina Dog was recently discovered living wild in the Southeastern United States. This breed seems to be genetically connected to the original American breed and not to modern European dog breeds. The original breeds are said to have looked and sounded like wolves.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to being eaten by the Sac and Fox natives on special ceremonial occasions as a kind of sacred communion with the Manitou, dogs played an important role in death cere-

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<sup>15</sup>William Jones. *Ethnography of the Fox Indians*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 125, 12. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939)

<sup>16</sup>Native American dogs wikipedia article. Retrieved October 29, 2017: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native\\_American\\_dogs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_dogs)

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

monies. William Jones has supplied a classic description of the funerary rites of the Fox Indians.<sup>18</sup> Truman Michelson has also provided translations of several texts on various aspects of the rites.<sup>19</sup>

There were four types of burial among the Fox natives, but not all are practiced any more. The first was to place the body in a tree or on a scaffold. This is no longer practiced among the Fox. The second was to seat the body, preferably on the body of a slain enemy, on the open ground with back supported and no covering. This was the way a victorious war party would bury a slain companion. The third way was to seat the body in the ground with the head extending out above the ground with a shed built over it. This kind of burial was still practiced (as of 1939). The final method of burial was to use a coffin or a matting cover underground. This was adopted from the Europeans.<sup>20</sup>

Traditionally, the feet of the dead were always pointed toward the west, and graves were dug on an east-west axis with or without sheds built above them. Weapons were rarely buried with the dead because of the fear that the soul of the departed might use them against the living. Formal farewells were spoken, tobacco was sprinkled on the body by everyone who attended. Food and water were placed beside the body, the coffin was closed or the body was wrapped in matting, and it was lowered into the grave. A stake was driven at the foot of the grave which indicated by color which gens the dead belonged to. Dogs were strangled and put in front of the stake,

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<sup>18</sup>William Jones. "Mortuary Observances and the Adoption Rite of the Algonkin Foxes of Iowa," *Congrès International des Américanistes*, XVe, 263-277. (Québec: Dussaut & Proulx, Imprimeurs, 1907)

<sup>19</sup>Truman Michelson. *Fortieth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnography to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*, 351-493. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925)

<sup>20</sup>William Jones, *Ethnography of the Fox Indians*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 125, 64-65.

facing west. The dogs were to serve as guides, companions, and protectors on the journey of the dead westward to the land of Aiyāpā'tä (or Iyāpā'tä, the Yama of the Fox?).<sup>21</sup>

In another place Jones says that it was a pup (often several pups) that was choked and placed west of the stake. It faced west and lay as if traveling westward. Here, however, bands of calico were tied around the lower parts of the pup's legs. The pup was to accompany the dead in order that Po'kwitepāhuwa, the Head-Piercer or Cracker-of-Skulls, may not harm the dead.<sup>22</sup> According to Jones: "It is believed that the path to the spirit world leads past a place where dwells an old woman, Cracker-of-Skulls by name; that she sits by the wayside watching for ghosts journeying westward; that she seizes them but detains them only for a while, just long enough for her to crack open the top of their skulls and dig out a fingerful of brain from each."<sup>23</sup> According to Skinner, in Sac mythology the Head-Piercer was male and guarded the bridge to the spirit world, helped by a watch-dog. He tried to dash out the brains of the passing souls. If he was successful, the soul was lost.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

So we see in both cultures, the ancient Vedic culture of India and the more recently attested, but equally ancient native culture of the Sac and Fox, that the dog was recognized as a savior, as a source of blessing for continued life both this side of and beyond the grave. Each culture expressed this in its own distinctive ways. The dogs of Yama, the Lord of the Dead, brought ancient Indians face to face with the problems and mysteries of

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>23</sup>Jones, "Mortuary Observances and the Adoption Rite of the Algonkin Foxes of Iowa," 265-266.

<sup>24</sup>A. Skinner, *Bulletin of the Public Museum of Milwaukee*, 5, 36, 1923.

death. What is death? Is there life after death? If so, what are the possibilities for that life? Yama's dogs suggest that there are two possibilities, one dark and one bright. The dark one (Śyāma) means eternal return to lives of sadness and disappointment, mixed to be sure with periods of joy and exhilaration. Nevertheless, it is an unending cycle with no place for rest. The bright one (Śabala) means escape, freedom, no more return, the end of cycle of birth and death, of recurring suffering. The dogs of Yama, Śyāma and Śabala, inherited from ancient Indo-European models, were transformed in India into symbols of distinct careers with very different outcomes, those of rebirth and of release which became so emblematic of later Hinduism.

Among the Sac and Fox, the dog was a gift from the Great Manitou, a companion and helper like no other. Others are left behind at the time of death; a piece of charcoal was placed through a hole in the skull into the brain of the soul just before it started off on the path to the land of spirits. This was to destroy all attachments to those being left behind. But the dog accompanies one even then on the path to the spirit world, a guide and protector. As a being with special powers, a manitou itself, the dog pleased the more powerful manitou, those capable of preserving the lives and increasing the fortunes of human beings even as spirit beings on the dangerous way to the spirit land of Aiyāpā'tä.

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