

Rig Veda Riddles In Nomad Perspective

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In the second millennium BC a horseborne Indo-European people penetrated from the Eurasiatic steppes into the Indus river basin, there to found a new civilization, the Old Indic (Gimbutas, 1963). Besides horses, cattle, and carts, the conquerors, who called themselves Aryans, brought with them from the steppe their tribal traditions and religious lore. In the new homeland, this cultural heritage gave rise to the Vedic religion. It has come down to us in the collections of hymns, incantations, and sacrificial formulas known as the four Vedas. Of these, the Rig Veda provides a unique window on the Old Indic culture in the rich and varied contents of its 1,028 hymns. Though some of these hymns yield to straightforward interpretation, others have been notoriously difficult of access, not only because of their archaic language, but because the key to the poetic imagery, sometimes explicitly cast in the form of the riddle, is missing.

If the mists of time have veiled the meaning of many a Rig Veda passage from the bearers of that ancient tradition, and if the creators of those hymns were migrants from the Eurasian steppe, is it conceivable that the living traditions of the peoples of the steppes and forests of Eurasia might provide clues to the hidden meaning of Rig Veda riddles?

A general similarity between Indo-European and Altaic religious beliefs has been noted (Eliade, 1964, p. 378). A comparison of Banzarov (1982) and O'Flaherty (1981) shows that with reference to the Rig Veda such similarity extends to the fundamental bipartition of the world into sky (or heaven) and earth, male and female respectively, their creation by separation from a primordial fused condition, the supremacy of Heaven or the sky god, as ruler or regulator of the world, all-seeing judge of men, and giver of life, and the veneration of fire. One may further note the propping up of the sky on a support (Harva, 1938, p. 38), a matter to which we shall return, the eagle as messenger of the sky god (Eliade, 1964, p. 128), and the horse sacrifice as points of coincidence between Vedic and Eurasian traditions.

In what follows, I propose to show by way of concrete examples that Altaic traditions are capable of throwing new light on enigmatic concepts and obscure allusions in the Rig Veda, and so help us solve some of its riddles. For an English rendering of the Vedic hymns I rely upon the easily accessible selection translated by O'Flaherty (1981).

I. Vena.

Rig Veda 10.123, *vena* or "longing" has been called a strange and mystical hymn by the translator. Three of its eight verses read as follows:

1. This Vena drives forth those who are pregnant with the dappled one. Enveloped in a membrane of light, he measures out the realm of space. In the union of the waters and the sun, the inspired priests lick him with prayers as if he were a calf.

2. *Vena whips the wave high out of the ocean.* Born of the clouds, the back of the loved one has appeared, shining on the crest at the highpoint of Order. The women cry out to the common womb.

7. Then the divine youth climbed straight back up into the dome of the sky bearing his many-colored weapons. Dressing himself in a perfumed robe, looking like sunlight, he gives birth to his new names.

I propose that the above imagery would be directly descriptive of the rainbow, were it not for the apparent incongruity of the italicized sentence in verse two. That, however, is the very clue that allows us to clinch the identification by noting the widespread belief among Altaic peoples that the rainbow sucks or drinks water from rivers and lakes (see Harva, 1938. p. 212). The subject of the hymn *Vena* is clearly the rainbow, insists the nomad riddler.

II. The riddle of The One.

Few Rig Veda conceptions are veiled in more hoary mystery than is The One. Having arisen through the power of heat (10.129.30), it props apart the six realms of space (1.164.6), and all creatures rest on it. (10.82-6). The hypostasis of The One as ultimate principle or ground of existence and philosophic Absolute in later Upanishadic and Vedanta monism should not deter attempts to find for it a less speculative referent within the world view of a preliterate people hailing from the steppe.

The Rig Veda contexts that feature The One are creation, cosmology, and the symbolism of the sacrifice. Pervading these contexts is the bipartite world scheme of sky and earth, already referred to as a point of coincidence between Vedic and steppe traditions. A basic and impressive fact of such a scheme of nature is the rotary motion of one of its halves relative to the other, observable in the rigid spherical motion of the starry night sky.

Celestial motion is the basic fact of nature behind the widespread Eurasian belief in a world pillar, the *axis mundi* which as support of the sky forms the centerpiece of the world scheme (Eliade, 1964, p. 261). In the Rig Veda it figures as the "axle pole of space" (1.164.19) and "pillar of the sky" (9.74.2), which props apart sky and earth (3.31.12). The point about which the starry heavens turn is marked by the Pole Star, uniquely at rest in the revolving expanse of stars, like the nave of a wheel. The Buriats picture the stars as a herd of horses tethered to the Pole Star, the "Golden Pillar" of the Mongols (see Eliade, 1964, p. 261). It, accordingly, is the point where the sky is suspended on the world pillar, the singular point of support of the world order without which its halves collapse back into their primordial condition. There, I propose, in the northern night sky, breathes the Vedic One, "there where, they say, the One dwells beyond the seven sages." (10.82.2)

Who or what are the seven sages? A Mongol riddle of nature reads:

Behind the Altai and Khangai Mountains

There are a hundred thousand horses, they say.

There is a group of seven loners, they say.

There is a group of six which flock together, they say.

There is a group of three which form a file, they say.

There are two which set black and white apart, they say.

There is one left behind, they say.
(Hangin, 1986, p. 63).

Stars and heavenly bodies are the topic here. The seven loners or seven Elders (Harva, 1938, p. 191), form the constellation Ursa Major, to which another Mongol riddle refers as "Those which go around are seven" (Hangin, 1986, p. 63). A Buriat story pictures the constellation as seven heroes with seven horses (Harva, 1938, p. 192). What they circumambulate is of course the Pole Star, which one finds in the night sky by extending one side of the Ursa Major trapezoid.

The seven sages of the Vedas, I propose, are Ursa Major, which may also figure as the seven-wheeled chariot with seven riders and horses of Rig Veda 1.164.3, and possibly even as the seven half-embryos of 1.164.36, which "themselves surrounded, surround it on all sides." As Ursa Major they would be surrounded by stars, and surround the pole star by going around it. "The One who dwells beyond the seven sages," then, would be the pole star, resting support of the revolving heavens, nave and navel of the cosmic order (1.164.6, 10, 13, 19, 33-34), found by sighting along two of the seven sages, though not the two we use today.

Because of the precession of the earth's axis, its north pole makes a 26,000 year circuit through the constellations. In 2,000 BC it pointed close to the star Thuban in the Dragon constellation. Thuban was the star indicated by one of the major corridors of the Cheops pyramid, built approximately 2,600 BC. Around Thuban Ursa Major made an even tighter circuit than around the Pole Star of today. One finds it by extending the opposite side of the Ursa Major trapezoid to about twice its length. Thuban was a good approximation of celestial north well beyond the middle of third millennium BC.

As pole, The One would be intrinsically linked to the act of creation that separated sky from earth, and to the *axis mundi* or world pillar that keeps them separated. Via these relations, much of the imagery of the hymn to the Unknown God ("Who") or Golden Embryo (10.121), such as holding earth and sky in place, propping up the dome of the sky, supporting the two opposed masses, and having the quarters of the sky as his two arms, becomes appropriately linked to The One. The answer to the hymn's recurrent question "Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?" -- a god said to be "the one king of the world that breathes and blinks," and "the one god among all the gods" -- would therefore be: The One, or Thuban, the late pole star. Its association with fire (10.121.7) and heat (10.129.3), as well as with Agni (1.164.46), elaborated, I suggest, in 10.5, matches the Mongol belief that fire was born in the separation of heaven and earth (Banzarov, 1982, p. 59). Faced with these clues and relations, the nomad riddler may indeed find in the pole star, mainstay of a familiar cosmology, the key to the Rig Vedic One.

III. The celestial riddle mill

The above two exercises direct attention to natural and particularly celestial phenomena as models and inspiration for the riddles of the Vedic poets. The revolving sky itself has not been exhausted in this regard by noting its anchoring at the pole star. When a heavenly body is spoken of as "clothing himself in those that move towards the same center but spread apart" (1.164.31) the stars of the night sky may be intended, rather than the rays of the sun, by analogy to the Buriat conception of tethered stars mentioned above. Also, a chariot-riding people would find in the wheel a natural metaphor for the revolving dome, as in the "ageless and unstoppable wheel with three naves," or the wheel whose axle, though heavy-laden, does not get hot nor break in its

naves, both featured in the Riddle of the Sacrifice (1.164.2, 13).

From the revolving sky-dome, the metaphor of the wheel naturally extends to the sequence of the seasons, and the rolling wheel of the annual cycle, as in verses 11 and 48 of the same hymn, particularly as the seasonal cycle is accompanied by the wandering of the seven celestial bodies (five visible planets plus sun and moon) through the constellations of the fixed stars (see 10.85.13). But what wheel has three naves? Again the beliefs of steppe and forest people may render assistance.

Where the *axis mundi* suspends the sky at the pole star, there is said to be a hole, and where Heaven is multilayered, a common feature in Altaic beliefs, there is a further hole for each layer or realm of heaven, one above the other. These holes are the primary conduit of communication between the heavens and earth, and provide the passage via which the shaman visits the various heavens in the course of his trance journey (see Harva, 1938, p. 49-53). These holes arrayed along the world axle would indeed resemble naves. The three naves of the Rig Veda may be associated with sky, earth, and the intercalated "middle realm of space", or, perhaps more likely, with the "triple dome" of the tripartite heaven featured in Soma hymn 9.113. There is also a triple earth (7.104.11), providing a context for the three fathers and three mothers held up by The One without wearing him down in 1.164.10.

Besides these "global" celestial characteristics, there is wide scope for attempting to fit more specific phenomena, such as the patterns of the constellations and their associated myths, or the behavior and appearance of the seven wandering heavenly bodies, to the numerology and allusions of hymns like the Riddle of the Sacrifice. Such an exercise lies beyond the scope of the present communication, but a few observations may serve to indicate possible points of departure.

The Mongols know Venus, the evening and morning star, as a heavenly horseman with a helper, keeper of stellar herds, and benefactor of men. Oldenberg has suggested that the Vedic twin horsemen, the Asvins, relate to the same "star" (see Harva, 1938, p. 199). Here it may be noted that there are in fact *two* visible planets associated with dusk and dawn because of their central orbits around the sun, namely Mercury and Venus. They may have inspired both the Altaic and Vedic pair of horsemen. Venus alone, by far the brighter of the two, may in turn be the celestial identity of the Vedic Savitr on the basis of his contextual similarity to and linkage with the Asvins (2.38; 1.35; 1.164.26-27; 10.85.8-9). The Buriat association of Venus with bride abduction (Harva, 1938, p. 199) recalls the strong attraction to beauty attributed to the Asvins in 1.116.17, and their intrusion on the wedding of Surya, the sun, to claim her for themselves in 10.85.14.

If, as suggested above, those spreading around the same centre are stars rather than solar rays, day is changed to night, and the cowherd appearing in that context (1.164.31; 10.177.3) might then be Venus, as above, or another impressive night-time luminary such as the moon. With its phases of waning, disappearance, "rebirth", and full moon marking the monthly division of the year one would expect the moon to provide lavish grist for the poet's celestial riddle mill. The moon appears as groom of the sun in 10.85. From the imagery of filling up, shaping the seasons and the year, hiding, repeated births, leading the dawn, and stretcher of the life span provided in that hymn, the nomad riddler sets out to search for allusions to its varied appearances in other hymns. Via overlapping or juxtaposed clues he may thus trace as aspects of the moon the full-

grown, white face (4.5) of the willful, self-ruled god who comes and goes, who strays from his field (when appearing in the daytime sky?), hides, is destroyed, yet is born again and again (mortal/immortal) (4.5; 1.164; 5.2-10.85; 6.9), and who sharpens his horns (points of the sickle) to break out of captivity (the dark phase) (5.2; 10.8; 4.58). The riddler might even wonder whether the bones of 1.164.4 refer to the new moon, cued by the strong association between bone and the color white in the lore of the steppe (Hamayon, 1972, p. 227).

Finally, our nomad riddler might wonder whether the Milky Way is hidden in one of the many "paths," such as 10.85.11, featured in the hymns. A number of Altaic peoples call this impressive celestial phenomenon the Way or Road of the Birds, in the belief that it guides their migratory flight (Harva, 1938, p. 200). There is a "path of the bird" in 10.5, and 1.163 features a racecourse of the sky reached by a team of horses in V-formation (Taurus, which touches the Milky Way?). But short of further clues, the matter must rest as a question.

Conclusion

The coincidences brought to light in the above do, of course, imply very little regarding their genesis. Neither independent origination within cultures sharing similar circumstances, borrowing from a common source, Altaic borrowing from traditions collaterally related to the Vedic, nor relatedness by common descent are excluded by the fact of coincidence itself. Nor is it clear how much further into Vedic lore the present approach may take us. The above exercises are exploratory in nature. They have been conducted without a wide-ranging search of Altaic sources on the one hand, and without the benefit of Vedic expertise on the other. That one tradition nevertheless appears capable of illuminating the other may encourage further attempts along these lines.

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