

The *Ṛgveda*, ‘small scale’ societies and rebirth eschatology

Joanna Jurewicz

1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to join the discussion about transmigration in Vedic times. It is generally assumed that the ideas of transmigration were introduced by the kṣatriyas, as attested in the Upaniṣads (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya*, *Kauṣītaki*)¹. The BU and CU present the ‘knowledge of five fires’ (*pañcāgnividyā*) together with the division into the *pitṛyāna* and *devayāna*, paths taken by the dead according to their past deeds. The model of five fires is used to explain how the world works also in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (JB 1.45-46, 49-50). This Brāhmaṇa too presents two possible ways the dead can take, depending on their knowledge.

A lot of scholars maintain that no belief in transmigration existed before the Upaniṣads². However, Killingley 1997 presented a number of data, which show that the topics of the *pañcāgnividyā* and *deva-/ pitṛyāna* have their antecedents in the earlier Brahminic texts. He claims that theories of karma and rebirth are made up of several ideas already present in Vedic thought. Also Tull 1989 shows that the conceptual framework of the Upaniṣadic idea of transmigration has been established already in the Brāhmaṇas and their idea of sacrifice during which the sacrificer symbolically undergoes death and rebirth during his journey to heaven. I would like to follow this line of reasoning and investigation, and to show that there are at least two stanzas in the *Ṛgveda* (RV) from which the belief in rebirth can be reconstructed.

The rebirth eschatology, which emerges from the Ṛgvedic data, is still far from its mature Upaniṣadic form. In order to explain it, I shall refer to the research of Obeyesekere 2002, who shows that the belief in rebirth after death is quite widespread and looks different in different cultures. Rebirth eschatologies, which are not linked to ethical causation, are not uncommon in ‘small-scale’ or ‘tribal’ societies. Traces of such an eschatology can be extracted from the Ṛgvedic data.

Obeyesekere is of the opinion that the kṣatriyas in the Upaniṣads who expound their views about transmigration implicitly are in discussion with traditions which ‘seem to believe that after death one can be reborn in the human world or in a subhuman one.’ (2002: 13).

Instead of inventing a new theory, the kṣatriyas rather incorporate views which were already known to them. In order to explain this, Obeyesekere claims that

‘because rebirth eschatologies are empirically widespread and perhaps prior to karmic eschatologies, India might well have had similar (rebirth) eschatologies before it developed its karmic ones. (...) After all, India was nothing but a conglomerate of small-scale societies (villages and tribes) prior to the period of Buddhism, which was also the period of its second urban transformation.’ (2002: 18).

Contrary to Killingley, Obeyesekere maintains that we lack the evidence for such a belief before the Upaniṣads but he thinks that the preserved texts do not necessarily represent the whole religious situation in ancient India. ‘It is true – he says – that there is no way to

¹ BU 6.1.9 ff and CU 5.4 ff and KU 1.2.

² Apart from classic approaches such as Keith 1989: 570 ff, Frauwallner 1990: 93ff, see Butzenberg 1996, partly refuted by Bodewitz 1999a: 116-117.

trace the history of the theory of rebirth backward, but there is a methodological way out by examining how it *might* have originated' (2002: 14). Then Obeyesekere creates – what he calls 'a theoretical possible model' to explain the problem.

My paper will support this model with textual evidence. The argument is based not only on the philological data, but also on the consistency of the whole reconstruction and its power to explain many unclear issues, concerning both the interpretation of some R̥gvedic stanzas and the development of the concept of rebirth. I may add that I had found the evidence supporting my argument before I became acquainted with Obeyesekere's book³.

2. Theories of rebirth of small scale societies and the RV

Obeyesekere describes the rebirth eschatology of small scale societies in the following way:

'The fundamental idea of reincarnation is that at death an ancestor or close kin is reborn in the human world whether or not there has been an intermediate sojourn in another sphere of existence or afterworld (...) The most obvious place [of rebirth] is in one's own family or group' (2002: 15-16).

2.A. RV 10.16.5

The first stanza, which in my opinion attests the belief in rebirth characteristic of small scale societies, is RV 10.16.5:

*áva srja púnar agne pitṛbhyo yás ta áhutaś cárati svadhābhiḥ |
áyur vásāna úpa vetu śéṣaḥ sám gachatām tanvā jātavedaḥ ||* (10.16.5)

The stanza expresses a request to the cremation fire to do – the question is *what?* The form *pitṛbhyas* in pada *a* can be either dative or ablative. All translators take it as dative and interpret this verse as a request to Agni to send back the dead person again to his fathers⁴. In my opinion this interpretation is too narrow. A brief survey of the semantic range of the verb *áva srj-* will show that both cases should be accepted here in order to get the full meaning of the stanza, which is brilliantly constructed.

In reconstructing the meaning of the R̥gvedic words I accept the principles of cognitive linguistics, according to which language is grounded in human cognition and words reflect what people think about entities, relations or states named by them. The word meaning includes 'not only designating meaning (dictionary meaning), but also features which are referred to as cultural connotation, i.e. features which encode historical and cultural experience of a speech community' (Bartmiński 2004). Thus understood, the meaning is a complex structure, the elements of which are internally bounded and rationally motivated (Tokarski 1990). Usually the concrete senses, which refer to everyday experience, are primary, while the more abstract and general senses are derived from them (Sweetser 1990: 28-29).

The word's meaning, understood as above, is an open, dynamic structure, which finally realizes itself in the particular context of a given expression (Langacker 2003). Poetry in particular is a linguistic creation, which plays with words and their meanings by modifying and elaborating the context (Lakoff, Turner 1989, Freeman 2000, Tannen 1989). The use of a word in a particular context evokes the images and concepts stored in the memory of recipients (Minchin 2001), which often are not included in the designating meaning of the

³ I would like to thank Richard Gombrich for paying my attention to this book.

⁴ Elizarenkova 1999, Geldner 1957, O'Flaherty 1981.

word. In this way, a word meaning in a particular usage can highlight rare or unexpected aspects. The demands of orality seem further to prompt such an activation of the wide semantic range of words, because of the need to express as much as possible in a relatively short linguistic message.

As a cognitive phenomenon, the word meaning is motivated by mental operations such as metonymy and metaphor. Metonymy is a mental strategy, which gives access to a whole conceptual domain via its salient point (e.g. “head” is a salient point of “person”, Lakoff, Johnson 1980: 36ff, Radden, Dirven 2006, 16). Metaphor is a mental strategy, which allows humans to think about a conceptual domain in terms of another domain (e.g. we conceive time in terms of money, Lakoff, Johnson 1980:8ff, Radden, Dirven 2006, 16 ff). Whenever I use the words ‘metonymy’ and ‘metaphor’, I understand them like this.

2.A.a. The meaning of *áva srj-* (Part I)

The concrete meaning of *áva srj-* is ‘to untie a human being or an animal’ (a thief, a calf), evoked in 7.86.5 as the source domain of the simile. The concepts evoked as the source domains of similes are often conventionalized and serve as the model enabling the recipient to understand the target domain better: by referring to what is more familiar one can grasp what is more abstract. This is the explanatory function of the simile (Minchin 2001: 138). *Áva srj-*, which means ‘to untie a human being or an animal’, is the source domain of a simile the target domain of which is the abstract idea of forgiving sins and absolving from them. This is the most abstract meaning of *ava srj-*.

On the basis of the concrete meaning of untying more general meanings are construed. These are, on the one hand, ‘to give cattle to someone’ (10.108.5, 10.28.11) and, on the other hand, ‘to free someone from captivity’ (5.2.5, 5.2.6). In the stanzas that instantiate this latter meaning it is fire which is freed from captivity, and its common R̥gvedic conceptualization as a bull (*vṛ̥ṣan*) further motivates this meaning. The most general meaning of *áva srj-* instantiated in the RV is ‘to let (someone) go’ (5.30.13, 10.85.13) and ‘to give (someone to someone)’ (10.65.12).

In a ritual context the concrete meaning ‘to untie an animal’ is extended to the meaning ‘to offer an animal oblation’. In 10.91.14 *áva srj-* is used together with *á hū-*, as in 10.16.15, to express giving cattle as an oblation to fire. This meaning is even clearer in the *āprī* hymn 1.13.11ab (*áva srjā vanaspate déva devébhyo havīḥ*), where *devébhyo* is to be interpreted as dative because the gods are the recipients of the sacrifice. In a similar way other usages of *áva srj-* in the *āprī* hymns are interpreted by scholars as evoking the meaning of freeing an animal from a cord and expressing sending a sacrificial victim to the gods.⁵

The second concrete meaning of *áva srj-* is ‘to shoot an arrow’ (6.75.16). One could presume that this meaning too is suggested by the idea of a cord present in the first concrete

⁵ In all these instances dative is not used 10.110.10: *upávasrja tmányā samañjan devānām pātha rtuthā havīm̐si* |, 3.4.10=7.2.10: *vānaspate ‘va srjōpa devān agnir havīḥ śamitā sūdayāti* |, 1.142.11: *avasrjānn úpa tmānā devām̐ yakṣi vanaspate* |, 2.3.10: *vānaspátir avasrjānn úpa sthād agnir havīḥ sūdayati prá dhībhiḥ* |, see Elizarenkova 1989, 1995, 1999, Geldner 1951, I, II, 1957, Renou 1965, Bosch 1985. Potdar 1944-46 interprets *vānaspāti* as referring to Agni and does not interpret the verses in which *vānaspāti* is evoked as referring to the animal sacrifice, but accepts the idea of binding and releasing the oblation as expressed by *áva srj-*.

meaning, ‘to untie’, because a bowstring could be viewed as a kind of cord binding an arrow until it is released.

Taking into consideration the meanings reconstructed above, the interpretation of the verse *áva srja púnar agne pitṛbhyo* would be ‘release him to his fathers’. The dead person is placed in the cremation fire as the oblation (he is *áhuta*, according to 10.16.5b) and then sent by it to his ancestors like other oblations. In this case the dead person is conceptualized as the animal oblation; this conceptualization is evoked by the semantic range of *áva srj-*, which – on the general level – expresses various activities the object of which is cattle. One could wonder if the meaning of shooting an arrow is not evoked here too to activate the image of the dead person being shot like an arrow to his fathers.

2.A.b *Svadhá* and the sun as the abode of the dead persons

Like *áva srj-*, the word *svadhá*, which is used in 10.16.5b (*yás ta áhutaś cárati svadhábhīḥ*), has a wide semantic range in the RV. Here I will outline only those semantic aspects, which are relevant to this paper. The word *svadhá* qualifies the movement of the dead in two other stanzas as well (1.164.30: *carati svadhábhīr*, 1.164.38: *eti svadháyā grbhītó*). Most scholars in their translations choose words denoting will, right or autonomy⁶. In my opinion, however, the main idea conveyed by *svadhá* in these two stanzas is contradictoriness. The movement of the dead is contradictory in four respects. He moves and does not move at the same time (1.164.30ab: *chaye turágātu... éjad dhruvám*). He moves towards and backwards (*ápāñ prāñ eti*: 1.164.38a). He breathes, he is alive, and he is dead (*anác...jīvo mṛtásya* 1.164.30a,c). The fourth respect is not explicitly expressed in the stanzas, but can be easily inferred: the dead moves although he has no vehicle, which would enable him to move, because his body has been cremated. So, in these two stanzas the word *svadhá* expresses the mysterious power, which enables the dead person to remain in a contradictory state.

This is not an isolated example of such a meaning of *svadhá*. The meaning of contradictoriness is conveyed in stanzas in which *svadhá* qualifies miraculous birth of mother from calf (1.95.4), the Creator’s ability to breath without breath (10.129.2), the mysterious power of the sun to move high in the sky without falling down (4.13.5, 4.14.4).⁷ *Svadhá* itself is internally contradictory: it is a power, which enables entities to move, but it has no wheel (4.26.4, 10.27.19).

I would argue then that in RV 10.6.5b the expression *carati svadhábhīḥ* evokes the idea of contradictory movement of the dead person whose body is burnt by the cremation fire.⁸ One can ask now where this movement takes place. In my opinion, there is sufficient evidence in the RV to accept that the dead’s abode was conceptualized as the sun. The word *svadhá* is used in RV 9.113.10, in the hymn describing the place obtained under the influence

⁶ Elizarenkova 1989: ‘po svoej vole’, ‘svoim obychaem’, Geldner 1957, I: ‘nach eigenem Ermessen’, ‘durch Eigengesetz’, O’Flaherty 1981: ‘as his nature wills’, ‘as his own nature wills’. Renou 1967 ‘autonomie’.

⁷ *Svadhá* qualifies the movement of the sun also in 10.37.5

⁸ At the same time, such passages betray the beginning of formation of the meaning of *svadhá* as the ‘food for the dead’: the mysterious power which enables the dead to move begun to be conceptualized in terms of the special food which, analogically to the human food, enabled the dead to live and move.

of Soma. This place is undecaying (*ākṣita*) and immortal (*āmṛta*), the sun or its shining (*svàr*) is there together with everlasting light (*jyótir ájasram*), there are shining spaces there (*lokā́ jyótiṣmantāḥ*) and it is high up in the sky (*triṇaké tridivé divāḥ*, 9.113.7, 9). The place thus described evokes the idea of the sun understood not as the heavenly body but as the embodiment of the extra-terrestrial happiness gained in Somic exaltation. At the same time, this is the place where rules Yama, who is here called King Vaivasvata (*rájā vaivasvatāḥ*, 9.113.8). This very name makes us think about the sun because *vivásvat* is explained as the sun in the RV⁹. We may presume that King Yama, who was the first to die and to show the way to all mortals, went back to his father's place, i.e. to the sun¹⁰.

The hymn mentions *svadhā́* together with various kinds of wishes and desires (*kā́ma nikā́māḥ*) and with the possibility of their accomplishment (*tṛ́pti, kā́masya...āptā́ḥ kā́māḥ*, 9.113.10, 11). In 4.33.6 *svadhā́* means the ability, which enables one to realise one's desire, and one could assume that in 9.113 too *svadhā́* ensures *tṛ́pti*, i.e. the accomplishment of all the wishes one can have. The ability to move according to one's will (*anukā́mām cáraṇam*, 9.113.9)¹¹ also expresses the total freedom of a person who is in that shining place: in everyday life on earth one cannot move as one wants. If limitations of the human organism come from the body, its burning gives the dead person the possibility to move freely, even in various directions at the same time, or to move and not to move at the same time – as described in 1.164.30, 38. In these two cases (as in 10.16.5b, as has been just shown) it is *svadhā́*, which ensures such movement, and the hymn 9.113 reveals the location of this contradictory situation: it is high in the sky, in a shining place, which is conceptualized as the sun.

There is more evidence, which supports this thesis. The fathers are said to exalt with *svadhā́* in the middle of the sky (*mádhye divāḥ*, 10.15.14), which is the place where the sun is (10.139.2) and where Indra and Agni exalt with *svadhā́* too (1.108.12). Fathers are described as being together with the step of Viṣṇu (*vikrámaṇam víṣṇoḥ*, 10.15.3), which is usually interpreted as the third step of Viṣṇu identified with the sun at its zenith¹². The close connection of the dead with the sun is expressed also in 10.154.5, according to which they are expected to go to the poets who guard the sun.

My interpretation that the abode of the dead persons is on the sun is not necessarily

⁹ Macdonell 1887: 43.

¹⁰ In my opinion, the convergence of the place gained under the influence of Soma and of the place where the King of The Dead does not necessarily mean that the poet asks Soma to ensure him well being after his death. Taking into account that the hymn begins with the description of everyday sacrifice I would argue that the poet asks Soma to take him alive to the place, which, without Soma drunk during the sacrifice, can be gained only after death. Thus the poet experiences an internally contradictory state: the state of a living person in the world of the dead is opposite to the state described as *jīvó mṛtásya* but the contradictoriness is the same.

¹¹ CU 7.25.2 expresses the same idea in its description of the liberated: *tasya sarveṣu bhūteṣu kāmacāro bhavati*.

¹² and with Agni (*[apām] napát*). The third step of Viṣṇu as the sun: 1.154.6, 1.155.3,5, 1.22.20-21, see Elizarenkova 1989: 555, Geldner 1951, I: 22. In RV 5.3.3, 10.1.3 it is Agni, who is present in the third step of Viṣṇu. See also Macdonell 1917: 178.

incompatible with Bodewitz's theory that the dead go to the subterranean world (Bodewitz 1999)¹³. In one stanza the fathers are presented as sitting in the womb of the reddish ones (*ásīnāso aruṇīṇām upáste*, 10.15.7). *Aruṇá* often qualifies dawn (e.g. 1.112.19, 4.1.16, 4.14.3), so to sit 'in the womb of dawns' means to sit in the place where the dawns are born, i.e. in the nether world identified with night¹⁴. It is possible then that the afterlife track of dead persons was conceived as follows: first they went to the nether world and then they were raised to the sky by the rising sun. This was the way, at least, for those who were properly cremated. It is possible that the rest remained in the nether world forever.

If we agree that the dead were in the sun, then we will see a symmetry between everyday *iṣṭi* and the final *iṣṭi*, i.e., *antyeṣṭi*: the fire of cremation – like the fire of everyday sacrifice, brings the dead to the sun – as it brings the oblation¹⁵. That a dead person was treated as an oblation has already been mentioned above: it is implied by the meaning of *áva sṛj-*, which denotes operations done upon animals, more precisely upon cattle.

Conceptualization of the dead person as an animal oblation finds its ritual expression in the protection of the dead body against fire by cowhide, which is expressed in 10.16.7a (*agnér várma pári góbhīr vyayasva*)¹⁶. However, it is worth noticing that 10.16.7a is the only place in the RV where the word *gó* in plural refers to cow hide. Usually, in its metaphorical sense this word is used to denote the milk with which Soma is mixed¹⁷. This common R̥gvedic usage makes the recipient to activate the meaning of *góbhīr* in 10.16.7a as referring to the milk too. The validity of this activation is supported by that there was a custom of covering a dead person with some milky food if the cow was not killed during the cremation rite¹⁸. Taking this into consideration, one can assume that the intention of the poet was to create the image of the dead identified not only with an animal oblation but also with the Somic oblation mixed with milk.

Thus the symmetry between everyday sacrifice and cremation is clear: the dead person, being an animal or a Somic oblation, was poured (*áhuta*) into the cremation fire. Then the cremation fire took him to its cosmic form, which is the sun, as happened with every oblation poured into the fire¹⁹. In this way, the concept of the afterlife would be incorporated into the R̥gvedic model of sacrifice.

2.A.c. The meaning of *áva sṛj-* (Part II)

The above reconstruction of the afterlife does not solve one problem: why does the poet say that the dead person should be sent to his fathers 'once again' (*púnas*)? The answer can be found in other semantic aspects of *áva sṛj-*. The meanings presented above do not

¹³ Bodewitz 1999a, b.

¹⁴ Kuiper 1964, Elizarenkova 1991-1992, Bodewitz 1994.

¹⁵ Tull 1989: 108-119 shows symmetry between the Agnicayana and the Śmaśanacayana.

¹⁶ See Evison 1989: 314, 324, 330, 331.

¹⁷ E.g. 1.134.2, 3.35.8, 9.32.3, 9.74.8, 9.103.2, Srinivasan 1979: 61 ff. According to Macdonell, Keith 1967, I: 234 the word *gó* 'frequently means milk, but rarely the flesh of the cow', the only example they give is 10.16.7a.

¹⁸ See Evison 1989: 372.

¹⁹ The belief that the oblation was poured into the fire identified with the sun is explicitly expressed in 10.88.1 where fire into which the oblation is poured is qualified as 'finding the sun' (*svarvíd*) and 'touching the sky' (*divispr̥ś*) which implies that fire filled with oblation goes up to the sky in order to touch it and to identify itself with the sun. On transformation of fire into the sun see also Bodewitz 1986.

exhaust the whole semantic range of this verb. The most frequent usage of *áva sꝛj-* in the RV is to denote freeing of waters by Indra²⁰. This semantic extension too seem to be motivated by its first concrete meaning, ‘to untie’: there is a similarity between a snake and a cord²¹ and the waters are tied by a snake Vṛtra as a calf or a thief is tied by a cord. What is more, waters are often conceptualized as cows, so the meaning ‘to untie an animal’ strengthens the rationale lying behind the usage of *áva sꝛj-* to denote freeing waters.

In the range of this semantic aspect of *áva sꝛj-* the idea of the direction downwards is inherent. The waters freed by Indra symbolise waters, which make the existence of the world possible: these are rivers and rain. The idea of movement downwards is obviously present in the idea of rain. It is also present in the idea of rivers, which have their sources in the mountains and flow down to the ocean (3.33.1, 5.43.11, 6.61.2, 7.95.2). There is a group of hymns, which use the noun *nimná* to express the direction downwards²². In these hymns the idea of waters conceived as flowing downwards is evoked in the source domain of similes explaining the movement of Soma (most frequently). This allows us to treat this image as conventional and the direction downwards as the essential feature of the movement of waters.²³ In the descriptions of Indra freeing waters with use of *áva sꝛj-* the direction downwards is explicit twice (10.133.2, 8.32.25).²⁴ In 5.62.3 *áva sꝛj-* expresses raining.²⁵

²⁰ 1.32.12: *ávāsꝛjah sártave saptá síndhūn*, 1.55.6: *áva ... sártavā apāḥ sꝛjat*, 1.57.6: *ávāsꝛjo nívr̥tāḥ sártavā apāḥ*, 1.80.4: *sꝛjā ... áva ... imā apó*, 1.174.4: *sꝛjád árṇāmsy áva*, 2.12.12: *avāsꝛjat sártave saptá síndhūn*, 6.30.4: *árṇoávāsꝛjo apó áchā samudrām*, 10.113.4: *áva sasyádaḥ sꝛjad*.

²¹ expressed explicitly thousands years later by Śāṅkara in his famous example explaining the nature of the false knowledge.

²² Lubotzky 1997: 815: *nimnám, nimnéna, nimnāḥ*: 5.51.7, 8.32.23 = 4.47.2, 9.97.45, 9.17.1, 9.97.7, 1.57.2, 10.78.5, 10.148.5. See also 7.18.15.

²³ Elizarenkova 1989, Geldner 1995, I, Renou 1966 interpret *nimnám* in 4.33.7 as the expression of the place where waters are and not as the direction of their movement. I think however that one can interpret it also as expressing the movement: the stanza describes creation of the world done by Ṛbhu-s: they make everything as it should be, their creative act sets the model for the future entities and their behaviour, so they make waters flow down too.

²⁴ *tvám síndhúṁr avāsꝛjo dharāco áhann áhim*, 10.133.2ab, *yá udnāḥ phaligám bhinán nyāk síndhúṁr avāsꝛjat*, 8.32.25ab The word *phaligá* is uncertain (Mayrhofer 1963) but the context evokes the idea of rock (which encloses the cows) and of the vessel (which encloses the rain), so the meaning of stanza is creation of rivers and of rain, the idea of rain strengthens the idea of movement downwards. Witzel 2005: 4 translates *phaligá* as ‘a robust rock’ which blocks the cave in which the sun is hidden; the possibility to interpret *phaligá* as the container both for water and the sun results from Ṛgvedic conception of the sun which is the container and the source of water, see below 2.B.

²⁵ *vardháyatam óṣadhīḥ pínvatam gā áva vṛṣṭīm sꝛjatam jiradānū* || 5.62.3 cd. The direction downwards is also evoked in 7.46.3: *yā te didyúd avasꝛṣṭā divás pári kṣmayā cárati*. It is also possible that *áva sꝛj-* expresses the movement downwards in 1.151.6c (*áva tmánā sꝛjátam pínvatam dhiyo*) of the gods who come to the sacrifice to eat and drink the oblations, sitting on the barhis. Two more usages of *áva sꝛj* seem to be motivated by the idea of ‘down’ conveyed by *áva*. In 4.19.2 the gods who remain behind Indra are compared to the old people.

There is no doubt, then, that when *áva srj-* is used to denote freeing of waters, *áva* highlights its basic meaning ‘down, downwards’, which modifies the meaning of the verb. I would argue that the intention of the poet of RV 10.16 was to activate the whole semantic range of *áva srj*, together with its meaning of freeing (waters) downwards. In this case *pitṛbhyo* should be interpreted as an ablative, ‘from [his] fathers’, and the pada *a* thus understood expresses a request to Agni to release the dead person downwards. This interpretation allows one to assume that *púnaḥ* evokes the idea of a repeated homecoming, explicit in padas *c-d*.

2.A.d. The meaning of padas *c-d*

As has already been argued by some scholars, padas *c-d* express the return of the dead to his relatives²⁶. Even though *śéśas* can mean burnt remains of a human body (it is so interpreted by Sāyaṇa), in the RV the word definitely means ‘offspring’ and there is no reason why this meaning should not be activated. The word *áyus*, which is used in the expression *áyur vásāna*, is consistently used in the RV to denote human life evaluated in a very positive way. And I think that this common meaning should be evoked first, before other possible meanings. Finally, the word *tanú* in the RV denotes ‘the body, the person, the self’ and this meaning suits the whole image which is – in my opinion – created in the stanza: the cremation fire, having burnt the body of the dead person and having taken the person to the world of his fathers, is requested to release him back to his offspring, in whom he can be brought back to life again²⁷.

From what has been said above it follows that the expression *áva srja púnar agne pitṛbhyo* activates the full semantic range of *áva srj-* outlined above. Thus the poet could express the bidirectional movement of the dead person: his movement upwards, to join his fathers on the sun (compare 10.14.8), where he could experience the contradictory state of the existence of the dead (compare 1.164.30: *jīvo mṛtásya carati svadhābhiḥ*), and his movement downwards, back to earth. This cycle of rebirth is very close to what Obeyesekere describes as the rebirth theory in small scale societies²⁸.

The idea of being down is evoked in the image of the old people who not only remain backwards, behind their young leaders, but also fall down on the earth. In the second use *áva srj-* is used to express the sinful state (1.189.5), the ideas of sin and of what is down are combined in the RV (Bodewitz 1999a, similarly in the Atharvaveda, see Bodewitz 1999b).

²⁶ O’Flaherty 1981, Elizarenkova 1999, Renou 1956.

²⁷ According to Obeyesekere, the problem of preserving individuality of the dead and of the person whose incarnation the dead is crucial for the rebirth theory of small scale societies.

²⁸ I would like to pay attention to the expression *avaróghanam diváh*, which is used in RV 9.113.8. This word appears once, only here, but in four other places the expression *āróghanam diváh* is used (three stanzas describe the function of Agni which brings the oblations to gods in his solar form, in two Agni knows *āróghanam diváh*, 4.8.2, 4.8.4, 4.7.8). Grassmann 1873 interprets both words as ‘der verschlossene Ort, das innerste Heiligtum’, Elizarenkova, Geldner and Renou in their translation of *āróghana* follow Sāyaṇa who understands it as *ārohana*. If Sāyaṇa is right, then *avaróghana* can also be interpreted in the same way: as *avaróhana*, i.e. the place through which the people come back to the earth. There is no doubt that the poet exalted with Soma, if he reached the heavenly place during the sacrifice, while he is alive (see Note 10), would really wish not to stay in the world of dead but to come back to his family (for dangerous character of the sacrificial journey and the wish

So finally, I would propose the following interpretation of RV 10.16.5:

‘Release him to his fathers and again down from them, who, poured into you, travels according to his will. Let him who wears life come to his offspring. Let him join his body, Jātavedas!’

2.B. RV 10.16.13-14

The fact that in the RV *áva sṛj-* is regularly used to denote the release of waters allows one to presume that it was believed that the form in which the dead come back to earth is rain. Such a belief is consistent with cosmological assumptions, because already in the RV the sun was thought of as the source of rain²⁹. This belief can be reconstructed also from RV 10.16.13ab: *yám tvám agne samádahas tám u nír vāpayā púnah*. According to padas *c-d* of the stanza, water plants (*kiyāmbu*, *pākadūrvā*, *vyālkaśā*) are supposed to grow on the cremation ground. In the next stanza water plants are requested to join with a female frog to gladden the fire.

According to Bloomfield, *nír vāpaya* means ‘simply <extinguish>’ (1890: 26). It is similarly interpreted by Elizarenkova 1999, Geldner 1957, O’Flaherty 1981. According to Grassmann 1873 and Lubotzky 1997 the form *nír vāpaya* comes from *vā-*, ‘to fan, to blow’.

Bloomfield 1890 quotes some later texts that comment on this Ṛgvedic verse. All of them understand *nír vāpaya* as expressing the extinction of fire with the aid of a fluid, like milk (*Śāṁkhāyana Śrautasūtra*, *Aaśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*) and/or honey (*Kauśika Gṛhyasūtra*). Sāyaṇa glosses *nír vāpaya* (ad. *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 4.1.2) as *itaḥ sthānāt niḥ sāraya*, ‘Make [him] flow from this place’. These readings find their confirmation in ritual practice: the cremation ground is “cooled”, i.e., water is poured on it and then water plants are sown; this ritual practice is evoked in 10.14-15 (Bloomfield 1890, O’Flaherty 1981, Elizarenkova 1999:426).

As Evison (1989: 350) writes, during the cooling ceremony milk and water were sprinkled by means of a branch, and it is possible that *nír vā-* evokes the idea of fanning with a wet branch. On the other hand, fanning or blowing on fire rather spread it than extinguish it (this is expressed by the RV itself which qualifies fire as *vātacodita* in 1.58.5, 1.141.7).³⁰ The

of the sacrificer to come back to the earth see Smith 1985, 1989). And similarly the real dead could wish to come back to his family (as Obeyesekere writes, such wish is very strong and constitutes the emotional rationale for the rebirth eschatologies). It is very consistent then that Agni in its form of messenger should know the *āródhana* to the sky, contrary to the human beings who – dead or alive – would like to know the *avaródhana* from the sky.

²⁹ Kaelber 1990: 15. That the water is the sun, the abode of the dead, is expressed also in RV 9.113.8, which presents it as the place where there ‘those young waters’ (*amúr yahvátīr āpas*) are. The waters are young because they are very close to their heavenly source. The expression *yahvátīr āpaḥ* is once more used in 1.105.11 which creates the image of birds which sit at the ascent to heaven (*āródhane diváḥ*) and which chase away the wolf who crosses young waters; this image implies the connection between *yahvátīr āpaḥ* and *āródhana*, implied also by 9.113. A very similar to *yahvátīr āpas* is *svàrvaṭīr āpas*: the celestial or solar waters are gained by Indra (1.10.8, 8.40.10-11) or by the poets (5.2.11). This expression also implies the presence of waters on the sun.

³⁰ One has to blow on fire, making it with stick. In traditional societies the fire was not extinguished at night but kept in the warm ashes and in the morning it was lit again by blowing on it. In the RV *vā-* is used to express the spreading of fire caused by the wind (1.58.5, 1.148.4, 4.7.10, 7.3.2, 10.142.4).

form *nír vāpaya*, however, can also come from the verb *nír vap-*, ‘to scatter, to throw, sow’. It was Ludwig 1877 who interpreted *nír vāpaya* as expressing sowing, and I think that in this context this is fully justified. The poet, by activating of the idea of sowing, could not only refer to what actually happened on the cremation ground but also express the cosmic and eschatological dimension of the ritual activity.

2.B.a. Raining As Sowing (Barley) Metaphor

Like other Ṛgvedic words, the verb *vap-* has a wide semantic range, the full analysis of which would go beyond the scope of this paper. I will mention here only those aspects of its meaning which are relevant for understanding RV 10.16.13b. The meaning of *vap-* ‘to sow’ is attested explicitly in the first and tenth maṇḍala (1.117.21, 1.176.2, 10.68.3, 10.94.13, 10.101.3). Sowing includes scattering grain and then watering it either by human beings or by rain. There is one stanza in which *vap-* is used in such a context that it may evoke the idea of rain: in 7.56.3 *abhí vap-* is used to express activity of the Maruts; taking into account their rainy character, it is possible to interpret *vap-* as ‘to scatter drops of rain’³¹. In 10.85.37 *vap-* expresses insemination (*tām pūṣaṅ chivátamām érayasva yásyām bījam manuṣyā vāpanti*), the context however evokes descriptions of ploughing and sowing the earth conceived as a woman (compare 4.57.7: *indrāḥ sītām ní grhṇātu tām pūṣānu yachatu*). The activation of the concept of rain in the description of inseminating is the more plausible because in the RV the idea of insemination was the basis for metaphorical conceptualization of raining: e.g. in 5.83.4 rain is conceived in terms of Parjanya’s semen, which inseminates the earth.

In one stanza the more specific idea of sowing barley is activated to express raining. Barley is presented in the RV as a plant which needs rain to grow properly, so there is a conceptual link of cause and effect between the concepts of rain and barley³². The first stanza describes an activity of Bṛhaspati:

bṛhaspátīḥ párvatebhyo vitúrya nír gā ūpe yávam iva sthivíbhyaḥ || 10.68.3cd

Bṛhaspati, having led the cows from the mountains, sowed them like barley from sacks.

The immediate understanding of the expression *párvatebhyo vitúrya ní gā ūpe* is the creation of the morning on the basis of the conventionalized metaphorical conceptualization of dawns in terms of cows³³. But in the RV streams of waters too are metaphorically conceptualized in terms of cows, and this metaphor should be evoked in this context too³⁴. In this case, ‘the mountains’ refers not only to the nocturnal sky but also to rain-clouds. The word *sthiví*, which appears in the source domain of the simile, activates the Ṛgvedic concept of rain metaphorically conceived as pouring water from a container (called *útsa*, *avatá*, *kósa*, *dṛti*, *kávandha*, Jurewicz 2006). The word *nír ūpe* activates the scenario of sowing which includes raining. The correspondences of the simile are: sacks in the source domain correspond to the mountains in the target domain, grains of barley correspond to the cows. The simile compares two conceptual metaphors expressing raining. The metaphor in the source domain of the

³¹ Elizarenkova 1995. Renou 1962, interprets the *svapú* as ‘ornaments-luisants’ but he also thinks that the idea of rain is evoked in this description, according to him the rain clarifies ornaments. Geldner 1951, II: ‘Reinigungsmitteln’ but adds in note: ‘Den Regentropfen’. In two places (8.7.4, 10.73.5) *vap-* expresses creation of fog, such usage evokes the idea of creation of something, which is wet and consists of drops.

³² 2.5.6, 5.85.3, 10.43.7

³³ For data see Srinivasan 1979.

³⁴ For data see Srinivasan 1979.

simile conceptualizes the drops of rain in terms of grains of barley and the clouds in terms of sacks. The metaphor in the target domain of the simile conceptualizes the drops of rain in terms of cows and the clouds in terms of mountains.

2.B.b. *vap-* ‘to sow’ and *vap-* ‘to shear, to shave’

In the RV another verbal root, *vap-* ‘to shave, to shear’, is used to express the activity of fire, and scholars agree that this root is distinct from the root *vap-* ‘to sow’³⁵. The aim of the following argument is not to challenge this opinion. I will just claim that since *vap-* ‘to scatter, to throw, sow’ and *vap-* ‘to hear, to shave’ are phonetically identical and their inflection is the same too, the poets could use this identity to express a wider sense construed on the basis of both verbs³⁶. The following stanza will show with what mastery a context is created to evoke meanings of shearing and sowing:

yé te śukrāsaḥ śúcayaḥ śuciṣmaḥ kṣām vāpanti viṣitāso áśvāḥ |
ádha bhramás ta urviyá ví bhāti yātáyamāno ádhi sānu pṛśneḥ ||6.6.4ab

Your bright, pure horses, set loose, shear the earth. And your whirling flame shines widely, arranged on the summit of the dappled one.

The horses of fire are its flames, which go around the earth and ‘shear’ the hair of the earth, i.e., they burn the grass and plants. Pada *d* of the stanza presents fire as being ‘on the summit of the dappled one’ (*ádhi sānu pṛśneḥ*). As is assumed by scholars, here *pṛśni* refers to the cow identified with the earth, on the peak of which the fiery horses run³⁷. One can assume that the summit of the earth is the place from which the sky can be reached³⁸. One can also assume that – in order to express the cosmic form of fire, which is the rising sun – the stanza evokes the image of horses ascending the cosmic mountain³⁹. In this case, if one understands *vap-* as ‘to shear’, one will get the meaning of the sun burning the earth⁴⁰.

But at the same time, the horses of Agni are *viṣitāsaḥ* – ‘set loose’. As in everyday life, horses are set loose after a long march; similarly the fiery horses are set loose after a long run up to the peak of the earth. Then, like ordinary horses, they not only eat grass, but are tired and sweating too. In the RV sweat (*svéda*) is the basis for conceptualizing rain (5.58.7: *varṣám svédam cakrire rudriyāsaḥ*)⁴¹. It is worth noticing that the participle *viṣita* is used in the RV to qualify not only horses which run freely (3.33.1) and the quick fire (6.12.5, 10.27.14) which confirms its usage in 6.6.4, but also expresses a gourd with rain which is opened in order to set free rain, and the streams of rain themselves (5.83.7, 5.83.8). In my opinion all these contexts of *viṣita* are evoked in 6.6.4 in order to highlight the rain-making function of fire⁴².

If the idea of rain can be evoked in the stanza, the phonetic resemblance between *vap-* ‘to shear’ and *vap-* ‘to sow’ is activated and the *vapanti* may convey both meanings: of

³⁵ Mayrhofer 1963.

³⁶ Like they do with *su-*, *sunoti*, ‘to press’, *sū-*, *suvati*, ‘to impel’, *sū-*, *sūte*, ‘to procreate’ (Heestermann 1957: 72-73).

³⁷ Elizarenkova, 1995, Geldner 1951, II, Renou 1964.

³⁸ Is this the place named by *āródhana diváh*?

³⁹ A similar image is created in 1.58.2.

⁴⁰ Heestermann 1957: 111, 215-219, Elizarenkova 1995: 576.

⁴¹ Kaelber 1989: 22. It is also possible that the idea of urination is evoked here; in the RV “rain” was conceived in terms of “the urine” too (1.64.6)

⁴² Elizarenkova’s (1995) translation of *bhramá* as ‘vodovarot’ activates the idea of rain expressed by this word.

shearing, i. e. burning, and of sowing, i. e. raining. The conceptual metonymy which activates the concept of a whole when we think of its part would justify the expression *kṣā́m vāpanti*: ‘seed’, which is the natural direct object of *vap-*, ‘to sow’, is replaced here by ‘the earth’ (*kṣā́-*), because seed, when sown, becomes a part of the earth⁴³.

The only place in the RV where *vap-* clearly denotes ‘to shave’ is 10.142.4cd:

yadā́ te vā́to anuvā́ti śocír vā́pteva śmáśru vapasi prá bhū́ma ||

When your wind blows after your flame you shave the earth, like a shaver [shaving] a beard.⁴⁴

The only other R̥gvedic usage of *vap-* with the preposition *prá* is at 10.115.3, which refers to Agni qualified as *pravāpantam arṇavám*. Since *arṇavá* means ‘waving water’, such qualification of Agni activates its rainy aspect and in this context *prá vap-* should be interpreted as ‘to sow’ with its extension of raining, rather than ‘to shave’ with its extension of burning⁴⁵. It is possible then that *vapasi prá bhū́ma* is meant to evoke the idea of sowing too, with a metonymic government of the direct object like that in *kṣā́m vāpanti* in 6.6.4b.

2.B.d. Final interpretation of RV 10.16.13b

From what has been said above it follows that it is justified to interpret *nír vāpaya* as a form coming rather from *vap-* ‘to scatter, to throw, sow’ than from *vā-*, ‘to fan, to blow’. The verb *vap-* highlights here its meaning of sowing. So I propose to render 10.16.13ab in the following way:

‘O Agni, sow again the one you burnt [before]!’

The cremation fire, having burnt the dead person, is now requested to sow him. It is possible that the form *nír vāpaya* prompt the recipient to construe an image similar to that of 10.68.3 and to create the image of Agni which sows the dead person like barley from the sacks; this possibility is strengthened by the fact that Agni and Bṛhaspati are identified in the RV. At the same time, the figurative meaning of sowing to express inseminating allows the recipient to create the image of Agni, which inseminates the earth with the dead person as seed so that he can be reborn from it. In this function, Agni is very close to Parjanya fecundating the earth with rain. This opens the way to the later belief that the dead are reborn in plants. The conceptualization of the dead as a Somic oblation makes the above suppositions even more probable, because in the RV Soma is compared to barley (2.14.11, 8.2.3) and

⁴³ The same metonymy motivates the usage of many verbs expressing the opening or destruction of an enclosure; their direct objects describe the contents of the enclosure instead of the enclosure: e. g. 8.63.3: *ápa vṛ-*, ‘to open cows’; 10.38.2: *ví vṛ-*, ‘to open riches streaming with cows’; 9.108.6: *kṛt-*: ‘to cut cows’ instead of ‘to cut stone’ in which the cows are; 6.17.3: *ṛd-* ‘to bore cows’; 7.49.1: *rad-* ‘to bite the water of rivers’. For conceptual metonymy PART FOR WHOLE / WHOLE FOR PART see Radden, Koevecses, 1999.

⁴⁴ The construction of the stanza is beautiful, it is based on the phonetic play of few consonants (*p, b, v, ś, s*) and words like with *udvāto nivāto ... vā́to anuvā́ti... vā́pteva ... vapasi*). It is possible that the aim of this play is to bring closer the meanings of *vap-* and *vā-* too. This would confirm my thesis that 10.16.13ab aims at activation of both roots, *vā-* and *vap-*.

⁴⁵ The stanza is construed so masterly that the meaning of shaving is activated immediately after recognition of the pada c of the stanza, which presents Agni being a driver whose mouth, is flame.

identified with rain.

In that case the cooling ceremony and the ritual sowing would be the external manifestation of the cosmic process just reconstructed⁴⁶. Like 10.16.5, 10.16.13 expresses recurrence of the dead's return by using the adverb *punāḥ*.

3. Conclusion

Let us recapitulate the rebirth eschatology reconstructed on the basis of the Ṛgvedic evidence: the dead person, properly cremated, was poured as a Somic oblation into the cremation fire (*yás ta áhutaś*). He reached the sun (*áva syja púnar agne pitṛbhyo, pitṛbhyo* as dative), where he enjoyed the contradictory afterlife state (*cáрати svadhābhiḥ*). Then he was sent back by the sun in the form of rain (*áva syja púnar agne pitṛbhyo, pitṛbhyo* as ablative, *yám tvám agne samádahas tám u nír vāpayā púnah*) to be reborn among his relatives (*áyur vásāna úpa vetu śéṣah sám gachatām tanvā*). This rebirth eschatology has all the features of the rebirth eschatology characteristic of small-scale societies.

The rebirth eschatology present in the JB seems to continue and develop the Ṛgvedic one. The JB version of the *pañcāgnividyā* does not mention the kṣatriyas. On the other hand, its view of how the world works is very similar to the Upaniṣadic model. It begins with the sun identified with Agni Vaiśvānara. The first oblation is immortality [and] waters (*amṛtam āpas*). The next oblations are King Soma, then he becomes rain, food, semen and a human being. It is clear from the sentence closing the description that the five levels of the model are seen as levels of transformation of water:

pañcamyām viśṛṣṭyām divyā āpaḥ puruṣavaco vadanti

At the fifth creation the divine waters speak with a human voice (Bodewitz's 1973 translation).

I have shown elsewhere (Jurewicz 2004) that the first oblation in the model of the *pañcāgnividyā* can be understood as a manifestation of the dead person who rises from the funeral pyre: his immortal part reaches the sun and becomes water. Thus understood, the model of *pañcāgnividyā* describes the world as animated by the dead circulating between heaven and earth, and the upaniṣadic *pitṛyāna* presents this process from the point of view of an individual. Viewed from this perspective the similarity between the *pañcāgnividyā* model of JB and the Ṛgvedic rebirth eschatology is clear: the sun is the final point of the dead person's journey, water is the form under which he comes back to earth.

Then the JB describes two ways the dead person may take, depending on his understanding of himself. If the dead person does not understand himself, his good deeds are divided into three: the first part is taken by a guardian of the sun, the second one disperses in the air, and with the third one the dead person returns to the world. Then he dies again (JB 1.46). If the dead person answers the question properly, his good deeds are taken by his fathers and grandfathers (compare RV 10.14.8). He stays in the sun and never dies (JB 1.49-50).

The model of *pañcāgnividyā* established in JB 1.45 is repeated in BU and CU with some minor changes which do not modify the main idea of the world's functioning. The *pitṛyāna* develops and elaborates the idea of the return of the third part of the dead, using the Ṛgvedic belief that he comes back to earth in a watery form.

The afterlife situation depends on knowledge (which leads to the devayāna) and on

⁴⁶ About ritual ploughing at funeral and its sexual and procreative meaning see Wojtilla 1986.

deeds (which leads to the *pitṛyāna*). The really new thing is – as Obeyesekere shows it – the ethical dimension of the final form assumed on the *pitṛyāna* track which depends on good and bad deeds. Gombrich’s argument, when he shows how the Buddha ethicized the Brāhmaṇic ontology, takes the same direction (Gombrich 1996). It is worth adding however that the author of the JB has already made a step towards ethicization: in his model the dead person who does not know himself is not reborn in the family (as implied by the R̥gvedic evidence) and the place where he is reborn depends not only on his knowledge but also on his charity⁴⁷. The kṣatriyas transformed this into a general concept of an ethical dependence of the afterlife upon deeds⁴⁸. Thus they introduced the idea of personal responsibility and of individual freedom, which enables human beings to influence and guide their future.

I am aware that many of these problems still need a solution. One of them is why there are so few references to the rebirth theory in the RV. As Kuiper 1960 has shown, the earlier maṇḍalas were composed to fulfill the needs of other rituals (such as the New Year’s Festival). According to Obeyesekere, in the times of the RV there may have been various beliefs, which influenced the religion attested in the RV. That hymns connected to cremation and death ceremonies appear only in the last maṇḍala of the RV⁴⁹ reflects a broadening of interests and new needs, which could be caused by that influence.

If my interpretation of the two stanzas of the RV is right, then Obeyesekere is wrong in one point. He writes: ‘any attempt to trace the history of the idea of rebirth from texts that exist only through the accident of history is by definition futile.’ (2002: 14) I hope that my presentation has shown that even if the texts exist through the accident of history, they may help us to trace the history of the idea of rebirth.

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⁴⁷ JB 1.46: *sa yo hāsya dānajito loko bhavati*. It is worth noticing that according to *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 10.4.3.9-10 the immortality can be gained by knowledge (*vidyā*) or by ritual (*kārman*), both identified with fire-altar (*āgni*). People who have knowledge or perform ritual, having died, are reborn again and become immortal. Those who do not have knowledge or do not perform ritual, having died, are reborn and again become the food of the death. I would add this passage to the evidence gathered by Killingley 1997, which confirms the Vedic sources of the Upaniṣadic *deva-/ pitṛyāna*.

⁴⁸ The *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*’s version is between the JB and the Upaniṣadic version: the afterlife lot depends on the dead’s knowledge, but the future birth depends on deeds too (*yathākarma yathāvidyam* 1.2.). The dead reaches the moon, and not the sun (*etad vai svargasya lokasya dvāraṁ yac candramāḥ* 1.2), then either goes back to the earth or to brahman passing through the worlds of fire, of wind, of Varuṇa, of Indra and of Prajāpati. The right answer is the same verse as in the JB, but it is the moon, who asks the question, not the season, the guardian of the sun.

⁴⁹ 10.14, 10.15, 10.16, 10.18, 10.154

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