

The Agnihotra and the Rājanya

Junko SAKAMOTO-GOTO

The Agnihotra, daily offering of milk at sunset and sunrise, is the simplest of all the Śrauta rituals but a lifelong obligation of those who have set up his sacred fires (*āhitāgni-*). As the sacrifice which controls the cosmic order (*ṛtá-*), this offering is considered, on the one side, to bring forth sacrificer's offspring and cattle in this world, on the other side, to realize his attainment to the heavenly world, and further to the immortality (*amṛta-*). Dealing with the process of birth, death, re-dying and re-birth, the discussions on the Agnihotra prepared the theory of transmigration. It is well known that intellectual kings such as Janaka played important roles in those discussions transmitted in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads.

Strangely enough, an Āhitāgni who was Rājanya (member of the governing and military class, Kṣatriya) was prohibited from offering the Agnihotra, though with exceptions, in the earliest stratum of the brāhmaṇa-literature (the prose portion of the Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā, Kāṭhaka- and Kapiṣṭhala-Kaṭha-Saṁhitā). The Rājanya obliged to fight, to plunder and to go on an expedition was considered as not qualified for the Agnihotra and required instead to practice the Agnyupasthāna (paying homage to the sacrificial fires) or to offer meals to a Brahmin as “human god”.

This prohibition of the Agnihotra reveals the ambivalence of the Brahmins towards the Rājanyas in those times. While the both stood in cooperative relations as sacrificer and priest or as king and Purohita, they were put in competition for social hegemony and economic profits. According to the development of tribal communities to kingdoms, the Brahmins were declining in might in reverse proportion to the Rājanyas, which caused to the Brahmins hostility and anxiety for being deprived of their superiority. They needed, nevertheless, the Rājanyas who set up the Śrauta fires and supported their life by priest fee and donation.

In contrast to the conservative attitude of the Maitrāyaṇīya- and Kaṭha-School which excluded the Rājanya from the Agnihotra, the Tāittirīyas incited the Rājanya to perform more sacrifices in order to extend their influence. The Vājasaneyins pushed forward this trend, based on close relations with the kingship, which encouraged active participation of the Rājanya in religious and philosophical discussions.