

On a little known Vedic goddess

During the *patnīsaṃyāja* cycle of offerings, it is allowed to make an oblation to one of three goddesses, depending on a specific wish of the Sacrificer. These three goddesses are Rākā, Sinīvālī and Kuhū. They are respectively held to grant a son, cattle or opulence (*puṣṭi*) to their worshipper.

Offerings to these goddesses are deemed optional by all the Śrautasūtras, except one. In the Vādhūla-Śrautasūtra, an offering to Rākā is a mandatory component of the *patnīsaṃyāja* ritual. In the *iṣṭi* or *paśubandha* forms of the *patnīsaṃyāja* taught by the Vādhūlas, a libation of clarified butter must be made to Rākā immediately before the offering to the *devānām patnīḥ* which is the central part of the *patnīsaṃyāja* ritual.

The purpose of the *patnīsaṃyāja* ritual is to gratify the consorts of the gods collectively, thus their name of "joint offering" (*saṃyāja*) to the Wives (*patnī*). It is therefore strange to see that one particular goddess is addressed in the Vādhūla version of the ritual. The presence of Rākā there raises a number of troubling questions.

We may wonder why the Vādhūlas felt the need to make a libation to a particular goddess during the *patnīsaṃyāja* and why they chose Rākā. We can also ask if we are not witnessing here some kind of rudimentary cult of the goddess in Vedic ritual.

In my presentation I will try to show that Rākā plays the role of a divine representative of the Sacrificer's Wife.

In her exhaustive study of the role of the Wife of the Sacrificer in Vedic ritual, JAMISON¹ stated that the purpose of the *patnīsaṃyāja* is to reincorporate the *patnī* into the ritual action away from which she has been kept while the principal offerings of the *iṣṭi* are made. In her analysis of the ritualistic sources, JAMISON has not taken into account a number of subtle differences which show that the different schools did not have the same attitude towards the Wife of the Sacrificer. Some of them gave to the *patnī* an active role during the *patnīsaṃyāja* while others held her more at a distance from the action. By minimizing the role of the Sacrificer's Wife during the *patnīsaṃyāja* certain ritualistic tendencies have left her place open to a substitute. Some characteristics of Rākā allow us to make the hypothesis that she functions as a divine representative of the human *patnī* in Vādhūla's scheme of the *patnīsaṃyāja*.

Her presence there is also, for reasons I shall discuss in more details, indicative of the fact that Vedic religion was not so immune to the cult of the goddess as it is usually thought to be.

François Voegeli

¹JAMISON, Stephanie W. (1996) *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife. Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.