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Śvetaketu and the *upanayana*

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In a recent publication (*Three Studies in Vedic and Indo-European Religion and Linguistics*, p. 1 f.) Boris Oguibénine makes the following observations:

The Upanishads mention some undoubtedly very ancient forms of the *upanayana* which are most bare as they are deprived of any solemnity and bear no traces of ritual ceremonies. They strikingly ignore any involvement of the gods during the young man's investiture. Ch.Up. [= *Chândogya Upaniṣad* (ChU)] and BĀU. [= *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BAU)] which are the oldest sources available after the Saṃhitā period hint at the *upanayana* being limited to the approaching a teacher by a future brahmacārin only with words: BĀU. VI.2.7 reports that Gautama (alias Uddālaka Āruṇi, famous for his philosophical dialogues in Ch.Up. VI.2), although having a son Śvetaketu, approaches Pravāhaṇa Jaivali with a simple announcement: "I am coming to you". This statement apparently sufficed to a[s]ertain his intention to become the latter's pupil. The comments incorporated in the BĀU. itself are most eloquent: we learn that in the ancient times those who were to become brahmacārins used to say just these words: VI.2.7 *sa hopāyanakīrtiyovāsa* "having mentioned his coming to him (as a pupil), he (Gautama) stayed (with him)".

On p. 2 of the same publication we read:

It is easy to infer thus that, at the early stage at least, the *brahmacārin's* education remained a matter of learned discussions between the father and the son or else, if ever these were deemed insufficient, between a teacher and a young man.

This inference is based on three Upaniṣadic passages which will be discussed below.

Similar observations are made by P.V. Kane (*History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. II part I p. 273):

... in the Br. Up. [= BAU] VI.2.7 it is said that former students (i.e. students in former ages) approached the teacher (for brahmacarya) only in words (i.e. without any further solemn rite or ceremony). In the most ancient times it is probable that the father himself always taught his son.

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Three questions have to be asked here:

1. Did the author or redactor of BAU 6.2.7 really possess knowledge about what was usual in ancient times?

2. Do the three Upaniṣadic passages referred to by Oguibénine really justify the inference that sons were taught by their fathers?¹
3. Are the ChU and the BAU really as old as Oguibénine suggests?

1. BAU 6.2 tells the story of the encounter between Śvetaketu and king Jaivali Pravāhaṇa of the Pañcālas. The king asks Śvetaketu a number of questions, which the latter is unable to answer. Obviously embarrassed, Śvetaketu returns to his father, who had also been his teacher, and reports what has happened. The father, who too must admit his inability to answer these questions, decides to become pupil of Pravāhaṇa Jaivali; the term used for studenthood is *brahmacarya* (BAU 6.2.4). The king accepts the father, here called Gautama, as pupil on condition that he "seek in the usual manner".² Then the Upaniṣad continues:³

‘I come to you, sir, as a pupil!’ — only by means of words, verily,⁴ men of yore came as pupils. — So with the acknowledgment of coming as a pupil he remained.

The phrase "only by means of words, verily, men of yore came as pupils" shows that this custom did not exist any more at the time of redaction of this passage.⁵ Why was it inserted? Did its author really know what had been customary in the past? Or did he perhaps have other reasons for believing that men of yore became pupils by means of words only?

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A comparison with the parallel passage in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (ChU 5.3 f.) shows that he may very well have had such other reasons.⁶ This passage tells essentially the same story as BAU 6.2, with the same characters playing the same roles. But here, unlike in BAU 6.2, Śvetaketu's father does not become a pupil of Pravāhaṇa Jaivali in

¹ Kane (*loc. cit.*) refers only to BAU 6.2.1 in this connection.

² BAU 6.2.7: *sa vai gautama tīrthenecchāsā iti*; tr. Hume.

³ BAU 6.2.7: *upaimy ahaṃ bhavantam iti/ vācā ha smaiva pūrva upayanti/ sa hopāyanakīrtiyovāsa*. Tr. Hume, modified.

⁴ This translation for *vācā ha smaiva* is in agreement with the use of these particles; see Hartman, 1966: 82: "This position [of *ha*] near the opening of a new passage is likely to draw attention to the first word of a paragraph or sentence". ChU 4.10.1 *taṃ ha smaiva na samāvartayati* has the same particles in the same order, and must be translated: "only him, verily, he did not allow to return".

⁵ Söhnen (1981: 195) states, with regard to this phrase: "vermutlich als Gloss eines späteren Überlieferers anzusehen". It seems safer to speak here rather of the work of the/a redactor.

⁶ This is by no means the only instance of a Sanskrit text wrongly attributing some custom or practice to the past. For another instance see Schmidt, 1987: 25 f. (*upanayana* for girls). See also the next note.

the technical sense of the term. He just asks the king to explain the questions he had posed to Śvetaketu, and the king, after some hesitation, complies.⁷

The inference about the early form of *upanayana* is further belied by a third Upaniṣadic story about Śvetaketu and his father, this one occurring in the *Kauṣītaki- (Brāhmaṇa-) Upaniṣad* (KU 1.1 f.). This story has a number of features in common with the story of BAU 6.2 and ChU 5.3 f. This time it is Citra Gārgyāyaṇi / Gāngyāyāni who poses an embarrassing question to Śvetaketu, with the ultimate result that Śvetaketu's father enters upon a course of study (*svādhyāya*) in the house of Citra. In this case, however, Śvetaketu's father approaches his future teacher 'with fuel in his hand' (*samitpāni*). This expression is common in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads to describe the process by which someone becomes someone else's pupil.⁸ The fact that it occurs in connection with Śvetaketu's father contradicts the idea that in his days this kind of approach of a teacher was as yet unknown. (I shall argue below that it is in any case not justified to read these stories as accounts of historical events.) If R. Söhnen (1981: 199, 212) is right in believing that the KU version of the story, at least as far as the introductory narrative is concerned "must have been the oldest one and probably the [594] source of the two other versions",⁹ obviously any conclusion as to an early *upanayana* by words alone is deprived of its basis.

Let us pay some more attention to the two versions of the above story in the ChU and BAU. Since they are two versions of one and the same story, there must have been an earlier version from which both have derived.¹⁰ There is reason to believe that this earlier version made no explicit mention of Śvetaketu's father becoming pupil of

⁷ A similar editorial observation about earlier customs is found at ŚB 11.4.1.1: "for in the time of our forefathers a prize used to be offered by chosen priests when driving about, for the sake of calling out the timid to a disputation" (*[e]tad dha sma vai tat pūrveṣāṃ vṛtānān dhāvayatām ekadhanam upāhitam bhavaty upavalhāya bibhyatā[m]*; tr. Witzel, 1987: 371). No such remark occurs in the parallel passage GB 1.3.6. The editorial remark finds its explanation in the fact that here one gold coin plays the role which elsewhere in Vedic literature is played by large numbers of cows, horses, etc.; see Witzel, 1987: 366 n. 11.

⁸ See Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* vol. II pt. I p. 273. Examples: ŚB 11.4.1.9; 11.5.3.13; but GB 1.3.14: *[u]payāmi tv eva bhavantam* (Witzel, 1987: 368); BAU 2.1.14. Note that the KU version allows of an interpretation in which Citra does not insist that Śvetaketu's father become his pupil; see Söhnen, 1981: 183 n. 19, Renou, 1978: 15 n. 22.

⁹ See however the next note.

¹⁰ In view of the fact that the story was most probably handed down orally before (and perhaps after) it became incorporated in the two Upaniṣads, I will not address the question whether perhaps either of the two surviving versions is the direct source of the other one. And even if we accept Söhnen's position that the story in the KU may have been the source of the two other versions, the many close similarities between BAU and ChU show that there must have been a common ancestor of the BAU and ChU versions which was already quite different from the KU version. Söhnen (1981: 200) is of the opinion that "[d]er Verfasser der BrU-Fassung ... offenbar die ChU-Fassung als Vorlage benutzt ... hat". Here, as in her view as to the position of the KU version, she may not sufficiently take into account that these stories may for a long time have been handed down orally, and that the composers of our texts did not necessarily base themselves on written or otherwise fixed texts.

Jaivali Pravāhaṇa ‘in the usual manner’, just as we find it in the ChU. Had it been different, it would be hard to explain how this important feature could have been lost in the ChU. If, on the other hand, we assume that in the earlier version Śvetaketu's father did not become pupil of the king, the remarks we find in BAU 6.2.7 become understandable, too. The redactor of this passage, we are then led to believe, was puzzled by the lack of appropriate ritual ceremonies in a situation which he interpreted as a form of *upanayana*. He ‘explained’ this puzzling state of affairs by stating that *in former times* no such ceremonies were performed.

There are other reasons, too, for assuming that the ChU version is, in at least certain respects, closer to the original. Both surviving versions begin with a number of questions, the questions namely which Śvetaketu is unable to answer. But only in the ChU the instruction by Pravāhaṇa Jaivali is more or less directly connected with these initial questions. In the BAU the link is not obvious any more, so that we are led to believe that the BAU version has lost some of the original coherence of the story.

Also the mention of Gautama's studentship in the BAU version does not fit easily. For the king had offered him a boon. In the ChU version the [595] situation is straightforward: Gautama asks as boon to hear the words which Pravāhaṇa had spoken to his son, and receives it, be it after some hesitation on the part of the king.¹¹ In the BAU, however, the boon is subjected to the subsequent condition that Gautama accept the status of pupil. But normally no special boon is necessary for becoming someone's pupil. If we assume that the original story made only mention of a boon, as indeed the ChU version does, this peculiarity is solved, too.¹²

If, then, we accept that the redactor of BAU 6.2.7 thought that something was missing in the text he received, what exactly was it? We have seen that in parallel passages in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads aspiring students are normally depicted as bringing *samidh* ‘fuel’ for the sacred fire. But Gautama approached king Pravāhaṇa without bringing fuel; here the two versions of the story agree. For the redactor of BAU 6.2.7 this was, as it appears, incongruous, so that he added the remark that in former times one could become student by means of words only, i.e., without bringing fuel for the sacred fire.

The redactor of the ChU version, on the other hand, does not appear to have taken offence at the fact that Gautama interrogated the king without becoming his student. This finds unexpected confirmation in the immediately following story in the ChU (5.11 ff.). There we read how six Brahmins — one of them being Uddālaka Āruṇi,

¹¹ Interestingly, both passages confuse, or identify, the words spoken to Śvetaketu, i.e., the questions asked, and the answers to those questions.

¹² See also Söhnen, 1981: 200.

presumably the same as Gautama, the father of Śvetaketu — approached king Aśvapati Kaikeya "with fuel in their hands" (*samitpāṇi*), apparently with the desire to become his students. The king, however, starts his teaching without having accepted them as students (*anupanīya*; ChU 5.11.7). One is tempted to believe that, in the opinion of the redactor of ChU 5 (supposing there was only one for these two stories), there was no problem connected with an instruction by a Kṣatriya of Brahmins in which the latter do not become formally pupils of the former.

The exact significance of the expression *anupanīya* 'without having accepted them as students' becomes clear by comparing ChU 5.11 ff. with the alternative version of this story at ŚB 10.6.1. There Aśvapati Kaikeya [596] does accept the Brahmins as pupils. This is described in the following terms:¹³

... they came again to him, with fuel in their hands, saying: "We want to become thy pupils." ... He said: "... put your fuel on [the fire], ye are become my pupils."

This simple ceremony was apparently denied the Brahmins in the ChU version of the story.

2. Basing himself on the three passages about Śvetaketu and his father so far considered, Oguibénine draws the conclusion that "at the early stage at least, the *brahmacārin*'s education remained a matter of learned discussions between the father and the son".

All these three passages admittedly mention a pupil who has been initially instructed by his father. But in all three cases the pupil is the same person, viz., Śvetaketu, the son of Gautama. Together they constitute, at most, one single case. And the value of this single case depends, again, on the amount of information the authors of these passages can be believed to have possessed of "the early stage".

Another passage in the ChU shows that the authors of the early Upaniṣads were not all that well informed about the time of Śvetaketu. Or rather, it provides completely different information about this same person. It tells us that Śvetaketu was initially **not** educated by his father:¹⁴

¹³ ŚB 10.6.1.2-3: ... *te ha ... samitpāṇayaḥ praticakramira upa tvāyāmeti/ ... sa hovāca ... [a]bhyādhatta samidha upetā stheti/*. Tr. Eggeling.

¹⁴ ChU 6.1.1-3: *śvetaketur hā"runya āsa/ tam ha pitovāca: śvetaketo vasa brahmacaryam/ na vai somyāmatkulīno 'nanūcyā brahmabandhur iva bhavatīti// sa ha dvādaśavarṣa upetya caturviṃśatīvarṣaḥ sarvān vedān adhītya mahāmanā anūcānamānī stabdha eyāya/ tam ha pitovāca// śvetaketo yan nu somyedaṃ mahāmanā anūcānamānī stabdho 'si/ uta tam ādeśam aprākṣyaḥ, yenāśrutam śrutam bhavaty amatam matam avijñātam vijñātam iti/ katham nu bhagavaḥ sa ādeśo bhavatīti//* Tr. Hume, modified.

Now, there was Śvetaketu Āruṇeya. To him his father said: "Śvetaketu, live the life of a student of sacred knowledge (*brahmacarya*). Verily, my dear, from our family there is no one unlearned [in the Vedas], a Brahmin by connection, as it were." He, then, having become a pupil at the age of twelve, having studied all the Vedas, returned at the age of twenty-four, conceited, thinking himself learned, proud. Then his father said to him: "Śvetaketu, my dear, since now you are conceited, think yourself learned, [597] and are proud, did you also ask for that teaching whereby what has not been heard of becomes heard of, what has not been thought of becomes thought of, what has not been understood becomes understood?" "How, pray, sir, is that teaching?"

According to this passage, Śvetaketu received first twelve years of education from someone different from his father. During these twelve years he studied "all the Vedas", which is certainly not the same as engaging in learned discussions. His father does not come into the picture as a teacher until after the completion of these twelve years, and that because Śvetaketu is still not able to answer some important questions.

It would be a mistake to try to read the above four passages about Śvetaketu and his father as descriptions of historical events.¹⁵ It is more promising to notice that they share an important feature. In each of them Śvetaketu is presented as someone who has received an excellent education but is, in spite of this, not able to answer some essential questions. That is to say, all of them ridicule, in the figure of Śvetaketu, the claims of traditional learning.

But why is Śvetaketu's father, in three of the four passages considered, presented as his son's first teacher? Here it is first to be noted that in all these three passages Śvetaketu's father, too, is presented as someone incapable of answering the questions that puzzle his son. In fact, it is the [598] father who is going to receive instruction, twice from Jaivali Pravāhaṇa, once from Citra Gārgyāyaṇi. If, therefore, these passages ridicule Śvetaketu, they do the same to his father.¹⁶

¹⁵ So Söhnen, 1981: 179. Oguibénine (190: 2) remarks: "It is noticeable that after Śvetaketu's twelve years' studying with Pravāhaṇa, it is again his father who has to perfect his son's science about the nature of the ātman (Ch. Up. VI. 1-16)." This is pure fantasy. Not only does ChU 6.1-16 not mention the name of Pravāhaṇa, there is no indication anywhere in Vedic literature that Śvetaketu **ever** was Pravāhaṇa's pupil. In the passages studied above it was Śvetaketu's father who became Pravāhaṇa's pupil. Oguibénine (l.c.) states, with reference to BAU 6.2: "... as soon as Uddālaka realizes that no one of the five questions asked by Pravāhaṇa have been fitly answered by Śvetaketu, it is decided that both the father and the son will stay as brahmacārins with Pravāhaṇa." This is incorrect. BAU 6.2.4 leaves no doubt that only the father takes up studentship: "[Gautama, i.e., the father,] said: '... But come! Let us go there and take studentship.' 'Go yourself, sir.' So Gautama went forth to where [the place] of Pravāhaṇa Jaivali was." (*sa hovāca: ... prehi tu tatra pratītya brahmacaryam vatsyāva iti/ bhavān eva gacchatv iti/ sa ājagāma gautamo yatra pravāhaṇasya jaivaler āsa;* tr. Hume.) Also the *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* contains the same mistake, stating (Macdonell and Keith 1912: II: 409 s.v. Śvetaketu Āruṇeya): "He (i.e. Śvetaketu, JB) was a contemporary of, and was instructed by the Pañcāla king Pravāhaṇa Jaivala (sic)".

¹⁶ Uddālaka appears to be ridiculed in his own right at ChU 5.11 ff.; cp. also Witzel, 1987: 368 n. 14. (Not in the parallel version ŚB 10.6.1, where Uddālaka's father, Aruṇa Aupaveśi, figures, but is not singled out for ridicule.) Note that the same characters are made fun of outside Brahmanical literature, too. Śvetaketu (Pāli Setaketu) is ridiculed in the Buddhist Setaketu Jātaka (no. 377), Uddālaka in the Uddālaka Jātaka (no. 487), the gāthās of which may be non-Buddhistic (Lüders, 1914).

It seems clear, then, that Śvetaketu was remembered, at the time of composition of these stories, as an exponent of Vedic learning, and was used as target by those who felt critical towards this type of learning. It seems ill-advised to look upon these tendentious stories as true descriptions of historical events.

Śvetaketu's renown as a Veda scholar is confirmed by other texts, which, unlike the above Upaniṣadic passages, do not ridicule him for this reason. The *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (ĀpDhS) mentions him twice. The first passage reads:¹⁷

Seers (*ṛṣi*) are not born among the modern people (*avara*), because the rules of restraint are transgressed. Some, however, become seers on account of their knowledge of the scriptures (*śrutarṣi*) in a new birth, due to a residue of the fruits of their [former] actions; an example is Śvetaketu.

The second passage is the following:¹⁸

Śvetaketu says: "one who wishes to study more scriptures after he has founded a household should live with devoted [mind] in the family of a teacher for two months every year; for in this way I studied more of the scriptures than in the preceding time".

Śvetaketu's opinions, mainly on details of ritual and its interpretation, are also recorded in a number of Vedic passages: KB 26.4; ŚB 3.4.3.13; 4.2.5.15; 11.2.7.12; 5.4.18; ŚBK 4.4.3.11; 5.3.1.12. He is here described as the son of Uddālaka (*auddālaki*; ŚB 3.4.3.13; 4.2.5.15; ŚBK 4.4.3.11; 5.3.1.12), or as the grandson of Aruṇa (*āruṇeya*; ŚB 11.2.7.12; 5.4.18).

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It seems safe to conclude that Śvetaketu was remembered for his Vedic learning. When later the need was felt, within the Brahmanical tradition, to criticize Vedic learning, or to point to its limitations, this was done in the form of stories in which Śvetaketu was unable to answer some important questions.

3. There is, on the other hand, no reason to doubt that the opinions and quotations directly ascribed to Śvetaketu did indeed, in this or similar form, belong to the historical person of that name. This raises the question whether the texts that mention these opinions or contain such quotations, are for that reason closer in time to Śvetaketu, and therefore older, than the texts which tell the stories in which Śvetaketu is embarrassed.

¹⁷ ĀpDhS 1.2.5.4-5: ... *ṛṣayo 'vareṣu na jāyante niyamātikramāt/ śrutarṣayas tu bhavanti kecit karmaphalaśeṣeṇa punaḥsambhave; yathā śvetaketuḥ/*

¹⁸ ĀpDhS 1.4.13.19-20: *niveśe vṛtte saṃvatsare saṃvatsare dvau dvau māsau samāhita ācāryakule vased bhūyaḥ śrutam icchan iti śvetaketuḥ/ etena hy ahaṃ yogena bhūyaḥ pūrvasmāt kālāc chrutam akurvīti/*

This is not necessarily always the case. It is conceivable that the words and opinions of Śvetaketu were still faithfully preserved by some at a time when he had become a legendary figure for others. It is none-the-less noteworthy that the ĀpDhS, in the first passage cited above, explicitly calls Śvetaketu a modern (*avara*) seer. This is all the more noteworthy since the BAU, as we have seen, considered him one of the people of yore (*pūrva*).

The characterization of Śvetaketu as ‘modern’ in the ĀpDhS has puzzled scholars for more than a century. Eggeling (1882: xli) commented that "Āpastamba, by this remark, pays no very great compliment to the inspired texts of his own school, since Aruṇa Aupaveśi, the grandfather of Śvetaketu Āruṇeya, is twice referred to in the Taittirīya-saṃhitā". What Eggeling fails to say, is that Aruṇa Aupaveśi is twice referred to in a brāhmaṇa portion of the TS (6.1.9.2; 4.5.1). Yet these brāhmaṇa portions, as I have argued elsewhere (1991: 97), may be considerably younger than the mantras, and may not yet have been known to Pāṇini.

This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of all the indications in the BAU and ChU that might have a bearing on their age relative to other texts. Most of these indications allow in any case of various interpretations; rarely do they constitute incontrovertible evidence for one position or for another. It yet seems worth the effort to call attention to the same fourfold classification of virtuous ways of life found both in the ChU (2.23.1) and in the ĀpDhS, and nowhere else. This identical classification — which is studied in another publication¹⁹ — strongly suggests that these two [600] texts, or portions of texts, were not far removed in time from each other. It seems wise to treat the dates usually accorded to Vedic and related literature with much caution.²⁰

The conclusions to be drawn from the above observations are the following: The Upaniṣad passages considered constitute no evidence that the *upanayana* was ever limited to the mere pronouncement of some words. Nor do they support the view that at any period of time the father always taught the son.

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¹⁹ Bronkhorst 1993: 11-16.

²⁰ See Bronkhorst, 1989.

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Abbreviations

- ĀpDhS *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, ed. Bühler
 BAU *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* = Limaye and Vadekar, 1958: 174-282.
 ChU *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* = Limaye and Vadekar, 1958: 68-173.
 GB *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* = Mitra, 1972.

- KB *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa*
KU *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* = Limaye and Vadekar, 1958: 301-324.
ŚB *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*
ŚBK *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (Kāṇvīya recension) = Caland, 1926.