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## Can there be play in ritual? Reflections on the nature of ritual

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Can there be play in ritual? The answer to this question depends on what we mean by play,<sup>1</sup> and what we mean by ritual. Broadly speaking, there is spontaneous play, play-acting and competitive games. Spontaneous play is a feature we find not only in human beings, but in many other animals as well. Because it is spontaneous, it is impossible to stipulate that it can or cannot appear in certain situations, such as ritual.<sup>2</sup> Play-acting is an important element of ritual, at least according to a number of researchers,<sup>3</sup> but it is not the kind of play considered in this article. Games, finally, take on many forms, so many that it is hard to determine what they all have in common. Games are indeed the paradigmatic example of a group that is related by what are called *family resemblances*, i.e. of a group all of whose members do *not* share one and the same feature. However that may be, the kind of play I wish to concentrate on in this lecture is the one embodied in rule-governed games. Our question therefore becomes: can there be games in ritual?

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I will have more to say about what is ritual as we proceed. To focus the mind, it seems useful to cite a passage from Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind (La pensée sauvage)*. We read here (1962/1966: 30-31):

All games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches. Ritual, which is also 'played', is on the other hand, like a favoured instance of a game, remembered from among the possible ones because it is the only one which results in a particular type of equilibrium between the two sides. The transposition is readily seen in the case of the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea who have learnt football but who will play, several days running, as many matches as are necessary for both sides to reach the same score ... This is treating a game as a ritual.

Lévi-Strauss gives a further, more elaborate, example, then proposes the following general way to differentiate between games and ritual (p. 32):

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of recent propositions, see Rousseva-Sokolova, 2005: 7-14.

<sup>2</sup> Unless, of course, one maintains, with Huizinga (1938/1951: 21), that ritual itself (along with other things) is rooted in play, but this is not the position here taken.

<sup>3</sup> See Kreinath, Snoek & Stausberg, 2006: xix; Grimes, 2006. Some authors have argued that drama is derived from ritual; see Segal, 2006: 112 f.

Games thus appear to have a *disjunctive* effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it *conjoins*, for it brings about a union (one might even say communion in this context) or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful. In the case of games the symmetry is therefore preordained and it is of a structural kind since it follows from the principle that the rules are the same for both sides. Asymmetry is engendered: it follows inevitably from the contingent nature of events, themselves due to intention, chance or talent. The reverse is true of ritual. There is an asymmetry which is postulated in advance between profane and sacred, faithful and officiating, dead and living, initiated and uninitiated, etc., and the 'game' consists in making all the participants pass to the winning side ...

In contrast to Lévi-Strauss, the Vedic specialist J. C. Heesterman maintains that the Vedic sacrifice is nothing but play. He says, to begin with (1993: 41-42):

sacrifice, at least Vedic sacrifice, is from beginning to end a contest. ... We ... find, embedded in the more elaborate soma feasts such as the *mahāvratā*, a New Year festival, or the royal rituals of *rājasūya*, *vājapeya*, and *aśvamedha*, regular contests, albeit neatly packaged in the rules of the *śrauta* ritual. Thus we have a ritualized chariot race in the *vājapeya* and the *rājasūya*; the latter, as well as the ritual for establishing one's sacrificial fires (*agnyādheya*), features a full-scale dicing game for the parts of a cow; and most importantly there are the verbal contexts, especially the *brahmodyas* or disputations in which the participants challenge each other with [163] riddle questions that hold the cosmic brahman secret and that provided the model for the great Upaniṣadic debates.

About these contests, Heesterman states (p. 42):

Although they are sportive games these contests are no less consequential and bloody. Even the verbal games of the *brahmodya*, as the Upaniṣads show, are far from harmless. The loser who does not acknowledge his defeat in time may pay for it with his head. It does not seem that originally this was simple hyperbole. The loser may well have been the victim providing 'the head of the sacrifice', a frequent expression for elements of the ritual considered important, which harks back to the original immolatory practice of cutting off the head.

Heesterman then continues (p. 42):

Like the whole of sacrifice [these games in the sacrifice] are 'play', 'games' in the sense Huizinga gave these terms. Therefore they fit in perfectly with sacrifice, which is the highest, most weighty manifestation of the phenomenon of play, because life and death are directly at stake in it. Being a game, it is characterized by tension and uncertainty, and, given the maximal stakes, tension and uncertainty reach a maximal and all but unbearable pitch. The parties in it cannot merely be antithetical. Sacrifice has to be agonistic: throughout the ancient Indian *śrauta* ritual the contest has left its mark. The disturbing and destabilizing effect of sacrifice makes itself manifest in its fiercely agonistic character.

Let us concentrate on the games that are presumably played within certain Vedic sacrifices. Heesterman mentions two in particular: chariot racing and dicing. The question we have to confront is whether these two can really be looked upon as instances of play in ritual.

With regard to chariot racing we can use the book *Chariots in the Veda* (1985), which was M. Sparreboom's doctoral thesis at the University of Leiden. Sparreboom's supervisor was Heesterman, the scholar whose opinions we have just cited.

Sparreboom's study of the sources brings to light that the chariot races described hardly deserve to be called play, that they are, at best, fossilized memories. Basing himself first on Vedic passages unrelated to the sacrifice, Sparreboom observes (p. 70):

Races were run for prestige or in order to settle disputes, as is evidenced in the *saṃhitās* and *brāhmaṇas*, where the gods are depicted as settling their disputes by means of chariot races (AV X.4.1; JB I.108-109; I. 105-106; II.128), or they were run for the winning of prizes ...

However, the races presented in the sacrificial texts do not correspond to this description (p. 71):

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The understanding of the real racing ... practices seems to have been lost early, as the discussion of the turning about by Baudhāyana and Śālīki shows and as it is demonstrated by Āpastamba's compilation of prescriptions for the chariot race.

Sparreboom concludes (p. 71):

There is no later Indian literature evidencing the usages of chariot racing ..., so we may consider these practices to have disappeared before or around the time when the earliest *sūtras* were composed.

On another page (p. 73) Sparreboom further elaborates on the obsolete nature of the use of the chariot in the ritual:

There is a general tendency in the ritual to replace acts by words (*kriyā - mantra*). It can be demonstrated that especially the proceedings with the *ratha* [i.e., chariot, JB] are in the process of being sublimated and eventually substituted by *mantras*. In the case of the chariot race, dissimulated as gift-acceptance in Lāṭyāyana and Drāhyāyana, the possibility is mentioned of avoiding performing the racing ritual (Lāṭyāyana II.8.16; Drāhyāyana V.4.16), for 'should he be weary to do all this, he should mutter all this, seated on his proper seat in the *sadas*. ... In the Vājapeya, the chariot race is in the process of being supplanted by the *brahman*, singing his *sāman*, sitting on a revolving chariot-wheel. This is further demonstrated by [Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa] II.193, in a discussion of this race: If one were to run the race, one would have to part from the *vedi* at the time of the sacrifice, which would be against the rules. As a compromise, it is made possible for one simultaneously to perform and not perform the race, by merely putting a foot on the chariot (*atho āhū rathopastha eva pādān ādhāya taṃ punar eva haret: tad eva śṛtaṃ cāśṛtaṃ ceti*). Although it is concluded that the race is nevertheless to be run, it appears that the performing of the chariot race had at least

become problematic in the ritual and finally was liable to be replaced by chants or formulas symbolizing it.

What should be concluded from all this? Sparreboom's answer follows the example of his teacher Heesterman (p. 75-76):

It has been argued by Heesterman that the many reminiscences in the ritual texts to agonistic procedures reveal a more violent past for the sacrificial session than it has retained in its classical form. Agonistic procedures, strife and combat between sacrificial parties must, according to this view, originally have formed part of the sacrifice, which in its classical form has eventually disposed of the acts of violence or sublimated them to 'harmless' recitation.

Sparreboom essentially repeats the same in the summary of his book (p. 119):

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Chariot racing was not, as it has so often been claimed, a favourite sport, a popular activity or some folkloristic event secondarily slipped into or absorbed by the framework of the Soma sacrifice. On the contrary, competition and rivalry, which probably found their strongest expression in contests involving war- and racing chariots, lay at the root of the sacrifice, which in its classical form has tried to eliminate these aspects.

It will be clear from all this that *real* chariot racing was not part of the classical sacrifice, i.e. of the only Vedic sacrifice we know, the one described in the ancient Sūtras. Both Heesterman and Sparreboom claim, without a shred of evidence, that there was an earlier kind of Vedic sacrifice that was altogether different from its classical form in that it encompassed real competitive chariot racing. Even if we were to accept their claim that the classical sacrifice preserves traces of an earlier agonistic encounter, this does not show that this agonistic encounter was part of an earlier *sacrifice*. It is at least conceivable that certain rituals contain traces of activities which, in their original form, were not rituals and were not part of rituals. For ought we know, the agonistic Vedic sacrifice is an invention that has never existed.

There is *a priori* good reason to think that real agonistic confrontations cannot be part of ritual, and that the moment they are incorporated into ritual they are no real confrontations any longer. This reason is that ritual activity is holistic in the sense that ritual actions are divorced from their usual goals, and that "the set of sequences that compose the ritual are not connected to this goal in the same way as sub-actions connect to sub-goals in ordinary behavior". I have argued this in an article that has come out elsewhere (Bronkhorst, 2010). Due to the cognitive structure of the human mind, I further argued, such holistic procedures are considered as giving access to a different, higher reality. The wedding ritual, for example, goes beyond the promises that are exchanged, for these promises are, by means of ritual, grounded in a higher reality in which no deception is possible.

We will see below that the last word about agonistic confrontations and sacrifice has not yet been said. First, however, we have to consider the game of dice in some Vedic

sacrifices. The *rājasūya* as well as the ritual for establishing one's sacrificial fires (*agnyādheya*), Heesterman pointed out, feature a full-scale dicing game for the parts of a cow. The rules of this [166] game have been studied by several scholars. I will follow the interpretation proposed by Harry Falk (1986) which, as far as I can see, is the most satisfactory. We learn from his book *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel* that the aim of this so-called dicing game was not to designate a winner, but rather a loser. This was accomplished in the following manner. A player would take a handful of nuts from a pile, and put them back in groups of four. If in the end he ended up with zero nuts, or three or two, he had not lost. If but one nut remained, he had lost.

It is not necessary to discuss for what specific purpose this game was played in Falk's reconstruction. Our interest is in the way it was played within the ritual. It turns out that here the nuts were carefully divided beforehand in such a manner that the outcome of the game was fixed in advance. In other words, the game was fixed beforehand, so much so that it was no longer a game, but ritual.

As a preliminary conclusion I propose (again) that it is of the essence of rituals that they constitute holistic entities. There can be no unforeseen outcomes of ritual, and if there are, the ritual is no longer ritual, it will be a disturbed or destroyed ritual which no longer counts as such.

This preliminary conclusion does not exclude that there may be agonistic features accompanying ritual. By way of example I cite a passage from a book by Terrence Deacon (1997: 404) in which he describes a ritual of the Yanomamö Indians from Venezuela, called "Feast".<sup>4</sup> This description runs as follows:

First, the hosts who wish to make peace prepare a meal. When their guests are due to arrive, dressed as for war and carrying their weapons, the hosts put their weapons away and the men recline on their hammocks waiting for the guests to enter their village. The guests enter, dancing and chanting, and circle around the camp stopping in front of each host. There they ritually threaten them, raising an axe or drawing a bow and arrow. The hosts must remain unmoved, trying to show no fear and no offense at provocative remarks. After this has been repeated for a while (and latent hostilities have not erupted in violence), the roles are reversed. The guests recline in hammocks, their weapons hidden away, while the hosts circle around the camp dancing and ritually threatening their guests. Finally, when it is clear that nothing untoward is likely to happen, they break off and the guests are offered food. Later they may chant together, barter and exchange goods, or even arrange a marriage.

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The challenging component of this ritual is obvious. It is equally obvious that a breach of the ritual rules would not result in ritual, but in slaughter. The challenge in this case is mutual. If successful, the outcome of this rite is comparable to that of the repeated football game referred to by Lévi-Strauss, viz., "a particular type of equilibrium between the two sides", in which "all the participants pass to the winning side". In the light what I said earlier, we may add that

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<sup>4</sup> This passage is also cited in Bronkhorst, 2010.

this equilibrium is anchored in a higher reality, and has therefore a deeper significance than the endless wars for which the Yanomamö Indians were famous (or infamous).

The ritual of the Yanomamö is of a kind that seems to invite disruption which it yet, scarcely, avoids. The next ritual I wish to draw attention to, a Vedic sacrifice, does the same: it appears to invite potential disruptors. However, the equilibrium resulting from this Vedic sacrifice is skew: it establishes a situation in which only one participant passes to the winning side, the others to the losing side.

I am referring to the so-called Horse Sacrifice (*aśvamedha*), initiated by a king who has been able to establish his power over his neighbours. Part of this rite is that a specially designated and consecrated horse is allowed to go where it likes for the duration of one year. It is accompanied by four hundred young men dressed for war, who protect it. A Vedic text stipulates that “if his enemies were to take his horse, his sacrifice would be destroyed”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a Vedic Brāhmaṇa text relates that a certain Śātānīka Sātrājita took away the white sacrificial horse of the king of Kāśī, which had already been roaming for nine months, before he performed his own Aśvamedha (according to a variant called Govinata).<sup>6</sup> Here, then, the freely roaming horse is asking for trouble. If the horse is not taken by enemies, the sacrifice can be completed. If it is, it cannot.

Once again, we must assume that the Horse Sacrifice gives a higher, or deeper, reality to a social situation, but this time it is a skew one in which one party is superior to the other. The successful completion of this sacrifice anchors this situation in this higher reality, and thereby fixes it in a way which the ordinary application of force might not accomplish. The king who has successfully completed a Horse Sacrifice has not just won a battle against neighbouring kings, he has done much more: he has established himself as a superior ruler whose supremacy has now been laid down in a [168] reality that is higher (and presumably more enduring) than the ordinary world of daily life.

The example of the Vedic Horse Sacrifice draws attention to the role a ritual can play in a situation where one party establishes itself as superior over another. Such superiority can be, and often is, imposed by violent means, but mere violence inevitably gives rise to a relatively unstable situation. The inferior party can at any time try to free itself from its burden by the same violent means. The winning party will therefore look for means to perpetuate the situation it has imposed. One such means is a ritual like the Horse Sacrifice. This ritual anchors the situation of social and political inequality into a higher reality, giving it something like a permanent status. Using the much used and abused word *sacred*, one may say that the sacrifice “sacri-fies”, i.e., sanctifies, the situation of inequality that finds expression in the Horse Sacrifice.

<sup>5</sup> TaitBr 3.8.9.4: *yad amitṛā aśvaṃ vinderan hanyetāsyā yajñāḥ*.

<sup>6</sup> ŚB 13.5.4.19-23; cf. Houben, forthcoming.

It will be clear that the Vedic Horse Sacrifice instantiates a form of ritual that is different from the rituals referred to by Lévi-Strauss. It is different in that the end result is that not all parties pass to the winning side. Quite on the contrary, only one party — the sacrificing king in this case — passes to the winning side, and all the neighbouring kings pass to the losing side. The Horse Sacrifice illustrates institutionalized *inequality*.

There is another difference with the situation described by Lévi-Strauss. The Horse Sacrifice clearly contains an element that one might call play. The roaming horse challenges neighbours: this is the play element. It is crucial that the sacrificer win this game, for otherwise the sacrifice fails. But it is not guaranteed that the sacrificer will win this game: he may lose it. The texts state explicitly that if a neighbouring king succeeds in preventing the horse from entering its territory by taking it, the sacrifice will then be dead. There is therefore real agonism in this sacrifice. However, if the wrong party wins, there is quite simply no ritual. The success of the ritual depends on the outcome of the agonistic encounter.

One could easily imagine that the idea which we thus discover behind the Horse Sacrifice could find expression otherwise. Imagine that our king, rather than just sending a horse into enemy territory, would go and catch prominent warriors from a neighbouring ruler, and put these to death in a ritual manner. His superiority over his neighbour would be evident, not by just by killing enemy warriors, but by killing them in a long drawn out ceremony, publicly, in such a manner that his neighbour can do nothing to prevent it. This would be a ritual assertion of superiority if ever there [169] was one. Such sacrifices might be different from the Vedic Horse Sacrifice in every conceivable detail, yet accomplish very much the same goal by recognizably similar means. In both cases the sacrificer would turn a situation that is unacceptable to his rivals into a ritual act. This unacceptable situation is in this way sanctified, it is given a higher dimension which fixes that situation in a manner that the rival cannot undo.

Such sacrifices involving the ritual killing of prominent warriors from neighbouring kings are not known from Vedic India. However, they are known from other regions in the world, in most detail perhaps from the Aztecs, at the opposite side of the globe. The vast majority of victims of their human sacrifices were enemy warriors. These warriors had to be obtained in war. The play element in this type of war is clear from the way it was named: *xochiyaoyotl*, which means “flowery war” and implies the sense “play-war”.<sup>7</sup> The aim of such wars was not to kill enemies, but to obtain a maximum number of victims for the sacrifice. As in the case of the Vedic Horse sacrifice, it is obviously crucial for the sacrificers to win the combats in which they collect victims, for otherwise they might end up becoming sacrificial victims themselves, in the sacrifices of their enemies. The play element is undeniably present, but it is vital that the right party win.

This situation could, at least theoretically, be remedied by organizing the confrontation of the opposing parties in such a manner that it is decided beforehand that the losing party, or

<sup>7</sup> Duverger, 1979: 103-104 (with note 1); 2004: 40.

its leader, will be sacrificed. It appears that different regions of Mexico had an example of this kind in its so-called “ball game ritual”. The details of this game remain somewhat obscure, but it is clear that in many cases the leader of the losing party was ritually beheaded.<sup>8</sup> This may to be one of the few examples of *real* play in ritual, real in the sense that the outcome of the game appears not to have been determined in advance. But even if the outcome of the game was not determined in advanced, the outcome of the ritual was: the ritual culminated in a human sacrifice, even though it was not yet certain at the beginning which human being would be sacrificed.

Examples of this kind of “political” human sacrifice may not be very frequent in recorded history (even though they appear to have been almost [170] omnipresent especially in Meso- and South-America). They must in any case be strictly distinguished from other forms of human sacrifice. Wide-spread has been the so-called “following into death”, the killing of servants or associates of important men after their demise. The Indian custom of *satee* — in which a widow follows her dead husband on the funeral pyre — falls in this category.<sup>9</sup> Kings in ancient China, and more recently in Benin and other countries, were followed into death by sometimes considerable numbers of people, but if these are human sacrifices in the strict sense at all, they are different from the ones we are discussing. The “regular” Aztec human sacrifice, as I argue, had structural similarities with the Vedic Horse Sacrifice: both infringed upon their neighbours rights by taking away from them, ritually, what belonged to them, whether it be authority over a country, or the possession of an army of warriors. In both cases these prerogatives are leisurely, ritually, infringed upon, creating in this manner a new, ritually sanctified, situation. And both are playful in the sense that they have at their core a competitive encounter.

Let us, by way of example, consider a special treatment which the Aztecs reserved for some of their most illustrious victims. The following passage describes it (Clendinnen, 1991: 94-95):<sup>10</sup>

... prized captives were preferably offered at the festival of Tlacaxipeualiztli, the ‘Feast of the Flaying of Men’, on what the Spaniards thought of as the ‘gladiatorial stone’, to die after having engaged in combat with a sequence of selected Mexica warriors. The victim was tethered by the waist to a rope fastened to the centre of a round stone, about waist high, a metre and a half wide, and elevated in its turn on a platform about the height of a man. The ‘display’ element was made explicit by the procession of ‘gods’ (high priests in the regalia of their deities) who formally took their places around the small round stage. The tethered victim was given a long draught of pulque, and most ceremoniously presented with weapons: four pine cudgels for throwing, and a war club, the club being studded not with the usual shallow flint blades but with feathers. He then had to fight up to four leading Mexica warriors

<sup>8</sup> Helfrich, 1973: 141 ff.; Duverger, 1978: 145 f.

<sup>9</sup> Fisch, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Duverger, 1978: 143 ff.

armed with bladed clubs, who fought from the platform, so giving the captive the advantage of height — an equivocal advantage, as we will see.

Despite the combat theme, the conditions so carefully constructed in the ‘gladiatorial’ encounter bore slight resemblance to ordinary battle. The combat with each warrior was presumably timed, so there was pressure on the Mexica warrior to perform at maximum. The victim, elevated above his opponent and released from the inhibition against killing which [171] prevailed on the battlefield, could whirl his heavy club and strike at the head of his antagonist with unfamiliar freedom. The Mexica champions were also presented with a temptingly easy target. The victim could be disabled and brought down with one good blow to the knee or ankle, as on the battlefield. But such a blow would simultaneously abort the spectacle and end their glory, so the temptation had to be resisted. Their concern under these most taxing and public circumstances was rather to give a display of the high art of weapon handling: in an exquisitely prolonged performance to cut the victim delicately, tenderly with those narrow blades, to lace the living skin with blood (this whole process was called ‘the striping’). Finally, the victim, a slow-carved object lesson of Mexica supremacy, exhausted by exertion and loss of blood, would falter and fall, to be dispatched by the usual heart excision.

This passage is of interest because it describes a procedure in which the play element is clearly present. However, the risk of losing in this encounter is minimized for the warrior who organizes it, i.e., the warrior who is scheduled to win. Here, then, we have an example of an agonistic passage in a ritual procedure, but the confrontation of which it consists has been deprived of much of its danger. One can very well imagine that there are other examples, perhaps in different cultures, in which this agonistic element has been reduced to no more than a fossil, a hint of confrontation without the least risk for the winning side.

What can we conclude from all this about the nature of ritual? I think it can be maintained that a ritual, in order to be ritual, has to be holistic, i.e., uninterrupted. In certain cases this may simply mean that a rite is carried out in circumstances where no disruptions are expected. In other cases, such circumstances are imposed. In those cases the rite becomes an implicit or explicit challenge to potential trouble makers. It defies them to disturb the sacrifice. Obviously, such challenging sacrifices are only carried out by people who think that they can prevent the trouble makers from interfering. The sacrifice becomes in this way a public signal testifying to the power of the sacrificer. Contrary to the claim of Lévi-Strauss to the extent that “the ‘game’ consists in making all the participants pass to the winning side”, in these specific sacrifices the game consist in making all the participants but one pass to the *losing* side. The rite serves to institutionalize this skew result.

It seems to me that this understanding of certain rites accounts for much of the so-called play that we find in Vedic sacrifices. It does not mean, for example, that there was once a time in which the chariot race in the *rājasūya* was won by someone else than the sacrificer. This option must be excluded, for [172] in that case the rite would no longer count as a rite, or rather, it would count as a destroyed sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> No, the sacrificer must win for the sacrifice to

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<sup>11</sup> That will then be the end of the sacrifice, but not necessarily of the story: “in a narrative in Sanskrit, one way to get a story going is to disrupt a Vedic ritual” (Minkowski, 2001: 169).

succeed. His victory can be assured by reducing the whole race to a formality. Alternatively, a real race can be held, in which case the sacrificer risks seeing his sacrifice destroyed.

*Appendix: the fateful game of dice of the Mahābhārata*

Our preliminary conclusion has been that there is no place for games, “real” games, in ritual, and that ritual is not a game in the ordinary sense of that term. But this position gives rise to new questions that need to be addressed. We argued above that the game of dice in the sacrifice called *rājasūya* was an example of a game that was no real game, that this game of dice could only be won by the sacrificer. This seems to be in contradiction with a well-known story of a game of dice within a *rājasūya* sacrifice that was lost by the sacrificer. This story recounts one of the crucial events of the Mahābhārata.

The second book of the Mahābhārata is called Sabhāparvan, the Book of the Assembly Hall. J. A. B. van Buitenen (1972; 1975: Introduction to Book 2) has argued “that those responsible for the composition of the Sabhā[parvan] found in the *rājasūya* a ready model for their composition and that they designed the book on it”. Indeed, an important part of this book describes a *rājasūya* sacrifice, which is followed by the game of dice. However, this game is here *lost* by the sacrificer, an outcome which would seem to be in conflict with our theory regarding the place of play in ritual. Does this constitute a reason to modify or reject this theory?

It does not. For in spite of van Buitenen’s suggestions, and even if we take it for granted that the *rājasūya* is an original part of the Sabhāparvan (which some specialists contest),<sup>12</sup> the game of dice is *not* part of the sacrifice: it is played after its completion. The text of the Mahābhārata is quite explicit about it that the *rājasūya* is completed before the very idea of a [173] game of dice is launched. The sacrifice is declared terminated in chapter 42,<sup>13</sup> the topic of dicing comes up in chapter 43.

Interestingly, there is mention of an attempt to disrupt the sacrifice while it is still going on. Van Buitenen describes it as follows in the introduction to his translation of the Sabhāparvan (1975: 22-23):

Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rājasūya*, it has been said, is a peculiar one, in that it does not so much legitimate a local king’s dominion as validate one king’s claim to *sāmrajya*, suzerainty. Such suzerainty is not strictly an inheritable office, so, if the epic gift parallels the Vedic gift of the Uñction water, the bestowal of it becomes the deliberate selection of the one who in the king’s eyes is the most deserving of the honor after himself. Thus, if Kṛṣṇa stands first after Yudhiṣṭhira, the implication is that the purple might next well descend on the Vṛṣṇi chieftain. This bestowal is abhorrent to Śiśupāla, the

<sup>12</sup> See below.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Mbh 2.42.34-35: *samāpayām āsa ca tam rājasūyam mahākratum / tam tu yajñam mahābāhur ā samāpter janārdanaḥ / rarakṣa bhagavāñ śauriḥ śāringacakraḡadādharaḥ // tātas tv avabhṛthasnātam dharmarājam yudhiṣṭhiram / samastam pāthivam kṣatram abhigamyedam abravīt //*

erstwhile marshal of Jarāsaṁdha — he may well have such pretensions himself — for not only is Kṛṣṇa not a king, he is also the assassin of the previous samrāj. His protests are of no avail, and Kṛṣṇa is duly honored. Śiśupāla, “wrathful, his eyes very red, addressed the kings: ‘Am I still the commander of the army, or what do you think now? Do we stand ready to fight the assembled Vṛṣṇis and Pāṇḍavas?’ When he had thus roused all the kings, the bull of the Cedis plotted with the kings to disrupt the sacrifice.”<sup>14</sup> The last sentence is interesting because it shows that the taking of the guest gift was a component rite of the whole long sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself could still be disrupted — and brought to nought — if the bestowal were successfully challenged. The sacrifice is by no means over, for the kings are still in the sadas, the “sitting site” of the ceremonial, where indeed according to one branch of the Yajurveda the bestowal of the Unction water takes place.

The Sanskrit word for “interruption” is *upaghāta*, which primarily means “destruction”. It reminds us that until the sacrifice is successfully completed, it can be destroyed, with the result that it is null and void. Śiśupāla’s attempt to destroy the sacrifice does not succeed, for he is killed by Kṛṣṇa before he has been able to do any harm. However, the dicing game in the Sabhāparvan is *not* part of the *rājasūya*. In other words, the dicing game in the Mahābhārata is not a counterexample to the claim that if there are games in ritual at all, their outcome has to be predetermined.

I am of course not the first to point out that the game of dice in the Sabhāparvan has nothing to do with the *rājasūya* sacrifice that precedes it.<sup>15</sup> Some go further and argue that the episode of the game of dice is older [174] than the *rājasūya* episode, or that the *rājasūya* episode is a later insertion in the text.<sup>16</sup> But whether or not one accepts their position, it is clear that Van Buitenen’s theory was wrong, and that the game of dice in the Sabhāparvan is no counterexample to the fixed nature of ritual activity.

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<sup>14</sup> Mbh 2.36.13-15: *tasminn abhyarcite kṛṣṇe sunīthaḥ śatrukarsanaḥ / atitāmreksanaḥ kopād uvāca manujādhipān // sthītaḥ senāpatir vo ‘haṁ manyadhvaṁ kiṁ nu sāmpratam / yudhi tiṣṭhāma samnahya sametān vṛṣṇipāṇḍavān // iti sarvān samutsāhya rājāas tāṁś cedipuṁgavaḥ / yajñopaghātāya tataḥ so ‘mantrayata rājabhiḥ //*

<sup>15</sup> Minkowski (2001: 175) thinks that “[t]he dice game could be said to constitute a sort of unregulated ritual fragment which has been extruded from the disrupted Rājasūya so that the damaged rite can be completed”, but this is an interpretation that does not seem to be based on any textual evidence, and that goes against the explicit statement in the Mahābhārata to the extent that the *rājasūya* has been completed.

<sup>16</sup> See Söhnen-Thieme, 1999; Oberlies, 1998; 2008: 82 with note 35; 2009; Gönc Moacanin, 2005.

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