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Aśvattha and *śamī*. The Evolution of the Meanings of an Arboreal Couple in Indian Religious History[1]

Igor Spanò[2]

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Abstract. In this article, I will explore some mythological and ritual aspects related to a pair of trees, the *aśvattha* and the *śamī*. In India, since the Vedic culture, these two trees have often been the protagonists of myths and rituals in which they are conceived of as a couple. In various contemporary religious contexts, one finds dendrolatric practices (*vanaspatipūjā*), which sometimes result in the celebration of actual tree marriages (*vṛkṣa-vivāha*), whereby trees grow by intertwining with each other. The *aśvattha* and the *śamī*, though in today's context separately, are also subject to dendrogamic practices. In particular, the *aśvattha* is subject to a gender shift whereby in some contexts, though traditionally regarded as the male tree, it acquires a female role within the couple. This phenomenon parallels various myths and rituals handed down in the Vedic texts. In fact, the *araṇi*s, that is, the two sticks rubbed together during the ritual of lighting the fire, were made from the wood of the two trees. The analysis of the symbolic values linked to the coupling of the two *araṇi*s and the many variants that this motif generated allows us to highlight, on a mythical level, the emergence of a sexuality that is not necessarily heteronormative. These versions lead us to reflect on an arboreal nature that alludes to sexuality that bypasses and transcends the gender binary and accounts for the fluidity found in certain contemporary arboreal 'marriages.
Keywords: Dendrogamies; New Animism; Gender and Religions; Vedic rites; Hindu rites

[esp] *Aśvattha* y *śamī*. La evolución de los significados de una pareja arbórea en la historia religiosa india

Resumen. En este artículo exploraré algunos aspectos mitológicos y rituales relacionados con una pareja de árboles, el *aśvattha* y la *śamī*. En la India, desde la cultura védica, estos dos árboles han sido a menudo protagonistas de mitos y rituales en los que se les concibe como una pareja. En diversos contextos religiosos contemporáneos, se encuentran prácticas dendrolátricas (*vanaspatipūjā*), que a veces desembocan en la celebración de matrimonios reales entre árboles (*vṛkṣa-vivāha*), por los que los árboles crecen entrelazándose entre sí. El *aśvattha* y la *śamī*, aunque en el contexto actual por separado, también están sujetos a prácticas dendrogámicas. En particular, el *aśvattha* está sujeto a un cambio de género por el que, en algunos contextos, aunque tradicionalmente considerado como el árbol masculino, adquiere un rol femenino dentro de la pareja. Este fenómeno es paralelo a diversos mitos y rituales transmitidos en los textos védicos. De hecho, las *araṇi*s, es decir, los dos palitos que se frotan durante el ritual de encendido del fuego, se fabricaban con la madera de los dos árboles. El análisis de los valores simbólicos ligados al acoplamiento de las dos *araṇis* y de las numerosas variantes que este motivo generó permite poner de relieve, en el plano mítico, la emergencia de una sexualidad no necesariamente heteronormativa. Estas versiones nos llevan a reflexionar sobre una naturaleza arbórea que alude a una sexualidad que elude y trasciende el binario de género y da cuenta de la fluidez que se encuentra en ciertos "matrimonios" arbóreos contemporáneos.
Palabras clave: dendrogamías; nuevo animismo; género y religiones; ritos védicos; ritos hindúes

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[2] Università degli Studi di Palermo.
Correo electrónico: igor.spano@unipa.it
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0304-0764

1. *The* aśvattha *and* śamī trees *in Indian religious history*

The *aśvattha* or *pippala* tree (*Ficus religiosa*, L.) and the *śamī* tree (*Prosopis spicigera* or *cineraria*, L.) occupy a central place in Indian religious tradition[3]. In particular, the *aśvattha* is a tree with aerial roots, the symbolism of which recurs in Indian religious history as far back as Vedic poetry. In a hymn to riddles with philosophical content, *Ṛgveda* I, 164, which contains themes that would be fully developed in later literature, the tree is a symbol of life (stanza 20), on whose branches two birds rest (Johnson, 1976, and Norelius, 2016: 4 n. 1, for a review of the different interpretations): one continues to feed on the figs, a symbol of the desire that perpetuates the attachment to the phenomenal dimension, the other, while clinging to the tree, observes without feeding, free from involvement in the chain of desires:

> *dvā́ suparṇā́ sayújā sákhāyā samānáṃ vṛkṣám pári ṣasvajāte | táyor anyáḥ píppalaṃ svādv átty ánaśnann anyó abhí cākaśīti ||*
>
> Two [birds] with beautiful wings, united together in friendship, embrace the same tree, of which one eats the sweet fig, the other looks on without eating (*ṚV* I, 164, 20)[4].

In the Upaniṣadic philosophy[5], the symbolism of *aśvattha* is taken up and enlarged, so the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* shows the image of the upturned tree[6], with the roots at the top and the branches at the bottom:

> *ūrdhvamūlo avākśākha eṣo 'śvatthaḥ sanātanaḥ | tadeva śukraṃ tad brahma tadevāmṛtamucyate | tasmiṁllokāḥ śritāḥ sarve tadu nātyeti kaścana || etadvai tat ||*
>
> This is the eternal *aśvattha* with roots upward and branches downward; indeed, it is the resplendent one, it is the *brahman*, it is called immortal; all worlds are fixed in it, but none goes beyond it. This is that (*KU* II, 6, 1).

Thus, in later epic and devotional poetry, *aśvattha*, identified with *brahman* (the supreme principle) represents the cosmic tree of immortality (*BhG* XV, 1-3 and Arapura, 1975).

In this tree, according to different versions of the myth, Agni (the deified Fire) or Prajāpati (the Lord of creatures) took up their abode when having abandoned the gods, they reached the world of men in the form of horses and took refuge for a year in an *aśvattha* tree. The *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*[7] presents both versions of the myth:

> *agnír devébhyo nílāyata | áśvo rūpáṃ kṛtvā́ | sò 'śvatthé saṃvatsarám atiṣṭhat | tád aśvatthásyāśvatthatvám | yád āśvatthaḥ saṃbhāró bhávati | yád evā́sya tátra nyàktam | tád evá ávarunddhe*
>
> When Agni departed from the gods, having taken the form of a horse, he remained in an *aśvattha* tree for a year. That is why the *aśvattha* is called *aśvattha*. If the *aśvattha* is the support, what has been there [ritually] anointed, that indeed is obtained (*TB* I, 1, 3, 9).
>
> *cátasro díśaḥ | digbhír eváinaṃ párigṛhṇāti || ā́śvattho vrajó bhavati | prajā́patir devébhyo nílāyata | áśvo rūpáṃ kṛtvā́ | sò 'śvatthé saṃvatsarám atiṣṭhat | tád aśvatthásyāśvatthatvám | yád ā́śvattho vrajó bhávati | svá eváinaṃ yónau prátiṣṭhāpayati*
>
> The regions of space are four. Indeed, he [the *adhvaryu*], by means of them, surrounds him [the horse]. The *aśvattha* is the enclosure. When Prajāpati departed from the gods, having taken the form of a horse, he for a year remained in an *aśvattha* tree. That is why the *aśvattha* is called *aśvattha*. If the *aśvattha* is the enclosure, indeed in its own matrix he [the *adhvaryu*] places it [the horse] as his abode (*TB* III, 8, 12, 3).

The two versions are set in the ritualistic framework of the *aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice)[8] and refer to the ritual prescriptions that prepared the performance of the rite. The texts state that the horse singled out for sacrifice, after wandering free for a year, was brought back on the eleventh month, and sheltered inside an enclosure made of the wood of the *aśvattha* tree, which literally means 'under which the horse resides'. Thus, according

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[3] For a few general references to dendrological practices in Indian religious history see Karmakar, 1950: 189-194; for some information on religious practices related to the two trees see Gupta, 2001 [1975]: 31-34 and 63-65; Krishna and Amirthalingam, 2014: 171-175 and 219-225, but especially Nugteren, 2005; for communities in North India see Crooke, 1926; 400 ff. In general, on the symbolism of the tree see Buttitta, 2006: 16-23 and the cited bibliography; for plant symbolism in the cultural and religious history of India see Banks Findly, 2008; Krishna, 2017; Pelissero, 2016, to whom we refer for the bibliography concerning ancient India; Ferrari and Dähnhardt, 2016: xi-xxxix; Hall 2011; Simoons, 1998, especially pp. 41-100.

[4] For the text see Aufrecht, 1968 [1877], for the translation see also, among the most recent, Jamison and Brereton, 2014. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Sanskrit are by the author.

[5] For the text of the *Upaniṣad*s I follow Olivelle, 1998

[6] Although we are dealing here with the Vedic and Hindu religious tradition, we would like to point out that in Buddhism too, the *aśvattha* tree (*assattha* in Pāli) plays a primary role. In fact, according to Buddhist narratives, it is the tree under which Siddhārta Gautama in Bodhgayā obtained the *bodhi* (awakening) and became the Buddha. Among the most recent studies, see Comba, 2016.

[7] For the text see Mitra, 1859. For translations of the following passages, see also, respectively, Mylius, 1984: 289 and Dumont, 1948: 463.

[8] On the *aśvamedha* Spanò, 2019 and the cited bibliography.

to the *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra*: *ūrdhvamekādaśānmāsādāśvatthe vraje 'śvaṃ badhnanti* («After the eleventh month, they tie the horse in a fence made of the wood of *aśvattha*», *ĀpŚS* XX, 7, 7)[9].

It is likely that Prajāpati's slow but gradual rise to the rank of chief deity among the *Brāhmaṇa*s' theologians caused the original myth, with Agni as the protagonist, to be obscured by the later version and Prajāpati to be identified with, or at least superimposed on Agni (Gonda, 1986: 35 ff.). However, the epic version of the myth in the *Mahābhārata* reverts to a narration where Agni is solely prominent (Feller, 2004: 49 ff.). The god initiates a series of self-transformations that on the one hand underlines the acquired value of the two plants in Indian culture, and on the other marks the distance from the context immortalized in the Vedic texts. The tale is bent to the needs and tones of epic poetry, giving shape to a capricious god who takes revenge every time he is discovered. A taste for narrative has taken the place of the ancient myths that questioned and attempted to provide an explanation in the face of the enigmas of the world and sacrifice. In the thirteenth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Anuśāsanaparvan* or 'The Book of Precepts' (a continuation of the twelfth, where Bhīṣma continues to impart his precepts to Yudhiṣṭhira) once again the gods are hunting for the god Agni who has run away and hidden himself. Hiding in the waters, Agni is discovered thanks to the delusion of the frogs and having cursed them, he seeks another hiding place and settles inside the trunk of an *aśvattha* tree. This time it is the elephants who reveal the place where he has taken refuge, drawing upon them the wrath of the god Fire: *aśvatthastho 'gnir* («Agni is in the *aśvattha*!», XIII, 84, 33)[10]. The god then flees (*niḥsṛto 'śvatthād agnir*, «Agni came out of the *aśvattha*», XIII, 84, 35) and tries to find shelter among the bamboo reeds, but in the end his last refuge will be in a *śamī* tree: *praviveśa śamī garbham* («penetrated the womb of the *śamī*», *ibid.*)[11]. But a parrot speaks to the gods, and they finally reach Agni. The gods, observing Agni sleeping in the *śamī*'s womb, understand that the tree is sacred or auspicious (*puṇya*) and that from then on it would become indispensable for the proper performance of sacred rites: *tad evāyatanaṃ cakruḥ puṇyaṃ sarvakriyāsv api* («[The gods] indeed made that shelter sacred in every ritual operation», *MBh* XIII, 84, 42).
That is why the *śamī* tree is said to contain Fire:

> *tataḥ prabhṛti cāpy agniḥ śamī garbheṣu dṛśyate | utpādane tathopāyam anujagmuś ca mānavāḥ*
>
> And since then, indeed, it is believed that Agni quivers in the wombs of *śamī* and men moreover sought [the *śamī*] as a means of generation (*MBh* XIII, 84, 43).

A passage from the *Śatapathabrāhmana*[12] explains why the wood of the *śamī* is the first to be used as fuel to feed the *āhavanīya* hearth, which receives the sacrificial offerings. Indeed, the etymology of the name *śamī* is traceable in the verb *śam–*, 'to calm', therefore *śamī* means 'pacifier', because it calmed and made peaceful the destructive power of fire whose flames threatened to reach on high even to the gods and destroy them. Fire represents a dangerous power, which must be tamed, so that it can with its mouth devour the offerings and transfer them to the gods. Then, it is necessary that:

> *sa vaí śamīmáyīm prathamāmā́dadhāti | etadvā́ eṣá etásyāmā́hutyāṃ hutā́yām prā́dīpyatódajvalattásmāddevā abibhayuryadvaí no 'yaṃ ná hiṃsyādíti tá etā́ṃ śamī́mapaśyastáyainamaśamayaṃstadyádetaṃ śamyā́śamayaṃstásmāchamī*
>
> Indeed, he [the sacrificer, *yajamāna*] first lays down that [*āhuti*, oblation] made of *śamī* wood. Indeed, when this oblation was then offered, he [the Fire] was lit and rose high. That is why the gods were frightened [and said]: 'May he not do us ill!'. They saw the *śamī*, through it they calmed him [verb *śam*-]. They rendered him peaceful by means of the *śamī*, and for this reason [it is called] *śamī* (*ŚB* IX, 2, 3, 37).

What happened in the mythical tales, in the world of the gods, is repeated during the ritual enaction, in the world of men: *táthaivaìnamayámetáchamyā́ śamayati* («Indeed, in the same way he [the *yajamāna*] calms him by means of the *śamī*», *ibid.*)

2. Aśvattha *and* śāmī: *contemporary dendrolatries and Vedic myths*

In recent decades, within the field of study of the anthropology of nature and the sciences of religion, the concept of neo-animism[13] has received renewed interest from authors such as Descola (2002; 2005; 2013), Ingold (2006), and Mancuso (2018), who, albeit differently, have attempted to reposition on a theoretical level the

[9] For the text see Garbe, 1983, for the translation see also Caland, 1928.
[10] For the text see Sukthankar *et al.*, 1933-1966; for the translation see also Ganguli, 2000 [1884-1896].
[11] The verb *praviś-* includes among its meanings that of 'to have sexual intercourse with'.
[12] For the text see Weber, 1849, for the translation see also Eggeling, 1963 [1882-1900].
[13] The animistic theories applied to the study of the religious phenomena of indigenous communities, which had seen in Tylor the first theorist (the first edition of *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* appeared in 1871, later expanded up to the 5th edition, which appeared in London in 1913), had found credence for a long time in the field of religious sciences, and then within anthropology, but had been progressively criticised and abandoned during the twentieth century in favour of new approaches.

idea that one can study the material relations between the natural elements of the environment and those who inhabit it[14]. According to Philippe Descola

> […] humans and all the kinds of non- humans with which humans interact each have different physicalities, in that their identical internal essences are lodged in different types of bodies, often described locally as clothing that can be donned or discarded, the better to underline their autonomy from the interiorities which inhabit them (Descola, 2013: 80).

This perspective differs from classical religious phenomenology (see Laack, 2020 for a discussion of the subject) in that it is able to capture the forms of relationship established in different geographical contexts by non-Western communities[15], that are structured in non-hierarchical ways with the surrounding environment, in the light of the theoretical elaborations of an ecological anthropology (Descola, 2011). The other element to be taken into account is the historical dimension of religious phenomena, which makes it possible to place them in a long-term context that recovers the depth and interweaving of relations that have been built up over time, reflecting on the relationships and derivations, the changes that renew their meaning and the continuity of their forms (Buttitta, 2013: 17-35 and the bibliography of reference). In this theoretical framework, the study of the relationships that some Indian communities have established with trees[16], and of the beliefs and rituals that underpin and accompany their relations, constitute a field of investigation that allows us to discover new shades of meaning, starting from the idea that, in the context of such religious phenomena, humans relate to trees as non-human persons[17] or as relatives (Bird-David, 2018). This conception, moreover, seems to fit into the broader hermeneutic framework of the connections between the macrocosm and the microcosm established by Brahmanical speculations, already in the earliest Vedic literature, as the interpretive key to reality. Thus, as Yājñavalkya states in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: *yáthā vṛkṣó vánaspátis táthaivá púruṣo 'mṛṣā́* («As a tree, lord of the forest, so surely is man», *BĀU* III, 9, 28).

The practice of dendrogamies[18] in India, both of marriages between trees and between tree persons and human beings, can be a useful case study, from which to weave the description of these phenomena, whose origin does not necessarily have to be traced back to an archaic or remote past, with a historical analysis of Indian religiosity, back to the Vedic period. The reasons for celebrating marriages with trees as protagonists have been seen by scholars in various ways. They may serve to reinforce the sense of identity of a community that recognises itself in a tree-totem (Dymock, 1886; Edwardes, 1922: 80-81) or ensure the tree world's protection of the human bride and groom, who celebrate their nuptials only after having celebrated those of the tree couple (Godden, 1895: 229-230). In general, it can be said that dendrogamies are part of the broader mythical-religious motif of hierogamies[19], whereby trees symbolically transfer their virtues to the couple, but above all they guarantee fertility: united in marriage a few days before the celebration of the human wedding, they are often planted close together so that, as they grow, they intertwine with each other until they become indistinguishable from each other, symbolising the indissolubility of the couple (arboreal and human). Eliade (1949: 266-267) explains the phenomenon by referring to rites promoting fertility or collective prosperity. The marriage of two trees also serves to strengthen the bonds between members of the same community and often these tree weddings are celebrated to coincide with the spring season, which is also considered an auspicious time for the celebration of human weddings: in the small village of Kattinagundi, near the town of Kandlur, Karnataka, on 27 April 2016, a wedding was celebrated between an *aśvattha* and a *nīm* tree (*Azadirachta indica*, A.Juss.), respectively considered as the groom and the bride (D'Souza, 2016). The ceremony, organised by members of the Mullugudde lineage, which has been passing on an ancient lineage for many centuries, was also attended by members of the village community. The tree wedding, in this case, has several aspects: it serves to strengthen the family ties between the many branches and members descending from the same lineage through the repetition of a rite that, in addition to its benevolent and propitiatory aspects, can also be considered a rite of foundation. There is a legend within the family that the first *aśvattha* tree miraculously sprouted in the family home from a *tulasī* plant (the basil used in the rituals) and that the resulting trees were to

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14 In this perspective and specifically concerning trees see Rival, 1998.

15 For example, the aforementioned Descola, but also the perspectivist approach advocated by Viveiros de Castro (2004) for the Amerindian and Amazonian communities; as for investigations relating to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent in particular, see Bird-David's 1999 and 2006 studies on the Nayaka hunter-gatherer community in southern India. On the conception of plants and trees as persons in the Indian context and on marriages between trees and between humans and trees see Banks Findly, 2008: 315 ff.

16 For an overview of the history of studies, in particular on Southeast Asia, see the two essays by the editors of the volume *Animism in Southeast Asia*, of which they form the introductory part, Århem, 2016 and Sprenger, 2016.

17 See the interesting perspective with which the Vedic rite of *audumbarī* is studied by Gerety, 2016.

18 Frazer, 1922: 109 ff., in particular 119, collects a wide range of case histories from Europe and other continents, accompanied by some interesting considerations on the sex of trees. In this regard, see also the considerations of Olivelle (2011: 58) on the term *skandha* ('trunk' of the tree). Eliade (1949: 266-267), taking up some news reported by Frazer, adds the examination of other phenomena, mostly referred to India or to regions where the Hindu culture spread. Regarding the celebration of tree weddings in Italy, the famous 'Maggio di Accettura', downgraded by some as a case of 'invention of tradition' (Mirizzi, 2009), is part of a series of similar rites widespread in the Calabrian-Lucanian area, such as in Alessandria del Carretto (Spera, 2015; 1998). A critical perspective on the legitimacy or usefulness of the term 'dendrolatry' in historical-religious studies in Geertz, 1994.

19 On this theme with a specific perspective on Indian religious culture, see Harman, 1989.

be transplanted to a new site and then 'married' after a few years to another tree. It seems to us that the gradual planting of new trees also supplies a ritual political aspect related to the expansion and perpetuation of the family's power, especially in relation to the progressive expansion of the family into the surrounding territory, whose conquest is symbolically marked by the presence of a new *aśvattha* tree.

It is precisely the *aśvattha* tree that is often the protagonist of the beliefs and cults of various communities in which it is worshipped in pairs with other trees, with which it is united in marriage. However, other tree species also have specific cultural significance. Among these, the tamarind tree plays an important role in Indian culture, particularly in dendrolatric ritual contexts and in the celebration of certain dendrogamies. In fact, the sour but refreshing fruit of the tamarind tree is little used in religious offerings and rituals in general, but folk legends of various Indian communities, although not found in the texts of the Sanskrit mythological tradition, attribute to the tamarind an intimate link with the goddess Uṣā (Gupta, 2001 [1975]: 78-79), with rituals for childbirth (Sahay, 1960: 71-72) and fertility promotion (Nair, 1960: 95 and Kabirai, 1960:155). Thus, the tamarind tree plays the role of the bride when a dendrogamy is celebrated, often with a male partner represented by the mango tree (Edwardes, 1922: 80). Indeed, especially in south Indian religious contexts, such as among the Konda Reddi people, the mango tree has an important significance linked to the promotion of fertility and purification, also in contexts related to funeral rites (Misra, 1998: 260).

In southern India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, the pair of plants worshipped is represented by the *aśvattha* tree, regarded as the groom, and the *nīm* tree, regarded as the bride (Longhurst, 1955: 36-37; Walter, 2015: 54)[20]; In the north, particularly in Bengal, the couple worshipped are two species of fig, *aśvattha* and *nyagrodha* or *vata* (*Ficus benghalensis*, L., or banyan). The term *aśvattha* is declined to the masculine gender and generally the tree is considered as the male element of the couple, not only in Bengal, but also in Odisha, where the *aśvattha* tree retains its masculine role, while the banyan tree assumes the feminine role[21] (Choudhury, 2012); in Assam, every year in the town of Guwahati there are celebrations for the marriage of an *aśvattha* tree and a *vata* tree[22].

However, Lassen (1867: 304-305) had already noted how in Bengal, when marriages between the two trees are celebrated, the *aśvattha* tree, planted alongside the *nyagrodha*, appears slimmer than its more majestic partner. Indeed, in some ritual contexts, the *aśvattha* tree assumes the female role within the couple (Pandey, 1989: 21)[23]: the marriage between a banyan and a *Ficus religiosa* was celebrated in 2017 in Ghasipura village in Kendujhar (Keonjhar) district in Odisha. Participants in the ritual, celebrated respecting all the performances of traditional Hindu marriage, consider the banyan the groom, the *aśvattha* the bride. It is possible that this association stems from the belief that sees *aśvattha* as a symbol of prosperity (*śrī*), which identifies the plant as the abode of the goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī (Upadhyaya, 1964: 19; but also Ghosal, 1960: 111), while the identification of the banyan as a symbolic manifestation of the god Viṣṇu, the spouse of Lakṣmī, finds attestation in epic-purāṇic literature, such as *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* I, 12, where the process of emanation and dissolution of the universe provides the context in which the comparison between the *Ficus benghalensis* and the god is placed (Gupta, 2001 [1975]: 58)[24]. Another symbolic association should also be taken into account: the milky substance gushing out of Ficus trees, in a wider chain of associations linking these trees to fertility-promoting rites, is conceived at the same time as the manifestation of both male sperm and female milk (Walter, 2011: 161), and this makes it so that in the Bangalore district two *aśvattha* trees, grown intertwined with each other, were considered a pair, one of which was recognised as the male and the other as the female (MacKenzie, 1875: 5). Again, in Bengal the *aśvattha* tree, mythically associated, as mentioned above, with the god Viṣṇu, in the beliefs of some communities is associated with female deities and is considered a goddess in *vrata* cults. Moreover, again in Bengal, it is associated with the goddess Lakṣmī, while the banyan is associated with the god Brahmā, but sometimes also with the goddess Lakṣmī (Mahapatra, 1960: 127). In another story, once again *aśvattha* takes on a feminine role: in Karnataka the *aśvattha* leaf represents the *yoni*, the vulva, and it is said

[20] The *nīm* tree, due to the refreshing properties attributed to its leaves, is associated with certain aspects of the divine feminine Power (Śakti), such as Śītalā (Ferrari, 2021) in the northern regions and Yellammā in the southern regions of India. In Benares, for example, the tree is worshipped as an aniconic manifestation of Śītalā (see Haberman, 2017).

[21] It is remarkable that in a recent wedding between a *Ficus religiosa* and a *Ficus benghalensis* celebrated in the suburb of Baurisahi near the city of Kendrapara in Orissa, the participants insisted on considering the trees as people, so much so that they complied with the Indian law on the minimum age for marriage: the *aśvattha* tree, the groom, was in fact 21 years old, while the banyan, the bride, was 18 (https://www.dailypioneer.com/2016/state-editions/peepal-banyan-tie-knot-akin-to-human-beings.html, accessed 23/04/2021). The choice of wedding day is also personal to the couple, who, like human beings, should choose to celebrate the ceremony on a day considered auspicious according to religious almanacs and astrological conjunctions. The widespread presence of indigenous communities on the territory of Orissa means that the celebration of dendrogamies is a fairly common phenomenon, but in this as in other cases (the rite is celebrated regularly in the village of Balia, see https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news, accessed 24/04/2021), for some years now, the motivations linked to the perpetuation of traditional religious practices have been intertwined with motivations based on the need to encourage the protection of forest heritage.

[22] See https://www.sentinelassam.com/guwahati-city/marriage-between-sacred-fig-and-banyan-tree/, accessed 23/04/2021.

[23] Marriages between the *aśvattha* and the *nyagrodha* are also celebrated in Nepal, where the latter is referred to as *bar*. In this context too, the *aśvattha* assumes the female role in the couple (Goodall, 2014: 53-54). On marriages between trees and human beings in Nepal, see also Banks Findly, 2008: 316-317.

[24] Motivations change, however: the tree wedding was celebrated by the villagers in order to push for a new awareness about the danger of global warming and the importance of saving the forest that is in the vicinity of the village (see https://kalingatv.com/state/two-trees-marry-keonjhar/, accessed 24/04/2021; see also, on these aspects, Fowler-Smith, 2018: 261-284).

that the seven beautiful daughters of an evil spirit had taken on the appearance of an *aśvattha* tree to escape the god Kṛṣṇa (accepted in Hindu religious tradition as the *avatāra* in human form of the god Viṣṇu) who had fallen in love with them and wanted to marry them. The god did not give in and in turn transformed himself into a *nīm* tree: in this version the sexual roles of the two trees are reversed (Nayak, 1960: 121-122)[25]. Finally, it should be borne in mind that on the political and social symbolic level, the system of classification of the universe generated by Indian traditions establishes a relationship of 'subordination' of the *aśvattha* tree to the *nyagrodha* tree: the former, traditionally associated with fertility and prosperity, is symbolically linked in the texts to the *vaiśya* social group, while the latter to the *kṣatriya* (Smith, 1994: 221 ff.). These examples lead us, in the light of neo-animistic theories, to consider a real, sentient tree community (Kohn, 2013), distinct from, but also parallel to, the human community, whose relationships (between plants and between plants and humans) are established on multiple levels (Hall, 2014: 393-394), and primarily with respect to the sexual gender by which the tree identifies itself. Moreover, tree marriages also involve human beings (Gupta, 2001 [1975]: XXIII; Nair, 1960): in Bangladesh the bride celebrated, the day before her wedding with her husband, the *aśvatthavivāha*, 'marriage with *aśvattha*', a rite already described in a digest on *dharma*, the Mitramiśra's *Vīramitrodaya Dharmaśāstra* (ca. 17th century CE), to prevent her from suffering the infamous fate of widowhood if her husband had died (Kāṇe, 1941: 546; Wilson, 2010: 57-58 and 66 n. 1). Thus, today in many Indian regions the 'marriage rite with the banana tree' (*kadalīvivāha pūjā*) or with the *aśvattha* tree is celebrated. A belief in astrology (*jyotiṣa*) is very widespread, so that several temples and the websites of *paṇḍita*s sponsor this rite, which has ancient origins: a classic of astrological science, the *Phaladīpikā* of Mantreśvara (13th-16th century CE), states that if one is born under the negative influence of the planet Mars (Maṅgala), a *maṅgaladoṣa* ('lack or defect of Mars') will be determined in the horoscope, which could cause the death of the spouse who was not born with this *doṣa* or 'defect' (*adhyāya* VIII, *śloka* 9, cf. Sastri, 1937: 87). The presaged event can be circumvented and nullified by proceeding, prior to marriage to the beloved, with an arboreal marriage[26]. While the *aśvattha* is identified with the man, the *kadalī* is identified with the woman and in particular with the goddess Lakṣmī: she is symbolically married, surrounding the branch with the *maṅgalasūtra* and with the cloth joining the hands of the bride and groom. In this way a first marriage is consummated, which will guarantee the second with the beloved (Jayēntira Sarasvati, 1976: 120). In other contexts, however, the *kadalī* plays the male role: in Assam, the banana tree is the protagonist of a dendrogamy that takes on the contours of a rite of passage, but also of fertility promotion (Das, 2014: 47-63; Das, 2017: 245): during the *tuloni biyā*, in fact, young adolescents, a few days after having their menarche, symbolically marry the tree, leaving their childhood behind.

Finally, the *aśvattha* is the object of fertility-promoting rites, in which women are the protagonists, who perform the *pradakṣiṇā* (clockwise circumambulation) 108 times around the tree and then tie some white or coloured (red or yellow) cotton threads to the trunk and hang small pieces of cloth or oil lamps from the branches to propitiate the birth of a son (Crooke, 1926: 407; Nugteren, 1995: 150). Concerning this rite, let us recall that some *dharma* texts also prescribe for the *aśvattha* tree the performance of the rite for the perfection (*saṃskāra*) of the body, called *upanayana* (Gonda, 1965: 284 ff.). It marked for a young boy the beginning of the period of study of the *Veda*s, conducted in the house (*kula*) of a master (*guru*), and ended with the gift to the boy, by the chosen *guru*, of the *yajñopavīta*, the woven thread that he would wear for the rest of his life, marking his full entry into *dharma*-regulated society. The *yajñopavīta* symbolically expresses the attainment of adulthood and thus makes the young man ready to listen to and memorise the *Veda*s. The gestures and ritual elements prescribed for the execution of a young man's *upanayana* are also more or less repeated with regard to the tree. The *saṃskāra*s that precede the *upanayana* are first symbolically performed towards the tree, then the *aśvattha* is touched while the invocation: *vánaspate* ("O lord of the forest")[27], taken from *ṚV* III, 8, 11, is recited. Finally, the accessories and garments proper to the one undergoing the *upanayana* are given to the tree: a piece of cloth, the *yajñopavīta*, a girdle, a staff, and a deerskin (Kāṇe, 1941: 299-300; Zotter, 2010).

On other occasions the threads are the same as those used by girls to bind their brothers to themselves during the festival of Rakṣā Bandhan[28] and the *aśvattha* is identified with the god Viṣṇu (Haberman, 2013: 88-89).

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[25] The story reinterprets, in an arboreal key, one of the most famous images of the Kṛṣṇaite cult: the god, conceived as the shepherd, surrounded by shepherdesses (*gopī*s), with whom he engages in amorous games, in particular with his favourite Rādhā. The *gopī*s, in turn, in the kṛṣṇaite theologies, represent the faithful, who abandon themselves with devotion (*bhakti*) to the god. Thus, it is no coincidence that role reversal also touches men's cults: the devotees of the god Kṛṣṇa in Mathura and Vrindavan, the Sākhibhāva, disguise themselves and behave as women, even simulating menstruation, and identifying themselves with Rādhā (Dimock, 1991).

[26] Relationships with trees are therefore marked by ambiguous attitudes: they instil fear but are also perceived as symbols of fertility and prosperity. This duplicity of meanings emerges, for example, in the communities of southern India for whom trees are «both 'sacred' (*sudham*) and 'fearful' (*bhayam*). They also described their nature in terms of 'life force' (*shakti*) and 'fault' (*dosham*)» (Uchiyamada, 1998: 178). On the symbolic associations between trees and the world of the dead see also Banks Findly, 2008: 276-278.

[27] The hymn is dedicated to the sacrificial post (*yūpa*).

[28] The festival of Rakṣā Bandhan ('bond of protection') is celebrated in northern India on the last day of the full moon (*purṇīmā*) of the month of *śrāvaṇa* (July-August), in the wider context of the festival of Haratālikā Tīj, dedicated to Pārvatī and the union with her spouse Śiva (Bhatnagar, 1988). The rite requires the sisters to tie a bracelet (*rākhī*) around the wrists of their brothers: it is a symbol of the bond that unites brother and sister and of the brother's commitment to protect his sister, especially when she marries, thus leaving the family unit of origin, but it also represents a symbolic barrier against incest (Malamoud, 2002: 39-40).

As far as the *śamī* is concerned, the tree is the object of a special *pūjā* (offering), performed from mediaeval times «to bring an end (*śamanīṃ*) to inauspicious elements and evil deeds» (Sarkar, 2012: 336 n. 33) by an individual of the royal family or by the king, in order to achieve success in one's deeds during the Dussehra (or Vijayadaśamī) festival, the celebration of Rāma's victory at the end of the Navarātri festival[29]. However, the tree is also the protagonist of another arboreal marriage. As we have already seen in the celebration of other dendrogamies related to the dharmic norms dedicated to widowhood, among several indigenous communities in central India a widow can only remarry if the groom, who himself has never been married, first celebrates a marriage with a *śamī* tree, a symbolic substitute (Enthoven, 1987 [1922]: XIII-XIV) of the widow herself: the *śamī* tree, which is cut down and then destroyed immediately after the ceremony, will be the bride's substitute for her deceased first husband, who in turn will be appeased.

The fact that in various ceremonial contexts the *aśvattha* tree changes its sexual gender, most often presenting itself as a male tree, but sometimes as a female tree, is reflected in the Indian religious tradition itself: even taking into account the fact that marriages between trees and humans may have originated before the birth of the doctrine of *saṃsāra* (Parkin, 1997: 51-56), and that tree cults were influenced by the beliefs of indigenous communities, the gradual diffusion, over the centuries, of the doctrines of rebirth and remerit of actions (*karman*) among these communities probably influenced, in turn, the expression of ritual and celebratory forms, as well as the beliefs of these communities themselves. Moreover, arboreal cults could hardly be seen as alien to the same religious tradition since the Vedic texts. Indeed, the gender-shift that emerges in some of these arboreal marriages may perhaps find a parallel in the Vedic 'sexual' relationship between the two pieces of wood that were used during the performance of sacrificial rites for lighting the fire: the *araṇi*s.

The motif of the sexual union between these two trees belongs to the category of origin myths insofar as the fruit of this union, the male, is fire, Agni. For example, in a hymn of the *Atharvaveda*, an incantation to ensure the birth of a child, it is said that: *śamī́m aśvatthá ā́rūḍhas tátra puṃsúvanaṃ kṛtám* («The *aśvattha* has mounted the *śamī*, at that moment the generation of a male is accomplished», *AV* VI, 11, 1)[30].

The mythical theme of fire generation, to which the coupling of the two trees refers, has profound implications in the Vedic world. The motif is first reflected in the many references in ritualistic manuals to the performance of the fire-kindling ceremony (*agnimanthana*). In fact, the laborious operation of lighting the fire by rubbing (*manthana*)[31] precedes the very possibility of subsequently making offerings to the deities. The Vedic religion, which is aniconic and has no permanent place of worship, is based on the rite of offering (*yajña*)[32]. Indeed: 1) through the *yajña* men and gods come into contact and thus exchange and communication between the two planes can take place; 2) repeating the prescribed gestures during the performance of the *yajña* means guaranteeing and re-founding each time the cosmic/political-social/religious/moral/legal order that is expressed in the Vedic concept of *ṛta* and subsequently in that of *dharma*; 3) The *yajña* consists of an offering, which may be animal or vegetable, but in any case the means by which the offering reaches the gods is fire: the offering is cooked; 4) going along with a series of analogies made explicit in many religious texts, Vedic theologians have come to the conclusion that the foundation of *yajña* is fire, personified as Agni. Just as every time the *yajña* must be repeated in all its gestures from the beginning, as if it were the first time, so the fire must always be lit for the first time and then carried to the sacrificial area. Each time, the fire must be born, but for there to be birth there must be the sexual union (*mithuna*) of two entities: the parents of the fire are the trees of *aśvattha* and *śamī*.

Consequently, questioning the origin of fire becomes a central theme in Vedic religious texts. The centrality of these two trees for the performance of the sacrifice, reflecting its founding value but at the same time insisting on the sexual valences of the relationship between this couple (*mithuna*, 'sexual union'), is exalted by the author of the *ŚB* in a passage in which the identification between *aśvattha* and fire itself and between *śamī* and the sacrificial pot or cauldron (*sthālī*) where the fire cooks the offering (Malamoud, 1989: 35-70), that is, the elements without which there can be no sacrifice: *yò 'gníraśvatthaṃ taṃ yá́ sthālī́ śamīṃ tāṃ* («What is the fire is the *aśvattha*, what is the vessel for cooking is the *śamī*», *ŚB* XI, 5, 1, 13)[33].

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[29] Depending on the region, the festival of Navaratrī, celebrated in autumn – in the month of *āśvina* (between September and October) – coincides with the celebration of the victory of the goddess Durgā over the buffalo demon (Durgāpūjā) or of Rāma over Rāvaṇa (Rāmalīlā). The *śamīpūjā* recalls two moments contained in the two major Indian epics; in the *Rāmāyaṇa* the episode in which Rāma, before leaving for Laṅka to defeat Ravaṇa and regain his beloved Sītā, pays homage to the *śamī* tree; in the *MBh* the episode in which Arjuna hides his weapons in the trunk of a *śamī* tree. See Biardeau, 1984; more recently, Rodrigues, 2003: 291-292 and Simmons, 2018.

[30] For the text see Orlandi 1991. The hymn instructs on the rituals to be performed to ensure the birth of a male child; in the incipit it uses the image of the rubbing of the two *araṇi*s, which are named by metonymy, referring to the wood of the plants they are made of. The description of the ceremony of kindling the domestic fire is well detailed in the *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra*: *aśvatthaśamīgarbhāraṇī prayachati* («[the *adhvaryu*] gives [to the *yajamāna* and his wife] the two *araṇi*s, the *aśvattha* and the *śamī*'s womb», IV, 7, 22. The text followed is Weber, 1972, see also translations by Ranade, 1978 and Thite, 2006). The medieval *paddhati*s, as Oldenberg (1886: 267) explains, further specify: «the wife takes the *adharāraṇi* from the hands of the *adhvaryu* and places it in her lap; the *yajamāna* places the *uttarāraṇi* in his lap».

[31] In his description of the ceremony performed at the famous execution of the *agnicayana* in 1975, Staal (1983: 316-317) recalls how the *agnimanthana* lasted more than 8 hours, causing a delay in the performance of the subsequent rites.

[32] For a history of historiography and new interpretative perspectives on *yajña*, among recent studies, Ferrara, 2018.

[33] For the text see Weber, 1964 [1879], for the translation see also Eggeling, 1963 [1882-1900].

3. *The* araṇi*s: rotate beyond gender and roles*

According to the classical versions of the myth sedimented in the epic poems and in the *Purāṇa*s (*MBh* and *VP*), fire is produced by the rubbing of two pieces of wood, the *araṇi*s (the 'rotating' ones), taken from the trees of *aśvattha* and *śamī*, conceived as a couple; thus, fire is the fruit of a coupling (*mithuna*) between trees[34]. The chain of ritual gestures related to the *araṇi*s is intended to build a network of symbols that follows one of the main symbolic motifs of the Vedic world: the world, which the sacrifice reproduces, works through pairings, but where there is only sameness, there is no means of differentiating anything. By contrast, where there is dualism, a link, or a bond (*bandhu*)[35] can be created, which sets in motion the sacrificial process. This is nothing but a Babelic building of bridges that allow to correlate the human and the divine planes (Silburn, 1989: 62 ff.). However, the rubbing of these two pieces of wood takes on a specific sexual connotation linked to the terminology used. The noun *mithuna* ('sexual act, couple, sexual union') derives from *mith*/*meth* (Mayrhofer, 1986-1993, *s.v.*), but the latter form is in turn related to the verb *math*- ('to mix, stir, rotate, rub'). The verb, also in composition with preverbs, such as *abhimanth*–, assumes since the *ṚV* (III, 29, 1, 5, 6, 12; X, 184, 3) and then in the *AV* (X, 8, 20) the specific meaning of lighting the fire by rubbing the two *araṇi*s. In fact, the original meaning of the verb *manth*- refers to contention, controversy, dissension, but in the sense of reciprocal or mutual alternation, just as opposites alternate and unite to constitute harmony (Renou, 1958: 46-49)[36]. This complementarity, which escapes the binary distinction and opposition of genders, is reflected in a further meaning of *mithuna*, 'partner in a mating' («partenaire dans un accouplement»), as Malamoud (2005b: 45 n. 8) has noted. Indeed, in cosmogonic contexts, the verb takes on the meaning 'to create', whereby the sexual connotation of the act of rubbing makes the two notions identical: to rub is to create. Thus, Prajāpati, after producing from himself Agni, the first deity, through ascetic effort (*tapas*), begins to create the rest of the creatures, in order to prevent the ever-hungry Fire (Agni not by chance came out of Prajāpati's mouth) from devouring even its creator (this had already happened when Agni, spewing out of the two *araṇi*s, devoured his own parents, cf. *ṚV* X, 79, 4). The *tapas*, which would later be identified with the 'heat' generated through the effort of concentration or asceticism or poetic creation[37], it is originally to be understood as heat that is generated by sexual rubbing: *tapas* is from the very beginning sexually connoted as 'desire' or 'sexual arousal' (Kaelber, 1976: 349). It is no coincidence that, in order to create again, Prajāpati produces heat, and this time he produces it by rubbing: the process of anthropomorphising leads one to think that the Lord of Creatures rubbed his hands together in order to create, but the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* speaks only of the movement itself, of the original rubbing that set the creative process in motion: *sá ātmánnevā́hutimīṣe sa údamr̥ṣṭa tadyádudámr̥ṣṭa tásmādidáṃ cālómakamidáṃ ca* («He, indeed, desired an offering in his own self, he produced a rubbing [of the hands], for that reason this and this [the palms] are hairless», *ŚB* II, 2, 4). Moreover, the stirring or churning movement denoted by the verb *manth*- denotes the movement of churning for the production of butter: the churning of butter is conceived by the mythopoetic imagination as a sexual union (*mithuna*) that generates Āyu, the Butter, son of the nymph Urvaśī and the mythical prince Purūravas, with whom the two *araṇi*s are associated[38] (so that Agni is often symbolically referred to in the texts as the 'butter', cf. *ŚB* III, 4, 1, 22 and *KŚS* V, 1, 30-31).

However, the interweaving of mythical narratives and the various versions handed down in the Vedic texts highlight an apparent short-circuit between the need to frame the birth of fire within the framework of a fertile sexual act, which envisages the presence of two trees, one male and one female, and, on the other hand, the fact that fire is born from the rubbing of two pieces of wood that are both considered feminine and named with the feminine term of *araṇi*s. This apparent short-circuit, however, is resolved in the speculations of Vedic ritualists through the idea that

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[34] In mythical language vegetation is often traced back to water and sexually characterised imagery, as a sexual union or *mithuna* (cf. *AĀ* V, 1, 1). Waters and vegetation are symbols of renewal and fertility (Lanternari, 1959: 411 ff.; Gonda, 1985; Rudhardt, 2005 [1987]: 9697-9704, *s.v.* Water; Chemery, 2005 [1987]: 9574-9580, *s.v.* Vegetation; for the ancient Indian world see Baartmans, 1990 and Piano, 2006). For example, the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* states that: *yóṣā vā ā́paḥ | vr̥ṣāgnírmithunénaivaìnametátprajánanena sámardhayati* («The waters indeed are the mare, the fire is the bull, so with these he realizes for fruitful mating», *ŚB* II, 1, 1, 4) or *apsvántáram̥r̥tamapsú bheṣajámapā́muta* («In the waters, there is the *am̥r̥ta* [ambrosia], in the waters healing», *ŚB* V, 1, 4, 6). Moreover, the mythical motif of fire born of waters (*agni apāṃ napāt*) or of fire residing in waters and plants is one of the oldest at the Indo-European level (West, 2007: 270-272; Puhvel, 1987: 277-283 and especially Banks Findly, 1979). Thus, in a ṛgvedic hymn (a dialogue between Agni and Varuṇa), Agni has abandoned the other gods because he refuses to assume his role as *hotr̥*, i.e., as the invoking priest who calls the deities to make themselves present and to sit among men during the sacrifice. Agni is thus the mediator between men and the gods, but he has run away and hidden himself so as not to be discovered by the gods who are looking for him: *aíchāma tvā bahudhā́ jātavedaḥ právis̱ṭam agne apsv óṣadhīṣu* («O Agni Jātavedas ['Who possesses or knows all creatures'], we have sought you in many places, you who have entered the waters and the plants», *ṚV* X, 51, 3a). Earlier, Agni had already been referred to as the «son of trees» (*sūnúṃ vánaspátīnām*, *ṚV* VIII, 23, 25a). On Agni Jātavedas see Banks Findly, 1981.

[35] On the term and its meaning in the *Saṃhitā*s see Renou, 1953, and in the *Brāhmaṇa*s see Gonda, 1975.

[36] On the sexual meanings of fire lighting see Buttitta, 2002: 68 ff. On the significance of the *mithuna* in the general context of the development of Indian religiosity, see Eliade, 2001 [1956].

[37] The effort made during the composing of the religious hymns of the *Veda* by the *ṛṣi*s is a process that generates *tapas*. See Renou, 1958: 55-56; Pellegrini, 1986: 81-88

[38] In *ŚB* XI, 5, 1, 13-17 the complex symbolic references of this pair of trees fit into the mythological pattern concerning the myth of the nymph Urvaśī and Purūravas, the first ruler of the lunar dynasty. On the connections with the *araṇi*s, see Orecilla, 2006: 112 ff.

two elements form a fertile pair because there is an opposition between them that makes them complementary, not because each of them carries within itself an organ or substance that makes it capable of reproducing itself or contributing to its own reproduction (Malamoud, 2005a: 65)[39].

For this reason, in the most archaic stratum of Vedic poetry, the birth of fire is attributed to two mothers who became pregnant with each other, and one of Agni's epithets is *dvimātā́* («with two mothers», *ṚV* I, 31, 2; III, 55, 6-7). In stanza 2 of *ṚV* I, 31 the *araṇi*s are not explicitly named, but the reference in the same verse to Āyu allows us to reconstruct the web of connections alluded to above. The *ṛ̊ṣi* or poet Hiraṇyastūpa Āṅgirasa, author of the hymn, who in verse 2 identified two mothers as the parents of Agni, alludes again to the two *araṇi*s with another expression: in verse 9 he states that the god resides *pitrór upásthe* («in the womb of the parents»). Note that the dual of the masculine noun *pitṛ̊* normally indicates 'parents' understood as 'father and mother', but here what is striking is the use of the locative *upásthe*. The term *upástha*, in fact, generically denotes 'the lower part, the part that is underneath', but already in the *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* and in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* it indicates the sexual organ and in a more specific sense the 'female womb', the 'vulva'. Thus, it occurs in the passages that the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* devotes to the sexual union of the *mahiṣī* ('female buffalo', 'first wife of the king') with the horse at the climax of the *aśvamedha* rite (cf. *ŚB* XIII, 5, 2, 2), but also in upaniṣadic passages devoted to the instructions to be followed during mating and the equating of sacrifice with sexual intercourse, (cf. *BĀU* VI, 2, 13; VI, 4, 3). Thus, it seems that this couple is a female couple and that their union is fertile to the extent that it mythically produces fire: behind these two enigmatic mothers are hidden, then, the two *araṇi*s (Jamison and Brereton, 2014: 131) and this identification is made even more explicit in *ṚV* III, 55, where the adjective *dvimātā́* is used twice (stanzas 6 and 7) in a context where the lighting of fire is mentioned several times (cf. stanzas 3-7).

Subsequently, the idea arose that the two *araṇi*s, the 'rotating' ones, though both named with a feminine term, possess the one masculine character, the other feminine, as they were made from the wood of *aśvattha* and *śamī*. For the upper *araṇi* (*uttarāraṇi*), made from the soft wood of *aśvattha*, is in the form of a stake or drill, while the lower *araṇi* (*adharāraṇi*), made from the hard wood of *śamī*, is a flat piece of wood. The author of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* states:

té hocuḥ | paró 'kṣamiva vā́ etadā́śvatthīmevòttarāraṇíṃ kuruṣva śamīmáyīmadharāraṇiṃ sa yastáto 'gnírjanitā sá eva sá bhavitéti

They said: 'Verily it is as [if it were] invisible to the eyes. Prepare then the upper *araṇi* of *aśvattha*, the lower *araṇi* of *śamī*. The fire that has been generated from here will indeed be this [fire]' (*ŚB* XI, 5, 1, 15).

The *adharāraṇi* has some holes in the centre, one of which is called *devayoni* ('vagina', i.e., 'birthplace of the god') or *prajanana*, 'generative energy'[40]. From the upper *araṇi* (*uttarāraṇi* or *abhimanthana*) one obtains, in turn, the *pramantha*s ('violently shaking'), small pieces of worked wood that will be used as the ends of the *upamantha*, i.e. the stick held in a horizontal position, with three holes in the lower part, in one of which is inserted the upper end of the *mantha* (lit. 'whipping, stirring') or *cāttra* ('spindle'), the peg that, held in a vertical position, is rotated. Finally, the third *pramantha* (also derived from the *uttarāraṇi* of *aśvattha*) is inserted as the lower end of the *mantha* or *cāttra* and is fixed in the *devayoni*. At the point of contact between the recess called the *devayoni* of the *adharāraṇi* and the *pramantha* of the *mantha*, fire springs forth (Vīra, 1934: 290-291).

On the symbolism related to this gesture insists in many passages the *ŚB*, e.g., III, 4, 1, 19 ff., where detailed instructions are given about the gestures to be performed for the lighting of the sacrificial fire. The priest, having taken the lower piece of wood (*so 'dhimánthanaṃ śákalamā́datte*, 20), in which the god Agni resides, arranges two tufts of *kuśa* grass, likened to two sons, then takes the upper piece of wood and begins to rub the two sticks, until the fire sparks: *āsā́dya havírdhṛ̥ṣyagním manthati* («Having arranged the offerings, he rubs the fire», *ŚB* III, 4, 1, 19).

Without this initial gesture, there can be no sacrifice, indeed it is precisely the production of fire through rubbing that initiates the sacrifice, for this is the gesture that represents the head (*śiras*) of the sacrifice:

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[39] «Deux éléments forment un couple fécond parce qu'il y a entre eux une opposition qui les rend complémentaires, non parce que chacun d'eux porté en soi un organe ou une substance qui le rend capable de se reproduire ou de contribuer à sa reproduction». Regarding the grammatical gender and its implications in relation to the *mithuna*s that take place in ritual contexts, Malamoud (2005b: 24) notes how the neuter gender is often perceived and considered as actually masculine and quotes a verse by Patañjali (*Mahābhāṣya* IV, 1, 3 *ad* Pāṇini II, 1, 36): «Gender is not an object of teaching, because it is based on worldly use» [«Le genre n'est pas objet d'enseignement car le genre repose sur l'usage mondain»]. The French scholar goes on to comment: «It is by no means true that all objects considered inanimate by the speaker by virtue of his experience of the world are designated by names of neutral gender. And as for animate, and possibly sexual, beings, the gender of the names designating them is not a sure indication of their sex. [...] The relation between gender and sex thus depends on use» [«Il s'en faut de beaucoup que tous les objets dont le locuteur considère, en vertu de son expérience du monde, qu'ils sont inanimés soient désignés par des noms de genre neutre. Et pour ce qui est des êtres animés, et, possiblement, sexués, le genre des noms qui les désignent n'est pas un indice certain de leur sexe. (…) Le rapport entre genre et sexe relève donc de l'usage»]. It seems to us that these observations, referring to Vedic ritual contexts, are also well suited to contemporary dendrogamies.

[40] Cf. *ṚV* III, 29, 1-3, where the *ṛ̊ṣi*, in the narration of the birth from the *araṇi*s, divests himself of the language of myth and assumes that of the description, albeit poetic, of the instruments with which to kindle Agni.

so 'dhimánthanaṃ śákalamā́datte | agnérjanítramasītyátra hyágnirjā́yate tásmādāhāgnérjanítramasī́ti

He takes the lower piece of wood suitable for rubbing, saying, 'You are the place from which fire is generated'. Since Agni is generated here, for this reason he says, 'You are indeed the place from which fire is generated' (*ŚB* III, 4, 1, 20).

However, the author of the *ŚB* proposes another manner of execution of the rite:

té hocuḥ | paró 'kṣamiva vā́ etadā́śvatthīmévottarāraṇíṃ kuruṣvā́śvatthīmadharāraṇiṃ sa yastáto 'gnírjanitā́ sá eva sá bhavitéti

They said: 'Verily it is as [if it were] invisible to the eye. Then, make the upper *araṇi* of *aśvattha*, the lower *araṇi* of *aśvattha*. The fire that was generated from here will indeed be this [fire]' (*ŚB* XI, 5, 1, 16).

Having presented both possibilities, the *brāhmaṇakāra* excludes the first and, as it makes clear immediately afterwards, the second must be followed:

sa ā́śvatthīmevòttarāraṇíṃ cakré | ā́śvatthīmadharāraṇiṃ sa yastáto 'gnírjajñe sá eva sá āsa téneṣṭvā́ gandharvā́ṇāméka āsa

He made the upper *araṇi* of *aśvattha*, the lower *araṇi* of *aśvattha*. The fire that is generated from here has indeed become this [fire]. Having poured out in this way, he became one of the Gandharvas» (*ŚB* XI, 5, 1, 17).

The definition of a ritual rule, which implies the abandonment of different possibilities of execution, is rendered using verbal tenses: the future tense (*bhavitā*) when the two modalities are presented, the perfect tense (*āsa*) when the action does not admit of other modalities of execution. The version established and accepted within the branch of the Śukla Yajurveda school, to which *ŚB* belongs, differs from that advocated in the texts of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda, which allow for further developments in the mythology of the two *araṇī*s. In fact, one must indeed derive both *araṇi*s from *aśvattha* wood, whether or not it in turn was derived from a tree grown[41] on the trunk of a *śamī*. Let us take as an example the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra*[42] (cf. also *TB* I, 2, 1, 8):

athāsmā araṇī āharaty āśvatthīmꣳ śamīgarbhīm apy aśamīgarbhīṃ vā [...] *tāvatīm evottarāraṇim*

Therefore, he procures for him [the *yajamāna*] the two *araṇi*s, one [the lower one] made of the wood of *aśvattha* born or unborn on a *śamī* tree. [He gives the measurements, then states] The upper *araṇi* great just the same (*BŚS* II, 6, 42, 16).

Then, the passage continues with the words that the officiant must pronounce in composing the sacrificial body of Agni (*agnes tanūṃ yajñiyāmꣳ saṃbharāmi*), saying: *yo aśvatthaḥ śamīgarbha āruroha tve sacā* («That *aśvattha* grown on a *śamī* tree, it is mounted on you», *ibid.*). In the quoted passages, the erotic link between the two trees lies not only in the final verb (*āruh–*, 'to mount, to climb'), but also in the repetition of the compound *śamīgarbha*, 'grown or born on a *śamī* tree'. Since the term *garbha* denotes the womb, the relationship is generative in the sense of the birth of the son *aśvattha* from the womb of the mother *śamī*. Although, due to the relationship traditionally attributed to the two, it seems possible to see in this version the transformation of the relationship into a sexual relationship of an incestuous nature: the soft wood of the *aśvattha* is tempered by symbiosis with the trunk of the very hard-wooded *śamī*, and the resulting *araṇi*s would both contain the characters of both parents/mother-son: softness and hardness, masculinity and femininity. Fire would then be born from a feminine couple (the *araṇi*s), but at the same time would also be a couple in which both elements possess androgynous characteristics.

4. Conclusions

The network of elements and ritual gestures analysed is reflected in one of the main symbolic motifs of Vedic culture: the world and sacrifice proceed in pairs. Indeed, where there is only sameness, there is no means of differentiating anything. By contrast, where there is dualism, a *bandhu* (a bond, a bridge) can be created, which sets the sacrificial and therefore creative process in motion. We have explored a few different versions of arboreal couplings, deployed across ancient religious traditions and contemporary devotional practices: the confusion and subversion of roles, the gender inversions, the overlaps between legitimate and incestuous couples, between heterosexual and homosexual couples all allude to the difficulty of saying how things really happened, but they all contribute to legitimising union and fecundity. The heterosexual model remains dominant, but the gender changes highlighted (in contemporary dendrogamies and in the *mithuna* between the two *araṇi*s) allow us to glimpse, in some cases, a fluid conception of gender belonging, so that what the Vedic ritualists elaborat-

41 The *aśvattha* tree has the particularity of not only developing aerial roots but also of being able to develop as an epiphytic plant, using the trunk of other trees as support for its roots.

42 For the text see Caland, 1904-1913, see also Kashikar, 2003.

ed seems to be able to provide a partial basis for understanding and explaining, while considering distinct uses and meanings, as well as temporal distance and different contexts, some contemporary cultic forms.

5. Abbreviations

ĀpŚS Āpastamba Śrautasūtra
AV Atharvaveda
BĀU Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BhG Bhagavadgītā
BŚS Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra
KŚS Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra
KU Kaṭha Upaniṣad
MBh Mahābhārata
ṚV Ṛgveda
ŠB Šatapathabrāhmana
TB Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa

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