



This Whole World Is OM: Song, Soteriology, and the Emergence of the Sacred Syllable

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This Whole World is OM:
Song, Soteriology, and the Emergence of the Sacred Syllable

A dissertation presented
by
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to
The Department of South Asian Studies

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Abstract

This study explores the emergence of OM, the Sanskrit mantra and critically ubiquitous "sacred syllable" of South Asian religions. Although OM has remained in active practice in recitation, ritual, and meditation for the last three thousand years, and its importance in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions is widely acknowledged, the syllable's early development has received little attention from scholars. Drawing on the oldest textual corpus in South Asia, the Vedas, I survey one thousand years of OM's history, from 1000 BCE up through the start of the Common Era. By reconstructing ancient models of recitation and performance, I show that the signal characteristic of OM in the Vedas is its multiformity: with more than twenty archetypal uses in different liturgical contexts and a range of forms (*om̐*, *om̐̃*, *om*, *o*), the syllable pervades the soundscape of sacrifice. I argue that music is integral to this history: more than any other group of specialists, Brahmin singers of liturgical song (*sāmvēda*) fostered OM's emergence by reflecting on the syllable's many and varied uses in Vedic ritual. Incorporating the syllable as the central feature of an innovative soteriology of song, these singer-theologians constructed OM as the apotheosis of sound and salvation. My study concludes that OM plays a crucial role in the development of South Asian religions during this period. As the foundations of South Asian religiosity shift, from the ritually oriented traditions of Vedism to the contemplative and renunciatory traditions of Classical Hinduism, OM serves as a sonic realization of the divine, a touchstone of Vedic authority, and a central feature of soteriological doctrines and practices.

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*for
Amy, Addie, Cosmo, and Kitty*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED SYLLABLE

§1 *Interrogating OM*

Perhaps no single sound evokes South Asian religions as succinctly as the Sanskrit mantra "OM" (ॐ, *om̐*, *om̄*, *om*). OM is a critically ubiquitous "sacred syllable" in these traditions: as a sound in recitation, ritual, and meditation, it has remained in active practice across faiths for almost three thousand years. Hindus in particular have long venerated OM as the essence of their ancient scriptures, the Vedas, compressed into a single utterance. In Hinduism—a religious tradition that holds auditory culture in the highest esteem and boasts hundreds of thousands of mantras—OM is the preeminent revelation. It is the sound of the universe, the audible embodiment of ultimate reality, and the reverberation that sets worlds in motion. In the words of the ancient aphorism from which my study takes its title: "this whole world is OM" (*om itīdam sarvam; Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1.8). This is truer than ever today, with the soaring popularity of yoga, meditation, and Indian spirituality around the globe. Surprisingly, however, OM's early development has received little attention from scholars. The question of how OM emerged from rituals with roots in the late-Bronze Age to become the apotheosis of Hindu sacred sound remains an open one. How did this syllable, which first enters the textual record without fanfare as one liturgical utterance among thousands, become individuated and important? What does it mean? Who promoted OM's ascendance? What does the history of the syllable tell us about the religions of ancient South Asia? What explains its enduring appeal? And what does it mean to be a "sacred syllable," anyway? These are the questions the present study aims to answer.

§1.1 *A veil over OM's history*

Such questions have gone unanswered in the study of South Asian religions because they have gone largely unasked. Within Hindu traditions, OM stands outside of history: as the distillation of the wisdom of the Vedas, the syllable remains "beyond human origin" (*apauruṣeya*), eternal, prior to everything.¹ Accordingly, the medieval theologian Śaṅkara makes a place for OM in his inquiry into the metaphysical relations between humanity and ultimate reality (*brahman*). For Śaṅkara, OM is the audible realization of the absolute—its utterance embodies a transcendent holism that is beyond words.² In modern academe, introductions to Hinduism and encyclopedias are content to explain OM with the well-worn formulation "sacred syllable," relying on a few choice citations from premodern texts and brief surveys of specialized literature.³ Indologists and other specialists, for their part, frame the syllable's history in terms of origins and etymology, sifting its myriad uses in ritual to find a single key, hidden deep in the past, that will unlock the puzzle of OM's success. Such scholars have explained OM in multifarious ways, arguing that it was originally a particle of assent, a rhetorical cue word, an exclamation, an onomatopoeic evocation of breath, an elemental relic of human evolution before language. None of these studies has achieved consensus.

All of these factors—its evocation of otherworldly transcendence, its centrality in metaphysical discourses, its manifold uses in complex liturgies, its uncertain etymology and origins—coalesce in a veil over the syllable's history. And this sense of abiding mystery plays into the master narrative of OM as a "sacred syllable." (While I believe that the phrase "sacred syllable" is imperfect—hackneyed, vague, and tending to obscure the complexities of OM's history—I shall use it throughout this study as a

¹ See *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.27-32 and further discussion in Smith 1989, 19.

² E.g., *Śaṅkarabhāṣya* on *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.23.3; see Jha 1942, 116.

³ Esnoul [1987] 2005 and Narayanan 2009 exemplify the merits and shortcomings of recent encyclopedia entries on OM.

convenient shorthand for OM's sacralization and apotheosis. For smoother reading, I will drop the scare quotes from here on out.) The fact that we remain unable to explain the syllable in linguistic, historical, and cultural terms only heightens its power and importance. OM stands aloof, elemental, impervious to deconstruction of any sort—a known unknown.

§1.2 *Constructing OM through ritual and reflection*

The sense of this study, however, is that OM is *not* beyond critical inquiry. I will show that OM emerges through the constant interplay of ritual performance and reflections about ritual during the first millennium BCE. Reflecting on the syllable's place in the elaborate sacrificial rites they knew so well, ritual experts constructed OM as a sacred syllable through processes of speculation. By exploring OM's myriad liturgical uses and the record of its discursive construction on the basis of Vedic texts, we come to learn about the interactions of sound, ritual, and soteriology in ancient India. This study argues that music has been overlooked as the decisive factor in OM's development; and that Brahmin singers of liturgical song (*sāmaveda*) were largely responsible for transforming the syllable into a locus for hermeneutic reflection. At the center of these reflections they fashioned an innovative soteriology of song, teaching that OM leads to immortality: sung to melody, the syllable propels the patron of the sacrifice beyond the sun and liberates him from earthly existence. The singer-theologians who formulated this doctrine were all specialists in liturgical song; they collected their insights in a repertoire of neglected but seminal oral texts. Marketed as the centerpiece of a soteriology of song, OM became wildly popular in the broader milieu of Brahmanical speculation: ritual experts of all stripes hailed it as the sound of the sun; the *only* syllable; the essence of the Vedas; the foundation on which the cosmos rests; and *brahman*. Even as sacrificial modes of religiosity gave way to more inward-looking, contemplative doctrines and practices, OM retained its preeminence as a touchstone of Vedic

authority and transcendence. In this way the sacred syllable—crystallized in the Vedas and channeled as divine revelation into the formative currents of Hinduism—was born from the minds of singers as they reflected on their songs.

§1.3 *OM, song, and soteriology*

My argument that music inspired OM's emergence has significant implications for our understanding of religion in early South Asia. First, identifying the singers' specific contributions to OM's history reveals distinct patterns of influence and intertextuality; in this way, we garner new insights into well-known texts such as the Upaniṣads, whose famous discussions of OM turn out to have been inspired by the lesser-known sources at the heart of my study. Next, in that the development of OM depends on the formulation of salvific knowledge about an element of Vedic ritual, the syllable provides a crucial case study in the broad-based transition from ritual (*karma*) to gnosis (*jñāna*) in the late Vedic period. The case of OM suggests that this transition was not, as conventional wisdom would have it, marked by discontinuities and an outright rejection of ritual, but was rather the culmination of several centuries of fruitful cross-pollination between ritual and hermeneutics. Third, OM's history sheds light on the syllable's reception in subsequent traditions of yoga and contemplation: early on, the musical sources attest to using OM in visualization, mentalization, and breathing. Fourth, the story of OM sheds light on a little known subculture of the Vedic period, the lineage of singers now known to us as the Jaiminīyas. Living and working on the southern and western fringes of the Vedic heartland during the middle of the first millennium BCE, these singers staked their livelihoods and identities on constructing the significance of a single syllable. Finally, we gain a new perspective on sonality, authority, and soteriology in these ancient religious cultures. Discourses on sacred sound, with OM as

the central feature, proved integral to the transformation from Vedic religion to Brahmanism and Classical Hinduism.

§1.4 *The parameters of OM's history*

In this introductory chapter, I give a broad sketch of Vedic religion, ritual, and hermeneutics in order to establish the basic parameters for my history of OM: scope, sources, approach, and contributions. Here and throughout this study, I shall devote a lot of space to explaining the intricacies of texts, including the formation, organization, transmission, and contents of a corpus that comes to be regarded as the "Vedic canon" (Witzel 1997a).⁴ The Vedic canon is its own world, an oral archive of an elaborate and remarkably resilient ritual tradition, filtered through the ideals and obsessions of the specialists who created it. The history of OM is completely intertwined with these textual and ritual intricacies. It is remarkable to ponder how such specialized reflections on ritual—often concerning liturgical minutiae so dense and detailed as to tax any outsider's comprehension—coalesced over time into a theology of sacred sound with a vast regional, and ultimately global, appeal.

§2 *The Vedas and religion in ancient South Asia*

While the primary focus of this study is the history of OM in Vedic texts and rituals, the emergence of the sacred syllable has effects that echo across the broader arc of South Asian religious history in the ancient period. I now touch on three religious traditions that are relevant to placing OM in context: Vedism, Brahmanism, and Classical Hinduism. As labels for complex and multifaceted religious traditions, such terms are admittedly, in Jan Heesterman's understated turn of phrase,

⁴ Witzel gives a "working definition" of the concept (1997a, 260): "the Vedic canon consists of all those texts in Vedic Sanskrit that originated in and were used by the various Vedic schools (*śākhās*)." On the *śākhās*, see §4.3 below.

"somewhat imprecise" (Heesterman 1987, 217). Still, when speaking of religious, linguistic, textual, cultural, political, and social developments that transpire over many centuries—not to say millennia—we must accept some degree of imprecision. Recognizing the problems inherent in such constructed categories,⁵ I nevertheless make use of the three "-isms" in an effort to speak broadly about the antecedents, circumstances, and legacies of OM's emergence in the history of South Asian religions. In this study, I take Vedism, Brahmanism, and Classical Hinduism as religious cultures that develop in rough but overlapping sequence in the centuries before, during, and after the first millennium BCE.

§2.1 *Vedism: religion of the Vedas*

Vedism refers to the religion of the Vedas, the totality of "knowledge" (*veda*) collected by Indo-Aryan-speaking populations as they settled in what is now northwestern India near the end of the second millennium BCE (Oldenberg 1894; Renou & Filliozat 1947, 270-380; Heesterman 1987; Jamison & Witzel 1992). Vedic texts were orally composed and transmitted by the Brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*), members of a priestly caste whose vocation was the performance of rituals on which the order and harmony of the cosmos was believed to depend. As such, the social contract at the heart of the Vedas is the alliance between the sacred and temporal powers of the Brahmins and their warrior counterparts, the ruling *kṣatriyas*. As represented in the texts, ritual is the primary venue for mediating this longstanding power dynamic between priests and their powerful patrons (Witzel 1997a, 267). According to recent consensus, the Vedic period in South Asia spans the better part of a thousand years, from ca. 1500 to 500 BCE (Jamison & Witzel 1992, 2).

⁵ By way of orientation, three recent critical inquiries into the construction and history of "Hinduism" are helpful: Lipner 2004, 9-34; Michaels 2004, 3-30; and Pennington 2005, 167-183. In spite of their diverse approaches, all three scholars defend the "responsible" (Lipner 2004, 13) use of Hinduism as a constructed category.

Making praise and offerings for a pantheon of gods was central to Vedic ritual (*yajña*), a sacrifice involving the immolation of animal victims to be offered at fire-altars. However, alongside the animals, one of the principal "victims" was a psychoactive plant, *soma*, whose stems were pressed and filtered into a juice drunk by the priests and shared with the gods. The aims of sacrifice were material as well as soteriological: wealth, fertility, and a place in heaven. In its earliest iterations, the verbal art of inspired poets was central to Vedic religiosity, and a grand compilation of their compositions-in-performance represents the earliest stratum of Vedic texts. Gradually, however, as the corpus of oral texts took shape and the institution of sacrifice became more elaborate, emphasis shifted away from verbal art towards ritual expertise. By the middle of the Vedic period, what mattered most was the meticulous performance of sacrifice according to increasingly rigid paradigms, including fixed texts and liturgies. The locus of power within Brahmanical culture also shifted from the inspired sages of bygone days to the erudite officiants of sacrifice. Texts of this period present what Sylvain Lévi (1898) has called a doctrine of sacrifice, whereby the performance of ritual *in itself* compels the gods and controls the cosmos. No longer dependent on the beneficence of the deities to whom earlier praises were addressed, sacrifice becomes a veritable "mechanism" (Lévi 1898) through which priestly officiants exercise their powers like "human gods" (*manuṣyadevāḥ*; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.2.2.6). The officiants gain power by formulating and mastering insights about the esoteric meanings of sacrifice. In time, insights about sacrifice lead to insights about salvific knowledge and personal soteriology. As the centrality of the external rituals (*karma*) declines in the late Vedic period, a further shift becomes evident, towards internal modes of religiosity, especially knowledge (*jñāna*) of absolute reality and ascetic practices. Notwithstanding such transformations in doctrines and practices, there are great continuities across the thousand years of Vedism, notably the tradition's veneration of knowledge in various forms. I will show that OM is central to fostering these continuities: the sacred syllable becomes

a central feature of pan-Vedic discourse, a way to synthesize knowledge from a range of sources and times.

§2.2 *Brahmanism: the expansion of Vedic authority*

With the formation of a Vedic canon by the mid-first millennium BCE and the concomitant spread of Brahmanical influence across the Gangetic plain, the Vedic corpus as a totality becomes increasingly influential as a source of authority. And the Brahmins, as custodians of the Veda, likewise increase their influence and authority. In these last centuries before the Common Era, Vedism—in the narrow sense of the ritual and theology contained in the Vedic corpus—gives way to a broader religious movement that acknowledges Vedic and Brahmanical sources authority: this is *Brahmanism* (Renou & Filliozat 1947-53, I, 480-620; Heesterman 1987, 217). Whereas Vedism is circumscribed by the Vedic canon, Brahmanism encompasses a much broader range of texts: grammatical, legal, and technical treatises (*śāstras*); compositions in derivative "Vedic" genres (especially *upaniṣads*); epics (*Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*); and stories of primeval times (*purāṇas*). In this era of consolidation of older forms of knowledge and expansion into new forms, OM's prominence continues to grow: even as the religious terrain shifts around it, the syllable remains an emblem of Vedic authority and transcendence.

§2.3 *Classical Hinduism: looking beyond Vedism and Brahmanism*

The preeminence of OM continues in its reception in *Classical Hinduism*. By this term, I refer to the formative currents of Hinduism discernible in post-Vedic Brahmanical texts such as the younger Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Conceived in this way, there is no hard and fast line between Brahmanism and Classical Hinduism. Rather, we find in the latter the ever more explicit integration

into Brahmanical discourse of previously unattested modes of religiosity, notably asceticism, renunciation, mendicancy, meditation, and theistic devotion. We also find increasing mention of concepts (*yoga*, *dharma*) and deities (Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu, Śiva) that many would style "Hindu." Even as so-called "lower knowledge" (Vedic texts and external practices) is superseded by "higher knowledge" (new texts and internal practices; see *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*), OM retains its pride of place as a touchstone of Vedic authority. In spite of ongoing changes, the currents of Classical Hinduism discussed in this study show great continuities with Vedism and Brahmanism. Indeed, all three together are well suited to Brian K. Smith's definition of Hinduism as "the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate, and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda" (1989, 13-14). While Smith's definition may not work for Hinduism more broadly—including the astonishing diversity of its historical and modern iterations, for which Vedic authority is sometimes irrelevant—it suits the scope of this study. Because my aim is to trace OM's history on the basis of the Vedas and closely associated texts, my argument will rarely stray from the Brahmanical milieu, where Vedic authority, in one form or another, is paramount.

§2.4 *Summing up: Vedism, Brahmanism, and Classical Hinduism*

To sum up, in this study I shall rely on Vedism, Brahmanism, and Classical Hinduism as labels to periodize South Asian religious history and broadly characterize the religious background against which OM emerges. Vedism refers to the religious culture textualized in Vedas, spanning ca. 1500 to 500 BCE. Sacrifice, interpretations of sacrifice, and ritual-based soteriologies are its central concerns. Brahmanism refers to the expansion of Vedic authority as textualized in works from ca. 600 BCE up through the first few centuries of the Common Era. In this period, while external practices like sacrifice remain important, internal practices begin to assert themselves more strongly, notably in the realm of

metaphysical speculation and soteriology. Classical Hinduism refers to the roots of later Hindu traditions which become manifest in the early centuries of the Common Era. In this period, while Vedic and Brahmanical authority continue to be invoked, they are increasingly at the service of religiosities previously unattested in a Brahmanical context: contemplation, renunciation, asceticism, and devotion.

§2.5 *By Brahmins, for Brahmins*

As my discussion so far suggests, the challenges of talking about Vedism, Brahmanism, and Classical Hinduism are simplified to some extent by the scope of this study, which is restricted to Vedic and Brahmanical texts. Much like the *soma* plant that is pressed and strained in sacrifice to yield its juice, my arguments about OM are also pressed through filters. The first filter is *text*: my aim is to trace OM's emergence on the basis of texts, along with the ritual and theological evidence contained therein. Although non-textual categories—sound, recitation, and performance—are integral to this study, the arguments I make about them depend on reconstructions from textual evidence. (I will have more to say about the orality and sonality of these texts in §5.4 below.) The second filter is *Brahmin*, the name for the ritual experts, officiants, theologians, and members of the hieratic class who composed the texts we are considering. As Witzel has observed, the Vedas are "by Brahmins for Brahmins" (1997a, 260). While they give us a remarkably clear perspective on the ritual and religious activities of a select few in ancient South Asia—a comprehensive vision of language, praxis, hermeneutics, theology, cosmology, soteriology, and so on—it is nevertheless a narrow and idealized perspective. By and large, the Vedas only tell us what mattered to Brahmins for the pursuit of their priestly vocation. As it turns out, OM came to matter very much.

I shall argue that OM is at the center of Brahmanical culture, and I shall try to show that a coherent account of the syllable's history can be fashioned from Vedic testimony alone. Nevertheless,

the possibility exists that in their construction of OM as a sacred syllable, Brahmins may have drawn on non-Brahmanical sources without acknowledgement, perhaps integrating aspects of religious and ritual cultures foreign to their own. Indeed, Asko Parpola has proposed a Dravidian etymology for OM, arguing that Brahmins adopted the syllable along with other elements of non-Indo-Aryan culture as part of a much wider process of assimilation and cultural exchange (Parpola 1981a; for further discussion see ch. 4, §2). These are important avenues of inquiry, but they lie beyond the scope of this study. The fact remains that the Vedas are the earliest South Asian texts we have, and they are the *only* texts we have up through the middle of the South Asian Iron Age (ca. 500 BCE).⁶ By the time texts from non-Brahmanical traditions begin to appear (royal inscriptions, Buddhist and Jain texts), OM has already been established in the Upaniṣads as a sacred syllable. Thus, to the extent that OM's development has been documented in the textual record known to us, it can be located squarely in a Brahmanical milieu. While acknowledging the possibility of non-Brahmanical influence, for the purposes of this study I regard the history of OM's emergence as the history of its trajectory in the Vedas.

§3 *Vedic ritual*

The central institution of Vedism, and the one most relevant to OM's emergence, is the Soma sacrifice, especially in its paradigmatic form, the *agniṣṭoma* ("praise of Agni"). (For a concise summary of Vedic ritualism, see Jamison & Witzel 1992, 33-36.) The "sacrificer" (*yajamāna*) is the patron who pays for the proceedings and to whom the material and spiritual benefits of the sacrificial worship accrue. To successfully carry out the elaborate liturgies, he is assisted by a cadre of sixteen Brahmin officiants divided into several groups. Each group is led by a specialist in one of the three main Vedic

⁶ Leaving aside the much-contested Indus Valley "script," on which see Farmer, Sproat, & Witzel 2004.

liturgies: the *adhvaryu* recites formulas (*yajus*) from the *Yajurveda*; the *hotṛ* recites verses (*rc*) from the *Ṛgveda*; and the *udgātṛ* sings melodies (*sāman*) from the *Sāmaveda*. (The "fourth" Veda, the *Atharvaveda*, was historically excluded from sacrifice, only becoming associated with the Soma liturgies after the Vedic period, when its exponents laid claim to the office of the silent supervisor and healer of sacrifice, the *brahman*. As such, the AV does not enter into this study until the final chapters; see ch. 10, §1.3.)

The *agniṣṭoma* is a five-day ritual culminating in the pressing and drinking of the psychoactive plant *soma*, interspersed with Ṛgvedic recitations (*śastra*) and Sāmavedic songs (*stotra*) praising various deities. Throughout, there are myriad offerings of ghee and other substances, as well as a wide range of manipulations superintended by the Yajurvedic officiants. Within the "great altar space" (*mahāvedi*) oriented towards the east, there are fire altars made of earthen bricks and structures made of other perishable materials (wood, thatch, grass). The central structure is the "sitting place" (*sadas*), the main venue for *soma*-drinking and chanting. Compelled by the chanted praise and lured by the offerings, the gods join the officiants in their *soma* feast, taking their seats on sanctified grass strewn throughout the *mahāvedi*. For the duration of the sacrifice, the sacred space is regarded as the heavenly world itself. While it is a ritual of great complexity, the goals of the *agniṣṭoma* are straightforward: to procure the sacrificer's material and spiritual well-being, including prosperity while he lives and a long stay in heaven when dies. In pursuit of these aims, the officiants guide him through rites that enact his rebirth as a sanctified participant, ascent to heaven, and return to earth. As we shall see in this study, the Sāmavedic officiants play a crucial role in the sacrificer's soteriology, their songs propelling him to the heavenly world.

§3.1 *Mantras and sacred sound*

As even this brief description should make clear, sacred sound in many forms is an integral feature of the Soma sacrifice, as it is in Vedic religious culture as a whole. The signature utterances of the three Vedic liturgies—*ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*—all fall under the rubric of *mantra*. (Depending on the context, OM itself may be identified as any one of these.) While *mantra* as a general category of South Asian religions remains notoriously difficult to define or circumscribe (see Gonda 1963; Alper 1989), within the Vedic context the task of definition is simpler: mantras are "bits and pieces of the Vedas put to ritual use" (Staal 1989b, 48). Vedic mantras in a range of forms are compiled in large collections that form the bedrock of the ṚV, YV, and SV respectively (see §4.1 below). An etymological definition may also be illuminating: a *man-tra* is an 'instrument of mind' (*√man* 'to think' plus the instrumental suffix *-tra*; see Gonda 1975, 251). This speaks to the conviction that to utter a mantra is to mentally evoke the divinity to whom it is addressed, bringing the god near. Thus mantras are utterances of great power, perfect formulations capable of bridging earthly and divine realms. They are perfect formulations (*brahman*); it is no coincidence that in the Vedic worldview, the same word *brahman* denotes an utterance as well as the highest theological principle (van Buitenen 1959). In the Ṛgvedic idiom, mantras have been "seen" by the poets who speak them—they are not human creations at all but rather preexistent and eternal sources of cosmogonic sound. Such ideas find expression in various doctrines of sacred sound in the Veda, several of which play a key role in OM's history. Foremost among these is the teaching that the goddess Voice (*vāc*) abides in the highest heavens as a cosmic cow, her udders flowing with the milk from which poets draw their inspiration. The conduit through which this divine Voice is realized is the *akṣara*, a polyvalent word meaning both "imperishable" and "syllable." At once irreducible and infinite, the primordial Syllable is never exhausted but always flows along, measuring the tracks of the bovine goddess. The earliest expressions of these doctrines predate OM, the *locus*

classicus being the "Riddle Hymn," ṚV 1.164. Perhaps the most decisive moment in OM's emergence comes when the sound is explicitly correlated with this great Syllable for the first time, thereby becoming integrated into the ancient doctrines of sacred sound.

§4 *Vedic texts*

Over the course of several centuries, the entire institution of Vedic sacrifice—mantras, interpretations of rites along with myths and stories, codifications of praxis, rules for recitation—was archived into a vast body of oral texts. The result is the Vedic canon, comprised of texts produced between ca. 1200 and 500 BCE (Witzel 1997a), and orally transmitted as a fixed corpus within Brahmin families ever since. The importance of orality and aurality in the formation and transmission of the Vedic corpus cannot be overstated: indeed, one name for the corpus as a whole is "that which has been heard" (*śrutam, śruti*), a reference not to the original, visual revelation of the mantras to the primeval seers, but rather to its ongoing transmission from the teachers' mouths into the ears of students (Heesterman 1987, 235; see further discussion below §5.3). From *śruti* comes the derivative term *śrauta*, the name applied to the system of "solemn" rites (including the Soma sacrifice), which the Veda preserves and expounds.

§4.1 *Four strata: mantras, rites, and interpretations*

The project of textualizing *śrauta* ritual traditions was not fulfilled in one fell swoop, but rather in stages, resulting in a corpus that is highly stratified. Most individual Vedic works are themselves stratified and composite texts, formed from a variety of sources under the hand of multiple editors. Be that as it may, there are four main strata that run through the corpus as a whole. The oldest layer is the *saṃhitās*, where the mantras of a given liturgy are "joined together" (*saṃhitā*) to form the raw material

of a given ritual repertoire. Although the mantras may be modified for the purposes of recitation and performance—for example, by the addition of OM— the Saṃhitās archive their canonical form. As the oldest layers of the corpus, the Saṃhitās are also the most authoritative; all subsequent layers strive to remain consistent with them. The next stratum is the *brāhmaṇas*, "explanations" of mantras and other elements of ritual. The Brāhmaṇas interpret the sacrifice using a range of discursive and hermeneutic strategies: myths, stories, rival teachings, numerical equivalences, and correlations between human, sacrificial, and divine realms. Their imperative is to formulate insights that the officiants may put to use in performance, thereby maximizing the material and spiritual gains of sacrifice. The next stratum, the *āraṇyakas* ("wilderness texts"), contains teachings too secret to be imparted anywhere but in the solitary wilds, far from the village. Whereas the Brāhmaṇas treat the Soma sacrifice as a whole, the Āraṇyakas focus on specific sub-rites or iterations deemed to be especially powerful, dangerous, and arcane. The fourth and final stratum is the *upaniṣads*, where the "connections" that underlie the cosmos, ritual, and the human body are expounded. Sacrifice still remains the organizing principle in this stratum but reflections tend much more in the direction of metaphysical concerns.

§4.2 *The fifth stratum: textualizing praxis and performance*

OM is attested across all four primary strata. However, another stratum of texts, though not strictly speaking part of the canon—these are *smṛti* "remembered" rather than *śruti* "heard"—are indispensable for understanding OM in Vedic texts and ritual. The *śrauta sūtras* furnish the "threads" (*sūtra*) that connect the four main strata, codifying in concise language the elaborate praxis that the canon takes for granted. Their project to describe, through step-by-step accounts, the three interlocking liturgies—*hautram* of the ṚV, *ādhvaryavam* of the YV and *audgātram* of the SV—so as to enable the seamless, ensemble performance of sacrifice. These texts are valuable sources for recitation

and performance, furnishing rules that govern OM's frequent addition to the Saṃhitā forms of mantras. In such cases, the syllable does not occur in the primary stratum at all, and its place in the liturgies would escape us without Śrauta Sūtra accounts (for further discussion, see §5.1 below). Although a gap of many centuries intervenes between the collection of the mantras in the Saṃhitās (ca. 1200-1000 BCE) and the explicit codification of the praxis in the Śrauta Sūtras (ca. 700-500 BCE), the system of Vedic ritual at its core remained relatively stable, thus ensuring mutual intelligibility between the earlier and later strata.⁷ Sacrifice was a fundamentally conservative institution, and its practitioners strived to preserve basic continuity and lines of authority from the Saṃhitās on down. In this way, the newer layers serve to complement the older ones, filling in blanks and collectively contributing to a comprehensive picture of ritual performance during the first millennium BCE.⁸

§4.3 *Branches of the family tree*

While we conceive of the Vedas as taking shape through the layering of textual strata across a broad swathe of time and space, these developments were not monolithic or uniform. In fact, the primary growth pattern of the Vedic family tree was in parallel "branches" (*śākhā*): localized, hieratic lineages that passed down inherited texts and composed new ones in their own idiosyncratic fashions. Thus, Renou observed already in 1947 that the history of the Vedas is the history of its *śākhās* (1947, 208; see Witzel 1997a, 259, 335). As Witzel's pioneering work has since shown, the growth of the Vedic corpus in these branches or "schools" (as *śākhā* is often translated), made up of extended Brahmin

⁷ Nevertheless, a definite "development of the ritual" can be discerned from Ṛgvedic ritual up through the subsequent "classical" systemization; see Jamison & Witzel 1992, 36-38.

⁸ Such is the "diachronic question" of Vedic ritual raised by Christopher Minkowski (1992, 29; 34-35). His solution is to assume that the Śrauta Sūtras are the culmination of a long, uneven effort to systematize and record ritual traditions dating as far back as the time of the Saṃhitās; as such, in spite of the obvious diachronic layering of the corpus, the various strata complement each other to form a coherent and roughly synchronic whole.

families settled in particular regions and receiving patronage from local rulers, is of paramount importance for understanding linguistic, textual, ritual, religious, and socio-political developments (Witzel 1987, 1989, 1997a). Although participating in a tri-Vedic culture of *śrauta* ritual shared by Brahmins across North and Central India, these lineages of ritualist-theologians nurtured their own customs and hermeneutic agendas; often they even expressed themselves using subtly different "dialects" of Vedic (Witzel 1989).

The record shows that the members of each branch archived their own proprietary traditions by composing texts tailored to their liturgical specialties. For the most part, these compositions correspond to the strata already discussed: thus, each branch has its own Saṃhitā, Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka, Upaniṣad, Śrauta Sūtra, and so on. (There are notable exceptions, especially in the later strata, which I will discuss as they arise.) In this way, it is possible to trace diachronic developments not only across the corpus as a whole, but also within particular branches. As I explain below (§5.10-11), this allows us to reconstruct OM's history with a high level of detail. The members of the Vedic branches cooperated in ritual performance but also vied competitively for patronage. Their shared *śrauta* culture was fractious, dynamic, and connected, with plenty of cross-pollination and mutual influence. For instance, the texts constantly cite rival authorities as straw men, introducing alternative viewpoints only to criticize them: "Some say..." (*ity eke*). Even more often, however, patterns of borrowing from other branches without attribution are evident. This rampant intertextuality is crucial for understanding OM's emergence because it shows how practices, doctrines, stories, and aphorisms relating to the syllable traveled widely throughout the Vedic world.

§4.4 *Distinguishing stratum and genre*

In light of the above, the standard classification of Vedic texts—Saṃhitā, Brāhmaṇa, and so on—simultaneously encompasses *stratum* and *genre*. The classifications are *strata* in that one succeeds the next, and each can be connected to a distinct phase of composition in the formation of the Vedic canon. The sequence of strata constitutes a branch's lineage of textual authority, from the Saṃhitā on down; what is taught in a later layer expands upon what has been established in earlier layers. But the classifications are also *genres* in that each one represents a discrete and widely reproduced strategy for generating and recording knowledge, with a stereotypical style and scope. In time, the various Vedic genres became so recognizable that they inspired derivative compositions for many centuries to come, long after the Vedic canon was formed. As we will see in this study, this leads to a situation where works composed and transmitted independently from the Vedas and their branches nevertheless assert Vedic affiliation as a way to claim prestige and authority. Such independent works—most of them in the genre of Upaniṣad—become important sites for innovative thinking about OM beyond the realm of sacrifice, shaping the syllable's continued emergence as Vedism gives way to Brahmanism and Classical Hinduism.

§5 *Approaching OM: methods of the present study*

Having touched on the basic features of Vedic religion, ritual and texts, I now make some observations about my approach to these materials. For reasons discussed below, OM is a special case. Uncovering its history requires a hybrid method suited to the syllable's unusual characteristics. These include OM's sonality, its use in recitation and performance, its multiformity, and its manifestation in both liturgical and discursive contexts. Another characteristic is OM's polyvalence. OM embraces many kinds of meaning beyond semantics, and the correlative hermeneutic of the Vedas—making meaning

through the correlation of two different entities—is integral to its emergence. Beyond such characteristics, the organization of Vedic texts and rituals also has an impact on OM's history. The liturgical specialization of Vedic ritualists and theologians—Ṛgvedic verse, Sāmavedic songs, or Yajurvedic praxis—imparts distinct ritual sensibilities to their reflections on OM. Affiliation with specific branches sharpens these sensibilities even further, resulting in idiosyncratic approaches to the syllable's practices and doctrines—these amount to fingerprints by which the contributions of particular groups may be traced. By taking into account all these factors, I hope to tell the story of OM's emergence in the Vedas with unprecedented nuance and detail.

§5.1 *Sound, recitation, and performance*

First and foremost, OM is a sound. Recitation and ritual performance are integral to its history. Ritual utterance in the Vedas can take many forms: hence OM may be spoken, recited, chanted, intoned, sung, whispered, mumbled, and even mentally evoked. An overarching pattern that unites these multifarious realizations is that OM is frequently added, interpolated, or substituted for certain syllables of an existing mantra. For instance, when a verse (*ṛc*) from the Ṛgveda is recited in sacrifice, a drawn-out and emphatic OM often replaces its final syllable. Or, when a melody (*sāman*) from the Sāmaveda is sung to lyrics, a resonant OM introduces the main part of the song. In other cases, the utterance of OM is prescribed as an independent syllable: for example, the officiant of the Yajurveda responds to certain recitations with OM alone. The multiformity of OM's realizations in *śrauta* ritual is staggering, with more than twenty discrete archetypal uses.

The key point is that OM is codified for a wide range of ritual sequences that recur again and again during the Soma sacrifice. Moreover, it is the codifications of these sequences that are textualized, usually not OM itself. Thus, although the majority of Ṛgvedic verses and Sāmavedic songs

feature OM in recitation and performance, they are attested in their respective Saṃhitās *without* OM. In this way, OM's connection with the sonic and auditory realms is even more immediate than that of most mantras in the Vedas, for OM is manifested chiefly in the charged, sacral sphere of *live* ritual performance. While other mantras are individually recorded in the vast corpus of oral texts, OM is at once nowhere and everywhere: nowhere, for it is rarely textualized within the mantras themselves; everywhere, since it pervades the soundscape of sacrifice in performance. The syllable quite literally abides in sound. No wonder, then, that a defining moment in OM's emergence is its correlation with the great primordial Syllable (*akṣara*), the unseen conduit through which all ritual utterance eternally flows.

§5.2 *Reconstructing audible history*

OM's connection to the sonic realm has important implications for how we approach the syllable's history. At the outset, we must acknowledge that many attestations of OM in Vedic ritual are inaccessible, at least through the conventional Indological discovery procedures: word searches, concordances, and so on. This is OM's hidden history: the majority of the syllable's occurrences are simply not found in texts. To transform this hidden history into audible history, we must do more than simply read about OM; it is necessary to *listen to OM* in the *śrauta* rituals of the first millennium BCE. How do we access these performances from so long ago? Without a time machine, we must settle for the next best thing: detailed codifications of ritual performance, especially those of the Śrauta Sūtras. By reconstructing models of ancient performance on the basis of these liturgical codifications, and by understanding how OM comes to be realized in the flow of sacrifice, we get a much better sense of the syllable's scope and significance. An essential counterpart to these philological reconstructions is consultation with modern exponents of *śrauta* ritual traditions in India, for whom Vedic ritual remains

a living performance tradition. I owe much of my understanding of the intricacies of OM's *śrauta* uses to long hours spent observing and consulting ritual experts such as the Nampūtiri Brahmins of central Kerala, and neighboring Tamil Brahmins on the border of Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Gerety forthcoming b). The expertise that abides in such orthoprax communities goes a long way towards proving the claim that even today, Vedic oral tradition in some corners may be regarded as "tape recordings" of ancient performance, a veritable archive embodied in the Brahmins who continue to pass it on (Witzel 1997a, 258).

§5.3 *The Veda as auditory culture*

I conceive of OM's audible history within the broader category of *auditory culture*. In tune with the embodied turn in cultural studies of the last quarter-century, cultural historians have reacted against the primacy of visual cultures in the West since the Enlightenment by attending to non-visual senses like hearing, touch and smell.⁹ There is a growing appreciation for aural practices as a way of knowing the world around us, and this has reverberated in the work of historians as they try to recover auditory cultures of the past (Bull & Back 2003). This includes auditory cultures of the pre-phonograph age, with soundscapes that are only recoverable through texts, reconstructions and oral traditions.

The Vedas surely belong to this category of auditory cultures, and a striking parallel appears in the indigenous designation for the canon as *śruti* ("that which is heard"). This term emphasizes the aurality of these texts, composed orally and transmitted face-to-face. *Śruti* is an intrinsic acknowledgement that the Vedic canon is first and foremost a corpus of sound. The Vedas encode recitations, rituals, poems, songs—that is, materials that depend on human voices and ears for their realization and transmission across generations. Thus it is incumbent on the historian working with

⁹ For a discussion of these trends in the study of the senses and their relevance to understanding premodern South Asia, see McHugh 2012, an exploration of smell in South Asian religions.

Vedic materials to attend not only to *what* the texts say, but *how* they sound; and to place the non-lexical features of the texts on an equal footing with the lexical: poetics, phonetics, metrics, melody, accentuation, and pragmatics. This trail has already been blazed by South Asian thinkers for millennia, in contexts including theologies of sacred sound, treatises on phonetics, and the acoustic organization of grammars and lexicons—hence Sheldon Pollock's apposite "phonocentric episteme" of Sanskrit (2006, 306).

§5.4 *Sonality: the primacy of sound*

Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus (2011) have proposed *sonality*—the sonic aspects and sounding of sacred texts—as the organizing principle of Hindu traditions. Their massive "cultural history of Sanskrit Hinduism," situates sonality within the broader context of religious aesthetics and communications theory. With a nod to Homi Bhabha (1994), Wilke & Moebus argue that sonality is a "third space habitus," a way to mediate polarities such as orality/literacy, emic/etic, meaning/meaninglessness, and so on (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 224). The primacy of sonality in Hindu traditions in general, and in the Vedas in particular, will be a key theoretical touchstone as my argument develops. Invoking sonality reminds us that, parallel to their existence on palm leaves, birch bark, and now critical editions, the Vedas have primarily existed in South Asia for the last three thousand years as *śruti*, as auditory culture. And sonality reawakens us to the imperative of listening to OM's history in the Vedas in the ways outlined above.

§5.5 *The multiformity of OM*

Arising out of OM's use in recitation and performance is what I refer to in this study as the syllable's *multiformity*. First, OM is multiform in the sense that it is employed in a wide array of

discrete liturgical contexts—there are more than twenty archetypes for OM's use in *śrauta* ritual (see ch.3, §5.1). Next, the syllable is multiform in that it quite literally takes "many forms:" the sounds *om*, *om̐*, *om̑*, and *o* (among others) all come under the rubric of OM. In a similar vein, the syllable is also known by the technical terms of recitation with which it is associated (*praṇava*, *udgītha*); and by its phonological analysis into the constituent phonemes *a*, *u*, and *m*. Finally, OM is multiform from the perspective of performance: every time an officiant adds, substitutes, or otherwise interpolates the syllable into a mantra as part of his recitation, he reenacts previous performances, whether from primeval times or just the week before. (We will see that the reenactment of the creator god Prajāpati's sonic discovery of OM is an essential feature of the syllable's emergence.) My take on multiformity owes a lot to the work of Albert Lord and Greg Nagy, who have fruitfully developed the concept with relation to oral poetic traditions of South Slavic song and Homeric epic (Nagy 2004, 25-27). In spite of the obvious differences—the most significant being Slavic/Homeric composition-in-performance against Vedic performance of a fixed text—the core concept still applies to the case of OM. Multiformity, Lord observes, "does not give precedence to any one word or set of words to express an idea; instead, it acknowledges that the idea may exist in several forms" (quoted in Nagy 2004, 25). In Lord's terms, the "idea" is OM across the Vedic corpus, expressed in the myriad ways that this study will reveal.

§5.6 *Liturgical OM, discursive OM*

Throughout this study, I conceive of OM's history by making a heuristic distinction between *liturgical OM* and *discursive OM*. My strategy of separating the evidence in terms of liturgical OM and discursive OM is not wholly foreign to indigenous strategies for approaching Vedic ritual culture as a whole: the corpus itself is organized into strata and genres that tend to be either liturgical or discursive

in content and approach. In this regard, my separation of liturgy and discourse corresponds to indigenous categories of textualized liturgy (*mantra, saṃhitā, śrauta sūtra*) on the one hand, and textualized discourse (*saṃhitā, brāhmaṇa, āraṇyaka, upaniṣad*), on the other. As already discussed above (§4.1), the liturgical sections of the Vedic corpus are the raw materials and blueprints for the performance of ritual; while the discursive sections furnish an evolving and dynamic record of what ritual means in religious terms.

Through this lens, liturgical OM is the syllable as it is attested in mantras and codified for ritual performance; the materials for its study are largely to be found in the liturgical strata of the corpus, the Saṃhitās and Śrauta Sūtras. Discursive OM is the syllable as it is interpreted in reflections, often theological in nature, about ritual; these materials are found in the interpretive strata, the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads. Ultimately, I argue that the ascendance of OM as a sacred syllable results from the constant interplay of both currents. To present a nuanced and accurate history of OM in the Vedas, we must recognize that the rituals and the reflections they inspired were in constant interplay and depended on one another for mutual intelligibility. Nevertheless, by maintaining a separation between liturgy and discourse for the purposes of analysis, we can better understand the contributions of each to OM's emergence. On some level, we are simply playing "catch-up" with the ritual experts who composed our texts—since they take OM in the liturgies as the point of departure for their discursive reflections, we must do the same. And for most of us, this involves a certain amount of homework: as a prelude to understanding OM's construction in interpretive discourses, we must get a handle on its basic liturgical uses.

§5.7 *The rehabilitation of meaninglessness*

Frits Staal has argued that the deliberate arrangement of the Vedic corpus in liturgical and discursive sections constitutes a veritable "theory of ritual" on the part of its composers (Staal 2009), as well as a proof of the fundamental disjuncture between the broader categories of ritual and meaning. He credits the composers of the Śrauta Sūtras, who present praxis with no exposition, as the inspiration for his own theory that ritual is "pure activity, without meaning or goal" (Staal 1989a, 131) and that mantras, as an element of ritual, are likewise "meaningless." I do not agree with Staal that ritual and mantras are meaningless—clearly, large sections of the Veda are devoted to imparting meanings to rituals and mantras. And I do not share Staal's scorn for the interpretive strata of the Veda where such meanings are made, notably the Brāhmaṇas, which he dismisses as *ad hoc* (Staal 1989a, 234). Indeed, the bulk of this study will be devoted to the careful analysis of OM's construction in the Brāhmaṇas and other interpretive texts. Nevertheless, I believe that acknowledging the indigenous separation between liturgy and discourse is an effective strategy for the study of OM, for it reveals that in many contexts, the syllable's semantic meaning is equivocal or irrelevant. In this respect, I wish to rehabilitate Staal's notion of "meaninglessness." Instead of taking it as a reproach, as so many have done, I see it as an invitation to deeper critical inquiry. By setting aside OM's meaning in liturgical contexts, we free ourselves to grasp ritual structures and patterns of sound that might otherwise have been ignored. This method in no way denies the syllable's capacity for meaningfulness—quite the opposite: by first attending to the structures and patterns of ritual and mantra on their own terms, we will find ourselves in a better position to understand OM's many meanings as constructed across a range of hermeneutic contexts.

§5.8 *The many meanings of OM*

The question of what OM means—or if it means anything at all—has been the central preoccupation of most Indologists who have inquired into the syllable's history. Motivated to propose and defend various etymologies for the syllable, these debates have often been predicated on a narrow definition of meaning in terms of semantics. The leading theory, most recently articulated by Asko Parpola, is that OM's primary meaning is 'yes' (1981a). But there is much more to the syllable's meaning than semantics, and we will need a more expansive conception of meaning to understand OM's emergence in the Vedas. For even in the many cases where OM appears to convey no semantic information, it nevertheless signifies on other levels: performative, aesthetic, and interpretive. Thus, beyond indicating assent, OM in other contexts may serve a performative function, acting as an introductory, exclamatory, or emphatic particle. In other cases, aesthetic meaning is paramount: the sound of OM can be analyzed in onomatopoeic or naturally expressive terms. Finally, the most developed realm of meaning for OM in the Vedas is interpretive: specific and (we might say) subjective meanings are constructed for OM on the basis of the prevailing Vedic hermeneutic of making correlations between entities. Indologists and historians of religion have largely ignored this massive record of OM's interpretive meanings, and hence the story of what OM *means* in the Vedas still remains to be told. One of the primary aims of this study is to show that the clearest trajectories of how OM came to be a sacred syllable can be located precisely in this fascinating and neglected interpretive record.

§5.9 *Making meaning through correlation*

How are OM's meanings made? The composers of Vedic texts construct interpretive meanings for OM by making correlations between different entities from ritual, myth, cosmology, and nature.

This fertile mode of thinking is a fundamental feature of Vedic texts and arguably the engine driving their formation and development. It is ubiquitous in the interpretive genres, and as such is the most significant hermeneutic in the emergence of OM. The basic procedure is to assert the identity of two or more entities based on some shared quality, the *bandhu* ("bond").¹⁰ Often, this bond will not be immediately evident and must be ferreted out; to do so is to prove one's mastery of the esoteric meanings of ritual. In this way, otherwise unconnected entities are correlated and meanings are made. Every act and every element of *śrauta* ritual has been subject to this sort of analysis, often more than once and in different ways, for Vedic correlations are not mutually exclusive. The constant use of this technique produces a vast storehouse of meanings; Vedic interpretive texts exist largely in order to systematize and preserve them in what Patrick Olivelle has called a "web of relations" (1998, 24). The

¹⁰ Every student of Vedic texts must grapple with this mode of thought, and the literature on the topic is vast. With its highly compressed style, superficially bizarre juxtapositions and intentional obscurity, it has attracted the derision of many Indologists over the years (see the opinions compiled in Smith 1989, 33-38), but it has likewise attracted a number of careful analyses that have sought to understand it as a system. Only a brief survey of scholarship can be attempted here. Lévi (1898) discerned that the exposition of correlations was the organizing principle of the Brāhmaṇas and the ideologies they contained. Along these lines Oldenberg (1919, 4) famously appraised the Brāhmaṇa *weltanschauung* as *vorwissenschaftliche wissenschaft* ("pre-scientific science") and considered the systematic exposition of correlations to be the chief aim of these texts. Schayer (1925) emphasized the "magical" character of the Brāhmaṇa worldview; the aptness of the term "magic" as a label for correlative thought and action has been defended (Parpola 1979; Witzel 1979) and criticized (Gonda 1965; Parpola 1979; Patton 2005). Parpola (1978) described the system as "the manipulation of the ritual symbols" (140). Karl Hoffmann (1976, 524) described the practice not only in linguistic but in cognitive terms, arguing that "a word is the phonetic representation of an agglomeration of concepts," a *noematic* aggregate, with a *noem* being "the smallest possible item to be thought of" (reformulated by Witzel 1979, 11). Two words (and the entities they represent) can be related in this worldview if they share one or more noem. Witzel (1979) developed Hoffmann's idea, elucidating its dynamics in the texts and suggesting "partial similarity means identity" as the underlying hermeneutic. Witzel calls the strategy "magical thought" and adduces ethnographic comparanda from traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere. The culmination of this philological-cognitive approach is Farmer, Henderson, & Witzel (2002), wherein Vedic "correlative thinking" is compared to other premodern cosmologies and "a cross-cultural model of the evolution of correlative systems" (49) with a neurological basis is proposed. (This article also contains a comprehensive summary of the relevant scholarship on correlations in Vedic texts (51n8). To that list we should add the important recent contribution of Michaels 2004, which argues that the "identificatory habitus," with roots in Vedic hermeneutics, is a defining feature of Hinduism through the ages.) Smith (1989) has proposed "resemblance" as the primary episteme of the Vedas, a formulation criticized by Heesterman 1991. Olivelle (1998, 24-25) emphasizes the centrality of what he calls "cosmic connections," characterizing this "web of relations" as the hidden, efficacious knowledge that constitutes the universe. Finally Patton (2005) invokes Vedic "associational thought" and the concept of metonymy as foundations for her resuscitation of a related emic hermeneutic, *vinijyoga*.

true potency of this arcane knowledge, however, is only realized when it is harnessed in the course of ritual performance. Carrying out some ritual action with the awareness of the bonds that link it to natural and divine correlates, the officiant gains power and expands his range of activity beyond the sacrificial ground. While to any observer he may be simply making an offering or speaking a mantra, in the Vedic worldview he is acting on unseen realms, like a god.

Let me illustrate the relevance of this hermeneutic to OM with an example from a Brāhmaṇa text. In the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* of the Sāmaveda, we learn this of OM: "This syllable is that sun up there" (*asau vā āditya etad akṣaram*; JB 1.322). What is the *bandhu* that links the sound to the sun? A clue comes in the next sentence: "When he begins with *om*, he places that sun at the beginning" (*sa yad om ity ādatte 'mum evaitad ādityaṃ mukha ādhatte*). The liturgical context under discussion is the recitational addition of OM to the beginning of the *udgītha*, the main portion of the Sāmavedic praise-song. Hence the probable explanation is that OM occurs at the beginning of the song, just the sun rises at the start of the day. The combination of the song and the knowledge of its esoteric meaning may have a cosmic effect in performance: when "the one who knows" (*ya evaṃ veda*)¹¹ sings with knowledge of the secret bond, he quite literally causes the sun to rise. In this respect, Brahmin officiants are "human gods" (see §2.1 above)—they exercise a divine, world-shaping agency. In the sacrificial cosmology of the Veda, the ritual expert helps maintain the cosmos.

The criteria for establishing a relation are many and various: attributes such as shape, color, size, number, texture, consistency, temperature, etc.; use in mantras and ritual praxis; associated narratives; even the sound of names or words may serve as a basis for correlation. On the basis of one (or more) of these criteria being shared, the deeper relation of the two (or more) entities becomes

¹¹ This turn of phrase and its variants are widespread in Vedic prose, usually as a concluding flourish at the end of a topic (e.g., *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 1.22, 2.23) or as a repeated refrain (e.g., *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.7.1.17-21). See also Oldenberg 1919, 5; Gonda 1965, 6.

established. And once the *bandhu* is understood, knowledge, mantra and action fuse with efficacious results: the agency of the "human gods" is activated. Although a range of English words may serve to describe these relations between things—connection, correspondence, identification, homology, similarity, bond, equation, symbol, counterpart, prototype, substitution— I will use *correlation* in this study.¹² This correlative hermeneutic is the primary mechanism through which OM's many meanings are constructed. OM is the sun, honey, truth, sap—with every new correlation, the syllable's potency in ritual performance increases. Chanting OM, a singer can ascend to the heavenly world and even gain immortality. In the hothouse of correlative speculation, OM ultimately comes to be identified with "this whole world" (*idaṃ sarvam*), an expression of the transcendent holism of the highest theological principle—*brahman*.

§5.10 *Liturgical specialization and ritual sensibility*

As the texts so often proclaim, the Veda is "threefold wisdom" (*trayī vidyā*), divided according to signature categories of liturgical utterance: *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*. This threefold division is such an iconic trope that it is easy to overlook the very real differences in liturgy, praxis, hermeneutics, and overall sensibility just under its surface. On the most basic level, these differences are self-evident: the specialists in each liturgy must master a proprietary repertoire of mantras, interpretive expositions, and practical codifications. It stands to reason that a Ṛgvedic expert in reciting metrical poetry in praise of the gods would have a different skillset and approach to his *métier* than, say, an expert singer of Sāmavedic songs, whose lyrics consist of non-lexical vocables and fragments of words and phrases. When I speak of *liturgical specialization*, this is the sort of specialized expertise I have in mind. Signe Cohen has traced the effects of such specialties on the formation of Upaniṣadic text and authority,

¹² In this I follow Farmer et al. (2002, 49-53), where "correlation," coined in Sinological studies of premodern Chinese classificatory systems, is promoted as a term with broad portability across fields.

arguing that Ṛgvedic traditions focus on deities, Yajurvedic traditions on action, and Sāmavedic traditions on sacred sound (Cohen 2008, 6-7). I shall show that such specialties likewise have important implications for OM's history, and not just in the Upaniṣads, but across all strata of the Vedic corpus.

The effects of liturgical specialization also resonate in broader terms, contributing to what I call the *ritual sensibility* of each Veda. Thus, as Cohen argues, the three different liturgical specialties shape the tenor and scope of theological discourses in their respective Upaniṣads. I shall show that these sensibilities operate across the corpus, in recognizable ways: Ṛgvedic discourses are attuned to meter, phonology, and lexical analysis; Sāmavedic discourses to melody, performance, and sonality; Yajurvedic discourses to gestures, offerings, and cooperation between officiants. These sensibilities directly effect OM's discursive construction, as the experts reflect on the syllable in a manner consonant with their training and experience. In particular, I will demonstrate that the Sāmavedic specialization in "sacred sound" predisposes these singer-theologians to explore the hermeneutic potential of the sound OM.

§5.11 *Branch affiliation as a tool of analysis*

Closely akin to liturgical specialization and ritual sensibility is the idea of branch (*śākhā*) affiliation within each Veda. (See also discussion in §4.3 above.) Whereas liturgical specialization and ritual sensibility allow us to discern three strains in OM's history—Ṛgvedic, Yajurvedic, and Sāmavedic—attention to branch affiliation brings a much greater level of detail. By tracing the distinctive trajectories of OM's emergence within particular branches, it becomes possible to localize, chronologize, and humanize the syllable's history. Instead of simply speaking of OM's emergence in the Veda writ large, or in terms of the three liturgical divisions, we may speak of the individual contributions of specific branches, as well as their relations to one another. We can credit innovations

in OM's construction and trace patterns of appropriation and influence. We can come very close to saying *who* promoted the syllable's preeminence, *what* they said about it, *where* and *when* they lived and worked. I will demonstrate that most of the milestones in OM's emergence can be traced to the texts of the Sāmavedic Jaiminīyas, and hence that these singer-theologians were instrumental in fostering OM's emergence as a sacred syllable.

In the formulation of Masato Fujii, the perspective of *śākhā* opens up three complementary levels of analysis: "vertical," within the history of the respective branches; "horizontal," in their mutual relationships stratum by stratum; and "global," in the Vedic corpus as a whole (Fujii 1997, 89, 98). In this study, I trace OM's emergence on all three levels. This is particularly instructive for understanding OM's construction in the interpretive texts, where horizontal patterns of appropriation and influence among branches are evident alongside vertical transmission of ideas inside a given branch. Thus each chapter (sometimes two) is devoted to a particular stratum: within the chapter, it is possible to establish the horizontal relations among the various branches for that period. By reading the chapters in sequence, the vertical developments come into view; these intra-branch developments are especially telling because they attest to significant continuities (and sometimes discontinuities) in the construction of OM—the composers of younger works engage in conversation with the authoritative older works in their branch. (For example, the Ṛgvedic Aitareyins attest the earliest sustained reflections on OM in their Brāhmaṇa, exalting it as "the world of heaven," only to reevaluate OM in their Āraṇyaka and downgrade it in favor of "the sound *a*;" by the time their Upaniṣad rolls around, OM has disappeared from Aitareya discourse entirely. In contrast, the Sāmavedic Jaiminīyas attest the earliest known mantras with OM in their Saṃhitā, reflect on OM at great length in their Brāhmaṇa, and finally devote an entire work to the syllable in the form of Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad—with every new stratum in the Jaiminīya branch, the prestige of the syllable grows.) Finally, the chapters as a group tell

the story of OM's global development in the Veda, from a multiform liturgical utterance to the embodiment of the Vedic corpus as a totality.

§6 *Why is OM still an open question?*

After almost three millennia since its emergence as a sacred syllable, and after nearly two centuries of inquiry by Indologists and historians of religion, why is the history of OM still an open question? As I noted at the beginning of this chapter (§1.1), previous scholarship on OM incorporates a wide range of perspectives (linguistic, phenomenological, evolutionary) leading to an exponentially wider range of conclusions—and yet consensus remains elusive. I shall have a lot to say about why earlier studies have failed to produce a comprehensive and convincing account of OM's emergence (see ch. 4, §2-2.1), but the short answer is quite simple: none has acknowledged OM's inherent multiformity or paid serious attention to the Vedic reflections on the syllable. Instead, scholars have searched high and low for the "original" OM, hunting for it in the complexities of the liturgical evidence; in the natural expressiveness of breath and voice; or deep in the prehistory of human linguistic evolution. While these are important paths of inquiry, they threaten to miss the forest for the trees. Until now, no one has documented every single liturgical context in which OM appears; considered the possibility that there might be one OM constructed from many; systematically collected the Vedic stories, similes, and aphorisms inspired by OM; or analyzed the cosmological, theological, and soteriological doctrines into which the syllable has been integrated. These are the tasks I set myself in the present study. Even if the findings do not conclusively settle the question of OM's emergence, at the very least they will establish the basic facts of OM's history according to the oldest, most detailed, and most relevant sources available to us: in the doctrines and practices of the Vedic ritualists.

§7 *Learning from OM's emergence*

To the extent that it is successful, my study of OM's emergence in the Vedas stands to improve our understanding of Vedic texts, ritual, and religion; and the history of religions in South Asia. Above all, my history of OM highlights the central role of sound and sensory experience in the formation and perpetuation of premodern religious cultures of South Asia. And it is not just any kind of sound, but music, melody, and song in particular. By tracing OM's attestations across the Vedic corpus, I will show that the oldest OMs occur in the songs of the Sāmaveda; that singer-theologians of the Jaiminīya branch took the lead in making new meanings for OM, including identifying it as the primordial Syllable in the Vedic doctrines of sacred sound; and that members of the same branch further innovated by implicating OM in their soteriology of song, which imagines a bodiless ascent to heaven with wings of sound. Along the way, these reflections on OM took shape in conversation with specialists from other liturgies and branches, leaving a record of mutual borrowing and influence. Ultimately, however, it was singers once again—this time from the Kauthuma branch—who picked up the thread, transforming the soteriology of song into a contemplative soteriology: rather than focus on singing OM, late Vedic texts stress its mentalization as a way to leave one's body at the moment of death. This innovation proved especially compelling for new discourses composed with reference to Vedic authority but beyond the confines of the Vedic branches. The transformation of OM from an instrument of sacrifice in a heaven-oriented soteriology to an instrument of contemplation in a liberation-oriented soteriology ensured that the syllable remained preeminent even as Vedism gave way to Brahmanism and Classical Hinduism. As the essence of the Vedas and the audible counterpart of their highest theological principle (*brahman*), OM kept its place at the center of Brahmanical discourse, its utterance embodying authority and transcendence.

§8 Chapter-by-chapter summary

The rest of this study is structured as follows. Chapter Two considers evidence for liturgical OM from the early mantra collections, locating the oldest OMs in the Saṃhitās of the SV and YV. Already in this oldest stratum where OM occurs, its multiformity is evident, with half a dozen distinct liturgical uses. Based on this early material it is difficult to generalize or draw conclusions about how OM is used in the liturgies, where OM comes from, or what it means. Chapter Three continues the survey of liturgical OM, but now according to the comprehensive (and much later) codifications of recitation and praxis in the Śrauta Sūtras of the ṚV, YV, and SV. Here the importance of recitation and performance to OM's story becomes abundantly clear, for the syllable must often be added to existing mantras by applying the rules of the *sūtras*, only becoming audible through live ritual performance or its reconstruction. This is what I call OM's hidden history. Also in this phase, liturgical OM's multiformity becomes undeniable—I enumerate more than twenty distinct archetypal uses, spread across the three liturgies.

In Chapter Four, I trace the search for liturgical OM's meaning in scholarly sources from the Vedic times up to the present. My critical study of previous scholarship encompasses the contributions of both insiders and outsiders, from the glosses on OM in Vedic texts and Sanskrit lexicographic treatises to the etymologies and semantic meanings proposed by Indologists; from the aesthetic evaluations of historians of religion to the theories of OM in terms of the evolution of language. Above all, I criticize the etic explanations for stressing a single path of origins for OM and failing to acknowledge the syllable's patent multiformity or the interplay between liturgy and discourse which fuels its rise. I argue that a dynamic of *emergence* is superior to that of "origins" for describing OM's parallel developments along several tracks at once.

With Chapter Five, our focus shifts away from liturgical OM towards discursive OM, that is, the construction of the syllable in Vedic interpretive texts. The first task here is to summarize the ancient doctrines of sacred sound in the ṚV and YV Saṃhitās that anticipate subsequent reflections on OM itself. These teachings credit the potency of all Vedic ritual utterance to the interactions of the goddess Voice (*vāc*), the great Syllable (*akṣara*), and the perfect formulation/realization of ultimate reality (*brahman*). Previous scholars agree that a decisive moment in the discursive construction of OM comes when it is identified with the primordial *akṣara*, but the question of exactly when this happens remains unanswered. Next, I show that OM's construction is foreshadowed in the Saṃhitās by reflections on recitational practices associated with the syllable. Perhaps the earliest discourse on the syllable—although never mentioning OM outright—holds that the diverse recitational practices of the triple Veda become unified through the sound they have in common.

In Chapter Six, we encounter sustained reflections on OM in the Brāhmaṇas. The creator god Prajāpati is a key figure: he toils to find the essence of the Vedas, eventually discovering OM and its three constituent sounds (*a, u, m*). Employing the signature hermeneutic of correlation, ritualist-theologians in this phase create a range of interpretive meanings for the syllable: OM is the three Vedas, the sun, honey, truth, and so on. I highlight the contributions of one branch in particular, the Sāmavedic Jaiminīyas, who go on record with a number of influential stories, similes, and aphorisms; I show that they are also the first to individuate OM as the "only *akṣara*," the transcendent realization of the doctrine of the great Syllable. The Jaiminīyas also extend reflections from earlier layers by explicitly naming OM as the sound in which diverse recitational practices coalesce, bringing the three Vedas into unity.

Chapter Seven explores the ongoing construction of OM in the next stratum, the Āraṇyakas, which constitute an esoteric turn in Vedic discourse, reflecting on OM in relation to certain arcane and

powerful rites. The profile of OM wanes in some branches, and increases in others. The Jaiminīyas continue their fascination with syllable, now devoting an entire work to elucidating a song whose non-lexical lyrics contain OM, a *sāman* that frees its singers from their earthly bodies. In fact, the Jaiminīyas have so much to say about the syllable that I devote Chapter Eight in its entirety to their innovative soteriology of song built around OM. The teaching goes that by singing with OM, the ritual expert and sacrificer shake off their bodies and ascend to the heavenly world. Demonstrating their mastery of secret knowledge in a dialogue with a solar deity, they vie for admission through the door of the sun where immortality awaits. From here on out, OM and soteriology become inextricably linked.

In Chapter Nine, I trace reflections on OM in the early Upaniṣads, documenting how Jaiminīya teachings and lore on OM are broadcast to a wider constituency through the efforts of another Sāmavedic branch, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas. On the one hand, they adapt stories, similes, and aphorisms from earlier strata wholesale; on the other, these singers innovate by formulating a soteriology with OM that is not predicated on specialized ritual performance. Instead, the Kauthumas teach that a man need only contemplate the syllable at the moment of death in order to ascend through the sun to the world of *brahman*. In this way, OM emerges as the audible counterpart of this transcendent principle. In these Upaniṣadic innovations, we see the glimmers of a broader shift from external to internal modes of religiosity. This shift manifests much more plainly in Chapter Ten, where we follow OM's fortunes in the next wave of Upaniṣads, those composed independent of specific branches and contributing instead to a pan-Vedic discourse on OM. Often claiming the authority of the marginal fourth Veda—the Atharvaveda—these thinkers prefer the "higher knowledge" of meditation and asceticism to the "lower knowledge" of *śrauta* rituals. Nevertheless, they continue to promote OM as the distillation of Vedic knowledge and authority in a single syllable. The contemplative soteriology

with OM continues to develop in these texts, which teach that meditation on the syllable at death, with the mind devotedly fixed on god, leads to liberation.

Finally, in Chapter Eleven, I bring this study to a close by reviewing a thousand years of OM in the Vedas. I offer a periodization of the syllable's development, an assessment of its most salient features, and an analysis of my findings within several key categories used throughout the study: the interplay of liturgy and discourse, multiformity, correlation, ritual sensibility, and branch affiliation. I also point to the primacy of music and song in OM's emergence, arguing that Sāmavedic singers' vocational affinity for sound and melody attuned them to the hermeneutic potential of the syllable. The starring role in OM's story belongs to the Jaiminīyas, who lived and worked on the southwestern edge of the Vedic heartland in 800-600 BCE. The Jaiminīya cultural legacy, which stresses the sonality, authority, and soteriology of OM, has been central to the syllable's appeal ever since, assuring its continued preeminence even as Vedism and Brahmanism give way to the formative currents of Classical Hinduism.

§9 *Notes on texts, translation, and formatting*

The editions of Vedic and Sanskrit texts consulted are given under the editor's name in the master reference list at the end of this study. After a first citation of a primary source given in full, frequently cited sources are abbreviated according to the list of abbreviations, also at the end. Except where indicated, translations from Vedic and Sanskrit are my own. The most significant exceptions are translations of the *Ṛgveda*, which I take from Stephanie Jamison's and Joel Brereton's recent publication (2014), or from George Thompson's work (1995b); and translations of the *Upaniṣads* (especially in chs. 9-10), which I draw from Patrick Olivelle's work (1998). In the name of style, internal consistency, and (occasionally) to register my own different interpretations, I have sometimes made

small changes to the fine published translations of these scholars, which I acknowledge accordingly ("with changes"). I generally give the Vedic or Sanskrit text of any given translation in the footnotes, unless I am making an argument that addresses the language and grammar directly, in which case I give it in parentheses within the main body text. In my transliteration of Vedic and Sanskrit into roman script, I have adhered to the conventions of the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST).¹³ Finally, I italicize all Vedic and Sanskrit terms throughout, except in the case of frequently mentioned classifications (e.g., Yajurveda, Sāmavedic), genres (e.g., Saṃhitās, Upaniṣads), and proper names.

¹³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Alphabet_of_Sanskrit_Transliteration. Accessed May 15, 2015.

CHAPTER TWO

THE OLDEST OMs: EVIDENCE FROM THE SAṂHITĀS

In Vedic texts, OM comes down to us in two currents: as a syllable recited in ritual and as the topic of discussions about ritual. The bulk of this study will be devoted to exploring the latter category, as we trace the discursive construction of the syllable across a range of interpretive texts. Such discourses—found largely in the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads—are tremendously important for understanding the religious development of the syllable; indeed, they are the theological hothouse where the notion of OM as a sacred syllable germinates and blossoms. However, a prerequisite to understanding such reflections on OM is to grasp the history and basic outlines of the syllable's use in the Vedic liturgies. We cannot fully understand *discursive OM* without first taking the measure of *liturgical OM*. Accordingly, the next two chapters will focus on OM in the liturgical sections of the Vedic corpus, the mantras of the *saṁhitās* (ca. 1000-800 BCE) and the codifications of the *śrauta sūtras* (700-500 BCE). Early on, the project of textualizing Vedic ritual focused on collecting the mantras "joined together" (*saṁhitā*) in sequence according to their use in specific rites; later, this project expanded to include step-by-step instructions, "threads" (*sūtra*) that teach how to recite the mantras and perform the rites. The mantra collections of the Saṁhitās are the oldest, most authoritative layers of the corpus, the raw materials of recitation and ritual, while the Śrauta Sūtras are the blueprints for putting it all together in performance. Both are indispensable for understanding liturgical OM.

I begin by addressing the fundamental issue of what constitutes OM in the early texts, *before* it has been established as the preeminent syllable of the Vedas. How do we recognize it? What does it sound like? How can we locate it in the texts that have come down to us? The answers to these questions are surprisingly complex, for one of OM's signal characteristics in the liturgies is its

multiformity. Circumscribing the many different sounds and practices that fall under the rubric of OM is a challenging task. Next, having confronted the syllable's multiformity and the problems—and possibilities!—this poses for our investigation, I turn to main task of this chapter, the reconstruction of OM's early history. What is the oldest attestation of OM? How is it used in the texts where it first appears? The earliest textualizations of OM are found in scattered mantras of the oldest stratum of the corpus, the Saṃhitās. Here, OM appears in a diverse range of mantras; some can be traced to specific rites, while others remain obscure. The evidence is scant and fragmentary—we can only speak of OM as it is attested in the texts that have come down to us. Crucially, however, the internal stratification of the Saṃhitās allows us to posit a provisional timeline for OM's textual history: I will argue that the oldest OMs are to be found in the mantras of the Sāmaveda Saṃhitās. The ramifications of this relative chronology will extend throughout this study, lending support to one of my core arguments—that Sāmavedic singers and theologians played the most active role in fostering OM's emergence.

Having established OM's multiformity and a basic timeline for its early history, I will devote the next chapter to filling in the blanks left by the fragmented evidence of the Saṃhitās. To do this, I will depend on the detailed descriptions of praxis found in later texts, especially the systematic codifications of the Śrauta Sūtras.

§1. *Variations on OM*

What did OM sound like in the liturgies? How will we know it when we see it in a Vedic text, or hear it in the modern performance of *śrauta* ritual? Standing between us and the answers to these questions is a rich tradition of transmission and reception. OM has been made globally famous by post-Vedic religions in South Asia, especially Hinduism. Needless to say, the OM of the early Vedas is *not* the OM of Hinduism; to reconstruct the syllable's early history, we must guard against making

anachronistic assumptions about its form, sound, and use. In Hindu contexts, the syllable has its own special sign (ॐ) that represents the sound *om̐*. Since the Vedas were composed and transmitted by mouth and ear, there was no need for such a sign in the Vedic period; however, later manuscripts and printed editions of Vedic texts, especially those that use the *devanāgarī* script, do make use of this sign.¹ Other printed texts and translations into Western languages may represent OM in roman script, using *om*, *om̐* or *om̐̐* (the latter two representing the nasal sounds *anusvāra* and *anunāsika*). Whatever the manner of representation, a key difficulty facing the historian of OM is to judge whether the syllable is an original part of the text from the time it was composed, or a post-Vedic insertion. When OM is given within the text as part of a mantra, such instances often represent authentically Vedic attestations of the syllable. In other cases, OM is a later insertion at the head of a work or chapter, influenced by the post-Vedic convention of beginning every sacred recitation with the syllable. Though sanctioned by tradition, such insertions are clearly anachronistic—they were not a part of text or practice during the time the Vedic corpus was composed. Although there is some textual evidence already in the late Vedic period for beginning personal daily recitation (*svādhyāya*) with OM, the practice does not seem to have been generalized and codified until later.²

While the orthography adopted by scribes, scholars, and translators to represent OM may vary according to choice or circumstance—influenced by post-Vedic religious, orthographic, iconographic or scholarly conventions³—it frequently masks authentic variations of OM in the oral source texts. The

¹ A comprehensive study of the history of OM's orthography and iconography, with attention to regional and religious variations, is a clear desideratum. Boeles 1947 discusses OM's iconography with special reference to its spread across premodern South Asia. According to Witzel (pers. comm.), the widespread sign for OM (ॐ) grew from much earlier antecedents: the initial *o*- in Gupta-era script resembles the modern devanāgarī *u*-; to this the *anunāsika* semi-circle was added to yield something like the present-day sign.

² See *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 2.11.4 and my ch. 7, §3.6; cf. *Mānava Dharmasāstra* 2.74-75.

³ For instance, Pāṇini's grammar has shaped the post-Vedic legacy of OM by codifying the practice of applying *pluti* to OM at the beginning of a Vedic recitation (Pāṇini 8.2.87); and by devising a rule to justify the exceptional

initial sound of the following word often determines whether we find *om*, *om̐* or *oṃ*: preceding a vowel, it is *om* (*óm índravantaḥ prácarata, Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 4.9.2); but preceding other sounds, it is attested variously as *oṃ* or *om̐* (*oṃ pratiṣṭha, Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra* 3.20.8). To further complicate things, even when the sound is simply *o* and has no nasal at all, Vedic texts may still classify it under the rubric of OM: discussions of the *praṇava* of ṚV recitation (e.g., *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 11.5; *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* 1.1.19-22) present *o* as the "pure" (*śuddha*) alternative to *om* ("with *m*," *makāra*). Similarly, the mantra called *āśrāvāṇa*, which has OM as its first term, is attested differently, even in the same text: with *o* (*ó śrāvaya, MS* 1.4.11), or with nasal (*óm̐ śrāvaya, MS* 4.1.11). Such variations prompted at least one premodern debate about the preferred pronunciation of the sound, wherein the three variants *om*, *o* and *om̐* are considered (*Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* 1.24.3; cf. Parpola 1981a, 198; Wackernagel 1896, I, 302).⁴

Further variations stem from the conventions for reciting or singing OM. Like other Vedic mantras, OM is connected to any of a number of "recitational practices" (Hock 1991, 90, 99, 102-105) that dictate its use in performance. For example, OM often undergoes *pluti*, the lengthening of a vowel to three morae (*mātrā*), represented by the numeral '3': *o3m*, *o3ṃ* (e.g., *ó3ṃ pratiṣṭha, Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* 2.13).⁵ Another example is the addition of OM to an existing mantra, where OM is embedded in the morphology of an underlying word so that it replaces one or more syllables. Consider again the *praṇava*, the technique whereby OM is substituted in performance—but not attested in the source text

euphonic combination of *om* with a preceding *a/ā*, as in the Sāmavedic invocation *subrahmaṇyom* (which can be analyzed as *subrahmaṇyā + om*; Pāṇini 6.1.95); cf. Renou 1966. On the *subrahmaṇyā*, see ch. 3, §2.9.

⁴ But Fujii (1986, 11) notes that all manuscripts of the JUB mention only *om*, *o*, and *o* as the three options (excluding *om̐*); he suggests that the difference between the latter two apparently identical *o* sounds lies in how they are sung.

⁵ In direct speech, the *pluta* grade communicates emphasis, as in a question, call or greeting; in ritual contexts, it is applied to certain syllables of some mantras. See Strunk 1983, 24, 34-35; Whitney 1889, 79; Wackernagel 1896, I, 297.

itself—for the final syllable of certain Ṛgvedic verses: a verse ending in *jinvati* becomes, in recitation, *jinvato3m* (or *jinvato3*; Hillebrandt 1879, 107). Other cases attest only the outcome of adding OM in recitation, while the unmodified mantra remains unattested: the mantra *śómśāvom* (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 3.12.1) represents the completed transformation, using OM, of an underlying dual imperative (*śámśāva* "let us both recite!;" cf. Hoffmann 1976, 552-554; Hock 1991, 99-100). The manifold recitational practices involving OM point to a key difficulty in navigating the syllable's history: as often as not, OM is unattested in the mantra collections, and only becomes evident through applying the rules of recitation laid out in later texts. In this way, most instances of OM in *śrauta* ritual remain hidden, never surfacing in concordances and rarely discussed in the secondary literature. We will delve at length into the complexities of singing and reciting OM in the next chapter.

In sum, the form of OM in mantras and ritual contexts is highly variable and remains in flux throughout the Vedic period. Aiming at a unitary sound with a "primary" or "original" form is like shooting at a moving target. There is still no consensus among Indologists as to whether *o*, *om*, *om̐*, or *om* is primary.⁶ This multiformity poses a big problem for our investigation: since the texts themselves accept considerable variation under the rubric of OM, what counts as OM in the Veda and what does not? How to circumscribe the liturgical evidence so that we can speak concretely about OM's history? My solution is to opt for inclusive, flexible criteria: if it sounds anything like the range of sounds above, or if a Vedic text classifies a sound with the technical terms associated with OM, I take it into consideration. As far as my own orthography is concerned, I stick to the attested variants when talking about specific examples. When discussing the syllable generally, however, I shall go on using "OM" as a convenient way to represent the range of variations.

⁶According to some, pure *o* is the "Grundform" (Wackernagel 1896, I, 302) with *om̐* resulting from the Vedic phonological tendency to nasalize an extended vowel (Roth 1846; Bloomfield 1889; Hock 1991). According to others, *om* is the underlying form (Parpola 1981a, 198), itself based on Sanskrit *ām* ("yes") pronounced in a special liturgical register (Weber 1853; Böhtlingk & Roth 1855). For further discussion, see ch. 4, §2.

§2. *The Oldest OMs*

What is the oldest attestation of OM? How is it used in the texts where it first appears? We now turn to the earliest textualizations of OM in the corpus, found in scattered mantras of the SV and YV Saṃhitās. The passages I will discuss are candidates for "oldest OM" according to *the texts that have been passed down*. The Vedic corpus as we know it is an accident of history: many texts, and even whole branches, have been lost. So even if we are able to pinpoint the oldest OMs by comparing the testimony of the oldest extant texts in which it appears, it does not follow these mantras necessarily represent the "original" uses of the syllable, but only the oldest we have access to. Similarly, the absence of evidence for OM in earliest strata of the Vedic corpus—the Saṃhitās of the Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda—does not necessarily constitute evidence of OM's absence in the milieu where these texts were composed; rather, it only proves that the syllable was never textualized in those Saṃhitās as we know them. Be that as it may, I will argue in a later chapter against claims that there are specific allusions to OM in the cryptic language of the ṚV and AV (ch. 5, §2.1-2.3).

§3. *OM in the Sāmaveda Saṃhitās*

The most ancient attestations of OM come in the Saṃhitās of the Sāmaveda and Yajurveda. Because these collections of mantras are stratified compilations, containing material from different times, it is difficult to date them with absolute certainty. The OMs we will discuss all appear in the "Village Songs" (*grāmegeyagāna*) and the "Wilderness Songs" (*araṇyegeyagāna*),⁷ which Caland has identified as the archaic core of the SV corpus (Caland 1931, xi, xiv-xvii). Witzel has placed a proto-version of this core ("Ur-Sāmaveda Saṃhitā") *before* that of the oldest YV Saṃhitās, ca. 1000 BCE (Witzel 1997a, 268-270). Therefore, the relative dating of the strata of the Vedic corpus would suggest

⁷ On these divisions, see note 10 below.

that the OMs in the SV are older than those in the YV. If this is true, then the SV Saṃhitās furnish us with the oldest attested OMs in South Asia.

SV traditions come down to us in three branches: Kauthuma and Rāṇāyanīya, the recensions of which are nearly identical; and Jaiminīya, which is somewhat different from the other two and probably contains the most archaic material.⁸ The *Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya Saṃhitā* has been published in the Bibliotheca Indica edition of Satyavrata Sāmaśrami (BI). Because that edition employs two separate, overlapping systems of reference, I shall follow Caland (Caland & Henry 1907) and Parpola (1969) in simply referring to the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya songs below by volume and page number. For its part, the *Jaiminīya Saṃhitā* lacks a complete critical edition and must be cobbled together from a range of sources: printed publications, manuscripts, and oral testimony.⁹ Following Staal (1983a, I, 276-277) and Parpola (1983), I adopt the "Kerala" system of reference, which is based on the numbering of songs and melodies transmitted in the oral and manuscript tradition of Nampūtiri Jaiminīyas.

§3.1 OM as *stobha* in the Sāmavedic *gānas*

In the songs of the SV Saṃhitās, OM shows up as a non-lexical vocable, a sound without semantic meaning, much like hundreds of other such sounds found in these songs. The SV Saṃhitās are made up of melodies (*sāman*) and verses (*ṛc*) presented in various formats.¹⁰ To form the songs

⁸ On the *śākhās* of the SV, see Renou 1947, 87-129; Fujii 2012, 100.

⁹ The printed sources include Caland 1907, Raghu Vira 1938, Vibhūtibhūṣaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya 1976, Makara Bhushanam n.d. [2000], and Ravindran 2013. Significant evidence comes from the oral testimony of modern Nampūtiri Brahmins of the Jaiminīya branch, recorded in notebooks. These handwritten "paper manuscripts" were produced in the early 1970s by the highly respected singer Muṭṭattukāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu Iṭṭi Ravi Nampūtiri and his students (Muṭṭattukāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu, n.d.); see Fujii 2012, 112, Parpola 1973, 21, and Gerety forthcoming b, 21.

¹⁰ The basic division is into compilations of verses alone (*ārcika*), taken from the ṚV but arranged in a different order; and compilations of songs (*gāna*), consisting of melodies (*sāmans*) and adapted "source" (*yonī*) verses. These categories are presented in primary (*pūrva*)/paradigmatic (*prakṛti*) form, as well as in secondary (*uttara*)/modified (*vikṛti*) form. The *pūrvārcika* contains verses organized by deity (Agni, Indra, Soma), set to

(*gāna*), the words from the verse sections (*ārcika*) were combined with the melodies and interpolated with various syllables (*stobha*). In some cases, these interpolations are non-lexical, although in other cases they are permutations of words, fragments or sentences. The *gānas* have been textualized with *stobhas* already embedded; the *stobhas* are an integral part of the text of the song.¹¹ For clarity, I refer to these song texts, which consist of verses adapted to the melody by means of the added *stobhas*, as "lyrics."

Open up a page of the *gānas* at random and you will find *stobhas* repeated on page after page: *hā bu, hā u, hoyi, e*, and many others. Also common is *o*, often paired with other syllables, especially *vā*: *o vā o vā*. Later texts seem to suggest that in certain contexts, Sāmavedic *o* is understood as a variant of OM (Fujii 2009, 27). At any event, the frequency of pure *o* as a *stobha* renders a survey of that sound in the SV Saṃhitās unfeasible; suffice it to say that *o* appears again and again. By comparison, *om* and its nasal variants (*om̃, om̄*) are among the rarest of *stobhas*, seldom encountered in these texts.¹² For the SV Saṃhitās, I focus mostly on these variants of OM, although pure *o* sometimes enters into the discussion.

melodies in the "village songs" (*grāmegeyagāna*; GG). Next is a set of verses known as the *āraṇyakasaṃhitā* corresponding to the "wilderness songs" (*araṇyegeyagāna*; AG). (Collectively, the GG and AG are known as the *pūrva-* or *prakṛtigāna*.) The *uttarārcika* presents the same verses (plus some others) arranged according to their use in the Soma sacrifice. These are set to melodies in the *ūhagāna* (including some songs of the GG) and the *rahasya-* or *ūhyagāna* (including some of the AG), known together as the *uttaragāna*. On the arrangement of the SV Saṃhitās, see Caland 1931, i-ii; Renou 1947, 92; Staal 1961, 64; Parpola 1973, 25-26; Howard 1977, 8-9.

¹¹ The term *stobha* is first attested in MS 4.7.3; useful definitions are found in *Śabarabhāṣya* on Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 39 (Jha 1936, III, 1533) and Mādhava's *Jaiminīya-Nyāya-Mālā-Vistara* (9.2.11 on verse 18, quoted in Sāyaṇa's commentary in BI I,13). See also Hillebrandt 1897a, 100; Faddegon 1927, 179; Hoogt 1929, 1; Caland 1931, ix; Renou 1954, s.v. *stobha*; Staal 1961, 64; 1989b, 56; Gonda 1975, 315-316; Howard 1977, 11, 539. It has been speculated (e.g., Hillebrandt 1897a, 100) that *stobhas* arose when an existing corpus of melody was merged with a selection of RV verses: in order to fill out the places where the two did not coalesce, *stobhas* were interpolated as "filler" (Hock 1991, 17). I follow Hoogt (1929, 72) in refuting this. These non-lexical syllables are an integral part of the SV corpus as it is handed down; indeed, many songs do not depend on verses at all but consist entirely of *stobhas*!

¹² Finding these OMs in the *gānas* is like looking for a needle in a haystack: none of the *gānas* are in concordances or digitized and some remain unpublished. Because of this inaccessibility, I cannot claim to have examined every single instance of OM in the Sāmavedic corpus.

§3.2 Village Songs

Richard Simon has discussed OM in the Village Songs of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas (KGG), counting twenty-three cases where OM appears in the initial position of the lyric. But the majority of these cases occur at a text division, usually in the first *sāman* in a new chapter, while the corresponding cases in the Village Songs of the Jaiminīyas (JGG) lack OM. These facts suggest that initial OM may have been added to the KGG during transmission as a reflex of the post-Vedic practice of beginning recitations and chapters with OM. If this is the case, many of the OMs counted by Simon are anachronistic insertions without any bearing on the Vedic material.¹³

Simon has also observed that when *om* occurs in the non-initial position in the Kauthuma Village songs, it is always in collocation with the *stobhas o vā*, as in this example (BI II, 3):

*uccātejā / tam dhāsāḥ / om ovā / divisadbhū / miyādā de / om o vā / ugrām̃
śā rmā / om o vā / mā hā auhovā / śravāi //*

The parallel Jaiminīya lyric is nearly identical (JGG 49.1). *Om* in these lyrics resembles other *stobhas*: it punctuates the underlying verse.¹⁴ Consider an adjacent lyric that transforms the same base text in a different way:

*...ugram̃ śā rmā / om o / mahovā / śrā vo hāi // (KGG = BI II, 3)
...u gram̃ śā rmā / om̃ om̃ ma ho vā śrā vo hā i // (JGG 49.1)*

In spite of some variations in representations of the nasal (*om̃*, *om*) and in syllable- and "segment"- (*parvan*, represented by slashes) breaks, the above pair of lyrics is closely parallel and, in phonetic

¹³Although Simon gives no citations in support of this total, I have been able to track down many of the OM-initial *sāmans* in the KGG to which he refers (Simon 1913, 2n4): BI I, 91, 208, 249, 286, 314, 369, 400, 489; BI II, 2, 14, 30, 55, 91, 224.

¹⁴The verse, from the SV *pūrvārcika* (Jaiminīya 1.49.1 in Raghu Vira 1938, 35; Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya 1.5.2.4.1 in Benfey 1848, 49), is based on ṚV 9.61.10 (cf. *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 12.3.1): *uccā te jātām āndhaso divi śad bhūmi ā dade / ugrā śārma māhi śrāvaḥ //* "It was born high above from your stalk; though it was in heaven, on earth it took for itself mighty shelter and great fame" (trans. Jamison & Brereton 2014).

terms, nearly identical. As in the previous example, OM is non-initial, repeated, and collocated with other sounds (among these *o vā*, as Simon observed).¹⁵

§3.3 Wilderness Songs

Let's now turn to the Wilderness Songs of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas (KAG) and the Jaiminīyas (JAG). In many of these esoteric songs, the lyrics consist entirely of *stobhas* and have no relation to Ṛgvedic verses. Bearing in mind the collocation of *om* and *o vā* noted already, consider a similar sequence where the word *vāk* ("voice, speech") takes the place of the non-lexical syllable *vā* and the word *āyus* ("life") serves as finale. A pair of *sāmans* twice attests the sequence (KAG = BI II, 470-471):

*hāu / hā / o vāk / (triḥ) / om / om / hā / o vāk / e āyuh...*¹⁶

The Jaiminīya text is longer but similar (JAG 4.9):

hā bu hā bu hā bu hā o vāk hā o vāk hā o vāk / om om om om om om om / hā o vāk hā o vāk hā o vāk āyur āyur āyur e āyur e āyur e āyuh...

In the next example, OM is attested in the initial position, introducing lyrics made up of the *stobhas* *o vā*, *jyotis* ("light"), and *āyus* ("life"), among others (JAG 7.4):

*om om om āyūr āyūr jyotir jyotir jyotiḥ jyotovā jyotovā jyotovā jyotovāhāyi jyotovāhāyi jyotovāhāvuvā...*¹⁷

The Kauthuma lyric is almost identical, likewise beginning with three repetitions of *om* (KAG = BI II, 505). As noted above, this initial position calls to mind the post-Vedic convention of beginning a

¹⁵At least one other *sāman* with OM in the GG also meets these criteria: KGG = BI II, 4; JGG 49.1. Another attests *om* a single time next to *ovā*, but in separate *parvans* (KGG = BI II, 5); the parallel Jaiminīya text (JGG 49.1) lacks *om*.

¹⁶*Triḥ*, printed with parentheses in KAG/BI, indicates that what precedes it should be sung "three times," as the corresponding Jaiminīya example—where *hā o vāk* appears three times in a row—confirms. However Staal (1961, 76-79) presents this and other numerical expressions (*dvīḥ* "two times") as part of the lyric in his small edition of selected Jaiminīya *sāmans*.

¹⁷Staal's unpublished notes on the Nampūtiri performance of the 1975 Agnicayana connect this *sāman* to the *pravargya* rite (photocopy courtesy of Masato Fujii).

recitation with OM. However, the fact that the present example is attested not just in the Kauthuma lyric but also in the more archaic Jaiminīya text suggests an authentic Vedic provenance.

Another group of OMs comes in the last seventeen songs of the Jaiminīya Wilderness Songs. Each of the songs in the series is built on a single word that introduces the lyric. The final syllable of each introductory word is replaced with *-om*; the word is then repeated three times without *om* and combined with *stobhas*. Thus, for example, using the word *satya* ("truth") (JAG 25.24; Staal 1983a, I, 411):

satyoṃ / satya ho yi satya ho yi satya hā ā vu vā / e suvar jyotiḥ //

All seventeen *sāmans* are formed with this same pattern, using the same *stobhas*. The introductory words vary but always refer to cosmological or divine entities. None of the *sāmans* is based on a *ṛc*; these songs are composed entirely of *stobhas*, some lexical and some not.

§3.4 Sound patterns with OM

I want to pay closer attention to the sound patterns that occur regularly in these Sāmavedic lyrics with OM. Recall Simon's observation that OM within the lyric of these songs almost always occurs in collocation with *o vā*. Examining our examples more closely, it seems that the collocation *om...o vā* noticed by Simon is actually part of a larger pattern that includes other syllables: *mā, hā, au, ho, ma, or ho*. Our examples of OM in the Village Songs all contain these *stobhas*, varying only in their repetition and manner of distribution. Omitting the intervening words, we have:

om o vā (x3)...*mā hā auhovā* (KGG = BI II, 3; JGG 49.1)
om o / mahovā (KGG = BI II, 3)
oṃ oṃ ma ho vā (JGG 49.1)

Turning to the Wilderness Songs, we find that the same pattern holds, with several new variations: the substitution of *vāk* for *vā*; the frequent interpolation of the words *āyus* ("life"), *jyotis* ("light"), and *suvar* ("heaven"); and the addition of *e* before the finale:

hāu hā o vāk (x3) *om* (x2) *hā o vāk e āyuh* (KAG = BI II, 470-471)
hā o vāk (x3) / *om* (x6) / *hā o vāk* (x3) *āyur* (x3) *e āyur* (x3) (JAG 4.9)
om (x3) *āyur* (x2) *jyotiḥ* (x3)...*jyotovā* (x3)...*jyotovā hā yi* (x2)...*jyotovā hā vu vā* (KAG = BI II, 505; JAG 7.4)

The same holds true for the special group of seventeen Jaiminīya songs:

...om ... hā ā vu vā / ē suvar jyotiḥ (JAG 24.25)

Based on these recurring patterns and collocations of *stobhas*, it would seem that we are dealing with variations on a traditional refrain of some kind. The simpler versions in the Village Songs are elaborated and transformed in the Wilderness Songs, *even as they retain the same basic structure*. OM in the SV Saṃhitās is consistently associated with this refrain, which, like a jazz riff or a classical leitmotif, remains stable even as it serves as the basis for ornamentation and augmentation. (This argument should be checked against a musicological analysis of the songs to determine to what extent these lyrical patterns conform to melodic patterns. The best musicological work on Sāmavedic recitation remains the impressive oeuvre of Wayne Howard.)

§3.5 Yajurvedic parallels

So what does it mean to uncover such collocations and patterns associated with the oldest OMs? In the SV Saṃhitās, we have direct attestations of OM in song lyrics but no ritual context of comparable age to further guide our interpretation. It is difficult to say *how* these songs with OM were used in the liturgies of their time. However, an important clue for understanding OM's Sāmavedic background comes, somewhat unexpectedly, in the oldest Saṃhitā of the Yajurveda. Let me anticipate

my discussion of liturgical OM in the YV Saṃhitās by touching on this mantra here. The *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* attests a number of mantras that feature OM, one of which is in a Sāmavedic style (MS 4.9.21):¹⁸

*nidhāyo vā3 nidhāyo vā3 nidhāyo vā3 oṃ vā3 oṃ vā3 oṃ vā3 e ai oṃ
svárṇajyotiḥ //*

Macdonell commented on the repetition of OM and other "unintelligible interjections" (1900, 183) in this YV mantra but did not note the resemblance to the Sāmavedic *stobhas* (but cf. Hock 1991, 97).

Presented more schematically, the similarities of this example to the patterns in the Wilderness Songs become evident, notably the recurrence of *hā*, *o vā*, *oṃ vā*, *e*, *s(u)var*, and *jyotiḥ*:

...hāyo vā (x3) oṃ vā (x3) e ai svárṇajyotiḥ

I suggest that we have encountered here a Yajurvedic elaboration of the same pattern found in the SV Saṃhitās. The MS also helps us hone in on the ritual context, for this mantra appears in a group of mantras belonging to the *pravargya* rite.

A further clue comes in the later *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*, where fragments of a nearly identical lyric appear, identified by Witzel as a *sāman* sung by the Adhvaryu at the *pravargya* (KaṭhĀ 2.230-231; Witzel 2004, 93):

nídhāyy óvā nídhāyy óvétí vái sámnó [dgāyati...] é svàr jyótī3r ít[i]¹⁹

The KaṭhĀ finale *é svàr jyótī3r* brings the lyric even closer to the Sāmavedic Wilderness Songs.

Crucially, the KaṭhĀ identifies this *sāman* as one of several "unexpressed praise-songs" (*aniruktās stutayas*) that permit the sacrificer to reach the light of heaven, the sun. This identification suggests that this Yajurvedic lyric is among the earliest examples of "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*), a style of singing of great moment for the subsequent Sāmavedic history of OM (see ch. 3, §2.3; chs. 7-8).

¹⁸We will consider the others in section §4 below.

¹⁹ This mantra is given with a gloss interspersed: "He is set down, *ovā*; he is set down, *ovā*."...[He sings] "e heaven light."

Another variant of this mantra is found in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, where it is similarly identified as a *sāman* at the *pravargya*.²⁰

§3.6 Summing up: OM in the Sāmaveda Saṃhitās

I now draw a few preliminary conclusions based on our survey of liturgical OM in the SV Saṃhitās. The evidence suggests that these ancient musical texts furnish us with the oldest attested OMs in the Veda, and therefore in South Asian religions. This points to the importance of melody in OM's early history: the oldest OMs were not simply recited, but sung. In the lyrics of Sāmavedic songs, these oldest OMs are non-lexical vocables, known by the technical name *stobha*; as such, they are meaningless, in the narrow sense of conveying no semantic information. OM in the SV Saṃhitās is consistently found in collocation with specific *stobhas*, forming a range of recognizable patterns. The recurrence of the pairing *om vā* in collocation with the ending *svaṛ jyotiḥ* suggests a connection between the OM songs of the SV Saṃhitās and certain mantras in a Sāmavedic style found in the YV Saṃhitās and later texts. The Yajurvedic sources identify these mantras with OM as "unexpressed," thereby suggesting a further connection with "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*), a style of singing central to OM's subsequent discursive construction, as we shall see in later chapters.

§4. OM in the Yajurveda Saṃhitās

Attestations of OM are even scarcer in the Yajurveda Saṃhitās, where the syllable appears less than half a dozen times in all across the Maitrāyaṇīya and Taittirīya branches, belonging to the Black

²⁰ TĀ 4.40: *nidhāyyo 'vāpi nidhāyyo 'vāpi nidhāyyo 'vāpi / e asme asme / suvarṇajyotiḥ //* Sāyaṇa's commentary (on TĀ 4.40; Rājendralāla Mitra 1864, 558-559) calls the syllables of the text *stobhas* and identifies the mantra as a *sāman* sung by the Adhvaryu. Van Buitenen (1968, 150) links the TĀ version of the *sāman* to an optional *sūtra* on the *pravargya* (*Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra* 15.19.11), stating that if the Udgātṛ does not sing the *puruṣa-sāman*, then the Adhvaryu should make up for this lack by singing the present one. On the *puruṣa-sāman*, see Staal 1983a, I, 417; 1989b, 55; as well as discussion below.

YV; and only once in the Vājasaneyi branch of the White YV.²¹ Unlike the mantras of the SV, which are presented as lyrics without exposition, the Yajurvedic mantras with OM often are often framed by prose discussions. These furnish technical terms and other clues that permit the reliable reconstruction of specific liturgical contexts. Another difference between the Sāmavedic and Yajurvedic evidence pertains to the fraught issue of meaning in mantras (see ch. 1, §5.7-8). Whereas the attestations of OM in the SV Saṃhitās were all *stobhas*, and hence patently non-lexical, the OMs in the YV Saṃhitās often appear in collocation with lexical expressions, forcing us to confront the thorny question of what OM *means*—or whether it means anything at all. Too often, parallel mantras are scarce, making comparison difficult; or else there is not adequate internal evidence to decide the question. Nor have previous scholars achieved consensus as to the syllable's meaning in these passages: where relevant, I will discuss their arguments below. (In many cases they have resorted to etymological arguments, which I will consider at length in ch. 4, §2). For these reasons, I will leave OM untranslated in my analysis of the Yajurvedic mantras below.

The earliest YV text attesting OM is the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*, where the sound occurs five times in five separate passages, corresponding to four different contexts within the YV liturgy. (We have already considered one of these passages in the discussion of the Adhvaryu's *sāman* above.) In all but one of these passages, the MS gives the syllable as *om*; however, a parallel passage with the form *o* proves that two different sounds under the rubric of OM may exist even within the same text. In short, the evidence of the oldest YV Saṃhitā—like that of the SV Saṃhitās—attests to liturgical OM's multiformity from the earliest period. In spite of this diversity in form and context, there are some common threads tying together the MS passages: for instance, several pertain to some sort of verbal exchange between officiants, while others feature in the *pravargya*.

²¹ The "black" YV is so called for its mixed presentation of mantras and prose together, while the "white" presents mantras and prose in separate sections.

§4.1 Overnight waters

The first example is an exchange during the rites of the "overnight waters" (*vasatīvarī*), when the Hotṛ queries the Adhvaryu (MS 4.5.2):

"Have you found the waters, O Adhvaryu, *om*?" With this he means to say:
"Have you found the sacrifice?"²²

Here *om* is the final term in a question; it is also in collocation with the *pluta* grade of an underlying vocative form.²³ It would seem reasonable to surmise that *om* here is "a particle of address" (Hock 1991, 91-92),²⁴ comparable to the archaic English interjection *o*, as in: "O, Adhvaryu..." However, nearly identical mantras without *om* show that the Adhvaryu can be addressed with only a simple vocative or *pluti* for emphasis.²⁵ One might also speculate that OM serves to mark a question, or anticipate a response, and then rule these out by adducing the same parallels. The function and meaning of *om* here remain inconclusive. At a minimum, we can observe that the mantra uses *om* as the final term in a question, collocated with a vocative; and that the testimony of parallel texts suggests that *om* is an optional addition.

²² *áver apò 'dhváryā3 óm // íty / ávido yajñā3m íti vā etád āha //*

²³ The underlying vocative is *ádhvāryō*; *-a3u* is the conventional *pluta* grade for a vocative ending in *-o*. See Wackernagel 1896, I,298. We can further elucidate the present example by working backward, that is, "undoing" the sandhi to reconstruct the underlying forms. Indeed, *adhvāryā3 óm* is one possible result of joining the *pluta* vocative *adhvārya3u* with *om* (*-a3u + om = -ā3v om = -ā3 om*; cf. Hock 1991, 104). On this unusual dropping of the final semivowel, see Whitney 1889, 47.

²⁴ Hock bases his claim on a set of examples featuring OM with imperatives and/or vocatives. However, one could just as easily surmise that it functions as an interrogative particle in the present example.

²⁵ Several examples from identical liturgical contexts do not use OM, relying on vocatives to signal address: *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 6.4.3: *ádhvāryó 'ver apā3; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.9.3.31: *adhvāryō 'ver apā*; and *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2.20.10: (*a*)*ver apo 'dhvāryā3u*. The latter lacks *om* but similarly attests the *pluti* on the final syllable of the vocative form. The *pluti* in such a case may mark the statement as an interrogative and/or a vocative salutation to a person of rank, as discussed above.

§4.2 *Prasava*

The next three attestations can be connected to the *pravargya*, a rite of offering milk in a red-hot clay pot. Just before the *pravargya* begins, the Adhvaryu addresses his fellow priests, among these the Brahman, to whom he announces: *brahman pravargyeṇa pracariṣyāmaḥ* "Brahman, we shall perform the pravargya." The Brahman priest responds (MS 4.9.2):

Earth, atmosphere, heaven! At the instigation of the god Savitar, instigated by
Bṛhaspati; *om*, accompanied by Indra, perform your duties!²⁶

OM in this excerpt introduces an imperative (*om...pracarata*). The Brahman, using the same verb as in the Adhvaryu's announcement (*pra √car*), impels the priests to act in the name of the sun god Savitr.²⁷

The so-called "instigation" (*prasava*) is one of the Brahman's main functions and is widely attested in Vedic texts, although not always with OM and not always at the *pravargya*. The younger *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* attests a *prasava* formula with a similar syntax and structure but in a different liturgical context. According to later testimony, after the Brahman priest has consumed the injured portion of the *idā* oblation that is reserved for him, the Adhvaryu seeks his permission to proceed with the performance: "O Brahman, shall I step forward?" (*brahman prasthāsyāmi?*; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.7.4.21). Breaking the silence he has maintained since his election at the beginning of the sacrifice, the Brahman replies with a series of mantras, ending with the *prasava*²⁸ (VS 2.13):

May All the Gods rejoice here! *o3m*, step forward!²⁹

²⁶ *bhūr bhūvaḥ svār devāsya savitūḥ prasavé bṛhaspatiprasūtā // óm índravantaḥ prácarata* // The *prasava* in this example includes the expiatory mantra *bhūr bhūvaḥ svar*, the "utterances" (*vyāhṛtayaḥ*), often found in collocation with OM, as we will see in ch.3, §4.3).

²⁷ On the Brahman's role in the history of Vedic texts, see Fujii 2001; Bodewitz 1983.

²⁸ For further details on this sequence, see ŚB 1.7.4.18-22 (where the *prasava* is given *without* OM); and ĀpŚS 3.20.8 (where OM is included).

²⁹ *vísve devāsa ihā mādayantām ó3m prátiṣṭha //*

One difference from the Maitrāyaṇīya examples is that the sound in the VS is lengthened by *pluti* (*o3ṃ*), demonstrating a fact about liturgical OM to which we will return time and again: the syllable varies its form in identical liturgical contexts—OMs with and without *pluti* are attested in the *prasavas* of these two Vedic branches. According to Parpola (1981a, 197), OM in the *prasava* has an affirmative meaning; it responds to a question and leads to a command, as in: "Yes (*o3ṃ*), step forward!" In a later chapter (ch. 4, §2), I will discuss this and other proposed meanings for liturgical OM, arguing that while such lexical interpretations may be defended for particular contexts, they do not adequately explain the ritual evidence as a totality.

§4.3 *Āśrāvaṇa*

Returning to the MS, we encounter another instance where a priest again exhorts another to act or recite. In this case the context is again the *pravargya* (MS 4.9.9):

Om, let him be heard! Let it be heard! Recite the verses of the hot-milk offering!³⁰

We are concerned with the first mantra in the series, *óm śrāvaya*, spoken in a loud voice by the Adhvaryu to the Āgnīdhra priest, a signal that it is time to cue a third priest, the Hotṛ, to recite.³¹ Many variants of this mantra can be found across the Vedic branches;³² the simplest form lacks OM: *ā śrāvaya*. This command has a technical meaning that can only be awkwardly translated: "utter [the mantra] *astu śrauṣaṭ!*" For its part, *astu śrauṣaṭ* is an archaic mantra—probably a frozen Indo-Iranian

³⁰ *óm śrāvaya // ástu śrauṣaṭ //ghármasya yaja /*

³¹ As for the others: the Āgnīdhra's reponse (*pratyāśrāvaṇa*) is the second formula, itself a cue to the Hotṛ to exclaim *vaṣaṭ*; and the third mantra is the Adhvaryu's cue to the Hotar to recite his *yājyā* verses. On these formulas and prescriptions, see Hillebrandt 1897a, 99 and Renou 1954. For a parallel passage with the same formulas (but without OM) see ŚB 14.2.2.15.

³² ĀpŚS 2.15.3 gives as options *ā śrāvaya*, *o śrāvaya*, *śrāvaya*, and *om ā śrāvaya*; cf. Parpola 1981a, 201. For examples of the *āśrāvaṇa* without OM, see KaṭhS 31.13; TS 1.6.11.1, 2, 3, 4; 3.3.7.2, 3; VS 19.24; ŚB 14.2.2.15; ĀpŚS 3.16.17; BŚS 20.12: 28.1. In the *mahāpitṛyajña*, the formulation changes to *óm svadhā* (ŚB 2.6.1.24).

form; literally, "let there be a hearing" (Caland & Henry 1907, xxv)—which exhorts the Hotṛ to make his verses heard by the gods.

Furnishing our next instance of OM, the MS elsewhere attests the variant *ó śrāvaya* (1.4.11). This is a striking demonstration of OM's multiformity even within the same Saṃhitā: nasal *om̐* and pure *o* alternate in contexts that are otherwise identical in terms of phonology and syntax. While OM's variation in the pair of *prasavas* discussed above might be chalked up to differences in branch affiliation, such an explanation cannot apply here, where the variation occurs in the mantras of the same branch. It is possible that the variation is due to diachronic change within the MS: *ó śrāvaya* is a mantra from the oldest stratum of the text, while *óm̐ śrāvaya* comes from the youngest layer. (For more on the internal stratification of the MS, see §4.5 below). How should these variations be explained? What do they tell us about OM's history? As we continue our survey of liturgical OM, we will constantly grapple with such questions. As I argue in a later chapter (ch. 6, §3.9), the multiformity of liturgical OM becomes a key motif in later reflections on the syllable.

Returning to MS 4.9.9, we can see that OM introduces a command, a syntactic position suggesting parallels with the *prasava*, which likewise consists of OM plus imperative. Indeed, Parpola thinks *om̐ śrāvaya* is based on the form of the *prasava* and carries a similar affirmative meaning (1981a, 201). On the other hand, Hock has argued that OM in this mantra is not meaningful in itself, but instead reflects the outcome of recitational practices, namely the "recitational substitution" of OM for the underlying verbal prefix *ā* in *ā śrāvaya* (1991, 99). The wide gulf between Parpola's and Hock's positions goes to show that the same material can lead to radically different interpretations; and that any translation of OM must be carefully considered and defended.

§4.4 *Pratigara*

We round out our survey of liturgical OM in the YV Saṃhitās by considering the syllable's unique attestation in the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, as the "response" (*pratigara*) spoken by the Adhvaryu to the Hotṛ. The mantra is part of an elaborate exchange between these two priests, which we will treat in greater detail in the next chapter. In reply to the Hotṛ's invitation to recite together, the Adhvaryu responds with *śóm̐sā módaiva* (TS 3.2.9.5). The morphology and underlying sense of this command have long been debated; one analysis that seems to fit the context is that the mantra is some transformation, using OM, of the underlying command **śam̐sā madeva*, meaning "recite! let us rejoice!"³³ The testimony of the later texts provides many analogous instances where OM is embedded within the morphology of another word. However, based on the TS alone, we cannot conclusively say how the mantra came to have its attested form.

§4.5 *OM in the Yajurveda Saṃhitās: relative chronology and analysis*

Let's turn now to the dating of these passages. The MS, though generally considered the oldest YV Saṃhitā (alongside the *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā*, in which OM is never attested), contains material from several different strata. Its internal arrangement reflects the relative age of its contents (Witzel 1997a: 270-272), with the first three *kāṇḍas* regarded as the oldest. The mantra *ó śrāvaya* belongs to the *prathama kāṇḍa* of the MS, and therefore likely furnishes the oldest OM in the YV. The remaining attestations of OM in the MS belong to the fourth *kāṇḍa*, traditionally known as *khila* ("appendix"), which Schroeder regarded as a later supplement (1879, 4). However, the fourth *kāṇḍa* itself is internally stratified: the Hotṛ's query ending in OM (MS 4.5.2) comes in a Brāhmaṇa-type section on the Soma sacrifice, which Dharmadhikari has argued is considerably older than the appendix in which it is

³³ On the morphologies and meanings of the Adhvaryu's *pratigara*, see ch.3, § 3.5.

embedded (Dharmadhikari 2008, 16-17). The other three Maitrāyaṇīya passages with OM cluster in an appendix on the *pravargya*, generally agreed to be the youngest layer of the Saṃhitā (MS 4.9; Witzel 1997a, 304).³⁴ Therefore, although the MS provides at least two of the most ancient YV mantras with OM in the Vedic corpus, it also attests several OM mantras in its youngest layers.

The other YV material we have considered comes from texts regarded as younger than the ancient core of the MS, the TS by a century or two, and the VS by considerably more (Witzel 1997a, 273-74). As with the MS, the TS is a stratified text; our mantra (TS 3.2.9.5) comes from the younger expository prose sections. We might surmise that these *brāhmaṇa* sections of the TS are of roughly the same age as the corresponding *brāhmaṇa* section of the MS; and older than the *khila* sections of the MS. The VS is a special case, representing a late Vedic collation of mantric material from existing *brāhmaṇa* texts, part of the larger project to separate mantras from prose which characterizes the formation of the White YV. Therefore, the VS as we now have it represents an ancient stratum that has passed through the filter of a much later redaction. While acknowledging the uncertainties this causes, I assume that the OM mantra (VS 2.13) is younger than the most ancient mantras in the MS and TS, but perhaps older than those found in the MS appendix.

Bringing all of the evidence from the YV Saṃhitās together, we arrive at the following series of mantras featuring OM, grouped here in rough chronological order with textplace and liturgical context indicated in parentheses:

ó śrāvaya (MS 1.4.11; liturgical context unspecified)
áver apò 'dhváryā3 óm (MS 4.5.2; Hotṛ in *vasatīvarī* waters)
śómśā módaiva (TS 3.2.9.5; Adhvaryu's *pratigara* in *śastra*)
ó3ṃ prátiṣṭha (VS 2.13; Brahman's *prasava* after *iḍā*)
óm...prácarata (MS 4.9.2; Brahman's *prasava* in *pravargya*)
óm śrāvaya (MS 4.9.9; Adhvaryu's *āśrāvaṇa* in *pravargya*)

³⁴ Dharmadhikari (2008, 17) argues that the *soma brāhmaṇa* of 4.5-8 is a transposed continuation of similar material in 3.10. He also points to internal evidence in the MS (2008, 20; MS 3.3.10) suggesting that the *pravargya* material in 4.9 was termed an *āraṇya*, i.e., an early example of what is later known as the *āraṇyaka* genre.

...oṃ vā́3 oṃ vā́3 oṃ vā́3 e ai oṃ svárṇajyotiḥ (MS 4.9.21; Adhvaryu's *sāman* in *pravargya*)

The most striking characteristic of this evidence is the overall multiformity of OM, both in its phonology (*o, om, o3m*), its position in syntax (introducing an imperative, finishing a question, embedded in other words), its speaker (Hotṛ, Adhvaryu, or Brahman), and its liturgical deployment (a range of rites). Especially in view of the tiny sample size, the "oldest OMs" of the YV Saṃhitās are extremely diverse in form and function.

Nevertheless, there are significant similarities that underlie this multiformity. For instance, four out of the seven mantras consist of OM introducing an imperative, while another set of three pertains to the *pravargya* rite. Excluding the Adhvaryu's *sāman*, which I have already discussed above, there is another key feature that unites the mantras: all six figure in some sort of verbal exchange between priests—questions, commands and acknowledgements. We will return to this apparent rhetorical feature of OM in the chapters to come, for the syllable's function in such exchanges is grist for the mill of many scholarly arguments about OM's primary meaning and etymology.

§5. *OM in the Vedic Saṃhitās: questions and conclusions*

This brings to an end our survey of liturgical OM in the Vedic Saṃhitās. Notwithstanding the conclusions I offer in the paragraphs to follow, this survey of the oldest OMs in the Vedas certainly raises more questions than it answers. What does OM mean? How is it used in ritual? As the authoritative collections of mantras used in sacrifice, the Saṃhitās are the bedrock of Vedic ritual in its early phases. While later codifications of liturgical OM *may* be consistent with the mantras textualized in the Saṃhitās, there is no way to know for sure; we must decide on a case-by-case basis. Nearly everything about the syllable—its sound, its meaning, its liturgical application, its religious significance—is up for grabs until the later texts give us more information. Why is OM attested so

rarely? Why do its form and function seem to vary so widely? While the Saṃhitās themselves provide no clear answers to these questions, they at least permit us to establish the basic fact of OM's multiformity from the earliest period. This poses a fundamental challenge to scholars who would approach the syllable's history in terms of a unitary or original OM (see ch. 4, §2.1).

By relying on the "oldest OMs" discussed in this chapter, it is possible to establish a framework for the diachronic development of liturgical OM in the Vedic Saṃhitās. Having surveyed the Saṃhitās in their entirety, we can now say—as far as the surviving texts allow—where the story of OM begins. I now summarize the evidence in order to sketch the diachronic development of liturgical OM in the early Vedic period. Absent from the oldest layers of the Vedic corpus (the Saṃhitās of the ṚV and AV), OM first shows up as a non-lexical vocable (*stobha*) in the lyrics of SV Saṃhitās. Set to melody, OM occurs in a range of forms (*o*, *om*, etc.) and positions in the lyric (initial, middle, repeated). It also appears consistently in collocation with specific *stobhas*, the most frequent being the pairing *om vā* noticed by Simon. I have argued that this pairing is part of a larger pattern on which most instances of OM in the SV Saṃhitās seem to be based. By comparing parallel mantras drawn from the YV, I have identified this pattern with the mode of Sāmavedic singing known in later texts as "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*). As the name suggests, this mode of singing trades on the non-lexicality of the lyrics: significantly, the earliest attested uses of OM in the Vedas are predicated on the syllable's lack of semantic meaning. In sum, the oldest OMs in South Asian religion are musical and meaningless.

The next phase of OM's history is reflected in a half-dozen mantras from the YV Saṃhitās. Multiformity continues to be a feature of OM in these passages, which attest the sound in several forms and connect it to distinct liturgical contexts. Although all but one of the Yajurvedic mantras feature intelligible semantics and syntax, this intelligibility does not extend to OM; the precise meaning and function of the syllable in these mantras—affirmation, interjection, recitational substitution—continue

to be debated by Indologists. However, OM in the YV Saṃhitās is consistently associated with verbal exchanges between priests, perhaps indicating that the syllable serves some rhetorical or performative function. In most of these cases, OM seems to be associated with the some form of ritual authority, especially requests, acknowledgements, and cues aimed at integrating the participation of the various officiants.

To conclude, I wish to contrast the general character of liturgical OM in the SV and the YV Saṃhitās, which in each case conforms broadly to the ritual specialization of the officiants who compiled the texts. OM in the SV Saṃhitās is musical and semantically meaningless. This clearly corresponds to the Sāmavedic liturgical specialty of offering praise through melody and song; more broadly, though, I think it reflects what I shall refer to in this study as the Sāmavedic sensibility, that is, an attunement to sound, melody, and non-lexical expression. In the YV Saṃhitās, by contrast, OM occurs in mantras which direct praxis and facilitate the participation of officiants. This corresponds in a parallel fashion to the Yajurvedic specialty of making offerings, uttering mantras, and cuing recitations; more broadly, it reflects the Yajurvedic sensibility, namely, a responsibility to organize and direct the flow of ritual.

CHAPTER THREE

RECITATION AND PERFORMANCE: OM IN THE ŚRAUTA SŪTRAS

Given the massive size of the Vedic Saṃhitās—tens of thousands of mantras preserved in numerous recensions, amounting to hundreds of hours in recitation and several thousand pages in print—it would seem from the scant testimony of the previous chapter that OM was rarely encountered in Vedic ritual. But this would be misleading. To locate OM in the Vedas, one has to search beyond the mantras in their *saṃhitā* form. In this chapter we approach liturgical OM through the codifications of recitation and performance found in the Śrauta Sūtras. These step-by-step accounts of praxis show how the mantras we have already encountered are put to use; even more importantly, however, the Śrauta Sūtras reveal many additional liturgical contexts for OM.

§1. *The Śrauta Sūtras: textualizing ritual expertise*

A gap of five hundred years or more separates the Śrauta Sūtras from the Saṃhitās. The texts composed in the intervening centuries—the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads—are largely interpretive, devoted to explaining the esoteric meanings of sacrifice; as such, they are of limited use in putting together a comprehensive account of liturgical OM. The composers of such works take expertise in the practical matters of sacrifice for granted, reiterating only as much of the praxis as is necessary for the elaboration of a given topic. This suggests that knowledge of praxis was transmitted extratextually from generation to generation within each branch for much of the Vedic period. In the case of OM and other mantras, this would have meant passing on information behind the scenes, with teachers orally instructing their students in the nitty gritty of recitation and performance. Ultimately, though, there was a need to systematically codify the sacrifice in a step-by-step fashion: in the Śrauta

Sūtras, we find the fulfillment of a centuries-long project of gathering and textualizing practical expertise.

§1.1 *Solos and ensembles*

The Śrauta Sūtras have a dual purpose: on the one hand, they codify solo roles and elements of ritual according to the idiosyncracies of each liturgy and branch; on the other hand, they integrate these specifics into a flow of performance in which officiants from different liturgies and branches come together as an ensemble. This twin emphasis on solos and ensembles has important implications for understanding liturgical OM. As individual texts, the Śrauta Sūtras give detailed and comprehensive accounts of the particular liturgies they address. Each Śrauta Sūtra takes shape within the traditions of a specific Vedic *śākhā* and with reference to one of the primary liturgies, each named for its lead officiant: the Sāmavedic *audgātram*, led by the Udgātr̥; the Ṛgvedic *hautram*, led by the Hotṛ; and the Yajurvedic *ādhvaryavam*, led by the Adhvaryu. (Some texts also identify a fourth liturgy, the *brahmatvam*, led by the Brahman and later associated with the Atharvaveda (Caland & Henry 1907, xix). However, the Brahman's duties are textualized piecemeal throughout the three main liturgies). With their focus on specific roles and elements of the performance, the Śrauta Sūtras are useful for documenting the variations of liturgical OM from branch to branch and Veda to Veda. Willem Caland has emphasized that Vedic ritual is an ensemble performance: he compared the four lead officiants to the four players in a string quartet.¹ Extending this comparison, we might say that the Śrauta Sūtras as a genre furnish the score: even as they codify individual parts, they serve to integrate an ensemble performance by officiants from different liturgies working together. Variations and rival teachings

¹ "Die *mise-en-scène* dieses Ritus...läßt ein wenig ein Streichquartett erinnern, wobei jede der Melodien für sich selbst genommen schon interessant ist, das man aber erst begreifen kann, wenn man alle vier zusammen, sich gegenseitig ergänzend, hört. Alles greift auch hier ineinander" (Caland 1990, xiii).

aside, the texts are mutually coherent in their presentation of *śrauta* ritual. In this respect, they are helpful for arriving at a more generalized assessment of the syllable's performance within the shared ritual culture.

§1.2 *Reconstructing recitation and performance*

To truly take the measure of liturgical OM in *śrauta* ritual during the first millennium BCE, we must push our inquiry beyond texts to embrace reconstructions of recitation and ritual performance. In fact, my survey of the Śrauta Sūtras will show that many uses of liturgical OM are never directly recorded in the primary sources—instead, they come about *only* in recitation and performance with the application of special techniques. As part of the overall project to comprehensively codify all aspects of ritual performance, the Śrauta Sūtras provide a wealth of information about such techniques. Here we find that OM is often added to existing mantras, or substituted for certain syllables. In sum, it is not enough to locate mantras in the texts that already contain OM; we must also attend to passages that codify *how* the syllable is used in performance.

In this way, the Śrauta Sūtras reveal a current in the history of OM that has been mostly hidden from view, precisely because it cannot be *visually* accessed as a reader using concordances or critical editions. Instead, this *audible* current of OM's history demands a different approach: first, philological reconstruction based on the close study of the Śrauta Sūtras and their ancillary treatises; and second, informed consultation with modern insiders, such as the Nampūtiri Brahmins of Kerala, who have maintained a faithful oral tradition.² By making audible this hidden history of the syllable, this chapter

² Combining mastery of the relevant texts with intergenerational experience of transmission and performance within specific Vedic branches, these modern heirs to *śrauta* traditions have helped me make sense of the concise and often cryptic formulations of the Śrauta Sūtras; I will credit their contributions as I would any other scholarly resource.

will show that far from being an unusual sound in Vedic ritual, OM virtually defines the soundscape of sacrifice.

§1.3 *Twenty archetypes*

The Śrauta Sūtras codify as many as twenty archetypal uses of OM in *śrauta* ritual, spanning all three liturgical Vedas and their signature modes of recitation: *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*. (It is difficult to fix an exact number of uses because they vary, overlap, and combine). The twenty-or-so archetypes generate an exponentially greater quantity of OMs in performance. The multiformity of liturgical OM is therefore not only a matter of multiple archetypes—OM's multiformity also encompasses every single iteration derived from each archetype. Each of these archetypes of liturgical OM would have been applied many times in the course of a given ritual performance; the total number of OMs ringing out in a single Soma sacrifice would have numbered in the thousands. After treating each of these archetypes individually in the sections that follow, I will return to the group of twenty at the end of the chapter to draw some general conclusions.

§1.4 *Om in the Soma sacrifice*

I mostly restrict my discussion below to the paradigmatic form of the Soma sacrifice, the *agniṣṭoma* ("praise of Agni"), with occasional reference to other rites in the *śrauta* system. The Soma sacrifice is a set of rites organized around the basic act of pressing, filtering, and drinking the juice of the plant called *soma*. The three pressings of *soma* (morning, midday, and "third") take place on a single day and make up the climactic finale of the multi-day sacrifice, which is performed for the benefit of a patron, the Yajamāna, and managed by the Adhvaryu of the YV. The pressing-day features the chanting of elaborate suites of mantras: "praise-songs" (*stuti*, *stotra*) by the Udgātṛ and other

Sāmavedic priests, and "recitations" (*śastra*) by the Hotṛ and other Ṛgvedic priests. The two types of chant alternate throughout the day, with five of each in the morning, five at midday, and two in the third service, for a total of twelve of each type.

I shall use the last day of the Soma sacrifice as the framework for my analysis below: first I take up the uses of OM in the Sāmavedic *stotra*, along with a few Sāmavedic uses from other liturgical contexts; next, I discuss those associated with the Ṛgvedic *śastra*; I finish up by treating several uses of OM that occur repeatedly in the sacrifice—these have affinities with the Yajurvedic liturgy. This structure also reflects the relative density of OMs across the three liturgies: the SV attests the greatest range of uses for the syllable, followed by the ṚV, and then the YV.

My main sources in this chapter are the Śrauta Sūtras pertaining to the three main liturgies. I also draw on Caland and Henry's masterful synopsis based on these primary sources, which is an invaluable guide to the integrated performance of sacrifice (Caland & Henry 1907); citations of this text are indicated by paragraph (e.g., CH §152). Together, these sources give us a much more complete sense of OM in the *śrauta* liturgies than was possible from the fragmentary evidence of the Saṃhitās. Nevertheless, in some cases it has been necessary to consult additional sources, including Vedic texts from earlier strata, later ritual manuals (*prayoga*), and so forth.

§2 OM in the Sāmavedic *stotra*

OM's uses in the Sāmavedic liturgy cluster around the *stotras*, sung by a trio of singers led by the Udgātṛ. An individual *stotra* is made up of repetitions called *stotriyās*, each formed from the union of a specified melody (*sāman*) with verses (*ṛc*). The number of repetitions is fixed for each *stotra*. Most *stotras* use the same melody throughout all repetitions, although some use several melodies. A *stotriyā* is further divisible into five portions, each of which is assigned to one or more of the three principal SV

singers: these are *prastāva* by the Prastotr, *udgītha* by the Udgātr, *pratihāra* by the Pratihār, *upadrava* by the Udgātr, and *nidhana* by the trio together. The five-fold arrangement is increased to seven in performance by the addition of the *himkāra* sung by all together before certain *prastāvas*; and the *ādi*, which is the addition of OM before the *udgītha*.³

The most significant attestations of OM occur in the *stotras* set to the *gāyatra* melody, especially those sung in the "unexpressed" (*anirukta*) style. However, the *gāyatra* is scarcely treated in the Saṃhitās and Śrauta Sūtras of the SV,⁴ a fact that Asko Parpola explains as a function of the extreme secrecy surrounding the melody (Parpola, pers. comm.). Tellingly, as we will see below, the most sustained treatment of the ritual performance of the *gāyatra-sāman* comes in an esoteric Sāmavedic text in the style of the Āraṇyakas and early Upaniṣads.

§2.1 *Prastāva: the prelude*

The "prelude" (*prastāva*), whenever it is sung to the *gāyatra* melody, has *-om* in place of the final syllable of the underlying verse. *Prastāvas* with OM therefore correspond to all occurrences of the *gāyatra* in the Soma sacrifice: that is, OM occurs as the final syllable of the preludes in all five *stotras* of the morning service (1-5), and in the first three repetitions of the *pavamānastotras* in the midday and

³ On the fundamentals of SV singing in the Soma sacrifices, see Eggeling 1885, 307n5, 310n1, 325n2; Hillebrandt 1897a, 99-101; Hoogt 1929, 22; Renou 1954, 168-169; Staal 1968, 412-413; 1983a, I, 602-603; Parpola 1969, 12-13; Howard 1977, 16-24. The *himkāra* encompasses a range of sounds (*hum*, *hiṃ*, *hṃ*) and is used in a variety of liturgical contexts (see Burnell 1876, xlv). For its use at the beginning of certain "rounds" (*pariyāyas*) of *stotras*, see Staal 1961, 69, citing Simon 1913, 3n5; Parpola 1969, 12. For the *himkāra* in other ritual contexts, see §4.4 below.

⁴ For the *gāyatra* melody in Sāmavedic texts, see Fujii 2009, 1n1.

third services (6, 11).⁵ According to the codifications of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas as reconstructed by Caland,⁶ the first *ājyastotra* features three *prastāvas*, all ending in *-om* (lyrics from CH §155):

agna āyāhi vītayom /...
taṃ tvā samidbhir aṅgirom /...
*sa naḥ pṛthuśravāyiyom /...*⁷

Staal (1968, 417), on the basis of the testimony of modern Nampūṭiri singers, provides the corresponding Jaiminīya lyrics, which also end in *-om*.

§2.2 *Ādi and udgītha: the beginning and the Udgāṭṛ's portion*

As the Prastotṛ finishes the prelude, the Udgāṭṛ begins his *udgītha* by singing OM, an addition to the lyric that applies to all *stotras* regardless of melody. Consider the second *pṛṣṭhastotra*, sung to the *vāmadevya* melody in the manner of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas (lyrics from CH §203):

*om ū tī sadāvṛdhaḥ sa khā au ho hā yi kayā śacāyi...*⁸

This introduction of the *udgītha* with OM is known as the *ādānam* "taking up" or the *ādi* "beginning."⁹

Adding OM in this manner is strictly a recitational practice: though never recorded in SV Saṃhitās, it is

⁵ Howard notes that "all *prastāvas* of all settings of the *gāyatra* conclude with this syllable [OM]" including the Sāmavedic rendition of the *gāyatrī* mantra (1983, 316; see 1977, 514 and JAG 25.39); see also Staal 1961, 67-68; 1968, 416ff.; 1983a, I, 603; Kashikar 1970, 278ff.; Parpola 1981a, 201; Fujii 2009, 10n39.

⁶ To reconstruct these (and other) *gāyatra* song-texts of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas, Caland depends on unspecified Prayogas (CH §134g), as well as the *pariśiṣṭa* to the Uttarārcika (BI V, 601; Asko Parpola, pers. comm.).

⁷The verses, from the SV *uttarārcika* (Jaiminīya 3.2.1-3 in Raghu Vira 1938, 51; Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya II.1.1.4.1-3 in Benfey 1848, 62), correspond to ṚV 6.16.10a. *agna ā yāhi vītāye...* "Agni...travel hither to pursue...;" 11a. *taṃ tvā samidbhir aṅgiro...* "You, Aṅgiras, with kindling sticks...;" 12a. *sā naḥ pṛthú śravāyiyam...* "...for us a broad, praiseworthy..." (trans. Jamison & Brereton 2014).

⁸ The verse, from the SV *uttarārcika* (Jaiminīya 3.4.3 in Raghu Vira 1938, 53; Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya II.1.1.12.1 in Benfey 1848, 64), corresponds to ṚV 4.31.1: *kāyā naś citrá ā bhuvad ūtī sadāvṛdhaḥ sákhā / kāyā śaciṣṭhayā vṛtā//* "With what help will our brilliant, ever-strengthening comrade be there for us—with what most powerful troop?" (trans. Jamison & Brereton 2014).

codified in the Śrauta Sūtras of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas. According to these texts, the basic form of this practice involves the addition of *om* to precede the first syllable of the *udgītha* (*Lāṭyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* 6.10.13); other options include replacing the first syllable entirely with *om*, or replacing it only when it begins with a vowel (LŚS 6.10.14-17).¹⁰ For their part, the Jaiminīyas refer to the *ādi* in their Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣad but seem not to have codified its performance uniformly; thus it is difficult to say exactly how the Jaiminīya *ādi* was performed.¹¹ It is clear enough, however, that the Jaiminīyas and Kauthumas alike regard the *ādi* as generally referring to the use of OM at the start of the *udgītha*, although there are variants mentioned in specific contexts (e.g., *om vāk* in the *rathamtarastotra*; see below §2.5).

§2.3 *Aniruktagāna: unexpressed song*

In the performance of many *stotras*, the lyrics are transformed further. We now take up "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*), the style of singing discussed in the previous chapter with reference to its antecedents in the YV and SV Saṃhitās. In *aniruktagāna*, the *prastāva* is sung as usual, but the lyrics of other portions are partly or wholly replaced by monosyllables such as *o*, *om*, *vā*, *huṃ*, and *bhā*. According to a Brāhmaṇa of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas (*Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 7.1.8), all

⁹Cf. *Pratihāra sūtra* fol. 3a, quoted in Simon 1913, which uses the suffix *-ādi* "beginning with." Bhavatrāta, in his commentary on the JŚS, also terms the practice *ādi* (Parpola 1981a, 202). See also Eggeling 1885, 310n1; Hillebrandt 1897a, 100; Parpola 1969, 12; and Howard 1977, 18, 530, who calls it *praṇava*.

¹⁰The broad rule is that the *udgītha* always begins with *om* (LŚS 6.10.13), but several qualifying *sūtras* follow: rival opinions for and against the practice of *om* replacing the first syllable of the *udgītha* entirely (14-15); initial vocalic syllables should be replaced by *om*, while consonantal ones should be preceded by it (16); *om* should be treated as an "addition" (*āgantū*) in all situations (17). Caland always treats *om* as an addition to the lyric.

¹¹ A Jaiminīya text contains an early reference to this practice (*Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 1.322), discussing the "taking up" (*āvdā*) of OM as an addition to the *stotra*. The JUB also contains numerous references to the *ādi*: 1.11.7; 1.12.4; 1.19.2; 1.31.2, 5; 1.58.9; 1.59.6; 2.2.9; 4.10.3, 13; yet none of these describe its form.

stotras sung to the *gāyatra* melody must be performed this way, a pronouncement born out by the testimony of later authorities (CH §134g n38).

By way of example, consider the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*, which is made up of nine repetitions sung to the *gāyatra* melody. The Ṛgvedic source verse for the second repetition runs (RV 9.11.3,¹² trans. Jamison & Brereton 2014):

*sá naḥ pavasva śám gáve śám jánāya śám árvate /
śám rájann óśadhībhiyaḥ//*
Purify yourself as weal for our cow, weal for our people, weal for our charger,
weal for our plants, o king.

Let's explore how this text is transformed into unexpressed form, guided by a Śrauta Sūtra of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas (LŚS 7.10.15-20). The Prastotṛ sings his *prastāva* in the usual fashion, setting the first eight syllables to the melody, with text unchanged save for the substitution of *-om* over its last syllable: *sa naḥ pavasva śám gavom*.¹³ Next, the Udgātr, taking up his portion with the customary *ādi* (*om*), sings the remainder, even those portions usually handled by the other singers. The Śrauta Sūtra teaches that he should approach his part in two ways, silently and audibly. "Mentally" (*manasā*, LŚS 7.10.20)—that is, in silence—he runs through the text in its "expressed" or "versified" form, known by the technical terms *nirukta-* or *ārcikagāna* (lyrics from CH §134g):

udgītha: *om śā2m jā2nā2ya śam arvātāyi śam rājā1 no2 śādhā1212 /
pratihāra: hum ā /
upadrava: bhāyo /
nidhana: suvā345ḥ //*

Out loud, however, he sings in the unexpressed style, which entails replacing all the syllables of the *udgītha* with yet more OMs. While the Śrauta Sūtra speaks here of "the sound *om*" (*omkāra*; LŚS

¹² Corresponding to the Sāmavedic *uttarārcika*: Jaiminiya 3.1.5 in Raghu Vira 1938, 51; Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya II.1.1.1.3 in Benfey 1848, 62.

¹³ LŚS (7.10.19) indicates variations in the final syllable: for instance, the final word *naraḥ* from the first repetition might be rendered as *naro3m*, *naro3*, or *nara3*; see Hock 1991, 103.

7.10.20), the detailed testimony of the later authorities suggests that specifically the non-nasal form (*o*) is intended. These *o* sounds correspond exactly to the syllables in the underlying verse, which the singer is in the process of playing back in his mind. His audible singing runs as follows (lyrics from Kashikar 1970, 278):

udgītha: *om o2 o2 o2 o o o o o o o o1 o2 o o1212/*
 pratihāra: *hum ā /*
 upadrava: *o o /*
 nidhana: *ā 345 //*

The Udgātṛ's mentalization has its counterpart in the participation of the silent Pratihartṛ, who is enjoined not to sing his portion (*pratihāra*) out loud but simply to contemplate it mentally (LŚS 7.11.4). The numerals within the lyrics of these examples are part of a complex notational system found in Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya manuscripts that also includes superscript numerals (not reproduced here). These superscript and in-line characters interact to convey aspects of melody and rhythm; for details, consult Howard (1977, 12ff., 29-31, 43-44). Note that the distribution of the in-line numbers remains consistent in both the expressed and unexpressed versions—by orienting ourselves with these, we can see that there is a one-to-one replacement of each syllable with an *o* sound.

§2.4 *The anirukta-gāyatra of the Jaiminīyas*

The Jaiminīya teachings about the unexpressed *gāyatra* melody are not found where we would expect them, in their Śrauta Sūtra; rather, the *Jaiminīya Śrauta Sūtra* defers to the authority of the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*, so this is the source we will follow.¹⁴ Assume the same source verse and *stotra* as a starting point. As among the Kauthumas, the Prastotṛ sings his prelude and the Udgātṛ sings

¹⁴ Although the JUB is the primary authority for the form and codification of the *anirukta-gāyatra* (Fujii 2009, 28n97; 1997, 90n6), some manuscripts of the JS also attest this form at the end of the JAG (25.39; Fujii 1997, 91n10; Parpola 1983, 708). On the Jaiminīya unexpressed *gāyatra*, see Staal 1968, 416-420, 425; 1983a, I, 603; Howard 1977, 504-505; Fujii 1984; 1986, 13-16; 2009, 6-8, 24-28.

the unexpressed portions alone in one breath, without help from the other singers (Howard 1987, 166; JUB 3.12.3; 3.13.8; 3.3.1). After the *prastāva*, which is identical in both branches, the unexpressed portion takes a very different form in Jaiminīya texts (e.g., JUB 1.2.3):

o vā o vā o vā / hum bhā / o vā //

The Jaiminīya version lacks the conventional division into portions: instead of four, as would be expected after the *prastāva*, it has three, as above (also sometimes given as one undifferentiated whole).¹⁵ The Jaiminīya version also lacks the *ādi* (*om*) at the beginning of the *udgītha*. And whereas the Kauthuma unexpressed version corresponds to the phrasing of the source verse, the Jaiminīya unexpressed *gāyatra* does not. This Jaiminīya version of the *sāman*, because it lacks the "body" of the lexical verse, is known as "the bodiless melody" (*aśariramñ sāma*, JUB 3.29-31; see Fujii 1984).

This lyric (*o vā o vā o vā hum bhā o vā*), in various permutations and in fragments, is an important locus for hermeneutic reflection in Jaiminīya circles (see chs. 7-8). In particular, the syllables *o vā*—along with the variants *o vā3c* (JUB 1.2.1), *o3 vā3* (1.3.1), *omñ vā* (4.8.9), and *omñ vā3c* (4.8.9)—are interpreted as cryptic renderings of OM and Vāc, the goddess "Voice" (Fujii 1984). The continuing prominence of these syllables recalls the early evidence of the SV Saṃhitās, where we frequently encountered collocations such as *om vā*, *o vā*, and *om o vā*. Moreover, it recalls the early attestation of OM in the YV, *om vā* (MS 4.9.21), as part of a lyric grouped with "unexpressed praise-songs" (*aniruktās stutayas*, KaṭhĀ 2.231-232); see discussion in previous chapter (ch. 1, §3.5). It seems possible that Sāmavedic and Yajurvedic lyrics with *om vā* represent early parallels for the unexpressed *gāyatra* of the Jaiminīyas.

¹⁵ On the normative fivefold division, see §2 above. The JUB divides it into two overall portions: the *prastāva*; and everything after it, which it terms the *gīta*, or "singing" (JUB 3.38.9). The text further subdivides the *gīta* into *udgītha*, *pratihāra*, and *nidhana*, contributing the basis for the triple division adopted above. In this analysis, only the *upadrava* is lacking. See Staal 1968, 415ff.; 1983a, I, 602-604; Fujii 1984, 1-2; 1986, 15-16; Howard 1983, 318; 1987, 166-171.

§2.5 *Bhakāra in the rathantara*

My discussion of *aniruktagāna* so far has concentrated on those *stotras* sung to the *gāyatra* melody, with its characteristic forms: the replacement of verse syllables by *o* sounds among the Kauthumas; and the replacing of the entire verse by *o vā o vā o vā...* among the Jaiminīyas. But *aniruktagāna* applies in the singing of *stotras* with other melodies, the precise forms of which are difficult to describe, since we lack unambiguous codifications and examples from Vedic texts.¹⁶ One well attested form is the *prṣṭhastotra* sung to the *rathantara* melody. Consider the first repetition of this song according to the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas (the unmodified *ārcikagāna* lyric is lined up below for reference; lyrics from CH §199¹⁷):

prastāva: *hum / ābhi tvā śūra nonumo vā /*
 udgītha: *oṃ vāg bhābhubhābhibhabhebhhabhabhībhābhhabhabhabhabhabhaḥ*
 (ādugdhā iva dhenavaḥ īśānam asya jāgataḥ)

The signature of this type of *aniruktagāna* is the "bha- sound" (*bhakāra*): the long unexpressed sequence of the *udgītha* is formed by substituting *bh-* for the consonants and adding *bh-* to the vowel-initial syllables of the underlying verse, which the Udgāṭṛ chants mentally.¹⁸ The astonishing sequence that he sings out loud as the *udgītha* inspired Faddegon to dub singing in this style "ritualistic dadaism" (Faddegon 1927; see also Staal 1989a, 227).

A feature of *aniruktagāna* evident in our examples is the coalescence of the final syllable of the *prastāva* and the initial syllable of the *udgītha*. In this iteration of the *rathantara* melody, the *prastāva*

¹⁶ The living tradition of the Nampūtiri Jaiminīyas furnishes us with a range of otherwise unattested examples of *aniruktagāna* in performance, characterized as the sporadic but systematic replacement of individual syllables with *o* sounds; see the modern performances transcribed by Staal (1968, 419-422) and Howard (1983, 328-334).

¹⁷ The verse, from SV *uttarārcika* (Jaiminīya 3.4.1 in Raghu Vira 1938, 53; Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya II.1.1.11.1 in Benfey 1848, 62), corresponds to ṚV 7.32.22abc: *abhī tvā śūra nonumo ādugdhā iva dhenavaḥ / īśānam asya jāgataḥ suvardṛśam...* "We keep bellowing to you, o champion, like unmilked cows—to you...who see (like) the sun, lord of this moving (world)..." (trans. Jamison & Brereton 2014).

¹⁸For the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya praxis, see Parpola 1969, 242n2 on LŚS 2.9.12-14a, DŚS 6.1.16; Caland 1931, 151n1 on PB 7.7.13. For the Jaiminīya praxis, see Staal 1968, 422; Howard 1983, 325-326.

ends with the substitution *o vā*, while the *ādi* of the *udgītha* is *om vāk*; compare iterations of the *gāyatra* melody, where the *prastāva* ends with *-om* and the *udgītha* begins with OM (see §2.1-2 above). In this way the transition from one portion to another, and from one singer to another, is bridged by a sequence of similar syllables: either *o vā* >> *om vāk* or *-om* >> OM. Some authorities even teach that the parts of the two singers must overlap, as one ends and the other begins, suggesting that OM helps achieve a continuity of sound in performance. This continuous flow of sound may have inspired one name for the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* in Jaiminīya texts, the "endless melody" (*anantaṃ sāma*, JUB 1.35.7-8; Howard 1987, 166; see also Staal 1968, 429 and further discussion in my ch. 8, §4.3).

§2.6 *Upagāna: the vocal accompaniment*

At all the *stotras* sung throughout the day (*Drāhyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* 3.4.1), back-up singers (*upagātr*) provide accompaniment (*upagāna*), intoning OM and other syllables over and over at a low pitch (*mandra*, LŚS 1.11.24; *nigīta* JŚS 1.11).¹⁹ The back-up singers may number three, four, six, or more; the Yajamāna participates, along with other priests excluding the Adhvaryu and Hotṛ (Fujii 1986, 21n6). The precise form of the accompaniment varies. According to one Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya source (DŚS 3.4.6), the back-up singers sing *ho* and the Yajamāna sings *om*; another source has the reverse (*Bhāradvāja Śrauta Sūtra* 13.17.9). The Jaiminīya authorities consider several options, deciding in favor of *o* drawn out for fourteen beats (JUB 1.24.3; Bhavatrāta on JŚS 1.11; see Fujii 1986, 11). One text explains that the function of these back-up singers is to cover the gaps between the portions of the *stotra*, that is, to create a continuous flow of sound pausing only at each verse finale (DŚS 3.4.7-10; LŚS 1.11.26 says that the back-up singers should sing over the gaps but go silent during the unison parts of

¹⁹On *upagāna*, see Parpola 1969, 156-162; Fujii 1986, 9-12.

the main singers).²⁰ Pause to imagine this soundscape: the main singers together begin each round of a given *stotra* with *hum*, the Prastotṛ often ends the *prastāva* with *-om*, the Udgātṛ frequently introduces the *udgītha* with OM and substitutes OM sounds for many of its syllables, and at least four back-up singers continuously sing *ho* and *om*—it all adds up to a chorus of rounded-mouth vowels and nasals, projecting a veritable wall of sound.

§2.7 OM beyond the Sāmavedic stotra

While the *stotras* provide an unparalleled density of OM, there are several other Sāmavedic contexts for liturgical OM in the Soma sacrifice.

§2.8 Viśvarūpa- and jyotirgāna: the song of all forms and the song of the lights

At his own discretion, the Udgātṛ may sing a solo repertoire during the pre-dawn hours of the pressing-day. Set to the *gāyatra* melody, these solos attest the features we have already noted for the *gāyatra* in the *stotras*: substitution of *-om* for the eighth syllable (analogous to the final syllable of the *prastāva*) and the application of *aniruktagāna* with OM. The solo called "song of all forms" (*viśvarūpagāna*) praises the goddess Voice and her omniform creative potency. According to the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas, this song begins with an *-om* substitution at the end of the first phrase (*yuñje vācam śatapadom*) and proceeds in unexpressed style, with the Yajamāna following along mentally (CH §120, BI V, 336; LŚS 1.8.9, DŚS 2.4.11-12; Parpola 1969, 122-123). The same sources teach that the "song of all forms" must be followed by the "song of the lights" (*jyotirgāna*; LŚS 1.8.13-16, DŚS 2.4.17-24; Parpola 1969, 124-127). Each repetition of *jyotirgana* begins with an eight-syllable sequence of repeated,

²⁰ Cf. the testimony of a lost Brāhmaṇa quoted at DŚS 3.4.2; Parpola 1969, 157-158.

paired words arranged in a chiasmus, with *-om* substituting for the final syllable. The central pair is "light" (*jyotis*); the framing pairs are Agni, Indra, and Sūrya (lyrics from CH §132e; see also BI V, 337):²¹

agnir jyotir jyotir agnom...
indro jyotir jyoir indrom...
sūryo jyotir jyotiḥ sūryom...

For their part, the Jaiminīyas resist the singing of the *viśvarūpa*, objecting that it constitutes a "thirteenth *stotra*" and, as such, disrupts the numerical symmetry of the twelve *stotras*, whose 190 *stotriyās* are evenly divisible by ten (JŚS 1.8.6). (Perhaps for this reason, the Jaiminīya codification of *viśvarūpagāna* mentions only that the Udgātṛ "utters" (*āha*; JŚS 1.8.15) the verses—he does not necessarily *sing* them.) As for *jyotirgāna*, the JS does not attest the verses of "the lights," nor does the JŚS address the practice.

§2.9 Invoking Subrahmaṇyā

The fourth Sāmavedic officiant, the *subrahmaṇya*, does not sing any of the *stotras*. He takes his name from his chief task, which is to proclaim the "call for *subrahmaṇyā*" (*subrahmaṇyāhvānam*, JŚS 1.3) on the days leading up to the climactic pressing day: *subrahmaṇyom!* The call has several variants across branches both in its form (ending *-om*, *-o3m*, *-o3ṃ*) and in the number of repetitions.²² Several texts agree that *subrahmaṇyā* ("with a fine formulation") is an epithet of the goddess Voice (JB 2.78; AB 6.3). The Subrahmaṇya priest first delivers his call during the procession of Soma after its purchase (LŚS 1.2.20; DŚS 1.2.27); according to the Jaiminīyas, in this iteration the call is "unexpressed" (*anirukta*), in the sense of not being addressed to specific deities besides Vāc (JŚS 1.3.2). On most other occasions, the call is "expressed" (*nirukta*) in the name of Indra: immediately after the call, the Subrahmaṇya recites a

²¹ The basic structure of these mantras is quite close to that of the Ṛgvedic *tūṣṇīmśamsa*, discussed below §3.4.

²² See Parpola 1969, 47n2 on LŚS 1.3.1a, DŚS 1.3.2.

litany describing that god's exploits and inviting him along with other "gods and Brahmins" to the sacrifice (e.g., JŚS 1.3.14; LŚS 1.3.1a; DŚS 1.3.2; see also Parpola 1969, 48; CH §49.). Morphologically, *subrahmanyom* could result from an exceptional sandhi (cf. Pāṇini's codification in ch.2, §1n3): the independent syllable *om* would combine with the final *-ā* of *subrahmanyā* to yield the present form (Strunk 1983, 34n52 on ŚB 3.3.4.17).²³ But the form can also be analyzed as the substitution of *-o(3)m* for the final syllable (Hock 1991, 104-105), a practice observed elsewhere in SV singing, as in our next example.

§2.10 *Vyāhrtisāmans: melodies of the utterances*

Although I have largely restricted myself in this chapter to the paradigmatic Soma sacrifice, I conclude this survey of OM in the Sāmavedic liturgies with a brief excursus beyond the basic paradigm. We now take up an elaboration of the Soma sacrifice called the *agnicayana*, the ritual of "building the fire altar." According to the Jaiminīya tradition, the foundation, building, and consecration of the altar are accompanied by a lengthy selection of solo *sāmans* sung by the Udgātr. Seventeen of these are the "melodies of utterances" (*vyāhrtisāmans*), whose lyrics follow the set pattern of beginning with a cosmological term with *-om* substituted for the final syllable: *sūryom* ("sun"), *candrom* ("moon"), *nākom* ("vault of the sky"), and so on. None of these *sāmans* has a Ṛgvedic source verse; they are composed entirely of *stobhas*. (For a list of these seventeen *sāmans*, referred to as "moon chants" after the Nampūtiri name for the Wilderness Songs, see table in Staal 1983a, I, 533; see also Staal 1983b).

Of the seventeen *vyāhrtisāmans*, five have the additional similarity of "ending with *svaṛ jyotiḥ*" (*svaṛjyotirnidhanāni*, JŚS 4 cited by Parpola 1983, 707). I have already referred to these melodies and lyrics above in our exploration of the SV Saṃhitās; by revisiting them now, we can fill in further details

²³ In support of this analysis—that OM is a free-standing, invocatory syllable—we have an inversion of the call, *om subrahmanyā*, mentioned in JB 2.78 as a practice used by "some" (*eke*).

as to their form and liturgical context. Five different objects are deposited under and on top of the bricks of the altar during its construction. Corresponding to each object is one of these five *sāmans*.²⁴ For instance, when the "golden man" (*hiraṇmayapurūṣa*; Staal 1983a, I, 414) is deposited in the ground below where the altar will be, the Udgātr̥ sings a variation on the word "man" (*purūṣa*; Staal 1983a, I, 417):

puruṣom / puruṣa ho yi puruṣa ho yi puruṣa hā a vu vā/ ē suvar jyotiḥ //

When a golden breastplate (*rukma*) is deposited, the source word is "truth" (*satya*; Staal 1983a, I, 411). The remaining source words are the three cosmological terms of the *vyāhṛti* mantra, *bhūr bhuvā suvar* ("earth, atmosphere, heaven"—hence the name of the entire group of *sāmans*; for further discussion of this mantra in other contexts, see below §4.3). These three come in sequence, corresponding to placing of pebbles on the lowest ("earth"), middle ("atmosphere"), and top ("sky") layers of the five-tiered altar (Staal 1983a, I, 419, 461, 505):

*bhūrom ... e suvar jyotiḥ
bhuvom ... e suvar jyotiḥ
suvom ... e suvar jyotiḥ*

These five songs echo the *sāmans* drawn from Yajurvedic sources on the *pravargya* (cf. Parpola 1983, 707), which similarly attest OM in collocation with the recurring finale *s(u)var jyotiḥ*.

§2.11 *Summing up: OM in the Sāmavedic liturgies*

This concludes our survey of OM in the Sāmavedic liturgies as codified in the Śrauta Sūtras and related texts. Overall, the results are consistent with the broader profile of liturgical OM's multiformity in the Vedic corpus: the syllable is attested in a range of forms and several different contexts. And yet

²⁴ The Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas also record the *vyāhṛtisāmans* in a similar context (BI V, 486-488; see Parpola 1983, 709), but with the Prastotr̥ (Parpola 1983, 707) or the Yajamāna as the singer (see *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 8.7.4.1-6 and Eggeling 1897, 145n1).

against this background of multiformity, patterns emerge. The first is melody: OM in the Sāmavedic liturgies is always sung. The second is meaninglessness: OM in these songs is always a *stobha*, a non-lexical vocable that conveys no semantic information. The third is repetition: where OM is called for, it comes again and again, interspersed with phonologically similar sounds. The fourth is substitution: OM often substitutes for one or more syllables of an underlying text. The fifth is interpolation: OM may be embedded as an extra syllable within an existing lyric. The sixth is accompaniment: OM is sung in overlapping fashion by two or more singers to provide a continuous flow of sound. The seventh is location: OM clusters most densely in the twelve *stotras* of the pressing-day, especially those sung to the *gāyatra* melody in the style of *aniruktagāna*. These patterns shape a series of performances where OM and related syllables form a wall of sound emanating from the sacrificial ground.

§3 OM in the Ṛgvedic śastra

The showpiece of ṚV recitation, performed in a dozen iterations by the Hotṛ (or another Ṛgvedic officiant) on the final day of the Soma sacrifice, is the *śastra*. Liturgical OM is used throughout this recitation in a range of circumstances. Although the Ṛgvedic officiant is the lead reciter in the *śastra*, the Adhvaryu of the YV provides an essential counterpoint, delivering his own interjections throughout.

§3.1 Praṇava: the humming

The central portion of the *śastra* is the *sūkta*, which strings together a large number of verses (ṛc) from various hymns, often with differences from their form in the ṚV Saṃhitā. A primary difference arises from the substitution of OM for the final syllable of each verse in a series; this final position is metrically stable, applied to all verses regardless of meter. In this capacity, OM comes to be

known as the *praṇava* ("the humming," in Caland's translation).²⁵ The textualization of this recitational practice in a Vedic source is extremely rare; for the most part, we depend on the reconstructions of modern scholars.²⁶ In one of the very few examples of the *praṇava* actually recorded in a Vedic text, the Ṛgvedic verse ending *dhenūnām iṣudhyasi* (RV 8.69.2) becomes *dhenūnām iṣudhyaso3m* (*Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, 5.1.6).²⁷ The Śrauta Sūtras indicate that the *praṇava* is consistently applied throughout the hundreds of verses that make up the twelve *śāstras*: in this way, even though OM is never directly attested in the text of the ṚV Saṃhitā, the syllable ends up being sounded in the majority of the verses in performance.

The two main Ṛgvedic branches, Kauṣītaki and Aitareya, codify the *praṇava* in different ways. According to the *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* of the Kauṣītaki branch, the *praṇava* varies depending on the context: either "pure" (*o*) in the middle of the *śāstra* and "ending in *m*" (*om*) before a pause (i.e., at the end of a set of verses) (ŚāṅkhŚS 1.19-20, 1.2).²⁸ Moreover, it is to be extended three morae with *pluti* (1.19), and sometimes four (1.2).²⁹ By contrast, the *Āśvalāyana Śrauta Sūtra* of the Aitareya branch teaches the *praṇava* only as *-om*, making no mention of the *o* as an option. The *praṇava* within a series

²⁵ See (ŚāṅkhŚS 1.1.19-21); also Caland's (1924, 50) note on ĀpŚS 8.15.14.

²⁶ Hillebrandt, for instance, explains that the verse ending *apām retāṃsi jinivati* (RV 8.44.16) is recited with the *praṇava* as *apām retāṃsi jinivato3m*. This example comes not from the *śāstra* but from the Hotṛ's invitation to divinities (*anuvākya*) in the rites of the New- and Full-Moon (*darśapūrṇamāsa*) (Hillebrandt 1879, 107; see also p.77; ĀśvŚS 1.6.1).

²⁷ This is drawn from the *mahāvratā* section of the *Āraṇyaka*, where the extremely elaborate *mahaduktha*, consisting of one thousand verses, is discussed. Although this form of recitation is by no means representative of the *śāstra* in the Soma sacrifice, the manner of inserting the *praṇava* is the same.

²⁸ There is also a fairly obscure rival opinion attested that the *praṇava* should not replace the final syllable but should be uttered right after it (ĀpŚS 24.13.13; 24.14.2).

²⁹ These codifications can be traced back to the teaching of the branch's namesake, Kauṣītaki, who discusses these details, for the first time in the Vedic corpus, in *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 11.5.1-9. The passage records a disagreement between the sage and rival authorities: while "some say" (*ity eke*) that *-om* is always preferred, Kauṣītaki disagrees, holding that the alternation between *-o* and *-om* depends on recitational context. The "some" referred to here almost certainly refers to the teachers of the *Āśvalāyana* branch, who do not allow pure *-o*.

of verses is called "continuous" (*saṃtata*) and must be drawn out for three mātrās (ĀśvŚS 1.2.10). At the conclusion of a series of verses, it is extended to four (ĀśvŚS 1.2.14). The Aitareyins also teach that the *praṇava* should change according to the phonetic quality of the sound following; these rules agree with the basic conventions of *sandhi* in Vedic (ĀśvŚS 1.2.15-19). This shows that at the time of the Śrauta Sūtras, the form of the *praṇava* remained fluid, depending on recitational context and branch affiliation.³⁰ Yet it is noteworthy that in spite of their differences, both branches differentiate between the *praṇava* applied in the middle of a series of verses and that applied at the end of a series. This strongly suggests that the basic function of OM as *praṇava* is as a performative cue—it serves either to emphasize the continuity of a running series of verses, or to mark their conclusion.

§3.2 *Nyūṅkha* and *ninarda*: the insertion and the slur

Akin to the *praṇava* are two other styles of recitation, *nyūṅkha* ("insertion") and *ninarda* ("slur"), which likewise involve the interpolation of OM phonemes, albeit in a much more elaborate fashion.³¹ Metrical position governs the interpolations: *nyūṅkha* usually pertains to the second syllable of the *pāda*, while *ninarda* pertains to the last. With both styles applied, *yajñāya stīrṇābarhiṣe ví vo máde* (ṚV 10.21.1cd) becomes in recitation (ĀśvŚS 7.11.14):

³⁰ This difference in *śrauta sūtra* praxis still distinguishes the recitations of the two branches in Kerala today. The modern virtuoso Nāras Ravindran Nampūtiri, trained in the Kauṣītaki branch in Kerala, confirms that the non-nasal *-o* occurs when verses are strung together continuously in a series, while the nasalized one (according to him the *anusvāra -ṃ* instead of labial *-m*) only comes on the final syllable of the last verse in the series. Ravindran also brought up the differences in recitational practice between his Kauṣītaki branch and that of the other Nampūtiri ṚV branch, the Āśvalāyanas. The Āśvalāyanas, he said, always use the *praṇava* with *anusvāra (oṃ)* and never *-o*. Moreover, there were differences between the branches in the degree of lengthening applied. On *saṃtata* and *praṇava* in Nampūtiri ṚV recitation, see Staal 1961, 50; 1983, I, 622.

³¹ Unlike the *praṇava*, which is widely applied in the *śrauta* liturgies, the *nyūṅkha* and the *ninarda* are quite rare, occurring for example in a small number of verses of the *prṣṭhya-ṣaḍaha* (ĀśvŚS 7.11.2, 11, 28-32). The *nyūṅkha* is discussed with reference to this and other Soma contexts in KauṣB (23.1; 25.10, 12; 30.4), AB (5.3.4-13; 6.29.3; 6.30.2; 6.36.7) and ĀpŚS 21.7.2. In AB 6.32.6-24, the application of *nyūṅkha* and *ninarda* together are discussed (cf. Haug 1863: 431n16).

§3.3 *Āhāva: the invocation*

To introduce the *śāstra*, the Hotṛ exhorts the Adhvaryu with an "invocation" (*āhāva*).³⁴ The paradigmatic *āhāva* is recited at the beginning, in the middle, and just before the last verse of the *śāstra*, although this varies according to the number of verses. Among the Aitareyins, it takes the form *śoṃsāvom* (AB 3.12.1; ĀśvŚS 5.9.1); among the Kauṣītakis, *śoṃsāvo3* (ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.1)—note that the two different versions correspond to differences in *praṇava* attested in the two branches. The OM phonemes in this mantra seem to modify certain syllables of the underlying dual imperative form, **śaṃsāva* "let us both recite!" (see Hoffmann 1976; Witzel 2009, 3-4; and detailed discussion in ch. 4, §2). With this command, the Hotṛ calls on the Adhvaryu to be his partner in an elaborate duet; throughout, the Adhvaryu will answer the Hotṛ's cues with a varied series of "responses" (*pratigara*; see below §3.5-6).³⁵

§3.4 *Tūśṇīmśaṃsa: the silent recitation*

The next part of the Hotṛ's recitation, beginning immediately after the *āhāva* and the Adhvaryu's first *pratigara*, is the "silent recitation" (*tūśṇīmśaṃsa*; ĀśvŚS 5.9.11; CH §152):

bhūr agnir jyotir jyotir agnoṃ /
indro jyotir bhuvo jyotir indroṃ /
sūryo jyotir jyotiḥ svaḥ sūryo3m /

The underlying structure of each mantra is the chiasmic arrangement of two pairs of repeated words.

The central pair consists always of "light" (*jyotis*), while the outer pair consists of the divinities Agni,

³⁴ Also *vyāhāva*; see Renou 1954, s.v. *āhāva*.

³⁵ When the *āhāva* introduces the morning recitation or is repeated at certain points in the midst of a given *śāstra*, it always has the same basic form, *śoṃsāvom* (or variants thereof); see ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.1, 6; 7.10.2-3; 7.19.6-7; Sabbathier (1890, 50) on ĀśvŚS 5.9.2; Staal 1983, I, 622-623; 1989b, 58. However, when used to introduce later *śāstras*, the *āhāva* changes: it becomes *adhvāryo śoṃsāvom* and *adhvāryo śośoṃsāvom* at the midday and evening liturgies, respectively. (KauṣB 14.3, ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.1, 7.19.6 and 8.4.5 substitute -o3 for the final syllables. I attribute this again to the different branch practices, *pace* Hoffmann 1976, 554 who explains it as a faulty pronunciation of *śoṃsāvom̃* without *anunāsika*).

Indra, or Sūrya. Interrupting this chiastic structure in the ĀśvŚS are the three cosmological terms of the *vyāhṛti* mantra: "earth, atmosphere, heaven" (*bhūr bhuvā svar*; see below §4.3).³⁶ While the *sūtra* does not specify how these mantras are to be spoken, the name suggests that it must be "silently" (*tūṣṇīm*); the ṚV Brāhmaṇas add "inaudibly" (*upāṃśu*; AB 2.39; KauṣB 14.1.15; ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.1).³⁷ Much like the *praṇava*, the final syllable in each mantra is replaced by OM: thus *agni-* becomes *agnom*, and so forth.

§3.5 *Pratigara: the response*

The Adhvaryu offers a variety of responses to the Hotṛ, each one tailored to a different part of the *śāstra*. These responses feature OM in various permutations, most frequently as a modification for certain syllables in underlying lexical expressions; sometimes OM alone is called for. According to the Aitareyins, the Adhvaryu responds to the *āhāva* with *śomśāmodaiva* (ĀśvŚS 5.9.5; also *śānsāmodaivom*, AB 3.12). Most scholars agree that this represents some modification of *a-* using OM (see details in next chapter, §2), but they disagree on the analysis of the underlying words: one possibility, mentioned in the previous chapter, is **śamśā madeva* "recite! let us rejoice!"; another is **śamśāma daiva*, "let us recite, o divine one!"³⁸ A YV Saṃhitā provides testimony on the manner of performance: the *pratigara*

³⁶ The meaning of each term suits its internal position in the mantra and its place in the overall sequence: thus, "earth" has the initial position in the first mantra alongside the terrestrial god Agni; "atmosphere" has the middle position in the second mantra alongside the sky god Indra; and "heaven" has the penultimate position in the final mantra alongside the celestial god Sūrya.

³⁷ The Brāhmaṇa versions of the mantras lack the interpolated *vyāhṛti* mantra and do not contain OM. ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.2 agrees with the Brāhmaṇas, indicating that the ĀśvŚS version is likely an innovation. Note also the similarities of the *tūṣṇīmśamsa* to the Sāmavedic *jyotirgāna* (see §2.8 above).

³⁸ The basic morphology of the Adhvaryu's *pratigara* for the *āhāva* has been understood in different ways. One early commentator takes it as *śomśāmo daiva* "let us recite, o divine one!" (thus the commentator on KauṣB 14.3, glossing *daiva* as a vocative addressed to the Hotṛ; cf. Weber 1868, 36n); while another divides the words *śomśā móda iva* "recite! it is like a delight" (*padapāṭha* gloss on TS 3.2.9.5 (*śomśā / módaḥ / iva*); see also CH §152. The former interpretation is adopted by Haug (1863, 141n1, 177n1, 227n49; on AB 2.35; ĀśvŚS 5.9), Sabbathier (1890,

must be timed to overlap exactly with the final syllable of the *āhāva* (TS 3.2.9.5; see Keith 1914, I, 252n2). As in the case of the Sāmavedic *stotra*, this highlights importance of continuous sound in sacrificial recitation.

Once the recitation is underway, the Adhvaryu responds with *othā modaiva* (ĀśvŚS 5.9.4); according to some texts this response marks every half-verse.³⁹ As above, the analysis of this expression is up for debate.⁴⁰ Following Hillebrandt (1897a, 101) and Hoffmann (1976, 554), I divide the text as *othā modaiva* and read the underlying expression as **atha madeva*, "then let us rejoice!" The sounding of the Hotṛ's *praṇava* triggers the same response but with *pluti* (*o3thā modaiva*; ĀśvŚS 5.9.6; CH §152.II). At pauses in the course of the *śāstra*, the Adhvaryu's response should be *om* alone or ending in *-om* (*othā modaivom*); however, the response for the conclusion of the *śāstra* is always *om* alone (ĀśvŚS 5.9.8-10; see also ŚB 4.3.2.13; KātyŚS 9.13.25-26). It is notable that throughout the ĀśvŚS account, the term *praṇava* is used not only with reference to the Hotṛ's recitation, but also to denote "*om*" in the Adhvaryu's *pratigara*; in other words, in the ĀśvŚS, *praṇava* is no longer exclusively a technical term reserved for Ṛgvedic recitation but also a word for OM in general.

There are still other variations in the *pratigara* suited to different contexts. At the end of the *śāstra*, the Hotṛ recites the mantra known as "strength of the *uktha*" (*ukthavīrya*, ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.6), to which the Kauṣītakins respond with a single vocative, *ukthaśā* "O reciter of hymns!" (KauṣB 14.4;

55; on ĀśvŚS 5.9.5), and Eggeling (1885, 326n1; on ŚB 4.3.2.2). I follow another interpretation mentioned by Weber (1868, 36n) and favored by most Indologists since Hillebrandt (1879, 104), *śomśā modaiva*. Similarly, Keith (1914, 252; on TS 3.2.9.5), Caland (1924, 308n4; on ĀpŚS 12.27.12), Vishva Bandhu (1959, 2506) and Hoffmann (1976, 552, with references). But see Hock (1991, 99-100), who prefers *śamsā moda eva* "recite! rejoice indeed!"

³⁹ĀpŚS 12.27.14 (trans. Caland): "'*othā moda iva*' bei jedem Halbverse (des Hotṛ), '*om othā moda iva*' bei den Pausen, am Schlusse des Śāstra bloss *om*." See also Sabbathier 1890, 56nn on Āśv 5.9.7-8; ŚB 4.3.2.13.

⁴⁰The morphology of this mantra has also long been debated. Weber (1868: 36n) analyzes *othā modaiva vāg iti* (ŚB 4.3.2.13, the oldest attestation) as *othā (ā)modā eva vāk* and translates "segnend,...erfreuend nur (ist deine) Stimme." (In the corresponding *sūtra*, KātyŚS 9.13.26, the utterance of *vāk* is optional.) Based on his survey of variants, Weber prefers his analysis *othā 'modaiva* to another possible division, *othāmo daiva*. Hock (1991, 99-100) combines aspects of this latter view with Weber's to arrive at *atha madā...eva* "now rejoice...indeed."

ŚāṅkhŚS 7.9.7; see also ĀpŚS 12.27.19, 29.11).⁴¹ For their part, the Aitareyins add OM to the expression: *om ukthaśā*.⁴² There are more elaborate *pratigaras* recommended for the *nyūṅkha* and *ninarda* styles of recitation. For example, the response to *vairāja nyūṅkha* is: *made mador madasya madirasya madaivo3 o3 othā modaiva* (ŚāṅkhŚS 12.26.11). Even more intricate is ĀśvŚS 7.11.15, which gives a response combining *nyūṅkha* and *ninarda*: *o3 o o o o o3 o o o o o3 o o o madetha madaivo3 o3 o3 o3m othāmo daivom*.⁴³

§3.6 *Pratigara: om and tathā*

Moving beyond the paradigmatic Soma sacrifice, we encounter other *pratigaras* deserving comment. When the Hotṛ states his intention to recite the *caturhotṛ* mantras in the course of the twelve-day Soma sacrifice (*dvādaśāha*), the Adhvaryu responds at each pause: *om hotas tathā hotar* (ĀśvŚS 8.13.8; AB 5.25; see also ŚāṅkhŚS 10.13.28; 16.1.24; KauṣB 26.5).⁴⁴ Keith translates: "Yes, O Hotṛ; be

⁴¹This agrees with the earliest evidence (TS 3.2.9.1). In the TS passage, *úkthaśā* is the response of the morning liturgies, with its three syllables corresponding to the three *pādas* of the *gāyatrī*; the midday and afternoon liturgies require longer responses to correspond to the longer meters with which they are associated (*ukthām vācī* and *ukthām vācīndrāya*, with five and seven syllables, respectively, for the five and seven *pādas* of the *triṣṭubh* and *śakvarī*). The KauṣB uses a different manner of reckoning but to the same end: the Hotṛ says *uktham avāci* ("the *uktha* has been uttered") and the Adhvaryu responds *ukthaśā*; together these add up to the eight syllables of the *gāyatrī* used at the morning pressing, and so on for the subsequent pressings. See next note and Keith (1914, 251 n2) and Weber (1865, 260; 1873, 95) on the variation between *vācī* (TS, AB, ĀśvŚS 7.9.26) and *avāci* (KauṣB, ŚāṅkhŚS).

⁴² AB 3.12.1; AĀ 5.3.2; see also *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.3.10. The AB also counts syllables, but with a reckoning slightly modified to reflect the addition of OM: *om ukthaśā* and the response *uktham vāci* each have four syllables; together they add up to the eight syllables of a *gāyatrī pāda*. Sāyaṇa glosses *ukthaśā* with *tvam śastraśamsī* (cited at AB 3.12.1 by Haug 1863, 178n4, who nevertheless incorrectly translates "thou hast repeated the recitation" and is corrected by Weber 1865, 260.)

⁴³ The *nyūṅkha* corresponds to the initial series of *o* sounds, the *ninarda* to the last. Different versions of the *nyūṅkha* response (e.g., *madetha madaivo3 o3 othā modaiva*, ŚāṅkhŚS 12.13.14) are given by Weber (1868, 36n); see also Hock 1991, 98-99. For longer *pratigaras* built on different words and delivered in response to the AV Kuntāpa hymns, see AB 6.32; ĀśvŚS 8.3.19; Haug 1863, 430-431.

⁴⁴ On the *caturhotṛ* mantras, see Renou 1954; ĀpŚS 14.13-15; see also TS 6.6.11.6. In ĀpŚS 21.10.4, *om* and *tathā* alternate as the proper responses for different versions of these formulas.

it so, O Hotṛ."⁴⁵ Another response involving OM and *tathā* comes in the royal consecration (*rājasūya*), when the Hotṛ delivers a recitation composed of RV verses (*ṛc*) and popular verses (*gāthā*). The Adhvaryu's *pratigara* varies according to which sort of verse is recited (ĀśvŚS 9.3.11; AB 7.18; ŚāṅkhŚS 15.27.1): "*Om* is the response for a *ṛc*, just as *tathā* is for a *gāthā*."⁴⁶ These parallels between OM and the affirmative *tathā*—whether in the same response or in alternating responses—recommend the literal meaning of 'yes' for OM in these contexts. As we will see in the next chapter, such examples are often cited to support the argument that OM's primary function is to signal affirmation. Within the context of our present survey, however, these examples tell us little about OM's primary meaning; instead, they add yet another dimension to liturgical OM's stunning multiformity.

§3.7 Summing up: OM in the Ṛgvedic liturgies

This brings us to the end of our survey of OM in the Ṛgvedic liturgies. As with the Sāmavedic evidence, the Ṛgvedic testimony speaks to both the syllable's diversity and to certain patterns in its deployment. Multiformity continues to be a leading characteristic: the form, application, and ritual context for liturgical OM cannot be easily circumscribed. Nevertheless, some consistent patterns are apparent. First is substitution: OM often substitutes for one or more syllables of an underlying verse or mantra. Next is interpolation: OM can sometimes be embedded as an extra syllable within an existing mantra. Third is repetition: OM and its variants often appear several times in a sequence. Fourth is diminution of meaning: OM in the Ṛgvedic liturgies seldom conveys any additional semantic

⁴⁵ See Keith's note on *om/tathā* at AitĀ. 2.3.6; Parpola 1981a, 203-204; Hock 1991, 90, 92. This interpretation is supported by another liturgical usage: AB (7.20) uses OM and *tathā* in collocation as in, *om tathā dadāmi* "Om, yes I give [a place of sacrifice]." Similarly, the JŚS prescribes an exchange in which the Yajamāna asks for a place of sacrifice and the Udgātṛ grants it. "In a low voice" (*upāṃśu*), the Udgātṛ says *tathā* to this request while "out loud" (*uccaiḥ*), he says only *om* (JŚS 1.2.17).

⁴⁶ *om ity ṛcaḥ pratigara, evaṃ tatheti gāthāyā*. See also KātyŚS 15.6.3.

information (the *pratigara* with OM and *tathā* being a possible exception); indeed, when OM is added to an underlying expression, it tends to obscure lexical meaning. However, this should be qualified by the fifth pattern: uses of OM such as the *praṇava*, while lacking lexical meaning, may nevertheless serve as performative cues to mark the various phases of recitation, or as rhetorical markers of emphasis. The sixth is counterpoint: the utterance of OM by one officiant is usually countered by the other officiant's response with OM. The seventh is accompaniment: mantras with OM may be recited in overlapping fashion by two reciters to provide a continuous flow of sound. The eighth is location: nearly all Ṛgvedic uses of OM cluster around the *śastra* on pressing-day. These patterns bear a substantial resemblance to those I observed in the Sāmavedic liturgies, which I likened to a wall of sacrificial sound during the *stotra* (see §2.11 above). However, the soundscape of the Ṛgvedic *śastra* is rhythmically punctuated by OM, rather than overwhelmed by it: liturgical OM punctuates the *śastra* at predictable, metrically determined positions, usually coinciding with distinct phases in the sequence of verses, or transitions from one reciter to the next.

§4 OM in the Yajurvedic liturgies and beyond

Our survey now turns to other uses of liturgical OM in the Śrauta Sūtras, many of which pertain to the Yajurvedic liturgies and have antecedents in the YV Saṃhitās. As with the Adhvaryu's *pratigara*, the Yajurvedic OMs are often part of a series of verbal exchanges between officiants. In keeping with this Yajurvedic specialty of guiding and facilitating the flow of the sacrifice, the uses of OM below are usually implicated in more than one ritual context. To assemble the account below, I draw on works belonging to several different Yajurvedic branches, but especially the *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* and *Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra* of the Taittirīya branch.

§4.1 *Āśrāvaṇa: the exhortation*

In my survey of the YV Saṃhitās, I touched on the mantra called *āśrāvaṇa*, which in its simplest form consists of the command *ā śrāvaya*.⁴⁷ With this mantra, the Adhvaryu exhorts the Āgnīdhra priest to "utter 'astu śrauṣaṭ'." The Āgnīdhra obliges by saying *astu śrauṣaṭ*, an archaic mantra frequently glossed by *śravaṇam bhavatu* ("let it be heard"; see Caland & Henry 1907, xxv). This in turn cues the Hotṛ's recitation of the "sacrificial" (*yājyā*) verses, which accompany certain oblations by the Adhvaryu. This entire sequence occurs whenever the *yājyā* verses are recited, an occasion that recurs many times in the course of the Soma sacrifice, most prominently at the end of the *śāstras* when the Adhvaryu pours a libation of *soma* (e.g., CH §153, 158).

The most widely attested form of the *āśrāvaṇa* is a variant with OM: *o śrāvaya*, with upwards of fifty attestations in the Śrauta Sūtras (e.g. BŚS 1.15; KātyŚS 3.2.3; ĀpŚS 2.15.3). Another variant, *oṃ śrāvaya*, is never attested in the Śrauta Sūtras and only rarely in other strata (MS 4.9.9; *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.3.10; 1.5.10, 21). The apparent replacement of the underlying prefix *ā-* with variants of OM may suggest some sort of "recitational substitution" at work (see Hock 1991, 99); another recitational analysis suggests that the *o* sound results from the combination of *ā-* with the emphatic particle *u*, sometimes nasalized to *oṃ* when it is drawn out in performance (Weber 1865, 256).⁴⁸ Such explanations imply that OM does not add to the semantics of the imperative—however, they do not rule out the possibility that OM provides some sort of rhetorical emphasis. In a different vein, Parpola argues that the *āśrāvaṇa* with OM is an "analogical secondary development" based on the form of the *prasava*, with

⁴⁷ ĀpŚS 2.15.3 gives as options *ā śrāvaya*, *o śrāvaya*, *śrāvaya*, and *om ā śrāvaya*; see Parpola 1981a, 201. For examples of the *āśrāvaṇa* without OM, see KaṭhS 31.13; TS 1.6.11.1, 2, 3, 4; 3.3.7.2, 3; VS 19.24; ŚB 14.2.2.15; ĀpŚS 3.16.17; BŚS 20.12: 28.1. In the *mahāpitṛyajña*, the formulation changes further to *oṃ svadhā* (ŚB 2.6.1.24).

⁴⁸ This on the basis of the grave accent of the example he adduces (*ò śrāvaya*). In this discussion, Weber corrects his earlier explanation (1853, 305) of the form as a special liturgical pronunciation of *ā śrāvaya*.

which it shares the basic form OM + imperative.⁴⁹ For Parpola, this would suggest that OM carries an affirmative meaning, adding an acknowledgement to the force of the command. Finally, yet another OM variant, *om ā śrāvaya* (uniquely attested at ĀpŚS 2.15.13), does not involve the transformation or replacement of the underlying *ā* prefix.

§4.2 *Prasava: the instigation*

We have already encountered the *prasava* ("instigation") with OM in the YV Saṃhitās. These early versions consist of OM followed by an imperative, spoken by the Brahman priest to acknowledge another priest's request and grant permission to act. The Śrauta Sūtras continue in this vein, multiplying the contexts in which the *prasava* with OM is called for. Thus, when the Adhvaryu announces his intention to bring water forward to place on the *āhavanīya* altar, the Brahman says: "OM, bring forward!" *om praṇaya* (BŚS 3.24, ĀpŚS 3.19). Then, as the waters are being carried forward, it is the Yajamāna who utters the *prasava*, assenting to the Adhvaryu's request to pour out an oblation: "om, pour out!" (*om unnaya*; ĀpŚS 4.4). In this fashion, the Śrauta Sūtras codify the *prasava* with OM as a way to authorize a wide range of ritual actions. That said, the *prasava* is equally well attested *without* OM, suggesting that the addition of OM to the formula is not required to convey the force of the authorization. It is possible, as with the *āśrāvāṇa*, that OM adds a sense of affirmation to the command; another possibility is that it simply adds emphasis.

⁴⁹ Parpola (1981a, 201). Parpola points out that "most of the oldest occurrences...consist of *om* followed by imperative" (199). It is true that "most" (but not *all*) of the earliest attestations fit this pattern (e.g., *prasava* and *āśrāvāṇa*). Parpola argues further (201) that the *āśrāvāṇa* takes the form *ā śrāvaya* in the oldest texts (e.g., KaṭhS 31.13) and that the variants with OM occur only later. But the equally ancient MS examples above show that the simple *āśrāvāṇa*, its variants with OM, and the *prasava* are all attested *together* in the same textual stratum (KS, MS). Hence Parpola's claim that the *prasava* was the basis for subsequent developments cannot be proven solely on the basis of these texts (cf. Hock 1991, 98).

§4.3 *Vyāhṛtayaḥ: the utterances*

The "utterances" (*vyāhṛtayaḥ*; sing. *vyāhṛti*) are the three words of the mantra *bhūr bhuvā svar*, "Earth! Atmosphere! Heaven!" (ĀpŚS 5.12.1). These words are spoken by various priests in a variety of contexts, especially by the Brahman priest as an expiation (*prāyascitti*) for a defect in ritual performance (Renou 1954, 144; Fujii 2001, 152-55). While the oldest attestations of the *vyāhṛti* mantra consist simply of the three cosmological terms, the Śrauta Sūtras codify versions of the mantra with OM appended as an independent syllable.⁵⁰ For instance, the Brahman priest takes his seat during the performance of the *iṣṭi* with a series of mantras ending with *bhūḥ bhuvāḥ svaḥ o3m* (ŚāṅkhŚS 4.6.9). Or, the Yajamāna utters the same sequence in the performance of his daily fire-offering (*agnihotra*; ĀśvŚS 2.3.16; 2.4.25). This same collocation also comes about when the special formula called *stomabhāga*, used by some branches for granting permission to the Sāmavedic priests, precedes the Brahman's *prasava* with OM.⁵¹ Thus, when the Prastotṛ signals that the Sāmavedic trio is about to begin the praise-song, the Brahman agrees: "...*bhūr bhuvā svaḥ. Om*, sing! " (*om stuta, Mānava Śrauta Sūtra* 5.2.16.14; cf. 5.2.15.10).

⁵⁰ The Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas furnish antecedents for the collocation of OM and the *vyāhṛti* mantra. For *bhūr bhuvāḥ svar om*, see AB 5.31.4 (bis); 8.27.4; and KaṭhĀ 2.55. For *om bhūr bhuvāḥ svaḥ*, see TĀ 1.14.4; 1.15.1; 1.16.1; 1.17.2; 1.18.1. Still other permutations of OM with the *vyāhṛti* mantra are attested in the *pravargya* mantras of the KaṭhĀ (198.15-18): e.g., *om bhūr bhuvā svas svāhā*; while these are significant for the historical development of the mantras, they are not codified *per se* in the Śrauta Sūtras.

⁵¹ Fujii has shown that differences arise among the Vedic branches around this granting of permission to Sāmavedic priests (2001, 148-151). The Kauṣītakins and Jaiminīyas compress the *prasava* for this context, teaching the utterance of *om* alone (e.g., JUB 3.18.5, 7). Other branches expand the *prasava* by codifying an additional *stomabhāga* formula, which may or may not feature OM. As codified by the Kauthumas, one variant of the *stomabhāga* ends in OM (LŚS 5.11.6).

§4.4 *Hiṃkāra: the sound hiṃ*

Another permutation of the utterances involves the addition of the sound *hiṃ*,⁵² yielding the form *hiṃ bhūr bhūvaḥ svar om*. Known variously as *hiṃkāra* (CH§37) and *abhihiṃkāra* (ĀśvŚS 1.2.4), the mantra in this form is spoken by the Hotṛ as a prelude to many of his recitations. Thus, to begin the Sāmidheni verses, "having made the sound *hiṃ*3 [with *pluti*], he mutters *bhūr bhūvaḥ svar om*" (ĀśvŚS 1.2.3).⁵³ Or, he may begin with three repetitions of *hiṃ*, as he does before the early morning recitation (*prātarānuvāka*; CH §119): *hiṃ hiṃ hiṃ bhūr bhūvaḥ svar o3m*. We will have occasion to discuss further parallels between *hiṃ* and OM in a later chapter.

§4.5 *Summing up: OM in the Yajurvedic liturgies*

This concludes my survey of OM in the Yajurvedic liturgies. Multiformity in terms of ritual context is still apparent, although the form of OM in the Yajurvedic liturgies is more stable: with the exception of the *āśrāvaṇa*, where *oṃ* and *o* are attested, the most persistent variation is the presence of *pluti* (*o3m*). I note a few patterns in the way the syllable is used. First, OM is independent: these examples all involve single iterations of OM as an independent syllable rather than multiple repetitions. Next, OM is an interpolation: the syllable is added to an existing mantra or expression, except perhaps in the *āśrāvaṇa*, where an outright substitution may occur. Third, OM introduces a command: the *prasava* and the *āśrāvaṇa* share the form OM plus imperative; even the *vyāhṛti* mantra with OM, which appears to be the exception, attests one such instance. Fourth is portability: these uses of OM apply not just to one ritual context but to several. Fifth—and most importantly—is exchange: all of these mantras with OM figure in verbal exchanges between officiants, including acknowledgement,

⁵² Known by the technical term *hiṃkāra*, this sound varies (*hiṃ*, *hiṃ*, *huṃ*, etc.) depending on its precise liturgical application. See further discussion above §2n3.

⁵³ *hiṃ*3 iti hiṃkṛtya bhūr bhūvaḥ svar om iti japati

permission, exhortation, and expiation. On the whole, the OMs considered in this section are quite different from those of the Sāmavedic *stotra* and Ṛgvedic *śāstra*. These OMs do not adorn vast stretches of recitation, nor do they make a substantial contribution to the sonic textures of sacrifice. Instead, they mark specific moments, especially the authorization to recite or to act.

§5 OM in the Śrauta Sūtras: multiformity and diffusion

The analysis of the practices presented in this chapter here leads to some generalizations about OM in śrauta ritual. First, OM appears in the liturgies of all three Vedas and most of their branches, encompassing ṛc, sāmān and yajus alike—liturgical OM is not restricted to a single branch, Veda, or tradition. Next, in the majority of these examples, OM is added, substituted or otherwise interpolated into a mantra according to the conventions of recitational practices; only in a minority of the instances is OM attested as a *bona fide* independent syllable with a stable form. In other words, OM most frequently results from a recitational modification to an underlying expression, leading to the expression of the syllable in a range of forms depending on context. The Śrauta Sūtras therefore confirm what we suspected from the Saṃhitā evidence, namely that liturgical OM has no fixed, unitary form; instead, its form largely depends on the manner of recitation, ritual context, and branch affiliation. Next, liturgical OM in the Śrauta Sūtras continues another trend we saw in the Saṃhitās: the syllable is often implicated in an exchange of mantras between priests, whether it be in the rhetorical realm of marking questions, acknowledgements or commands; or the performative realm of marking the end of mantras, and transitions from one mantra to the next. Finally, OM is used in as many as twenty archetypes, each of which may occur multiple times in the course of recitation and performance. By emphasizing the reconstruction of OM's audible history, as well as its wide diffusion across the liturgies, I hope to have made a convincing case that OM in one form or another defines the

soundscape of sacrifice. If you were to sit on the sidelines of a Soma sacrifice as I have reconstructed it here, you would hear OM ringing out again and again.⁵⁴

§5.1 *Illustrating the multiformity of liturgical OM*

In this section I offer a graphic illustration of liturgical OM's multiformity. The diagram (see Table 1 below) lays out twenty archetypes of OM in the *śrauta* liturgies. The columns labeled "name" and "description" present a roughly synchronic list of OM's uses as codified in the Śrauta Sūtras and discussed in this chapter. However, since a number of these uses have antecedents in the Sāmhitās, Brāhmaṇas, and Āraṇyakas, I have seen fit to address liturgical OM's historical development across the strata of the Vedic corpus. To provide this diachronic perspective, the column labeled "attestation" gives the earliest text layer for which I have found evidence. In parentheses, I note the specific texts of this layer where OM appears; an asterisk indicates that the context is referred to but not directly attested. Moreover, the entries are given in clusters that place the older attestations (near the top of the list) before the younger (near the bottom). This does *not* mean, to take one example, that in absolute terms the *prasava* with OM is older than the *pratigara* with OM; but it does convey a rough chronology according to the texts that have survived.

⁵⁴ This is very much the case even today, as my observations of Nampūtiri sacrifices in Kerala can confirm. However, the use of amplification at modern rituals changes the overall effect: with officiants reciting into microphones, every mantra is projected equally, and thus a wave of amplified sound competes with the frequent repetition of OM.

Table 1: Diagram of twenty archetypes of liturgical OM⁵⁵

NAME	FORM	DESCRIPTION	ATTESTATION
<i>stobha</i>	<i>o(3/ṃ/m) (+vā)</i>	syllable in <i>sāman</i>	SV+
<i>vyāhṛtisāmans</i>	word ends in <i>-om</i>	e.g., <i>puruśom</i> , <i>bhūrom</i>	SV+ (JAG)
<i>āśrāvaṇa</i>	<i>o(ṃ) śrāvaya</i> , etc.	Adhvaryu cues Āgnīdhra	YV+ (MS)
(vocative, question)	<i>(á)dhváryā3 óm</i>	Hotṛ queries Adhvaryu	YV+ (MS)
<i>stobha</i> in YV <i>sāman</i>	<i>om vā3 / ovā</i>	sung by Adhvaryu	YV+ (MS)
<i>pratigara</i>	(many variants)	Adhvaryu responds	YV+ (TS)
<i>prasava</i>	<i>om</i> + imperative	Brahman's authorization	YV+ (MS, VS)
<i>āhāva</i>	<i>śomsāvom</i> , etc.	Hotṛ exhorts Adhvaryu	Br.+ (AB, *ṚV)
<i>subrahmaṇyā</i>	<i>subrahmaṇyo(3)m</i>	invocation in SV rite	Br.+ (JB)
<i>aniruktagāna</i>	<i>o(ṃ/m)</i> substitution	"unexpressed" singing	Br.+ (PB)
<i>vyāhṛti</i>	<i>bhūr bhuvaḥ svar om</i>	expiatory mantra	Br.+ (AB)
<i>upagāna</i>	<i>o, om, and ho</i>	accompanying SV <i>stotra</i>	Up.+ (JUB)
<i>praṇava</i>	verse-final <i>-o(3m)</i>	Hotṛ's ṚV recitations	Ār.+ (KauṣB)
<i>pravargya</i> mantras	OM + X	first term of mantra	Ār.+ (KaṭhĀ)
<i>ādi</i>	OM begins <i>udgītha</i>	element of SV <i>stotra</i>	ŚS (*JB)
<i>(abhi)hiṃkāra</i>	<i>hiṃ</i> +utterances+OM	before Hotṛ's recitations	ŚS (*AB)
<i>nyūnkha, ninarda</i>	verse-internal <i>o(3)</i>	Hotṛ's ṚV recitations	ŚS (*KauṣB)
<i>prastāva</i>	<i>gāyatra</i> ends in <i>-om</i>	"prelude" of SV <i>stotra</i>	ŚS
<i>viśvarūpa, jyotirgāna</i>	<i>gāyatra</i> ends in <i>-om</i>	Udgātṛ's solo <i>sāmans</i>	ŚS
<i>tūṣṇīṃśaṃsa</i>	mantra ends in <i>-o3ṃ</i>	Hotṛ's <i>śastra</i>	ŚS (*AB)

⁵⁵ Beyond the conventional abbreviations for texts given at the end of this study, the present diagram also employs: Br. (Brāhmaṇas); Ār. (Āraṇyakas); Up. (Upaniṣads); and ŚS (Śrauta Sūtras). An asterisk next to a text name indicates that the archetype was referred to in that text but without a direct attestation of OM.

§5.2 *OM in ritual: not one but many*

The survey of ritual evidence presented so far aimed to comprehensively document liturgical OM. If the survey so far has felt dense, detailed, and, at times, dizzying in its complexity—then this only serves to emphasize that the signal characteristic of OM in the Vedic liturgies is multiformity. The evidence of the Saṃhitās suggests that this multiformity dates back to the early days: these ancient layers of the Vedic corpus furnish a range of mantras with OM, each one different from the next in form and function. And the evidence of the Śrauta Sūtras demonstrates the persistence of OM's multiformity up through the late Vedic period: these ritual manuals attest several forms of OM, codify at least twenty archetypal uses, and make the case for its extremely wide diffusion across *śrauta* ritual in performance. To put it succinctly: there is not one OM in the Vedas, but many.

Throughout these efforts to document liturgical OM, I have purposely neglected one important aspect, the realm of meaning. What does liturgical OM mean? Need it mean anything at all? In the next chapter I address head-on the critical questions around liturgical OM's meaning, etymology, and origins.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: GLOSSES, ETYMOLOGIES, AND ORIGINS OF OM

Having established the basic uses of OM in the liturgies, it is a good time to round out our survey of liturgical OM by confronting issues of meaning, and their implications for understanding the syllable's history. In this study, I approach the meaning of OM in the most expansive terms, taking the stance that the syllable signifies on several different levels: interpretive, performative, aesthetic, and linguistic (see ch.1, §5.8). The interpretive meanings of the syllable will occupy us in later chapters when we explore the discursive construction of OM in interpretive texts. I have already touched on the issue of OM's performative meanings: we saw in the survey of liturgical OM that the syllable authorizes ritual action, demarcates sequences of recitation, and serves as a rhetorical marker in verbal exchanges. I have broached aesthetic meaning insofar as I have attempted to listen to OM's history, reconstructing how the syllable sounded in recitation, and how its sounding contributed to the overall soundscape of sacrifice. As for linguistic meanings, my survey of liturgical OM so far has mostly neglected semantics and syntax. This deliberate neglect has been a matter of method: the linguistic features of OM remain controversial, and they distract from a clear presentation of the ritual evidence.

So what does OM mean? To find out, I shall focus for the moment on the syllable's linguistic, performative, and aesthetic meanings; I reserve my discussion of interpretive meaning for later chapters. In this chapter, I critically engage a large body of scholarship, more than two thousand years in the making, about OM's meaning, etymology, and origins. This scholarship encompasses the contributions of insiders and outsiders: I shall explore emic accounts in Sanskrit texts, commentaries, and lexicons alongside the etic accounts of Indologists, historical linguists, and historians of religion. Even after so many centuries, no consensus as to OM's meaning, etymology, and origins has gained

acceptance. I attribute this lack of consensus to the fact of liturgical OM's multiformity: it is impossible to prove a primary meaning and single etymology of a syllable that is so diverse in its form and function. I argue that the many OMs in the liturgies convey many linguistic and performative meanings, depending on context; and that these in turn cannot be explained exclusively in etymological terms. I propose in this chapter that we acknowledge the syllable's multiformity and proceed accordingly: above all, this means giving up the idea, cherished by generations of scholarship, of OM as a unitary entity with a single stream of origins.

The chapter begins by tracing the glosses and definitions of OM in Vedic texts, ritual treatises, and premodern Sanskrit lexicons. These accounts define OM above all as a way to say "yes" or a way to introduce mantras; however, they are also notable for the polyvalence they attribute to the syllable. This leads to a survey of Indological contributions, which investigate OM's semantics, etymology, and origins using the methods of historical linguistics and philology. While these contributions exhibit some common threads—largely influenced by earlier emic analyses—they are remarkable for their lack of consensus. I then pivot to consider other approaches to the issues of OM's meaning, etymology, and origins. I discuss several studies that have focused on the origins of OM as a natural and universal sound, stressing its sonic qualities and its affinities with "natural" human processes such as respiration and prelinguistic utterance. I conclude the chapter by criticizing the assumption shared by this heterogeneous body of scholarship: that liturgical OM can be explained as a unitary entity with a single meaning, etymology, and origin. OM's multiformity in the liturgies makes it problematic to speak in terms of origins, or to trace its diverse manifestations back to a single source. As an alternative, I argue that we must conceive the syllable's history in terms of *emergence*: the gradual but persistent integration of liturgical OM and discursive OM, streams flowing together from many sources.

§1 Vedic meanings

Vedic texts seldom gloss liturgical OM directly. And yet there are numerous sequences in the liturgy where the syntax or the context suggest a distinctly affirmative sense: for example, OM plus imperative to acknowledge a request and authorize an activity (e.g., *om pracarata*, "yes, perform your duties!"; MS 4.9.2); or, OM in collocation with another affirmative particle (e.g., *om tathā dadāmi*, "Yes, I give [a place of sacrifice]"; AB 7.20).¹ Similarly, one can infer an affirmative meaning in certain dialogues of the Brāhmaṇas or Upaniṣads that seem close to everyday speech (cf. Parpola 1981a, 203-204). For example, in the famous Upaniṣadic dialogue between the sages Śākalya and Yajñavalkya about how many gods there are, each of Yajñavalkya's answers is met with a positive acknowledgement (*om*) from his questioner before the next question is posed: "'Yes (=om),' he says, now tell me..." (*om iti hovāca*, BĀU 3.9.1). Taken together, such instances inform a burgeoning sense in Vedic texts that one meaning of OM is "yes." A gnomic verse from the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, opposing OM and the negative particle *na*, attests to this (AĀ 2.3.8): "In speech, what is *om* and what is *na*..." (*yad vāca om iti yac ca neti*).

In light of such examples, it is significant that when Vedic texts explicitly assign a lexical meaning to liturgical OM, they gloss it as an affirmative, as a special way to say "yes" in *śrauta* ritual. One of the most famous Vedic pronouncements on OM's meaning comes in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (ChU 1.1.8; trans. Olivelle):

Clearly, this syllable signifies assent, for one says *om* when one assents to something.²

¹ Similarly, the JŚS prescribes an exchange in which the Yajamāna asks for a place of sacrifice and the Udgātṛ grants it. "In a low voice" (*upāṃśu*), the Udgātṛ says *tathā* to this request while "out loud" (*uccaiḥ*), he says only *om* (JŚS 1.2.17).

² *tad vā etad anujñākṣaram / yad dhi kiṃcānujānāty om ity eva tad āha /*

The context here is a series of reflections that correlate OM with the *udgītha*, the main portion of the Sāmavedic *stotra*. The lexical meaning supplied here (*anujñā* 'assent') does not follow directly from the liturgical context under discussion: when it begins the *udgītha*, OM is interpolated as a non-lexical addition the lyric; to the extent that it has meaning, one might argue that it is performative, marking the transition from one portion of the song to the next (see Parpola 1981a, 204). The interpretation of OM as a syllable of assent here almost certainly derives from another liturgical context, the Brahman's *prasava*, which is glossed in various post-Vedic *sūtras* with the identical term, *anujñā* (see Renou 1954, s.v. *prasava*; *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* 1.13.8; Parpola 1981a, 200; Böhrtlingk & Roth 1855-1875, s.v. *om*; *Ṛgveda Prātiśākhya* 6.16).³ Again, the syntax and rhetorical context of the exchange featuring the *prasava* suit this affirmative interpretation: the Brahman accedes to his colleague's request for permission with OM and an imperative.

Another Upaniṣadic passage explains liturgical OM along similar lines. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* enumerates a range of contexts where OM cues or introduces recitation; the text understands this initial position as communicating "compliance" (*anukṛti*). One example adduced by the composers is the *āśrāvāṇa* mantra (TU 1.8.1, trans. Olivelle, with changes):

When one says *om*, it indicates compliance. Thus, they make him listen saying
"O! make him listen..." (*o śrāvaya*)⁴

As discussed above (ch. 3, §4.1), the *āśrāvāṇa* mantra (*o śrāvaya*) serves to cue the utterance of another mantra (*astu śrauṣaṭ*) by the Āgnīdhra, which in turn serves as a cue for the Hotṛ to recite. This passage thus associates the pure form of OM—the initial *o* in *o śrāvaya*—with the granting of permission, passed

³ Parpola considers *prasava* and *anujñā* to be interchangeable as technical terms in Vedic liturgical texts (Parpola 1981a, 200).

⁴ *om ity etad anukṛtir ha sma vā apy o śrāvayety ā śrāvayanti*

on from one priest to the next.⁵ But the very existence of non-OM variants of mantra (e.g., *ā śrāvaya*) shows that the same permission to recite can also be granted *without OM*; therefore the imperative alone can serve the same purpose. If OM does indeed express affirmation here, it is redundant and emphatic.

§1.1 *OM in Sanskrit lexicography*

Vedic passages such as these served to authoritatively establish two analyses of liturgical OM, encompassing semantics as well as performance: first, that the syllable indicates assent; and second, that it marks the beginning of recitation. Thus, liturgical OM seems to have been broadly received in post-Vedic texts as an affirmative particle and as an inceptive particle introducing mantras. In the centuries that followed, glosses along these lines appear in the works of pre-modern Sanskrit grammarians and lexicographers. To be sure, these scholars understood the syllable in many other ways as well, especially as a focal point of theological and soteriological discourses. OM's semantic and performative definitions stand cheek by jowl with theological definitions in such works. For instance, "OM has the sense of 'yes' and 'the supreme'" (*om evaṃ paraṃ mate; Amarakośa* 3.5.12; *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi* 1540); "OM has two meanings: 'yes' and 'sacred syllable'" (*om evaṃ praṇavārthayoḥ; Trikāṇḍaśeṣa* 3.3.465); "OM means both 'sacred syllable' and 'expressing assent'" (*om praṇave 'ṅikṛtāvapi; Anekārthasaṃgraha* 7.6); "OM indicates 'commencement' as well as 'sacred syllable', 'agreement', 'taking away' and 'auspiciousness' (*om upakrame / praṇave cābhyupagame*

⁵ Note that the passage is glossing *om* (with labial -m) but then adduces as its first example a version of the mantra beginning with the simple *o*; this exemplifies the multiformity of liturgical OM, with its variants (*om, o*) grouped under a single rubric.

cāpākṛtau ca maṅgale; Medinīkośa).⁶ Note that these post-Vedic glosses all use the liturgical term *praṇava* in a non-technical sense to denote OM as an apotheosized and transcendent sacred syllable; I will discuss the development of *praṇava* along these lines in chapters to come (see ch. 9, §4.1, 5).

Also relevant are the Sanskritic etymological analyses of OM, foremost among these the "grammatico-philosophic disquisition" about the syllable in the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*, which advances the claim that OM derives from the Sanskrit roots $\sqrt{āp}$ 'to obtain' or \sqrt{av} 'to urge' (*Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.1.26; Bloomfield 1899, 109). The former is justified with the usual circular "exegetical etymology" (Lubin forthcoming): because it comes from $\sqrt{āp}$, the sound OM "obtains" everything. The latter etymology is endorsed in the *Uṇādisūtras* (1.141), and the derivation of OM from \sqrt{av} continues to hold sway in Sanskritic grammatical traditions of modern India: in order to locate OM in Viśva Bandhu's word indices, for example, one must look under \sqrt{av} .

§1.3 Summing up: emic approaches to OM's meaning

Vedic authorities establish the definition of liturgical OM as assent (*anukṛti, anujñā*), along with its related function of introducing mantras. Premodern lexicographers follow suit, most frequently glossing OM as an affirmative, but also allowing for a range of other definitions, including theological ones. In the Sanskrit grammatical tradition, a late Vedic etymology deriving the syllable from a verb root (\sqrt{av}) remains remarkably persistent, attested to the present day. On the whole, the testimony of emic sources on liturgical OM's meaning and etymology is homogeneous but quite scanty; this suggests the composers of these texts accepted OM's definitions as a matter of course. They may also have approached the question of OM's meaning in other ways. We will see in later chapters that Vedic thinkers, at any rate, conceived of OM's meaning chiefly in theological terms.

⁶ For another discussion of OM in Sanskrit lexicography and grammatical traditions, see Ouseparampil 1977, 442-43.

§2 Meanings, etymologies, and origins of OM in Indological scholarship

Vedic and Sanskrit glosses directly influenced nineteenth-century European Indologists in their attempts to explain OM's lexical meaning, etymology, and origins.⁷ In terms of meaning, many scholars held that OM was indeed an affirmative particle. Böhtlingk and Roth in their Sanskrit dictionary defined it as a word of solemn affirmation and respectful recognition, citing the premodern glosses reviewed above.⁸ They also likened OM to the Hebrew *amen*, a comparison that was soon reiterated by Rājendralāl Mitra (1865) and would continue to be made for many years to come.⁹ Monier-Williams (1899), as was his wont, followed the views of Böhtlingk and Roth *verbatim*; he also adduced the definition of the influential nineteenth-century pandit Tārānātha Tarkavacaspati, who drew from many of the same lexicographic glosses.¹⁰ Hillebrandt (1897b) also argued for OM as an affirmative particle, while Oldenberg allowed for both 'yes' and *amen* as possible interpretations (1919, 263).

The prevailing view was that *om*, as a syllable of assent, must be etymologically connected to the Sanskrit particles of affirmation, *ām* and *ā-*—but how? Weber (1853) maintained that *om* was an "obscure pronunciation" (dunkeln Aussprache) of these affirmative particles, while Böhtlingk & Roth (1855-1875) contended that the "more original Form" (ursprünglichere Form) was *om̃*, that is, ending with *anunāsika* instead of *-m*, which in turn was a "distorted pronunciation" (dumpfe Aussprache) of

⁷ For further discussion of these early Indological efforts, see Parpola 1981a.

⁸ Böhtlingk & Roth 1855-1875, s.v. *om*: "ein Wort *feierlicher Bekräftigung* und *ehrfurchtsvoller Anerkennung*, dem Sinne nach oft dem *amēn* vergleichbar."

⁹ In March 1865, Rajendralal Mitra made a sustained argument before the Asiatic Society of Bengal that Sanskrit *om* and Semitic *āmen* were essentially identical, traces of a common history. Bloomfield 1889 and Müller 1899 argue against such a view. While ruling out the cognate relationship of the two utterances, Otto 1932 and Parpola 1981a acknowledge the basic parallelism of *om* and *amen* and the usefulness of the comparison; see further discussion below.

¹⁰ Monier-Williams quotes Tārānātha Tarkavacaspati's Sanskrit glosses as follows (Monier-Williams 1899, s.v. *om*): *praṇave, ārambhe, svikāre, anumatau, apākṛtau, asvikāre, maṅgale, śubhe, jñeye, brahmaṇi*. I translate: OM has "the sense of 'sacred syllable', 'undertaking', 'acquiescence', 'permission', 'taking away', 'non-acquiescence', 'auspiciousness', 'virtuousness', 'something to be inquired into', '*brahman*'..."

ām̐, a nasalization resulting from drawing out the simple sound *ā*. A different line of etymological inquiry derived the syllable from the demonstrative pronoun *avá* 'this' (Windischmann 1834, cited in Parpola 1981a, 210n6). Benfey (1848, 41) explained this etymology in theological terms, arguing that the syllable might be derived from the (unattested) neuter singular **avam*, used on the analogy of forms such as *tad* or *idam* to designate the "highest unity" (der höchsten Einheit). Müller (1899, 423), while tentatively accepting the etymological link with *ava-*, combined it with the prevailing affirmative gloss: he argued that *om* could represent a weakening of the pronominal stem *avam* (to *au-m*) and that the semantic development from deixis ("this, that") to affirmation ("yes") was analogous to the affirmative French *oui*, a contracted compound word ultimately derived from the Latin deictic pronouns *hoc-illud*. Müller also considered a natural explanation of OM based on the sound's affinity with respiration; more on this in the next section (§3).

A different approach to the syllable's meaning and etymology highlighted OM's frequent position at the beginning of mantras or recitation. Bloomfield (1889) connected OM to the conjunction *atha*, 'now, now then', extrapolating the "original value" of OM from its introductory position in certain mantras of the *śrauta* liturgies. This inceptive function, he argued, prefigured the later practice of pronouncing *o3m* with *pluti* at the beginning of recitations (of the Veda and other texts; see Pāṇini 8.2.67).¹¹ For Bloomfield, pure *o* was the underlying form, undergoing nasalization (*om̐*) when it was drawn out in recitation ("euphonic *anunāsikya*"; cf. Roth 1846, 76). Somewhat paradoxically, Bloomfield made his arguments in spite of his conviction that "the word *om̐*...has no organic connection with the

¹¹ Bloomfield denied that OM was a syllable of assent, pointing out that it introduced not only formulas of assent but other types of formulas as well; and that *ām̐*, the proposed parent form, was post-Vedic (however, Hock has since adduced instances of *ām̐* in Vedic texts; see Hock 1991, 95-96). He also dismissed earlier attempts by Weber and others to link OM and Amen: "This explanation involves the transfer of a Semitic conception, colored by German religious feeling; it does not seem to represent an Indian view" (cli).

language. All its uses are conscious and secondary" (Bloomfield 1889, cl)—that is, confined to the realm of ritual.

Keith (1917), while acknowledging the syllable's affirmative sense in some liturgical contexts (e.g., AB 7.18), as well as its "ordinary use as a solemn 'Yes'" (e.g., ŚB 1.4.1.30; 10.6.1.4; 11.6.3.4), also stressed OM's confinement to the scripted verbal exchanges of ritual. Keith's innovative idea was that OM had no clear etymological antecedents but instead had roots in some "primitive exclamation." He posited that the syllable derived strictly from a recitational practice, the *praṇava*, which, as we saw above, involves drawing out the final vowel of a ṚV verse as *-o3* or *o3m*.¹² Like others before him, he regarded OM's nasalized form as a modification of underlying *o* with some connection to long *ā*, adducing the alternation of the *āśravaṇa* between the three forms *om śrāvaya*, *o śrāvaya* and *ā śrāvaya*; and the frequent nasalization of vowels drawn out with *pluti*.

Implicit in many of the arguments considered so far is the idea that mantras recited in ritual exhibit phonological and morphological features that set them apart from everyday spoken language. With Karl Hoffmann (1976), this recitational argument gains precision: ritual performance, he argues, leads to the artificial lengthening ("affektische Dehnung") of certain sounds; at the same time, it also preserves certain archaic pronunciations—frozen forms from Indo-Iranian prehistory. According to Hoffmann (cf. Witzel 2009, 3-4), mantras with embedded OMs exhibit phonological peculiarities along these lines: when *a* is artificially lengthened in recitation, it becomes not *ā* but *o* (e.g. *śaṃsā* > *śoṃsā*); moreover, some of the mantras exhibiting this lengthening may also attest the vestiges of Indo-Iranian pronunciation in other syllables (e.g., diphthongal pronunciation of [ai] for what is represented in the

¹² According to Keith, Pāṇini's special OM sandhi, whereby *-om* simply replaces rather than combines with the preceding *a*-vowel (Pāṇini 6.1.95: final *-a/ā + om = om* instead of the expected *aum*), could be traced to the *praṇava*'s recitational precedent.

texts as <e>: *athā madeva* > *othā modaiva*).¹³ According to Hoffmann, the Adhvaryu's response *śóṃśā módaiva* (TS 3.2.9.5)—which he deems a liturgical pronunciation of the underlying expression *śaṃsā madeva*—is among the oldest mantras exhibiting these phonological peculiarities. The Hotṛ's *āhāva* would result from the same tendency: the first *-om-* in *śoṃsāvom* represents the liturgical lengthening of *a*, so that *śaṃsāva* has become *śoṃsāva*. Hoffmann further distinguishes between OMs produced through recitational lengthening, on the one hand, and the addition of the independent particle *om̐*, on the other (as in the final syllable of *śoṃsāvom*). However, he offers no etymological explanation for the independent particle, restricting his argument to phonology alone.¹⁴

Against this background Asko Parpola brought out a rigorous and sustained treatment of OM's primary meaning, etymology, and origins (1981a). Taking into consideration many of its liturgical uses, he argued for *om* as the primary form and for 'yes' as the primary meaning, like Weber linking it to Sanskrit *ām* and *ā*. Parpola's unique contribution was to ultimately derive Sanskrit *ām* and *ā* from the Dravidian *ām* 'yes', framing this etymology against the background of large-scale assimilation of indigenous Indian culture by the newly arrived Indo-Aryans in the first millennium BCE.

¹³ Hoffmann (1976, 552-553) explains the lengthening in phonetic terms as the transformation from "[ɔ] : [ɔ:]"—that is, from a short open-mid back rounded vowel to a long one. Witzel (2009, 3-4) generalizes Hoffmann's arguments about this case of recitational lengthening as follows: "It is clear, thus, that in *post-Ṛgvedic* recitation and singing, what is now written as <a>, was pronounced as [ɔ]—or perhaps also as [ə]—and was lengthened to [ɔ:], a sound that does not occur in post-Vedic Sanskrit and thus was normalized in the redacted texts by [o:], now written as <o>" (emphasis in original). Witzel also confirms Hoffmann's contention that the *-ai-* in *modaiva* is very old, hearkening back to the original diphthongal pronunciation of *-e-* in Ṛgvedic times. Witzel and Hoffmann thus account phonologically for these mantras whose underlying morphologies were discerned already by Hillebrandt (1897a, 101): *śaṃsāva*, *śaṃsā madeva*, and *atha madeva*.

¹⁴ He notes that independent *om* combines with the preceding term in an exceptional sandhi operation (Hoffmann 1976, 553-554): *śoṃsāva + om = śoṃsāvom*. Pāṇini codifies this type of sandhi with its own *sūtra* (6.1.95): final *a/ā* plus initial *óm* yields *-óm*. According to Hoffmann (1976, 554n5), the syllable's proper pronunciation is *om̐* with *anunāsika*; further, it is always treated in sandhi as consisting of the preposition *ā* plus *ūñ*. Word final *-a/ā* coalesces with initial *ā-*, which then combines with *ūñ* to yield *-om̐*. In Hoffmann's example, *śaṃsāva om* yields the attested form *śoṃsāvom* ("let us both recite, *om̐*"; AB 3.12.1, ĀśvŚS 5.9.1). Strunk (1983, 34) follows this explanation in accounting for the morphology of the Sāmavedic invocation *subrahmaṇyo3m* (see below). By contrast, Hock explains Pāṇini's rule as a *post hoc* rationalization of the recitational substitution of *om* for *a*-vowels (rather than a euphonic combination with an independent *om*; Hock 1991, 103).

Parpola argues that OM plus imperative formulas constitute the majority of the oldest attestations of OM in the Veda; that the *prasava*, which exhibits this syntax, is the paradigmatic use; and that 'yes' is the meaning of OM in the *prasava* (Parpola 1981a, 200). According to this line of reasoning, all other liturgical uses of OM follow by analogy from the model of the *prasava*, or are secondary reflexes of OM's affirmative meaning. This applies even to OM's apparently non-lexical use in Sāmavedic singing, where OM is added to the existing lyrics as the *ādi*: for Parpola, the syllable in this case communicates an affirmative acknowledgement of what has just been sung. He compares OM to Hebrew *amen* (as well as similar asseverative responses from other cultures) which, when "used formulaically denotes the acceptance of what has been said before" (204).

With comparable rigor and detail, H.H. Hock (1991) has contested many of Parpola's claims: he argues that pure *o* (not *om*) is the primary form; that the syllable can be explained as an Indo-European (not Dravidian) inheritance; and that 'yes' as a meaning is not primary, but a later innovation. One of the key disagreements between Hock and Parpola is how to understand OM's uses in exchanges between priests. Whereas Parpola understands OM in these formulaic exchanges to convey assent, Hock argues that the syllable is rather a particle of address, as shown by the high instance of vocatives and imperatives; he suggests that it only gradually accrues the idiomatic meaning of assent.

Broadly, Hock proposes not one, but "two origins for *-om*" (Hock 1991, 106): exclamation and recitation. He argues that OM in the liturgies exemplifies a pattern found among exclamatory particles in other Indo-European contexts: they are purely vocalic, or else ending in a nasal; they tend to precede or follow the utterance they serve to mark; and they are often associated with direct address. Hock includes in this category the uses of OM as a non-lexical syllable in Sāmavedic singing; like other *stobhas*, he argued, OM in SV is an exclamatory, "filler" particle, interpolated to help the underlying verse meld with the melody. Hock also emphasizes the primacy of recitational practices in OM's

history; the syllable, he argues, is often a "recitational substitution" governed by specific phonological processes. Chief among these is the transformation of an underlying *a / ā* to *o* noticed by Hoffmann (e.g. *ā śrāvaya* >> *óm śrāvaya*). Hock (1991, 98-99) accounts for these forms in somewhat different terms, attributing the OM phonemes not to lengthening but to the outright substitution of *o(m)* for *a*-vowels. Following Keith, Hock stresses the importance of the *praṇava*, a liturgical usage that combines recitational substitution with the qualities of an exclamation (and one which Parpola barely addresses; cf. Hock 1991, 90). Hock concludes that recitational and exclamatory OM often converge in the liturgies but leaves open the question of whether they can be traced to the same source.

§2.1 *The failure of semantic and etymological approaches*

The arguments laid out so far encompass the emic explanations of premodern exponents of Brahmanical learning; and the etic explanations of Indologists trained in European philological methods. The former deal with meaning and etymology succinctly, without elaborate argumentation; their glosses carry the sanction of the tradition. Moreover, their definitions present OM as a polyvalent term: multiple meanings sit comfortably side-by-side. The Indological arguments present a stark contrast: most make the case for the primacy of a single meaning, etymology, and stream of origins. While it is beyond the scope of this study to respond in detail to every twist and turn of these arguments, I now offer a few observations about the Indological contributions as a body of work, weighing their strengths and weaknesses in elucidating OM's history.

The body of modern scholarship just considered yields explanations as diverse as OM's many uses in the liturgies. Even the two most recent contributions, those of Parpola and Hock, exhibit fundamental disagreements: Is it *o* or *om*? Indo-European or Dravidian? An affirmation or an exclamation?—and so on. This drives home the point that we are farther than ever from reaching a

consensus on the syllable's meaning, etymology, and origins. I will argue below that this gridlock arises because no one has adequately addressed liturgical OM's multiformity. But for now let me focus on areas of agreement, pointing out some common threads through what Frits Staal has called, in another context, the "*śrauta* maze" (Staal 2004). First, there is evidence that OM is a syllable of assent: the use of OM in liturgical exchanges to acknowledge requests and grant permission; the verbal evidence of several Brāhmaṇic and Upaniṣadic dialogues; the close parallels of the Sanskrit affirmative particles *ām/ā*; the glosses in Vedic and Sanskrit texts—all of this suggests that one meaning of OM is "yes." Next, there is also evidence for OM as an inceptive particle: the syllable often introduces mantras, signaling the start of a given chunk of the liturgy or sequence in the ritual. Finally, it is amply clear that OM is a recitational modification: whether through lengthening, substitution, interpolation, or other means, OM is attested in mantras as the outcome of modifying a mantra in recitation.

Notwithstanding these common threads, almost two centuries of work has failed to produce consensus among Indologists. As I see it, this is because the body of scholarship has failed to acknowledge, much less account for, OM's signal characteristic in the liturgies: multiformity. Individually and as a group, the Indological efforts have been wedded to the project of establishing primary meaning, etymology, and origins. They have assumed from the outset that OM is a word, a lexeme with a semantic history that can be documented and a single path of origins that can be reconstructed. They have also assumed that it is unitary, and that the diversity of its liturgical applications can be explained as various reflexes of a single underlying *Grundform*. Such assumptions have led scholars to reduce the complexity of liturgical OM at all costs, to "cherry-pick" from the liturgies the evidence most amenable to a given argument, and to downplay—or worse, ignore—the counterevidence. While this may serve the project of proposing and defending an etymology, it does little to convey a holistic understanding of a complicated liturgical phenomenon. What's more, these

efforts have been hasty, in that they have sought to establish meaning, etymology, and origins *without* taking the full measure of OM's place in the liturgies. (This is akin to defining a word and proposing an etymology for it without enumerating all the ways it is used in a language!)

The comprehensive liturgical survey of the previous chapters refutes these assumptions and demonstrates that OM has little in common with ordinary language. We have seen that there is scant evidence to suggest that liturgical OM can be circumscribed as a single lexeme whose primary meaning and etymology can be definitively reconstructed. And there is likewise little evidence that OM as a sound in ritual has a single path of origins—tracing attestations of the syllable as far back as possible (to the Vedic Saṃhitās), we find already that the sound is multiform (*om̐, om, o, o3m̐, etc.*), with almost half-a-dozen discrete uses. While I have shown that the oldest OMs are found in the songs of the SV, there is no convincing evidence that a single form of OM *necessarily* preceded or gave rise to the others. Several centuries later, the Śrauta Sūtras show that OM's early multiformity has expanded to encompass twenty discrete archetypes with manifold variations from branch to branch.

How do we reconcile liturgical OM's multiformity with the quest for a single meaning and etymology? I believe that a complete reconciliation is impossible. However, the erudite contributions reviewed above remain relevant and useful to our inquiry *provided they are restricted to particular contexts*. For example, it seems reasonable to understand OM, when followed by an imperative in the *prasava* or *āśrāvaṇa*, as an affirmative syllable; or to attribute the embedding of OM in certain mantras to phonological transformations; or to explain OM in the *praṇava* as an exclamation of sorts that emphasizes the final syllable of a mantra. The problems arise when specific arguments tailored to specific liturgical contexts are pressed into the service of a single, overarching meaning and etymology. On the basis of the texts now available to us, any attempt to find a single solution to the multifarious

problem of liturgical OM is bound to fail. The syllable has defied semantic and etymological analysis because it is multiform, a rubric to organize a wide array of sounds and practices.

§3 *Just a sound: the sonic approach*

If we accept the failure of semantic and etymological approaches to account for the totality of OM's liturgical uses, then we must look elsewhere for insights into the syllable's history. An alternative point of departure is to acknowledge that liturgical OM may not be a lexeme with a unitary meaning and etymology, but rather "just a sound" (Katz 2013, 9n21), coming from many sources and flowing into many currents. *As a sound*, OM enters the textual record in the songs of the Sāmaveda ca. 1000 BCE. And *as a sound*, it gradually proliferates with many variants and contexts until it comes to be recognized as a category in its own right, a common rubric under which the many forms of liturgical OM are organized. This approach stresses the primacy of sound, recitation, and performance, areas that we have found to be integral to the use of OM in the liturgies.

§3.1 *The sonality of OM*

In the discussion below, I rely on the recent work of Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus, who have proposed a broad-based phenomenological and aesthetic approach to Sanskrit religious cultures. They emphasize above all the *sonality* of these traditions, arguing that the sounding of mantras, texts, and rites is the fundamental feature of their history and the perennial source of their authority (see ch.1, §5.4). Their conception of sonality provides a welcome theoretical framework for exploring the past and present of OM and other mantras. For instance, Wilke & Moebus argue that sonality can serve as a middle way to mediate the polarity of meaning and meaninglessness in the study

of mantras. Rather than making a sharp dichotomy between meaning and meaninglessness, Wilke & Moebus argue that whether semantic or non-semantic,

...every sound has an inherent natural expressivity...Sounds elicit emotive or intuitive associations, they can be felt physically, and they have meanings and connotations (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 282-283).

They make the point that a sound signifies not only through the semantic information it conveys, but also through its sensory, aesthetic, and experiential associations. In one way or another, the scholarship discussed in this section shares this interest in sonality and brings it to bear on the history of OM.

Why did *this* sound—or rather, range of sounds—find favor and establish itself as a fundamental feature of the ritual soundscape? Was it chance? Or is there something special about OM's sonality that fostered this development? A number of interpreters over the years have sought to explain OM's significance with reference to the realm of pure sound, recitation, and performance. Foremost among these are the indigenous Vedic explanations that will occupy us as we explore the discursive construction of OM in the chapters to follow. But leaving these aside for the moment, we find a number of sonic explanations from modern linguists and historians of religion, several of whom have emphasized OM as a natural, primal, and even universal sound. According to this line of thought, OM's phonological characteristics, its affinities with breath, its natural expressivity, and its relation to prelinguistic human vocalizations have caused it to outstrip all other sounds, in a sort of auditory survival of the fittest.

§3.2 *Sonic analyses of OM*

Müller argued that OM's "historical and etymological justification" could never be conclusively proven. While flirting with an etymological explanation (see §2 above), he also stressed OM's

onomatopoetic evocation of breath. The syllable, he observed, might be "a mere imitation of the involuntary outbreathing of the deep vowel *o*, stopped by the labial nasal, and then drawn in" (Müller 1899, 423). (We will see in later chapters that OM's affinity with human respiration is a fertile topic throughout the syllable's history; see ch. 7, §5.3; ch. 9, §5.3; and ch. 10, §2.) A less convincing explanation along these lines is that of Hauer, who had the idea that the primitive Vedic nomads concocted OM as an onomatopoetic term to mimic the sound of their "bull-roarer" (*Schwirholz*; Hauer 1932, 6n25).

Rudolf Otto approached the syllable in phenomenological terms. He heard OM in terms of his *sensus numinis*, calling the syllable a "primal sound of numinous feeling" ("Urlaut numinoses Gefühles;" Otto 1932, 208-209; cf. Heiler 1961, 307). Perhaps inspired by Müller, he argued that it was not a word or even a syllable, but rather a drawing out of *o-o-o* with nasalization. In this regard it was something "akin to a murmur" ("Art Raunen"), a natural sonic expression of inner feeling with no meaning. He compared it to another Vedic liturgical syllable (*hum*) as well as drawing attention to the close resemblance between OM's hermeneutic rendering *aum* and the Semitic *aun*. Unlike Mitra before him (1865), Otto emphasized that no borrowing or diffusion from Semitic languages to Aryan languages need be assumed. Instead, he thought such sounds were "natural" and probably invented independently, placing them alongside "Ah, Oh, Sst, [and] Ha."

Though situating OM's development within broader currents of the Vedic ideology of language, Dermot Killingley (1986) has deemphasized the syllable's linguistic character. Instead he argues that OM's meaning is chiefly acquired through its ritual uses. He acknowledges the emic etymology of OM as derived from \sqrt{av} but argues that "it seems futile to seek an etymology for it, or attempt to give it a meaning otherwise than showing the [ritual] contexts in which it is used" (1986, 20; cf. 21). For Killingley, the ritual evidence suggests that OM is "not so much a word as a paralinguistic sound, a

vocal gesture," the resonant fusion of the open *o* and the nasal into a single, uniform sound producing a "distinctive, solemn sonority" (1986, 20). Killingley stresses OM's affinity with the Sāmavedic *stobhas*, especially in collocation with another "paralinguistic sound," *hum*. He follows van Buitenen (1959, 180) in speculating that OM may even have had its origin in a Sāmavedic milieu, thanks to the Sāmavedic liturgical specialization of singing lyrics composed of non-semantic sounds—my liturgical survey, which shows that the oldest OMs arise precisely as *stobhas* in the SV Saṃhitās, lends credence to this idea. But Killingley also notes other liturgical contexts, acknowledging OM's use in verbal exchanges to coordinate recitation and to convey assent (21-22). On the whole, Killingley's analysis of OM is quite cogent, not least because he attempts to reconcile the sound's ritual profile with its discursive construction (more on this in ch. 5, §1.4).

Certainly the most sustained and provocative thinking about OM's sonality comes from Frits Staal, who has situated the syllable at the center of his broader arguments about mantras and the origins of language. Staal's analysis of OM pertains chiefly to its phonology and its uses in ritual (Staal 1989a, 274-276; cf. Wilke & Moebus 2011, 439-440). OM is closely akin to breathing, he argues, the vocalization of breath passing from the back to the front of the mouth, followed by either the closure of the lips (*om*), the nasalization of the vowel (*om̃*, *om̄*), or a trailing off without closure (*o*). OM may therefore qualify as a "universal mantra" (274), a vocalization occurring naturally before an infant acquires language. In the prelinguistic babbling stage, an infant's calls for food and affection bear a phonological resemblance to OM: in the famous formulation of linguist Roman Jakobson, "the most natural order of sound production is an opening of the mouth followed by its closure" (Jakobson 1962, 541). Calling this "a very apt description of the mantra *om*," Staal coopts Jakobson's argument as follows:

The importance of *om̐* and its priority to language is inherent in this scenario, which depicts how *om̐* comes before *mama*, and *mama* before *papa* who introduces language (Staal 1989a, 274-275).

Staal argues for the priority of OM (and sounds like it) not only in the sense of preceding the acquisition of language by individual infants, but also in the wider sense of preceding the origins of language in the human species. From this perspective, OM is not only universal, it is also an "original mantra" and a signal instance of Staal's theory that mantras anticipate language in human evolution. In Staal's scheme of the prehistoric development of language, OM belongs to the earliest phase, which consists of meaningless monosyllabic "sounds subject to phonological constraints," and precedes the later phases when syntactic and, finally, semantic constraints are introduced.

Let us assume that *om̐* was an "original" mantra; that is, we assume it existed before language was born. Suppose that Pithecanthropus, for example, was humming *om̐* but could not talk. Let us further assume that this *om̐* re-appeared in Sanskrit where it is now used in the manner mantras are used, e.g., preceding, following, or interspersed between chants and recitations, accompanying rites, meditation, etc. This *om̐* is not used in the manner in which other words are used... (Staal 1989a, 262)

As such, OM exemplifies the phenomenon of "mantras-couched-in-language," whereby a primordial utterance from an earlier phase of human development persists or "re-appears," becoming integrated into verbal exchanges.¹⁵ According to Staal, OM is not the only original, universal mantra that survives atavistically in human utterances. Rather, it is the most famous example of a broad group of non-lexical monosyllables that preceded language—*hi*, *ha*, *hay*, *o*, *ma*, *la*, and the like (276)—but remain embedded

¹⁵ For Staal, this explains how OM, like other mantras—which he considered as a category to be fundamentally non-linguistic—comes to be enmeshed with verbal material. Thus we have *om̐ namo śivāya*, the combination of prelinguistic OM with a linguistic expression in a single Hindu mantra: "OM, homage to Śiva" (Staal 1989a, 262). (Note that OM here also *precedes* the linguistic expression in syntactic terms.)

in archaic contexts, especially song and ritual. It is noteworthy that Staal also includes the "sound *hiṃ*" (*hiṃkāra*) in this group.¹⁶

Whether or not one accepts Staal's controversial ideas about mantras, language, and human evolution, his analysis of OM is valuable for its emphasis on sound over semantics. Like Killingley, Staal has stressed OM's affinity with the non-lexical vocables of Sāmavedic singing (*stobhas*):

...The Samaveda turns verse into chants that...introduce a great variety of meaningless sounds, especially long *o*'s, sometimes ending in *-m*. *One result is the famous mantra OM* (Staal 2001, 752-753; emphasis added).

As we have already seen, the songs of the Sāmaveda do indeed contain a preponderance of long *o*'s and *om*'s as *stobhas*, which are woven together with lexical verses to form the lyrics of the songs (see ch. 3, §2.3). Staal suggests here that the mantra OM emerges as a "result" of this integrative praxis: OM is the recitational outcome of integrating meaningful language, meaningless sounds, and melody. While Staal never elaborated on his suggestion that OM and Sāmavedic singing are closely linked, my survey of liturgical OM confirms his observation: I have shown that Sāmavedic sources both attest the oldest OMs and contribute the majority of codifications for the syllable's use in performance (see ch. 2, §2; ch. 3, §2.11; see also Gerety forthcoming a).

Wilke & Moebus carry forward the arguments of Staal and others by continuing to emphasize OM's sonality, which they call the "physical sound substance of the syllable" (2011, 438). However, they criticize what they take to be Staal's efforts to completely separate mantras such as OM from the communicative functions of language, denying them not only semantic but also other forms of expressivity. "...Even if mantras do not possess any actual semantic meaning, they do not stop being sounds that are received via the senses and can affect the recipients directly via their senses" (Wilke &

¹⁶ This sound matches Jakobson's phonological criteria, while the aspiration can be explained as "an onomatopoeic representation of breathing" or of the wind (Staal 1989a, 274). Indeed, "the sound *hiṃ*" (*hiṃkāra*) is the earliest attested non-lexical monosyllable in the Vedic corpus: it appears in the Riddle Hymn of the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* (ṚV 1.164.41) to evoke the sound of a mother cow lowing as she suckles her calf; (see ch. 5, §2.2).

Moebus 2011, 281). They also take issue with Staal's interpretation (via Jakobson) of OM as a relic of prelinguistic development, akin to an infant's vocalizations for *mama*. They argue that when a baby opens his mouth wide to bawl for food, the result—"waaaah, waaaah"—is the exact opposite of the phenomenological realization of OM, which they describe with reference to its constituent phonemes (*a*, *u*, and *m*¹⁷):

The mouth is closed and the timbre modulates from a full, "richly colored" harmonic spectrum (*a*) to a nearly "colorless" spectrum devoid of overtones (*m*), which is completely reduced to the fundamental tone, and can only be heard as a faint hum...As a sound event, OM is characterized acoustically by the internalizing movement from the full tone to humming (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 440).

It is possible to describe OM's pronunciation quite differently than Wilke & Moebus do here (contrast the observations of Katz 2013, discussed below). Their emphasis on the pursed lips and "internalizing" movement of sound probably owes more to contemporary Hindu realizations than to those of *śrauta* ritual performance, where OM can be realized very much in the manner of a baby's cry, that is, in a loud and externalizing fashion.

In fact, Wilke & Moebus themselves acknowledge this kind of realization of OM elsewhere in their study. They characterize OM as the *praṇava* of Ṛgvedic recitation as "an emphatically affirmative and forceful syllable...which gives the hymn additional momentum and energy, like applause after a theater performance" (2011, 435). Substituted for the last syllable of a *ṛc*, OM here is "final" and "fundamental"—it "confirms and concludes the melody." They hear this as a complete identity of the syllable's musical and semantic function—in other words, the meaning of OM is imparted through its "comprehensive performative and audible aspect" rather than through its "isolated semantic meaning"

¹⁷ This phonological analysis, first recorded in Vedic texts, is discussed at greater length in chapters to come (ch. 6, §2.1; ch. 10, §2.4, §7.4). The enduring popularity of this analysis in its Hindu reception has led many scholars to wrongly assert—as Wilke & Moebus do here—that "today's pronunciation 'Om' is apparently a shortened and contracted version of the original 'Oum' or 'Aum'" (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 438). As we have seen already, the multiformity of OM in *śrauta* ritual is *always* based on some iteration of an *o* sound, never *aum*.

of assent (435). Repeated again and again in this fashion, becoming "virtually omnipresent in the rite," OM is well suited to metaphysical speculations of holism and diffusion (436).

Johusa Katz has also sought to explain OM's history with reference to sonality and phonology. Like Wilke & Moebus, he highlights OM's division into the constituent phonemes *a*, *u*, and nasal. His account of how these phonemes are realized has much in common with their description of the *praṇava*, stressing the openness of the mouth and the resonance of the final nasal. According to Katz, the two vowels combine with *pluti* into an "overlong diphthong" that finishes with "an open-mouthed and highly resonant nasalization:" *o3m̐* (Katz 2013, 8). Noting that the flow of air defines vowels as a category, Katz observes that the drawn out vocalic resonance of OM maximally extends this flow. Like Otto and Staal, he compares it to another "echoic" liturgical syllable that evokes breath, *hum*. The core meaning of OM, for Katz, is wrapped up in the sequence of its phonemes: in the (admittedly post-Vedic) classification of Sanskrit vowels according to points of articulation, *a* is first and *u* is last. He argues that OM "is originally just a sound, but a deeply meaningful one—specifically, a representation of the sonic universe by means of the vocalic gamut from *a* to *u*..." Adducing Indo-European parallels, Katz argues that this array of vowels has a longstanding association with divinity; for example, similar vocalic combinations are found in the Greek and Latin words for "god" (2013, 12-15). To the Indo-European ear, OM *sounds divine* and lends itself readily to theological speculations.

§3.3 *The primordial sound of OM*

These arguments about OM's sonality constitute an altogether different approach from the Indological arguments surveyed earlier in this chapter. Rather than focusing on semantics and etymology, these scholars stress the importance of OM's sound, phonology and non-semantic expressivity. While their agendas may vary—from philological (Müller) to phenomenological (Otto),

from religio-cultural (Killingley) to evolutionary (Staal), from aesthetic (Wilke & Moebus) to historical-linguistic (Katz)—all insist on sonality and sensory experience as keys to understanding OM's history. We will see that such perspectives have much in common with the Vedic hermeneutic discourses to be examined in the chapters that follow—Vedic thinkers, too, favored discussions of OM's sonality over its semantics and etymology.

Compared with the Indological contributions, the scholarship in this section does not address the liturgical evidence on OM in overwhelming detail. As such, a fundamental strength of the sonic arguments is that they do not privilege one liturgical context over another. Simultaneously and without contradiction, OM *as a sound* can serve any and all of its diverse liturgical functions. By insisting that OM is "just a sound," we make room for liturgical OM's multiformity, keeping our ears open to multiple paths of development in the ritual texts. But this openness also hints at fundamental weakness of the sonic arguments, which too often seem predicated on ideal or abstract accounts of OM's sonality. Is OM "internalizing" or externalizing? Pronounced with mouth open or closed? Since the characteristics comprising OM's sonality—volume, pitch, duration, pronunciation, timbre—vary from rite to rite, text to text, and time to time, the arguments about the syllable's sound ought to reflect these variations. My own arguments about OM's recitation and performance in the Śrauta Sūtras demonstrate how a sonic approach can serve a more nuanced engagement with OM's sonality in the liturgies.

Be that as it may, the scholarship considered in this section betrays little interest in systematically cataloguing the many sounds of liturgical OM. Instead, the overarching priority is to address the general features of OM's sonality and ponder the implications for the syllable's origins and development. This line of inquiry leads to a diverse array of thematically similar claims: OM is the onomatopoetic evocation of breath; a non-semantic but expressive primal sound; a paralinguistic ritual

utterance that nevertheless comes to inform the ideology of language; a relic of prelinguistic evolution with affinities to an infant's vocalizations; a naturally expressive humming; an iteration of an evocative and inherited Indo-European vowel sequence. Setting their apparent diversity aside, we confront here yet another set of arguments predicated on the idea that OM is a unitary entity with a single path of origins. All of these arguments share the conviction that OM is originally a primordial sound that finds expression in human vocalizations outside of the realm of language.

§4 *The last word on OM's meaning, etymology, and origins*

The scholarship surveyed in this chapter, while contributing a great mass of useful observations about OM's semantics, syntax, phonology, recitation, liturgical use, and sonic profile, represents a collective failure to provide a single, overarching explanation of OM's meaning, etymology, and origins. I take several lessons from this collective failure. The first lesson is that scholars have been asking the wrong questions of OM's history. Their quest for a *single* meaning, etymology, and origin based on the liturgical evidence is misguided. The earliest evidence for liturgical OM is multiform; there is no "original" OM to discover. This brings me to the next lesson: rather than frame the syllable's history in terms of "origins," or continue searching for one-size-fits-all answers, I suggest that we conceive OM's history as a process, a becoming, and an emergence. What are the processes that led to the individuation of one OM from many? Why did liturgical OM in all its multiformity become a unitary, transcendent entity? How did OM emerge as the sacred syllable of the Upaniṣads and Classical Hinduism?

The answers to these questions cannot be found in the methods of semantics, etymology, phenomenology, aesthetics, evolutionary biology, historical linguistics—or in any of the approaches utilized so far by scholars to make sense of OM in the Vedic corpus. The answers, to paraphrase

Dorothy in the Wizard of OZ, can only be found *in our own backyard*, that is, in sources which are close to home but which, so far, have been largely neglected in the scholarship on OM's history. I am speaking of the Vedic interpretive genres—what does the discursive construction of OM in these neglected texts tell us about the syllable's history? The chapters to follow will show that these discourses furnish direct testimony for OM's individuation, ascendance, and apotheosis. They document in impressive detail how one transcendent syllable emerges against a backdrop of liturgical multiformity. They succeed, where modern scholars have faltered, in giving us a comprehensive and consistent account of how OM becomes OM.

§4.1 *Emergence*

In light of this chapter's critique of "origins" as a frame of reference, I have adopted my own terminology to address the question of how OM came to be, and why it became the preeminent syllable of the Vedas. To reflect the processual character of the syllable's history, I speak here and throughout this study of OM's *emergence*. For me, the term denotes above all the constant interplay between OM's uses in ritual performance and its burgeoning significance in interpretive texts. Emergence captures the spirit of continuous conversation and reflection about ritual—only fragments of which have been textualized—that characterizes the milieu in which the liturgies and discourses featuring OM were composed. A dynamic of emergence (as opposed to origination) captures the way OM appears, disappears, and reappears within the texts and rituals of Vedic branches—always following a trajectory towards greater elaboration and prominence, but with significant gaps in its history.

Lest my choice of terminology be misunderstood, let me make it clear that I do not assume that the syllable "emerges" somehow naturally or universally from the mists of time. Quite the opposite: the materials on which this study is based locate the emergence of the syllable in a milieu that is anything

but "natural"—OM belongs to the highly artificial, rule-bound realm of *śrauta* ritual, as well as to the arcane realm of Vedic hermeneutic discourses. Moreover, I lay great stress in this study on the human agency driving OM's emergence. I aim to demonstrate how a specific lineage of singers and thinkers, in a specific time and place, promoted it as the preeminent liturgical syllable of the Vedas. As succeeding chapters will show, I am keen to give credit to the documented contributions of these Vedic ritualists and theologians, the works they composed, and the localized branches of the *śrauta* tradition in which they operated.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROOTS OF OM: SACRED SOUND IN THE SAṂHITĀS

Now that we have thoroughly examined OM's place in the Vedic liturgies, it is time to shift gears and explore the hermeneutic discourses that fostered its emergence as the preeminent mantra of South Asian religions. This part of our inquiry touches on a great mass of material drawn from across the entire Vedic corpus; tracing the development of the pertinent discourses will occupy us throughout the rest of the work. Even as we switch our focus from liturgical OM to discursive OM, we will not exactly be leaving the liturgical evidence behind, for the discourses we will examine all take OM's role in the liturgies as their point of departure. Our guiding aims will be to understand how OM's use in ritual shaped reflections about the syllable; and how the ongoing integration of liturgy and discourse ultimately resulted in a bold new soteriology of sound with OM at the center.

The findings of the previous chapter demonstrated that liturgical OM permeates the soundscape of sacrifice—in the words of J.A.B. van Buitenen, who at Poona in 1955 observed an elaborate iteration of the Soma sacrifice, the *vājapeya*, "generally the cry *OM!* is the commonest sound heard at the sacrifice" (van Buitenen 1959, 180). Yet the previous chapter also showed that, in spite of OM's high profile, the liturgical evidence alone is insufficient to explain OM's path to preeminence. I argued instead that we must hunt for OM's emergence in the interpretive discourses of the Veda, which record theological discussions about ritual. If we closely attend to what theologian-ritualists had to say about OM, we will hone in on the birth of OM as a sacred syllable.

Remarkably, however, scholarly engagement with such interpretive discourses has yielded few insights into OM's history. One reason for this may be the longstanding disdain among Indologists for the terse, impenetrable prose of the YV Saṁhitās and the Brāhmaṇas (see Smith 1989, 32-34); only a

small number of scholars have been motivated to work on these texts in the first place. But a more important reason has to do with the accessibility of the relevant materials: as I shall show later in this study, the most significant contributions to OM's discursive construction are recorded in texts belonging to a rare and little studied branch of the SV. Even though some scholars have intuited the fundamental connection between OM and Sāmavedic singing, their efforts to find out more were frustrated by corrupt manuscripts, poor editions, and a general dearth of scholarship on the *sāman*, that "stepchild of Vedic and ritual research" (van Buitenen 1959, 180).

This chapter takes up the roots of OM's discursive construction. When Vedic thinkers reflected on OM, they did not do so in a vacuum: rather, they integrated the syllable into existing discourses about sacred sound. I begin by summarizing the main doctrines of sacred sound in the Veda, which include reflections on a great, generative "syllable" (*akṣara*) that is the source from which all mantras spring. A key question is: when and where is this *akṣara* first explicitly identified with OM? To explore this question, I review the small body of scholarship to date on OM's discursive construction, especially as regards the *akṣara* doctrine. I argue that work in this direction remains incomplete: most scholars have focused on the integration of OM into doctrines of sacred sound in the Upaniṣads but ignored the important testimony of earlier strata. Next, I try to remedy this by closely examining relevant material from the earliest Vedic poetry and prose, collected in the Saṃhitās. While these passages rarely mention OM explicitly, they do address doctrines, hermeneutics, and recitational practices with which OM will later be associated. From our perspective far in the future, such passages constitute the indispensable antecedents of OM's discursive construction: they lay the groundwork for the sustained reflections in the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads which will occupy us in later chapters. I finish the chapter by dwelling on the issue of how reflections on OM take shape diachronically within specific

branches and across the layers of the Vedic corpus. I identify and explain the interpretive modes that I see as crucial to OM's emergence: correlation, synthesis, and integration.

§1 *Three doctrines of sacred sound: brahman, vāc, and akṣara*

Let's begin by considering three theological doctrines that are central to discourses about sacred sound in the Veda and how they relate to OM. For clarity, I shall refer to each doctrine by the single Vedic term that most closely encapsulates its teachings, namely: *brahman*, *vāc*, and *akṣara*. While later texts will elaborate on them more systematically, in the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas these terms organize burgeoning conglomerations of ideas, insights, and speculations—such are their "doctrines." Together, these exert a profound influence on OM's emergence as the preeminent syllable of the Vedas. This influence operates broadly, in the sense that the teachings on *brahman*, *vāc*, and *akṣara* inform the theological background for all subsequent speculations on OM's religious significance. But their influence is also brought to bear more concretely: we will see in later chapters that the direct correlation of OM with these terms in Vedic prose is a way of tracking OM's development.

The three intertwined doctrines establish the parameters of Vedic sacred sound: its source, its cosmology, its transcendence, its soteriological efficacy, its realization in voices human and divine, and its measurement into meters, words, and syllables. Each contributes in its own way to the development of what is arguably the overarching ideology of the Vedas, what Guy Beck has called, in the context of Hindu traditions, a "sonic theology" (Beck 1993): the transcendent power of sound, especially ritual utterance in its many forms. Whatever we choose to call this category of sound —*śruti*, mantra, poetry, hymn, song, word, speech, language, and so forth—it is clear that Vedic tradition assigns unlimited potential to its expression in the right circumstances, from its initial revelation to primeval sages through its reenactment by priests in ritual. In the Vedic worldview, sacred sound is cosmogonic and

universal: anterior to creation, it gives form to the cosmos and maintains the cosmic order. But at the same time, it is also efficacious and personal: the basic aims of sacrifice—sons, cows, wealth, sustenance, and heaven—are all fulfilled through its realization on the mouths of the sacrificer and his priests.

§1.1 *Brahman: from perfect formulation to the Absolute*

This primacy of sacred sound in the Vedas is reflected most notably in the coalescence of ritual utterance and ultimate reality. The semantic history of the term *bráhman* exemplifies this quite neatly: a word for "poetic formulation" in the earliest texts (ṚV), the word comes to have more and more explicitly cosmic implications, until it conveys a sense of "the absolute" or the "supreme principle."¹ (The same can be said of *akṣara* "syllable," as we will see below). Nevertheless, situated as it is at the apex of a sonic theology, even in its cosmic sense *brahman* retains sonic and verbal connotations. As Renou and Silburn have observed, *brahman* is "une sorte d'énergie qui utilise la parole mais pour laisser entendre, par voie d'énigme, l'inexprimable" (Renou & Silburn 1949, 18). From this perspective, *brahman* is a conduit between that which is expressed in ritual utterance and all the rest that is left unexpressed. (Inexpressibility will become a major concern of Sāmavedic hermeneutics about OM; see ch. 8, §6). The connective and inexpressible character of *brahman* accords well with its other attributes: it is holistic, immanent and supreme—it encompasses, pervades and exceeds everything that is spoken, known, and formed. This perfect holism becomes especially relevant in later speculations that advance OM as the sonic embodiment of *brahman*.

¹ On the meaning and semantic history of *bráhman* see Oldenberg [1916] 1967 and Renou 1949a; see also van Buitenen 1959.

§1.2 *Vāc: the Goddess Voice*

Brahman's natural complement is *vāc*, the "voice" manifest in every sound, from mantras down to animal noises. As a goddess, *Vāc* is celebrated in the ṚV and possesses as a fragmentary mythology in the Brāhmaṇas, where she is the consort of the creator god Prajāpati (Macdonell 1897, 124; Lévi 1898, 22; Brown 1968; Padoux 1990; Calasso 2014, 107-116). *Vāc* is the medium through which Prajāpati's first acts of creation are achieved: whatever the god speaks, comes into being (ŚB 11.1.6.3; Padoux 1990, 11). Like *brahman*, the hidden, unexpressed aspect of *Vāc* remains her most potent part (ṚV 8.100.10; Padoux 1990, 12). Abiding in the highest heavens, *Vāc* is a source of endless potential that may be actualized by experts in the performance of ritual. Just like Prajāpati, they channel this transcendent "voice" into poetry and mantras, creating the primeval order anew. In the memorable image of the Ṛgvedic Riddle Hymn, she is bovine, and at the sound of her own lowing, her udders burst with milk (ṚV 1.164.41-42; trans. Thompson 1995a, 5, with changes):

The Cow has lowed, fashioning seas.
She is one-footed, two footed, four-footed,
She has become eight-footed, nine-footed,
With her thousand syllables in the highest heaven!

From her, oceans flow forth.
On that the four directions live,
From there the Syllable flows,
On that everything subsists.²

This hymn and especially these stanzas have received considerable attention from exegetes both ancient and modern,³ who are unanimous in considering the cow a representation of *Vāc*, the

² *gaurīr mimāya salilāni tākṣatī ékapadī dvipadī sā cātuṣpadī /
aṣṭāpadī nāvapadī babhūvūṣī sahāsrākṣarā paramé víoman//41//
tāsyāḥ samudrā́ ádhi víkṣaranti téna jīvanti pradíśaś cātasraḥ /
tātaḥ kṣarati akṣāraṃ tád víśvam úpa jīvati //42//*

³ For a recent interpretation and survey of previous efforts, see Houben 2000.

apotheosis of sound and speech.⁴ The milk oceans flowing (*kṣar-*) from her udders furnish the raw material of creation. Her many feet and her thousand syllables convey her boundless potential.

§1.3 *Akṣara: the Great Syllable*

Emanating from the goddess Voice but "not flowing out" (*a-kṣara*)—in the sense of never expending its potency, hence "imperishable," as it is frequently translated—is the great generative "syllable" (*akṣara*) on which everything depends. (I shall capitalize this "Syllable" to differentiate it from other reflexes of the same word.) In another iteration of this cosmogonic narrative, Vāc the Cow is the first principle, and the Syllable arises in her footstep (RV 3.55.1; trans. Thompson 1995a, 25; cf. van Buitenen 1959, 178):

When the first dawns dawned
The great Syllable was born in the track of the cow.⁵

Even as this verse describes the first cosmogony, it alludes meta-textually to cosmogonies yet to come: with the individual syllables of his poem inspired by Vāc, the poet channels the cosmogonic agency of the "great Syllable," creating and sustaining the world anew; when this verse is recited as a mantra in ritual, the cosmogonic loop will be reenacted. This reflexive cosmology highlights the "imperishable" potency of the *akṣara*: emanating endlessly from the matrix, realized again and again in mantras, it is the ultimate renewable resource (cf. Brown 1968, 394).

In its more mundane grammatical usage, *akṣara* denotes a single "syllable" of a word or metrical verse, the smallest unit of poetic speech. Unlike the great Syllable, these syllables can be counted—and counting the syllables of words and mantras becomes a bit of a mania in Vedic

⁴ Vāc is "personified speech" (Macdonell 1897, 124) and "the personification of the Vedic oral tradition" (Thompson 1995a, 2).

⁵ *uśásah pūrvā ádha yád viūśúr mahád ví jajñe akṣáram padé góh /*

hermeneutics, facilitating all manner of numerical correlations between poetic speech and other elements (Jamison 1986). Just like *brahman*, *akṣara* carries a double valence, simultaneously denoting a unit of poetic speech and articulating a cosmic ideal. A paradox therefore abides at the heart of the term: although drawing from an "imperishable" (*a-kṣara*) source, each "syllable" (*akṣara*) of a mantra can nevertheless be delimited, counted. As van Buitenen observes, the *akṣara* at once measures the creative potency of speech and embodies its compressed essence (van Buitenen 1959, 178). It is not only imperishable, but also irreducible, "the principle of continuity to which everything can be reduced and from which everything can be derived" (179).

§1.4 *The synthesis of three doctrines of sacred sound*

Having touched on these three doctrines of sacred sound in the Vedas, I now review what other scholars have had to say about how OM is brought into engagement with them. The consensus is twofold: first, that the great Syllable comes to be routinely identified as OM in the Upaniṣads; and second, that given its sonic character and its ritual applications, OM is well suited to embody the transcendent conception of sacred sound encoded in the terms *brahman*, *akṣara*, and *vāc*. I shall dispute the former but affirm the latter.

At some point in the history of Vedic ideas, reflections on OM become integrated into existing discourses about *brahman*, *vāc*, and *akṣara*. André Padoux describes the ideological nexus this way (1990, 14):

[The *akṣara*] will come to be identified with the syllable *oṃ*, which will appear clearly, as early as the Vedic Upaniṣads, as the main symbol, the phonic expression *par excellence* of the *brahman*, and then as the basic mantra, the primordial sound, to which all mantras as well as any form of speech can be reduced, as the very source of the Word [= *vāc*].⁶

⁶ Padoux programmatically renders *vāc* in English as "word," although he acknowledges that other translations (e.g., voice, speech, utterance, language) may be appropriate in certain contexts. "As *vāc* is both what is said,

Padoux thus traces OM's integration with the doctrines of sacred sound to the Upaniṣads, where its discursive construction appears "clearly." Nevertheless he acknowledges that the syllable was in liturgical use already in the YV Samhitās, prompting him to wonder "why the syllable *om̐* has been given such an exalted position. It was used, so it seems, as early as the *Yajur Veda*, where it is not yet divinized..." He muses that OM's apotheosis is all the more remarkable since that the YV has many other "ritualistic syllables...which will not have a comparable destiny" (15). This cuts to the heart of our inquiry: why OM? why not *hiṃ*, *huṃ*, *svāhā*, *vauṣaṭ*—or any of the many other ritual interjections?

Of all its liturgical uses, Padoux mentions the *praṇava*, where OM is substituted for the final syllable of the Hotṛ's recitation. Lilian Silburn has likewise singled out the *praṇava* for special mention, arguing that it has a quality of structuring recitation which makes it amenable to further theological elaboration: "Though imperceptible, it would underlay the whole ceremony and would thus appear like *brahman* as the upholder of the sacrifice" (Silburn 1955, 92; cf. Padoux 1990, 15n33).⁷ Although Padoux briefly considers such liturgical explanations for OM's preeminence, he focuses most of his attention on OM's discursive construction from the Brāhmaṇas through the Upaniṣads in a brief but useful survey (Padoux 1990, 16-29). This choice demonstrates that for Padoux, the emergence of OM is driven not by semantics, etymology, or liturgical concerns, but rather by the ways Vedic thinkers have sought to integrate the syllable into a quintessentially Indian "linguistic theology" (1990, 1). In this regard, his

uttered, and that which says or utters—One who is said and is saying—its translation as *word* (or *Word*) seems to us the least inappropriate of all" (1990, xiii). To my ear, the cognate "voice" (cf. Latin *vox*) is the most accurate and flexible translation, for its semantic and sensory resonances map onto those of Vedic *vāc* (cf. Mayrhofer 1992-2001, s.v.): a "voice" sounds, speaks, or sings; a "voice" may be human, animal or divine. I sometimes also employ "speech," where the context demands it. On translating *vāc*, see Malamoud 2005, 22-24; also my ch. 7, §5.2.

⁷ At least in modern Nampūtiri recitation, the *praṇava* is hardly "imperceptible"—rather it is a loud flourish that clearly marks the end of a verse (see ch. 3, §3.1).

main concern is to show how OM as the essence of speech informs the Tantric material that is the focus of his study.

J.A.B. van Buitenen, in his classic study on *akṣara* already referred to above, is keenly interested in establishing the circumstances in which the great Syllable came to be explicitly identified as OM, which then becomes a "name for the Supreme" (van Buitenen 1959, 180). He credits late Vedic texts of the SV as the probable sources for this identification, for the two major Sāmavedic Upaniṣads contain extensive speculations along these lines. In particular, van Buitenen proposes that the correlation of OM and the *udgītha*—the hermeneutic leitmotif of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*—has been inspired by a specific liturgical context, the singing of long sequences of *o*-sounds in "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*) during the Soma sacrifice. He draws again on his own field experience to explain how this sounds: "When one hears it chanted, it sounds like the repetition of the initial OM with which the *udgītha* begins" (180). (My own field experience, as well as my reconstructions of the Śrauta Sūtra codifications, confirm van Buitenen's impression; see ch. 3, §2.3). For van Buitenen, such non-lexical sequences transcend the lexical words they replace, revealing the *sāman* to be "the fullest manifestation of the sound of a mantra [and] the very generator of the power of the sacral word" (180). In this way, true to the ancient mythology of the great Syllable and the goddess Voice, OM comes to be constructed as the ultimate principle of speech, reserved for the climax of the ritual when "the actual words do not even seem enough" (180).

Van Buitenen's analysis is especially valuable for the way it reconstructs the dynamic interplay between ritual performance, on the one hand, and reflections about ritual, on the other. He does not argue that one *necessarily* precedes the other, but rather that liturgy and discourse simultaneously and reflexively model the development of Vedic thinking on OM. Between liturgy and discourse there is no priority *per se*, but a mutual relation that cannot be disentangled: OM is repeated constantly in

sacrifice because it is the secret identity of the *akṣara*, and OM comes to be identified with the great Syllable because it is repeated constantly in sacrifice.⁸ In other words, although discursive OM takes liturgical OM as its point of departure, this is not a one-way street: conversations about ritual informed subsequent ritual performances and *vice versa*. In keeping with this pattern of revolving influence, van Buitenen argues that it is precisely the connection of *akṣara* to OM which drives the subsequent theological development of the term *akṣara* itself: "*Akṣara* is no longer the syllable as such...but a certain syllable, or rather sound, which is hypostasized *brahman* and from which the Veda and hence the world originates" (181). From this point forward, OM and *akṣara* develop in tandem, exalted together to the level of the highest *puruṣa* beyond the sun, the aim of Upaniṣadic and Classical Hindu soteriologies alike (184-186; more on this in chs. 8, 9, and 10).

Dermot Killingley (1986) has attempted a survey of OM's history in the Veda that attends to its place in the liturgies and the interpretive discourses alike (for his treatment of OM in the liturgies, see ch. 4, §3.2). On the whole, Killingley's position is that OM is fundamentally non-semantic but that ritual performance invests it with a specialized meaning of assent which is then adapted to new hermeneutic contexts in the interpretive texts (21). Observing that the doctrine of the Syllable does not at first explicitly connect *akṣara* to OM (Killingley 1986, 14, 20), he considers two scenarios by way of explanation: OM is not mentioned because the knowledge of the Syllable belonged to the gods, not men, and hence no particular sound was intended in early reflections on *akṣara*; or else, OM is extant early on but goes unidentified because "the collections record only the hymns, and not their ritual

⁸ Interestingly, van Buitenen suggests that at least one aspect of liturgy has been consciously modeled on a discourse about OM's phonology: he surmises that the occasional substitution of the *a*-sound for the paradigmatic *o*-sound of *aniruktagāna* is inspired by the analysis of OM into the constituent phonemes *a*, *u*, and *m*. (However, this analysis is much older than Van Buitenen gives it credit for, dating not to the "later *upaniṣad* stratum" but to an early stratum of the Brāhmaṇas, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 5.32; see ch. 6, §2.1).

context of which *om* was a part"(20).⁹ Following van Buitenen quite closely, Killingley then emphasizes the close affinity between OM and Sāmavedic singing, especially *aniruktagāna*; and he points out that "the early stages of speculation on *om* are found especially in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads of the SV, which suggests that such thinking originated in Sāmavedic circles" (20). Killingley relies on a fairly late text, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, to furnish evidence of the explicit link between OM and *akṣara* (20); he cites the KaṭhU in the same capacity on the connection of OM to *brahman* (24; for my discussion of KaṭhU, see ch. 10, §4; note, however, that Sāmavedic texts anticipate the KaṭhU on both counts: see ch. 6, §3.7). Killingley then proceeds to trace OM's discursive construction across the Upaniṣads; like Padoux, his main interest is to situate OM in the history of Vedic ideas about language.

Wilke & Moebus also strive to present a detailed history of OM in the Veda with reference to the syllable's "strongly ritual presence" and the metaphysical speculations it has inspired (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 435). Their treatment of OM comes in the course of an ambitious "aesthetic cultural history of Sanskrit Hinduism"—as such, it touches on most phases of OM's discursive construction, from its antecedents in the Ṛgvedic *akṣara* doctrine (388) through its ongoing development in the later Upaniṣads. As already noted (see ch. 4, §3.2), their primary aim is to demonstrate the syllable's relevance to the ancient but persistent ideologies of sound and language in India. I will revisit their arguments about specific texts in the chapters to follow.

§1.5 *The integration of OM into the akṣara doctrine*

As the work of these scholars shows, the process of discursively constructing OM was gradual, lengthy and incompletely recorded: even if the outcome—OM's preeminence—is by now a foregone

⁹ Throughout his article, Killingley refers to "collections" and "hymns" without specifying precisely which texts he has in mind; I understand his usage of the former to refer to the Vedic Saṃhitās as a group and the latter to refer sometimes to the *sūktas* of the Ṛgveda Saṃhitā, and sometimes to mantras more generally.

conclusion, the phases of the process are not always easy to identify. When in the course of so many centuries did OM go from being a "normal" liturgical utterance to a sacred syllable? The nature of Vedic texts—orally composed, stratified, compiled from multiple sources—prevents us from answering this question with complete precision. However, we can establish a rough *terminus a quo* by locating the earliest record of OM's integration into the discourse on *akṣara*—this is a handy yardstick by which OM's sacralization may be measured. Exactly when and where OM becomes the definite sound of the great *akṣara* is up for debate, though the consensus is for the Upaniṣads: Padoux speaks somewhat broadly of "Vedic Upaniṣads" as the source (1990, 14); van Buitenen, for his part, traces the "explicit connection" back to the older Upaniṣads of the Sāmaveda, the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (1959, 179-180) while finding "implicit" evidence in the rituals of the SV (180); and Killingley adduces the later KaṭhU (1986, 20). Similarly, one may ask exactly when and where OM was first integrated into the related discourses around *brahman* and *vāc*. My research confirms van Buitenen's surmise that the link between OM and *akṣara* was first forged in Sāmavedic circles; however, the evidence is earlier than he suspected. There is further evidence showing that the correlations between OM and *brahman* and *vāc* gained currency for these singer-theologians at around the same time. I shall demonstrate in the next chapter that OM's earliest correlations with all three terms and integration into the associated doctrines can be found in the Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīya branch of the SV (see ch.6). The implications of these findings are significant, proving that OM's emergence as a sacred syllable is well underway several centuries before the Upaniṣads, already in the Brāhmaṇa period.

§1.6 *Summing up: OM and doctrines of sacred sound*

The scholarship surveyed in this section represents the most comprehensive efforts to date aimed at explaining OM's history on the basis of Vedic interpretive texts. I will continue to engage with specific arguments about specific passages as my own analysis gets underway in the chapters to follow. For now, let me offer some preliminary conclusions about what this body of work can tell us. First, there is consensus that the decisive transition in OM's development comes about when it is openly identified as the great Syllable (*akṣara*). In this way, OM assimilates to itself the whole range of inherited teachings on sacred sound in the Vedas, thereby establishing a theological pedigree dating as far back as the ṚV; in addition to the *akṣara* doctrine, this includes the intimately related doctrines on *brahman* and *vāc*. From this point forward, OM has the capacity to encapsulate both the ritual and cosmic spheres in its single syllable: like the terms *brahman* and *akṣara*, it simultaneously denotes ritual utterance and ultimate reality. Next, scholars agree that OM's uses in the liturgies overwhelmingly suit it to its new hermeneutic role: the uses most frequently mentioned are the insistent humming of the *praṇava* with its drawn out *pluti*; the relaying of assent or acknowledgement; and the transcendent meaninglessness of Sāmavedic singing. (Significantly, these three reflexes of liturgical OM correspond to the ṚV, YV, and SV, respectively.) The ongoing relevance of liturgical OM confirms that the interplay between ritual and its interpretation remains a livewire for OM's discursive construction. As van Buitenen's nuanced analysis suggests, this is an open-ended exchange: the priority of one category to the other is evident only insofar as liturgical OM (and ritual more broadly) can be seen to organize the reflections; beyond this basic hierarchy, there is every indication that liturgical OM and discursive OM form a feedback loop, simultaneously and reflexively shaping OM's emergence. Finally, I think the efforts of these scholars demonstrate the promise of an inquiry along these lines, which privileges the testimony of Vedic interpreters above all others. The ancient ritualists and

theologians made OM what it is today—therefore, their reflections must form the backbone of any account of the syllable's emergence.

§2 *Foreshadowing OM's construction: the testimony of the Saṃhitās*

Another way to approach the roots of OM's discursive construction is to examine the testimony of the Vedic Saṃhitās more closely. Whereas the first part of this chapter treated broad doctrinal developments around the terms *brahman*, *vāc*, and *akṣara*, the remainder will locate specific interpretive threads relevant to OM's emergence. So far in this study, I have emphasized the liturgical character of the Saṃhitās, but these collections also contain interpretive discourses in a range of forms, from the enigmatic verses of the ṚV to the terse sentences of early Yajurvedic prose.

Below I present a selection of passages from the Saṃhitās which, in one way or another, foreshadow OM's construction in later texts. While only one mentions OM explicitly, they all address doctrines, hermeneutics, and recitational practices with which OM will later be associated. Pulling together these threads will clarify the development of the specific discourses into which OM is ultimately integrated; it will also introduce the parallel discursive construction of other liturgical elements. For OM was not the only liturgical element to be integrated into the doctrines on sacred sound, nor was it the first syllable to be individuated as an embodiment of sonic transcendence: several technical terms (notably *praṇava* and *udgītha*) and at least one other liturgical syllable (*hiṃ*) anticipate the arc of OM's career.

§2.1 *OM in the Ṛgveda?*

I begin with the earliest stratum of the Vedic corpus, the ṚV Saṃhitā. (I will also briefly refer to the slightly younger AV Saṃhitā. On the whole, however, authentic Atharvavedic traditions have little

to do with *śrauta* practices, which are the domain of the other three Vedas; see ch. 10, §1.3). On the face of it, OM does not appear at all in the ṚV. Nevertheless, its absence has not deterred scholars ancient and modern from hearing allusions to the syllable in the famously opaque and enigmatic verses of these hymns.

The most consistently cited passage in this regard is the verse of the Riddle Hymn already mentioned above, with its epithet describing the bovine Vāc as "one-footed" (*ekapadī*; ṚV 1.164.41, trans. Thompson 1995a):

...She is one-footed (*ekapadī*), two footed, four-footed,
She has become eight-footed, nine-footed,
With her thousand syllables in the highest heaven!

The enumeration of her various "feet" (*-pad*) likely refers to the segmentation of poetic speech according to various measures, whether lines of verse (one, two, four, nine) or syllables in meter (eight syllables make up the *gāyatrī* meter in which the stanza is composed; see Thompson 1995a, 6 for discussion). Favoring the latter interpretation—and especially in light of the following verse, which speaks of the single, transcendent "Syllable" (*akṣara*; 1.164.42)—scholars from the late Vedic period up through today have regarded this "one-footed" form of Vāc as a thinly veiled allusion to the monosyllable OM. Thus, already in the ancient period, Jaiminīya thinkers identified *ekapadī vāc* as OM (JUB 1.10.2, 11); later, the medieval commentator Sāyaṇa follows suit (Müller 1890-92; Wilke & Moebus 2011, 388).

More recently, Parpola (1981a, 206) and Thompson (1995a, 5) have concurred with this reading, while also hearing OM elsewhere in the earliest strata of the Vedic corpus. Thompson, for his part, also takes the "great syllable" of ṚV 3.55.1 (quoted above) to be an allusion to OM (1995a, 25-26), while Parpola cites similar "indirect references" to OM in the *Atharvaveda* (AV Śaunaka 13.1.15, 13.3.6;

Parpola 1981a, 206¹⁰). These claims, compelling as they may be, cannot be easily tested: adjudicating them comes down to the unanswerable question of what the composers of the hymns had in mind—was it OM, or some other syllable? Or was it a more expansive conception of "Syllable," without a specific referent intended? Based on arguments made later in this study, I think the Jaiminīya analysis of *ekapadī vāc* is an innovation that reflects ideas about OM and *akṣara* inherited from their own Brāhmaṇa (see ch. 7, §9.2); in other words, the evidence suggests that Jaiminīya thinkers have reinterpreted the ṚV passage in terms of their own branch hermeneutics. The claims of Parpola and Thompson, made briefly without much argumentation or additional evidence, do not convince on their own terms. There is simply not enough evidence to assume that the composers of the ṚV had OM in mind as the supreme *akṣara*.

§2.2 A proto-OM: the sound *hiṃ*

But let us consider another possibility. Wilke & Moebus argue that while an allusion to OM in the Riddle Hymn is far from proven, some other ritual syllable may be intended (2011, 388):

It seems to mean the syllable with ritual power *par excellence*. Whether this is now [at the time of the ṚV] a certain monosyllabic call, which must be added to the hymns, or the sound of a bourdon providing the fundamental note for hymn-singing, or some other form of accompaniment, we do not know.

I know of no evidence in the Vedic corpus for a "bourdon"—a sort of pitch pipe for establishing a universal tone for recitation. However, as we have seen over and over, there are numerous other monosyllables in the repertoire of Vedic ritual. Insofar as the term *akṣara* in ṚV 1.164 and similar contexts refers to a specific sound that embodies the supreme "Syllable," it may have been the sound *hiṃ*, a non-lexical vocable which, unlike OM, actually appears in this hymn (twice!). By virtue of its

¹⁰ Flood (1996, 222) may have Parpola's argument in mind when he claims that OM is first attested in the AV.

attestation within the Riddle Hymn itself, *hiṃ* is a superior answer to the implicit "riddle" we have been pondering: what is the sound of the great *akṣara*? When a cow lows in Vedic, she "makes a *hiṃ*-sound" to attract the attention of her calf and lure him near for suckling (RV 1.164.27, 28; trans. Houben 2000):

Making a *hiṃ*-sound, longing for the calf in her mind, the mistress of riches
has come near...¹¹

The cow has lowed after the calf which blinks its eye: she was making a *hiṃ*-
sound to begin lowing...¹²

If we understand this cow to be the same bovine form of Vāc whom we encounter later in the hymn,¹³ then these verses depict the moments *before* suckling, *before* milk flows from her udders. The sound *hiṃ* is meant to evoke her lowing at this moment. (This is quite an apt approximation of a cow's vocalization, much truer to farmlife in my experience than the corresponding vocable in English, *moo*.) In this way, the utterance of *hiṃ* by the cow-goddess Voice precedes the flowing of her milky "syllables" in the later verses (41-42); the monosyllable is anterior to the emanation of mantras from this cosmic source.

Such a cosmic conception of *hiṃ* as the great syllable marking the beginning of ritual speech finds some corroboration in the Vedic liturgies themselves. As it turns out, the liturgical texts codify several practices where the monosyllable *hiṃ* precedes the recitation of mantras in *śrauta* ritual. The technical term *hiṃkāra* refers to a range of recitational practices, most notably the utterance of "the sound *hiṃ*" in initial position to introduce recitations of the RV and the SV alike (see ch.3, §4.4).

¹¹ *hiṃkṛṇvatī vasupātnī vāsūnām vatsām ichāntī mānasābhyāgāt /*

¹² *gaúr amīmed ānu vatsām miśāntam mūrdhānaṃ hīṃ akṛṇon mātavā u /*

¹³ There are many other possibilities—not necessarily mutually exclusive—for example the pragmatic interpretation of Houben 2000, 502-503, which interprets these verses (and the hymn as a whole) with reference to the "hot milk offering" or *pravargya* rite.

Too little is known about Ṛgvedic ritual performance to claim that these exact recitational practices with *hiṁ* were current in the time the ṚV was composed. However, it is worth noting the continuity that exists between the speculations about *hiṁ* in the Riddle Hymn and its later codification as liturgical practice. Further, later texts also made *hiṁ* the topic of hermeneutic reflection.¹⁴ Thus the ṚV presentation of *hiṁ* as a sonic realization of the primordial power of *akṣara* is carried forward into the Brāhmaṇas and Śrauta Sūtras, influencing liturgical and discursive developments in these later texts. At the very least, such continuity demonstrates one significant fact: it shows that OM does not emerge in a vacuum, that it is not the *only* liturgical syllable that Vedic thinkers made the subject of theological and cosmological reflection; other ritualistic monosyllables were in the mix, candidates for integration into interpretive discourses as they develop. Indeed, I think of *hiṁ* as a sort of "proto-OM," anticipating the primacy in discourses on sacred sound that OM would ultimately come to possess.

Had things been different, devotees of South Asian religions might now be intoning *hiṁ*, not OM, in their observances; and venerating *hiṁ*, not OM, as the supreme expression of religious piety. But this is not the case—so why not? In other words, why did OM outstrip other possible candidates for sacred syllable? To paraphrase Padoux, why did the other syllables of *śrauta* ritual not have a comparable destiny? Such questions are not easily answered, for they posit scenarios that run counter to the history recorded by our texts. In the previous chapter I have already touched on a number of OM's characteristics that may have contributed to its appeal: its elemental simplicity, its affinity with breath, its maximal vocalic flow, and so on. Be that as it may, the records show that *hiṁ* and other liturgical syllables were decisively eclipsed by the intense, persistent integration of OM *in particular* into Vedic hermeneutic discourses—no other single syllable received a comparable level of discursive construction, and hence, no other syllable would come to rival OM's preeminence. And it was chiefly

¹⁴ See e.g., ŚB 1.4.1.1-3, which I discuss in ch. 6, §4.1.

the singers and thinkers of one Vedic branch *in particular*—the Jaiminīya branch of the SV—who fostered OM's ascendance; they did so by integrating OM into inherited teachings about sacred sound, on the one hand, and making OM the centerpiece of an innovative soteriological doctrine, on the other. It will be our task in the chapters that follow to show how this happened.

§2.3 *Āhāva and pratigara in the Ṛgveda*

By way of wrapping up our consideration of the ṚV evidence, let us briefly examine a reference in one hymn to a pair of intertwined recitational practices that are later associated with OM. The first of these is the *āhāva*, the Hotṛ's exhortation to the Adhvaryu to join his recitation of the *śāstra*. As we saw earlier (ch. 3, §3.3), subsequent liturgical codifications attest this mantra with OMs embedded: *śoṃsāvo3m* (or *śoṃsāvo3*), "Let us both recite!" The second practice is the *pratigara*, the Adhvaryu's "response," which also contains OM in later texts. The testimony of the ṚV suggests that the basic form of this exchange must be quite ancient, for it shows up in one of the family books, the archaic core of the ṚV Saṃhitā (3.53.3):

śāṃsāvādhvāryo prāti me grṇīhi
"Let's both recite, Adhvaryu, respond to me."

The verse directly evokes the sequence wherein the Hotṛ invites the Adhvaryu to join his recitation.¹⁵ The diction here prefigures the underlying dual imperative of the *āhāva*: *śāṃsāva*; it also uses the verb (*prāti √grṇ*) from which the *pratigara* takes its name. If OM were current in the liturgies and discourses of the ṚV, we might legitimately expect to find it attested here, in this verse that reports the direct speech of the Hotṛ as he recites his *āhāva*. And yet this Ṛgvedic verse contains no insertions of OM over

¹⁵ Geldner calls this "das Urbild der Āhāvaformel" ([1951] 2003, 392n).

the syllables of the dual imperative *śáṃsāva*. OM's absence in this context is another strike against those who hear allusions to the syllable throughout the ṚV.

§2.4 *OM in the prose of the Yajurveda Saṃhitās*

We saw in the previous chapter that the mantra sections of the YV Saṃhitās contain some of the earliest attestations of liturgical OM. While so far I have emphasized the liturgical character of the YV Saṃhitās, these collections also contain extensive sections of expository prose on ritual topics. None of this prose addresses OM explicitly; we must wait until the Brāhmaṇas for sustained hermeneutic discourses about OM to surface (see next chapter). The key contribution of the YV Saṃhitās to the discursive construction of OM is to inaugurate reflections not on the syllable *per se*, but rather on recitational practices later associated with the syllable. In the course of these reflections, several themes relevant to the later construction of OM stand out: the counting of "syllables" (*akṣara*) in certain mantras; the synthesis of diverse recitational practices under a single rubric; the underlying unity of the three Vedas; and the capacity of a sound to perfect existing mantras when it is added in recitation.

§2.5 *Syllable counting*

We have seen from the Riddle Hymn that already in the ṚV, the segmentation of poetic speech into various measures—whether syllable, line or verse—was an important basis for reflections about sound, speech, and language. That hymn counted the feet of bovine Vāc, spanning the range of one through one thousand syllables. "One" conveys the compressed power of the goddess Voice—her irreducibility; while "one thousand" conveys her infinite potential—her immeasurability. In this way,

syllable-counting becomes a hermeneutic tool, and the act of analyzing an utterance in numerical terms comes to convey far more than mere facts and figures (see Jamison 1986).

Although I argued against the enumeration of syllables in the Riddle Hymn as carrying a specific allusion to OM, it is nevertheless clear that the hermeneutic of syllable-counting contributes to OM's gradual integration into the *akṣara* doctrine in later discourses. At least one passage from the YV Saṃhitās exemplifies an early phase of this process: it counts the syllables of a series of mantras and explains the esoteric significance of the total. One of these mantras contains a reflex of liturgical OM, the *āśrāvāṇa* mantra (*ó śrāvaya*; see ch. 3, §4.3; MS 1.4.11):

The one who knows how the seventeenfold Prajāpati is connected with sacrifice—his sacrifice does not falter. And through sacrifice, he has a firm foundation on Prajāpati. Thus: '*ó śrāvaya*' has four syllables, '*astu śrauṣaṭ*' has four syllables, '*yája*' has two syllables, '*yé yájāmahe*' has five syllables, and the cry '*vauṣaṭ*' has two syllables. Precisely that is the seventeenfold Prajāpati who is connected with sacrifice...¹⁶

The syllables of these five mantras total seventeen, a number that is here (and elsewhere in the Vedas, e.g. ŚB 1.5.2.17; JB 3.321-322; see ch. 6, §3.11) associated with Prajāpati. In this enumeration, liturgical OM (the first syllable of *ó śrāvaya*) is one among many *akṣaras*; as a group, these syllables constitute the holistic embodiment of sacrifice, the creator god Prajāpati. In this case, OM is not singled out as *the* great Syllable, but rather enumerated as one syllable among sixteen others. Still, this passage is significant as a very early YV elaboration of the *akṣara* doctrine in collocation with liturgical OM. It paves the way for later discourses when the counting of syllables will lead to the individuation of OM as the most important and venerable *akṣara*.

¹⁶ / *yó vai prajāpatiṃ saptadaśam ya3jñe 'nvāyattaṃ véda nāsya yajñó vyáthate / prajāpatau yajñéna prátitiṣṭhati // ó śrāvaya // iti caturakṣaram // astu śrauṣaṭ // iti caturakṣaram // yája // iti dvyakṣaram // yé yájāmahe // iti páñcākṣaram / dvyakṣaro vaṣaṭkārā / eṣá vai prajāpatiḥ saptadaśó ya3jñe 'nvāyatto...*

§2.6 On the same level: reflecting on three recitational practices

The Saṃhitā of another YV branch also contains a passage that exemplifies an early phase in the discursive construction of OM. This passage uses the attestation of liturgical OM in a mantra (the *pratigara*) as the point of departure for a brief but pregnant exposition. *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (TS 3.2.9.5-6) refers to three recitational practices later associated with OM, *udgītha*, *praṇava* and *pratigara*:

On the same level are the *udgīthas* of all the priests: the *udgītha* itself belongs to the Udgātr̥s, the *praṇava* of the verse belongs to the reciters-of-hymns, and the *pratigara* to the Adhvaryus...¹⁷

Three different recitational practices, one from each of the three Vedas, are said to be "on the same level" (*prabāhuk*) because they have a common element; although unspoken, this common element is almost certainly OM. We can be reasonably sure about this because these statements are preceded by the unique attestation of OM in the TS, embedded in the *pratigara* mantra *śomsāvom* (TS 3.2.9.5). The Adhvaryu speaks his *pratigara* with OM in reply to the Hotṛ's utterances, notably the *praṇava*, where OM substituted for the final syllable of certain ṚV verses (see ch. 3, §3.1, 3.5). The *udgītha* portion of the *stotra*, sung by the Udgātr̥, is introduced by OM in performance (*ādi*; see ch. 3, §2.2). This TS excerpt correlates three different contexts, one from each of the three Vedas; and it stresses their sonic identity—they all give voice to OM in one fashion or another—over their liturgical differences.

The passage synthesizes the technical names for these practices (*udgītha*, *praṇava*, *pratigara*) under the heading of one of them alone. As a group, the three practices are the *udgīthas* (plural!): "The *udgīthas* of all the priests are on the same level..." This is remarkable because there are no liturgical parallels for this synthesis—no other YV Saṃhitās or Śrauta Sūtras ever refer to the *praṇava* or

¹⁷ *prabāhug vā ṛtvijām udgīthā udgīthā evódgātr̥ṇām //
rcāḥ praṇavā ukthaśamsínām pratigarò 'dhvaryūṇām/*

pratigara as *udgītha*.¹⁸ So it is evident that the composers of the TS are here making a hermeneutic statement, a correlation of the three on the basis of a shared feature—presumably OM. This passage invests a Sāmavedic technical term with a more expansive scope, beyond its narrow liturgical application: *udgītha* stands here for three different recitational practices, drawn from each of the three Vedas, whose bond is the sounding of OM.

It is but a short step from the correlation of three recitational practices on the basis of OM to the correlation of the three Vedic liturgies they represent (ṚV, SV, YV). We will see in the chapters that follow that the idea of the three Vedas united by OM continues to develop, both within the Taittirīya tradition and more broadly as it is adopted by other Vedic branches, taking on great significance in the emergence of OM as a sacred syllable. As for *udgītha*, the use of this Sāmavedic term beyond its liturgical context will resurface in Sāmavedic hermeneutics, most famously in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* where it is a virtual synonym for OM (see ch. 9, §3.1).

§2.7 Just add OM: perfecting mantras with the *praṇava*

In the Saṃhitā of the Vājasaneyins, we find a similar effort to expand the scope of a recitational practice associated with OM. In this case, the term is *praṇava*, the name of the Hotṛ's practice of substituting OM for verse-syllables in ṚV recitation. Just as above for the *udgītha*, this passage places the *praṇava* in a correlative framework to reflect on its deeper meaning (*Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* 19.25):

By means of the half-verses he obtains the form of the *uktha*, by means of the *pada*, that of the *nivid*. By means of the *praṇavas* the form of the *śāstras* is made complete, by means of the milk, the *soma*.¹⁹

¹⁸ However, the ChU intentionally conflates the two terms, *praṇava* and *udgītha*, in an effort to demonstrate OM's transcendence of narrow liturgical boundaries (see ch.9, §5).

¹⁹ *ardha ṛcāir ukthānām rūpam padāir āpnoti nividaḥ / praṇāvaiḥ śāstrānām rūpam pāyasā sóma āpyate...*

The text gives a series of elements that constitute the recitational repertoire of the ṚV liturgy; the *praṇavas* are said to "complete the form (*rūpa*)"²⁰ of the showpiece recitation, the *śāstra*. The relation of the recitation and the syllables added to its verses is compared to that between *soma* and the milk added to the juice of the plant for certain oblations (Macdonell 1897, 107).²¹ The *śāstra*'s wholeness depends on the substitution of the *praṇava*—in general terms, a single, extratextual syllable added to a verse in recitation improves the existing mantra. The implication is profound: that a mantra—already perfect in itself, for the Vedic corpus is *śruti*, aural revelation—may be further perfected through recitational modification. This anticipates a key theme in subsequent reflections on OM, where it is explicitly claimed that the addition of OM perfects a mantra or a song.

The overall effect of this passage is to inaugurate the discursive construction of the term *praṇava*, which enters more and more into discussions of OM. From the Upaniṣads forward, *praṇava* comes to be widely accepted as an alternative name for OM, not merely in the narrow liturgical sense, but more broadly as its transcendent moniker. The effects of the VS reflection on *praṇava* and the TS reflection on *udgītha* are therefore similar: to invest technical terms with a deeper resonance, allowing them to engage themes beyond their own limited liturgical contexts. Based on these foundations, the terms *udgītha* and *praṇava* grow into independent rubrics under which liturgical OM's diverse practices are unified. As they become established in their own right, such terms serve to organize the burgeoning reflections on OM.

²⁰ Note the diction, which is a characteristic formulation of the *bandhu* hermeneutic (ch. 1, §5.9): by means of X, he obtains the form (*rūpam*) of Y. The idea is that *praṇava* and other elements, when performed, help the sacrificer obtain a metaphysical version of the correlated entities.

²¹ It's possible that the correlation between *praṇava* and milk could lend support to a position that I have argued against, namely that the "syllable" flowing in the milk of Vāc in ṚV 1.164 is an allusion to OM (see above §2.1). On the other hand, the composers of the VS passage may simply be building on the inherited association of *akṣara* and milk in order to suggest a new correlation along these lines.

§2.8 *Summing up: foreshadowing OM in the Ṛgveda and Yajurveda Saṃhitās*

This selection of Saṃhitā passages elucidates not only the broad thematic patterns, but also the specific interpretive threads from which subsequent reflections on OM will be fashioned. Though absent from the ṚV Saṃhitā, OM is nevertheless foreshadowed by *hiṃ*, a ritual syllable that appears as the sonic realization of the great Syllable and the goddess Voice in the Riddle Hymn. Moving to the prose of the YV Saṃhitās, the glimmers of discursive OM become stronger. One passage connects the liturgical reflex of the syllable with the fertile hermeneutic of syllable-counting: OM is one of seventeen syllables that add up to an esoteric reckoning of Prajāpati. Without mentioning OM explicitly, other passages inaugurate the construction of three recitational practices associated with the syllable: *praṇava*, *udgītha*, and *pratigāra*. The correlation of these diverse practices, one from each Veda, under a common rubric anticipates the central hermeneutic claim of later texts, namely that OM is the sound in which the three Vedas become unified. Finally, another passage alludes to the potency of such recitational practices to perfect a mantra in recitation. I will show in the next chapter that these Saṃhitā passages all anticipate reflections on OM in the next stratum of the Vedic corpus, the Brāhmaṇas.

§3 *Summing up: the roots of OM's discursive construction*

In this chapter I have addressed OM's discursive roots, which take two forms—one broad-based and theological, the other specific and hermeneutic. First, I locate its roots in the core doctrines of sacred sound in the Veda. These teachings—associated with the terms *brahman*, *vāc*, and *akṣara*; and addressing the cosmological and soteriological parameters of the Absolute, the goddess Voice, and the great Syllable—comprise the theological framework into which reflections on OM will be integrated. I argue that OM's integration into these doctrines may have been influenced by the precedent of another

monosyllable (*hiṃ*), which seems to occupy in the ṚV a niche later taken over by OM—that of audible essence of all ritual utterance. Second, I locate OM's roots in specific contexts from the YV Saṃhitās which will inform hermeneutics in later texts. These include counting the syllables of mantras to glean arcane insights into sacrifice, the correlation of diverse recitational practices on the basis of their common link to OM, and speculations based on the idea that adding OM to mantras will perfect their form and efficacy. While only one of the YV Saṃhitā passages discussed mentions OM directly, the evidence is quite strong that OM is the organizing principle throughout.

§4 *In with the old, in with the new: correlation, synthesis, and integration*

In the next chapter, we will trace the growth of reflections on OM from these roots, shifting our focus from the Saṃhitās to the Brāhmaṇas, whose composers undertake the first sustained interpretive engagement with OM in the Vedic corpus. As we prepare to follow these developments, this is a good moment to draw attention to the modes of interpretation evident throughout the discursive sections of the Veda. I want to dwell here on how ideas are received, elaborated, modified, and incorporated from one stratum of the Vedic corpus to the next. This is a critical issue for the rest of this study: from here on out, I will move diachronically through the layers of text, trying to shed light on how reflections on OM take shape within specific branches as well as across the corpus as a whole. As I see it, the engine that drives OM's emergence in the Vedas runs on *correlation, synthesis, and integration*.

By *correlation*, I refer to the widespread Vedic hermeneutic of correlating two or more entities on the basis of a shared feature (see ch. 1, §5.9). Often, this shared feature or "bond" (*bandhu*), as it is called in Vedic, will not be explicitly revealed in the texts—the challenge to the listener is to discover it for himself. Once discovered, this secret knowledge can be actualized in ritual so as to make a given performance more successful; hence the frequent refrain that "the one who knows" will reap certain

benefits in ritual. The formulation and explication of such esoteric bonds is the organizing principle of the texts that will occupy us in the next chapter, the Brāhmaṇas, but the hermeneutic of correlation permeates the corpus as a whole. The Taittirīya passage above is an excellent instance of this correlative method in practice: the essential identity of three distinct recitational practices is asserted on the basis of a shared feature; the "bond" uniting the three is not revealed, only hinted at—I have shown that it is almost certain to have been the sound OM.

While correlation is my umbrella term for an insider's hermeneutic that is recognized by the composers of the texts, *synthesis* and *integration* denote, from an outsider's perspective, the cumulative impact of correlative thinking on the formation of Vedic texts, rituals, and their discourses. Vedic correlations work locally—within a given passage, text, or branch—but also globally, as they contribute to a systematic "web of relations" (Olivelle 1998, 24) shared across branches, over centuries constituting a pan-Vedic repertoire of esoteric insights about ritual, theology, cosmology, and soteriology. This shared repertoire of knowledge is intertextual in the sense of not being represented by any single work but only by the textual corpus as a whole. By synthesis, I refer to the amalgamation of specific insights within the broader repertoire of knowledge; by integration, I refer to the melding of this knowledge into inherited and innovative discourses. These are circular processes, for the synthesis of insights in one stratum leads to a new synthesis in the next; and the integration of inherited knowledge into an existing discourse leads in turn to new discursive formulations. To take a concrete example: all the discourses we have considered in this chapter—the doctrines of *vāc*, *brahman* and *akṣara*; the import of counting of syllables in mantras; the bringing together of discrete recitational practices under a common rubric; the possibility of improving mantras by adding a special syllable—will, through processes of synthesis and integration, contribute to innovative discourses about the significance of OM in the Brāhmaṇas, which in turn will inspire new discourses in the Āraṇyakas, and

so on. I should emphasize that while my use of these terms recognizes the formation of a theological and ritual culture shared across the Vedic branches, it does not minimize the importance of developments within individual branches, where ritual specialization and hermeneutic sensibility combine to construct OM in specific ways.

I have adopted the terminology of synthesis and integration from Matthew L. Sayers's recent work on ancestor worship in ancient India (Sayers 2013, 55; see also Gerety forthcoming d). Like Sayers, I aim to describe developments in Vedic texts that transpire over many centuries and have a decisive influence on the formation of key aspects of South Asian religiosity. And like Sayers, I discern in the sources a pattern of dynamic continuity that carries forward inherited terms, ideas, practices, and themes into new contexts. The synthesis of inherited material and its integration into new and existing discourses lead to a constant reinvigoration of traditional ideologies and institutions. Instead of "out with the old and in with the new," as the saying goes, the Brahmanical motto might be "*in* with the old and in with the new."

CHAPTER SIX

SUN, HONEY, SEX, AND THIS WHOLE WORLD: OM IN THE BRĀHMAṆAS

This chapter turns to the interpretive discourses of the Brāhmaṇas, which reflect on the theological, cosmological and soteriological significance of OM's use in the liturgies. These reflections synthesize the material from the Saṃhitās on *vāc*, *akṣara*, *brahman*, and an array of recitational practices associated with OM. This material from the earlier strata is then integrated into the first sustained discourses on OM found anywhere in the Vedic corpus. The Brāhmaṇas help OM to transcend its background of liturgical multiformity, transforming it into a unitary sound and concept—in these texts, OM serves to organize theological discussions. Perhaps the most significant development during this phase is the integration of OM into the *akṣara* doctrine. For the first time, the great Syllable will be identified as a definite sound—OM.

The idea of OM as the sonic essence of the three Vedas gains also prominence, and indeed, the Brāhmaṇas of all three Vedas make significant hermeneutic contributions to OM's construction. These contributions are far from equal, however. One Sāmavedic branch in particular, the Jaiminīya, is extremely active in OM's rise, devoting more space to reflections on OM than all other branches combined. Much of the diction and many of the themes that come to define OM as a sacred syllable in the Upaniṣads (and beyond) receive their first articulation in these reflections of the Jaiminīyas. This signals two significant yet overlooked features of OM's history: first, that its discursive construction was underway earlier than scholars have acknowledged, already in the Brāhmaṇa period; and second, that the thinkers who championed it in this phase were mainly specialists in Sāmavedic ritual performance—that is, singers of songs. Music is the fuel that drives OM's emergence.

§1 *Those in the know*

The Brāhmaṇas are sprawling compendia of sacrificial lore: speculations, etiologies, etymologies, myths, legends, and rival teachings pertaining to sacrifice. They are "explanations of *brahman*," in the sense of elaborating on the compressed potency (*brahman*) of the mantras collected in the Saṃhitās. Above all, these texts teach how to maximize the material and spiritual efficacy of ritual performance. To master the sacrifice, one has to *know* the sacrifice: what it means, where it came from, how it relates to gods, demons, and primeval times; its scope and its sequence; its pitfalls and possibilities. Taking for granted a high level of practical knowledge about the rites, the Brāhmaṇas aim to inculcate expertise in the realm of interpretive meaning. In the words of Witzel, these are texts "by Brahmins for Brahmins"(1996, 2)—tricks of the trade collected for a constituency of ritual insiders.

As I have already noted several times in this study, the dominant hermeneutic of Vedic discourse is correlation, whereby one entity is correlated with another on the basis of a shared feature or "bond" (*bandhu*). For the Brāhmaṇas, the pursuit of such insights is paramount: their aim as a genre is to formulate and collect expositions of these secret bonds, which insiders—in that ubiquitous refrain, "those in the know" (*ya evaṃ veda*)—can then draw on in the course of ritual performance. The impact of this hermeneutic on the career of OM is profound: by means of correlation, the multiform syllable becomes reified as a uniform entity, identified with a wide range of terms, and integrated into new contexts. Correlative thinking serves to connect OM's diverse liturgical practices with each other, creating a unitary OM under one overarching rubric; but it also relates this constructed, unitary OM to an array of other entities. The passages we will consider in this chapter bring OM into one-to-one correspondence with individual things such as "syllable," "honey," "grains," or "truth"; but they also correlate it with cosmic collectives, especially triads such as the three primordial sounds (*a, u, m*), the three Vedas (ṚV, YV, SV), three gods (Fire, Wind, Sun), or the three realms of the cosmos (earth,

atmosphere, heaven). Ultimately the Brāhmaṇas push the fertile hermeneutic of correlation to a holistic extreme, transforming OM into a sound that is quite literally "all-encompassing:" the sound is "this whole world" (*idaṃ sarvam*), as well as the Absolute (*brahman*).

§1.1 *Ritual sensibilities*

The ultimate insider in the Brāhmaṇas is therefore the man who understands the meanings underlying every mantra and ritual act, and especially the connections between them. In this way, the Brāhmaṇas participate in what Sayers has called the discursive construction of the role of "ritual expert" (Sayers 2013, 68-69); each Brāhmaṇa in its own way models the combination of liturgical and hermeneutic know-how that it takes to successfully officiate in a given liturgy: the *audgātram* of the SV, *hautram* of the ṚV, and *ādhvaryavam* of the YV. Accordingly, Brāhmaṇa discourses usually bear the imprint of their composers' liturgical specialization. Thus, for example, a Sāmavedic Brāhmaṇa may frame its discourses in terms of sound and melody, in keeping with the musical specialization of the SV singers who composed it; while a Ṛgvedic Brāhmaṇa may tend more towards verbal, metrical, and mythical correlations, in keeping with the poetic specialization of ṚV reciters; and a Yajurvedic text may favor speculations on offerings, formulas, and the apparatus of ritual, in keeping with the practical specialization of Yajurvedic officiants.

Throughout this study, we will be attentive to the ways in which each liturgical specialty imparts its own distinctive sensibility to the interpretive discourses about OM; and even within a shared liturgy, to the recognizable sensibilities of particular branches. Signe Cohen (2008) has argued strongly for the influence of liturgical specialization on the shape of Upaniṣadic discourses, which often stand at some remove from the details of praxis (see ch.9, §1.1). Liturgical influence is even more strongly evident in Brāhmaṇa discourses about OM, which directly engage ritual topics.

§1.3 *The Aitareyins and the Jaiminīyas*

Turning now to the texts themselves, we find that the main work of constructing discursive OM in the Brāhmaṇas is carried out by the members of two Vedic branches: the Aitareyins of the ṚV, who weigh in with several early discourses on OM, one of which proves to be especially influential for the later tradition; and the Jaiminīyas of the SV, who return to OM again and again in at least half a dozen passages, formulating several of the most lasting *dicta* on the syllable and exerting a profound influence on OM's discursive construction in later texts. Although there are mentions of OM and its liturgical multiforms in the Brāhmaṇas of other branches, it is the Ṛgvedic Aitareyins and Sāmavedic Jaiminīyas who are largely responsible for synthesizing the earlier Saṃhitā discourses and integrating them into innovative discourses about OM. Thinkers from these two branches crystallize the themes that will characterize OM throughout the Vedic period and beyond: that it is the preeminent syllable of the Vedas and their irreducible, shared essence; that it has cosmogonic and soteriological potency; and that it is the sonic counterpart of the highest theological principle, *brahman*.

§2 *Ṛgvedic reflections on OM: the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*

The Brāhmaṇa of the Ṛgvedic Aitareya branch contains reflections on the Ṛgvedic liturgy (*hautram*), which includes the recitations of the Hotṛ priest and other officiants. Like its younger counterpart in the Kauṣītaki branch, the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* bears signs of its Ṛgvedic liturgical specialization, favoring discourses on recitation, phonetics, metrics, poetics, and close analysis of verses. Unlike the Kauṣītakins, however, who analyze Ṛgvedic recitational practices but never mention OM outright (see ch. 3, §3.1), the Aitareyins engage in what are perhaps the earliest explicit efforts to discursively construct OM. Among these is the very first passage to present the famous division of OM into its constituent phonemes, analyzing *om* as the union of the sounds *a*, *u*, and *m*. This sound

equation ($A + U + M = OM$) has proven extremely fertile ground for the growth of new interpretations up through the Upaniṣads and beyond (see ch. 10, §2.4, 7.4).

§2.1 $A + U + M = OM$

A cosmogonic narrative frames these reflections, telling how creation and everything in it emanated from the heat of the creator-god Prajāpati. The liturgical context is the *praṇava*, which among the Aitareyins takes the form-*o3m* (AB 5.32):

From these gods, all heated up, the three Vedas were born: the Ṛgveda was born from Agni, the Yajurveda from Vāyu, and the Sāmaveda from Āditya. Prajāpati heated up these Vedas, and from these Vedas, all heated up, the three pure ones were born: 'bhūr' was born from the Ṛgveda, 'bhuvās' from the Yajurveda, and 'svā' from the Sāmaveda. He heated up these pure ones, and from these pure ones, all heated up, the three sounds—*a*, *u*, and *m*—were born. He brought these together as one; so that was *o3m*. That's why the Hotṛ utters the *praṇava* with "om-om." *Om* is the heavenly world. That one up there who burns is *om*.¹

The cosmogony begins with the creator god Prajāpati, divine embodiment of the sacrifice itself and sometime consort of the goddess Voice (*vāc*), engaged in ascetic practice.² As Roberto Calasso has observed, the "ardor" (*tapas*) of Prajāpati's asceticism is generated through austerities as much mental as physical: the strain of his deep contemplation produces flashes of red-hot insight (Calasso 2014, 99-102; see also Lévi 1898, 23). The heat of his austerities generates a chain of cosmic triads:³ three gods, three Vedas, the threefold *vyāhṛti* mantra (the "utterances," *bhūr bhuvās svā*), the three "pure"

¹ ...tebhyo 'bhitaptebhyas trayo vedā ajāyanta: rgveda evāgner ajāyata, yajurvedo vāyoḥ, sāmaveda ādityāt. tān vedān abhyatapat, tebhyo 'abhitaptebhyas trīṇi śukrāṇy ajāyanta: bhūr ity eva rgvedād ajāyata, bhuvā itī yajurvedāt, svā itī sāmavedāt. 2. tāni śukrāṇy abhyatapat, tebhyo 'bhitaptebhyas trayo varṇā ajāyantākāra ukāro makāra itī. tān ekadhā samabharat, tad etad o3m itī. tasmād om-om itī praṇauty. om itī vai svargo loka, om itī asau yo 'sau tapati.

² For a discussion of Prajāpati as representing the sacrifice, with ample Brāhmaṇa references, see Lévi 1898, 15; on his relations to Vāc, see Lévi 1898, 22. On Prajāpati as the central deity of the Brāhmaṇa texts, see Gonda 1986a.

³ For a study of triads in the Veda, see Gonda 1976.

sounds (the phonemes *a*, *u*, *m*), and finally *o3m*, the sound of the *praṇava*. The phonological explanation of OM as the union of three constituent sounds is rhetorically useful, permitting the sound to be correlated with other triads. Note that even the last link in this chain of threes, the *praṇava*, contains an embedded triad: drawn out with *pluti* in recitation, *-o3m* consists of three beats; Hock argues that its "trimoric" recitational character makes the syllable especially amenable to triadic correlations (Hock 1991, 109). For his part, van Buitenen has argued that *o3m* is a recitational encoding of the three-term *vyāhṛti* mantra (van Buitenen 1959, 180). Each triad becomes more compressed through Prajāpati's ardor, and each triad is a compression of the one preceding. Indeed, one might say that Prajāpati boils down his creations, and the final distillation is OM; beyond OM, no further reduction is possible. In this way, OM stands as the compressed synthesis of deities, natural forces, and especially the "knowledge" (*veda*) of the Vedic canon. In later texts, this gives rise to a trope wherein Prajāpati juices a comparable chain of triads; when he arrives at OM, he cannot take its "sap" (*rasa*)—it is irreducible (see ch. 7, §5.1).

After arriving at OM by these triadic correlations, the passage proposes a new pair of correlations: "*om* is the heavenly world" and "that one up there who burns is *om*;" the latter correlation probably refers to the sun. As the shared correlate of this pair, OM makes its entry into the soteriological discourse of the Brāhmaṇas, which centers on the ascension to heaven. This association between OM, heaven, and the sun is an intimation of how reflections on OM will develop in the Jaiminīya branch, where the syllable becomes the focal point of soteriological speculations (see ch. 8).

§2.2 *Sonic cosmogony*

Prajāpati's mythical association with Vāc is also relevant, for the elements he creates here are sounds, manifestations of her "voice" (Calasso 2014, 107-116; see my ch. 5, §1.2): the sonic corpus of the

Vedas, the *vyāhṛti* mantra, the three pure sounds, and *o3m*—all are modulations of sound uttered in ritual performance. Even the deities Fire, Wind and Sun are frequently conceived in the Vedas in terms of their sonality: because he crackles as he burns, Agni is elsewhere compared to the Hotṛ priest of the ṚV, Vāyu is said to make the sound *hiṃ* (TS 3.3.2.1; Staal 1989a, 276), and the sound of Āditya is OM as sung by Sāmavedins (ChU 1.5.1; cf. ch. 9, §5.1). Thus we find here a reflex of the familiar Vedic theme of the construction of the cosmos through ritual sound, where liturgies and mantras figure as first principles of creation. The *vyāhṛti* mantra serves as a pivot for this sonic cosmogony: its three terms *bhūr bhuvā svar* correlate with the three Vedic liturgies,⁴ while at the same time they carry the literal meaning "earth, atmosphere, heaven," articulations of Prajāpati's cosmogonic power.

We know from a Brāhmaṇa in the Vājasaneyi branch of the YV that Prajāpati creates simply by speaking this mantra; whatever he names comes into being. "He uttered *bhūr* and that became this earth; *bhuvā*—that became this atmosphere; *sva*—that became yonder sky" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6.3).⁵ These primordial speech acts are measured in *akṣara*, with each of the utterances being either mono- or disyllabic: "When he was speaking for the first time Prajāpati spoke only one- and two-syllable words..." (ŚB 11.1.6.4; cf. Lévi 1898, 22-23).⁶ But while this Yajurvedic text attests to Prajāpati's association with cosmogonic "syllables," the term *akṣara* is missing from our present passage, AB 5.32. Therefore, although the Aitareyins make a major contribution to the discursive construction of OM by analyzing it as *A + U + M*, they fall short of the crucial measure we mentioned in the last chapter: they do not identify OM with the great Syllable of the Riddle Hymn. (However, the Aitareyins *do* speak of OM as an *akṣara* in the mundane, grammatical sense; see below).

⁴ *Bhūr* :: ṛc/ṚV, *bhuvā* :: yajus/YV, *sva* :: sāmān/SV. See ŚB 4.6.7.1.

⁵ *sa bhūr iti vyāharat seyam pṛthivy abhavad bhuvā iti tad idam antarikṣam abhavat sva iti sāsau dyaus abhavad*

⁶ *prathamam vadan prajāpatir avadat tasmād ekākṣaradvyakṣarāṇy eva*

The sonic cosmogony provides an apt framework for thinking about OM *as a sound*. This passage exemplifies the sophisticated phonological analysis already achieved by the Ṛgvedic exegetes of the Aitareya branch: the vowel combination described here accords with Pāṇini's later sandhi rules codifying the euphonic processes of Sanskrit sound combination. This sophistication in phonology and phonetics may have been a particular specialty of the Aitareyins, for the systemization of their branch's phonetic analyses in a handbook (*prāṭisākhya*) seems to have been achieved quite early.⁷

§2.3 *Language of gods, language of men*

The Aitareyins invoke OM not only in terms of its phonology, but also in other discourses pertaining to the lexical and poetic interpretations of ṚV verses. A common thread running through such passages is the idea of the hierarchization of speech into two registers, the language of the gods and the language of men (cf. Watkins 1970; Thompson 1995a, 6). The former find expression in the divine revelations of Vedic mantras, while the latter is typical of everyday speech. At certain moments in the Soma sacrifice, there are circumstances where one register is preferred over the other. In some instances, the elevated place of OM in this hierarchy is emphasized by showing it to be the divine way to say "yes;" in others, OM is invoked as hermeneutic tool for understanding what the gods mean when they seem to say "no."

§2.4 *Saying yes with OM*

While we have to wait until the Upaniṣads to find OM explicitly glossed as "assent" (*anujñā*, ChU 1.1.8; see my ch. 4, §1; ch. 9, §3.3), already in the Brāhmaṇas there is some evidence that it was

⁷ Indeed, George Cardona has argued that the ṚV *prāṭisākhya* is oldest of the genre because it shows "less influence of Pāṇinian methodology than the others" (Cardona 1997, 356n428; 273ff.). The ṚV *prāṭisākhya* is attributed to Śaunaka and is associated with the Aitareya branch.

understood this way, and that this interpretation, in turn, fuels the development of hermeneutic discourses about OM. We have already considered a variation of the Adhvaryu's *pratigara* that speaks to this (AB 5.25): "OM, O Hotṛ; be it so (*tathā*), O Hotṛ."⁸ The close collocation of OM and *tathā*, alternating in successive phrases, suggests that OM may be understood here as an affirmative particle. Another passage correlates a similar alternation of OM and *tathā* with the two registers of speech. Seated on a golden cushion during the royal coronation (*rājasūya*), the Hotṛ recites the story of Śunaḥśepa, which contains Ṛgvedic verses (*ṛc*) interspersed with popular ones (*gāthā*). The response of the Adhvaryu varies according to the type of verse being recited (AB 7.18): "*Om* is the response for a *ṛc*, just as *tathā* is for a *gāthā*. *Om* is divine; *tathā* is human. And so through the divine and the human alike, he frees the Yajamāna from evil and from offence."⁹ Here *om* is presented as the appropriate divine response, suited to the sacred status of of Ṛgvedic verse, while *tathā* is the human response, suited to the popular *gāthā* genre.¹⁰ This suggests two different registers in which the Adhvaryu may acknowledge his colleague's recitation, suited to two corresponding registers of poetic speech. By controlling both registers of speech, the passage claims, the Adhvaryu avails himself of both the divine and the human to effect the sacrificer's liberation from evil.¹¹

⁸ *om hotas tathā hotṛ ity adhvaryuḥ pratigrṇāti*

⁹ *...om ity ṛcaḥ pratigara, evaṃ tatheti gāthāyā. om iti vai daivaṃ, tatheti mānuṣam / daivena caivainaṃ tan mānuṣeṇa ca pāpād enasaḥ pramuñcati...*

¹⁰ See Horsch 1958, 11, 31.

¹¹ The divine register of *vāc* is the one described in RV 164.41-42, located in the highest heaven whence the Syllable (*akṣara*) originates. The same hymn alludes to a hierarchization of divine and human *vāc* that has echoes elsewhere in the Veda. In stanza 45, *vāc* is measured in four tracks, one used in everyday speech, and the remaining three known only to gods and insightful Brahmins. See Thompson's discussion of this verse as "an early example of the Indo-European metalinguistic distinction between the 'language of the gods', the elevated poetic language, and the ordinary 'language of men'" (1995a, 6; with further references). For other Brāhmaṇa examples of this distinction, see Lévi 1898, 86-87. See also next note.

Another reflex of the opposition of divine and human utterance pertains to the emic interpretation of mantras. It turns out that even in the first millennium BCE, understanding the meaning of Vedic mantras was not always straightforward, and the language of the gods sometimes proved unintelligible to men. The Aitareyins themselves maintain that "the gods love the hidden"¹²—in other words, a signal characteristic of divine speech is its inscrutability, which requires the mediation of specialized interpreters. In this way, the composers of the Brāhmaṇas place themselves in a position to shape the contemporary understanding of mantras from earlier strata.

§2.5 *Na for the gods, o3m for men*

This is especially clear in two passages that discuss OM in relation to the negative particle *na*. These passages claim a gap in understanding between divine language and human language, manifest in the incomprehensibility of certain archaisms in the (divine) Ṛgvedic verses for the (human) priests. At issue is the interpretation of Ṛgvedic mantras that use *na* in an archaic fashion no longer current in the Brāhmaṇa period, namely to signal comparison.) In the kindling of fire at the royal reception (*ātithyeṣṭi*) for Soma, the Hotṛ recites (AB 1.16 on ṚV 6.16.40; trans. Jamison & Brereton):

Whom they carry like a bangle on the hand, like (*na*) an infant just born, Agni, who conducts good ceremonies for the clans...¹³

The same usage comes in a verse recited during the animal sacrifice (AB 2.2 on ṚV 1.36.13; trans. Jamison & Brereton):

Stand upright to help us, like (*na*) god Savitar...¹⁴

¹² *parokṣakāmā hi devāḥ*, AB 3.43.1. Similarly ŚB 6.1.1.2 and elsewhere. See Keith 1909, 232n14 and Olivelle 1998, 515n.

¹³ *ā yām háste ná khādínam síśum jātám ná bíbhṛati / viśām agnīm suadhvarám*

¹⁴ *ūrdhvá ū śú ṇa ūtáye tíṣṭhā devó ná savitā*

The composers of the Brāhmaṇa make the same comment about each verse excerpt: "indeed, what *na* is for the gods, that is *o3m* for them."¹⁵ With reference to the second verse, this is elaborated through the gloss of *na* with the comparative particle *iva*: "...what he really means is 'stand upright like (= *iva*) the god Savitr'."¹⁶ The archaic, Ṛgvedic usage of *na* to signal a comparison ("like, as") needs glossing because it is no longer a feature of Vedic syntax in the Brāhmaṇas. The Brāhmaṇa explains this archaism as a difference between the divine register of speech ("for the gods") and that of the human ritual actors ("for them," i.e., the priests¹⁷). But in mediating between these registers of speech, the AB seems to take the further step of associating OM with comparison, a use with no parallels in the Veda. One must recall that these passages are not simply lexicographic glosses, but rather hermeneutic claims about the cryptic syntax and semantics of the gods' language. Thus, the passage mentions OM not because it is conventionally understood to signal comparison—if that were the case, there would be no need to further gloss the statement with *iva*—but because in Brāhmaṇa syntax, OM as an *affirmative* particle ('yes') is naturally opposed to *na* as a *negative* ('no'). This opposition stresses the obscurity of the divine register to the human ear: antonyms in human language are synonyms for the gods.

§2.6 Counting syllables: call and response with OM

The Vedic predilection for enumerating the syllables of mantras, as we saw in the previous chapter, contributed to the development of a numerical hermeneutics, a reflex of the broader trend of formulating correlations between elements of the liturgies and things external to them. The AB attests

¹⁵ *yad vai devānāṃ neti tad eṣāṃ o3m iti*

¹⁶ *tiṣṭha deva iva savitety tad āha*

¹⁷ Haug takes the demonstrative pronoun to refer to mortal men (1863, 75n3), which I understand in this context to denote those who use and interpret the Vedas, that is, the officiants. Sāyaṇa takes the pronoun to refer to the Vedas themselves.

to this continuing interest in its treatment of the elaborate exchange between the Hotṛ and the Adhvaryu during the ṚV *śāstra*. In this context, the composers of the AB discuss pairs of call and response with OM, enumerating the syllables (*akṣara*) in each pair. These reflections are of interest to us primarily for a negative reason: these passages treat OM as merely one more "syllable" (*akṣara*) among others to be counted; in this way, this testimony suggests that the Aitareyins, in spite of their obvious interest in the discursive construction of OM, did not necessarily identify OM as the single, primordial great Syllable.

Each of the three *soma*-pressings has a characteristic meter, with the total syllables in each increasing over the course of the day (cf. TS 3.2.9): the *gāyatrī*, with eight syllables, corresponds to the morning pressing; the *triṣṭubh*, with eleven syllables, to the midday pressing; and the *jagatī*, with twelve syllables, to the third pressing. The number of syllables in the call and response also increases incrementally with each pressing. The hermeneutic program is to show that the number of syllables in the Hotṛ's call (*āhāva*) plus the number in the Adhvaryu's response (*pratigara*) equals the number of syllables in the reigning meter. An aphorism introducing the reckoning puts it this way (AB 3.12): " 'The gods' dependents (*devaviśaḥ*) must be properly arrayed,' so they say. 'The meter must suit the meter.'"¹⁸ The "dependents" of the gods are the mantras and liturgies that serve them; they are "properly arrayed" when the syllable-counts match those of the meters being recited (cf. Wilke & Moebus 2011, 438-439). The utterance of successively longer mantras ending in *-om* accomplishes this (AB 3.12):

The Hotṛ calls out with three syllables at the morning pressing, "*śoṅsāvom!*"
With five syllables the Adhvaryu responds "*śaṅsāmodaivom!*" That makes

¹⁸ *devaviśaḥ kalpayitavyā ity āhuś chandaś chandasi pratiṣṭhāpyam iti*

eight syllables. Now the *gāyatrī* has eight syllables. Thus they place the *gāyatrī* first at the morning pressing...¹⁹

The same logic is applied to the midday pressing. With the addition of a word to the call—*adhvāryō śoṅsāvom* "O Adhvāryu, let us recite!"—three syllables are added to the total (8 + 3 = 11), matching the eleven syllables of the *triṣṭubh*. For the third pressing, a single syllable is reduplicated—*adhvāryō śośoṅsāvom* "O Adhvāryu let us re-recite!"—thereby bringing the total (11 + 1 = 12) in line with the twelve syllables of the *jagatī*.

The formulation of numerical equivalences (*sampad*) is a widespread hermeneutic in the Brāhmaṇas: a nearly identical series of enumerations occurs in the Brāhmaṇa of the Kauṣītakins (KauṣB 14.4),²⁰ and it will come up again in the Sāmavedic discourses on OM below (see §3.6 below). The

¹⁹ *śoṅsāvom ity āhvayate prātaḥsavane tryakṣareṇa, śaṅsāmodaivom ity adhvāryuḥ pratigrṇāti pañcākṣareṇa. tad aṣṭākṣaram sampadyate. 'ṣṭākṣarā vai gāyatrī, gāyatrīm eva purastāt prātaḥsavane 'cikṣpatām...*

²⁰ In an adjacent exchange during the morning pressing, one difference between the two R̥gvedic branches is especially telling. Here are the two versions, with each exchange making up the eight syllables of the *gāyatrī*:

AB (3.12):

Hotṛ: *ukthaṃ vāci* "may the hymn be chanted" (four syllables)

Adhvāryu: *om ukthaśā* "Yes (=OM), hymn-chanter!" (four syllables)

KauṣB (14.4.11-12):

Hotṛ: *uktham avāci* "the hymn has been chanted" (five syllables)

Adhvāryu: *ukthaśā* "hymn-chanter!" (three syllables)

The difference comes in *how* they make up the eight syllables. The AB makes an even division, four syllables per speaker, with *om* in the Adhvāryu's response indicating assent. By contrast, the KauṣB assigns five syllables to the Hotṛ by preferring an augmented aorist passive (*avāci*, instead of the unaugmented injunctive *vāci*; cf. Macdonell 1916, 179-180) and three syllables to the Adhvāryu by eschewing OM. This division is curious, especially since it results in a somewhat awkward response ("hymn-chanter!"). Since the Kauṣītakins certainly knew the practices of the rival Aitareyins, and since this section of the KauṣB is decidedly later than that of the AB (Witzel 1997a, 320-22), it appears that the Kauṣītakins have analyzed and arranged their formulas to avoid using *om*. Why? We saw already that the KauṣB teaches two forms of the *praṇava* (*-o* and *-om*) where the Aitareyins teach one (*-o3m*); and, similarly, that the branch prefers the *o*-ending in its *āhāva* and *pratigara* (*śoṃsāvō3*) where the Aitareyins have *om* (*śoṃsāvom*) (ch. 3, §3.1, 3.5). Moreover, *om* does not appear as a separate particle *anywhere* in the KauṣB. In other words, the consistent use of *-o3m* in the *praṇava* and *om* as a separate particle was a signature feature of Aitareya praxis, one that the Kauṣītakins did not share. These recitational niceties had consequences in the realm of hermeneutics: with a praxis that did not single out *om*, the Kauṣītakins never developed their own speculations

Aitareya reflexes of this hermeneutic count *-om* as an *akṣara* in the grammatical sense but make no effort to individuate it in any way. This is significant in view of the fact that the Aitareyins *do* cultivate a hermeneutic interest in OM in passages such as the A + U + M sound equation—after all, if OM were regarded in Ṛgvedic tradition as the preeminent *akṣara* above all others, one would expect AB discourses such as this one to signal that fact. This presents a stark contrast to the Sāmavedic discourses we will consider below, where OM is not simply one grammatical *akṣara* among many, it is the "only" *akṣara*.

§2.7 *Summing up: the reflections of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*

In their Brāhmaṇa, the Aitareyins mention OM a number of times and reflect on its use in the liturgies. Their most sustained discourse concerns the *praṇava*. It divides OM into its three constituent phonemes (*a, u, m*), connects this triad of sounds to other important Vedic triads, and implicates OM in Prajāpati's primeval cosmogony. It concludes by claiming that the recitation of the *praṇava* has soteriological efficacy, granting access to the heavenly world. Overall, the passage emphasizes OM's sonality, connecting insights into its phonology and recitation with broader cosmological and soteriological themes; the term *akṣara* is notable for its absence here in a discourse centered on the phonology and utterance of a single, transcendent syllable. Other passages in the AB use lexical, poetic, and metrical strategies to discursively construct OM. Several explore the hierarchy of divine and human speech: thus, OM is a way to say "yes" that is suited to the god's language, as compared to the more mundane affirmative *tathā*; and OM is invoked to explain the archaic obscurity of Ṛgvedic mantras, where the negative particle *na*—the opposite of OM as an affirmative—signals a comparison. Finally, we examined an instance of Aitareya enumeration that aimed to correlate the number of

on OM *per se*; the Aitareyins, meanwhile, developed a substantial discourse on the syllable, including the celebrated A + U + M equation.

syllables in various mantras with the metrical composition of the three meters of the *soma*-pressing day. Beyond exemplifying the rich interplay of liturgy and hermeneutics, this passage served as negative testimony, speaking against a particular bond between OM and the term *akṣara* in the Ṛgvedic milieu. On the whole, the discursive construction of OM in this Brāhmaṇa bears the imprint of the Ṛgvedic specialization of the thinkers who composed it, testifying to their professional interest in phonetics, poetics, metrics, and the hierarchization of speech.

§3 *Sāmavedic reflections on OM: the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*

Having taken stock of the Ṛgvedic contributions to discursive OM in the Brāhmaṇa period, let's turn now to those of the SV. The interpretive texts of the SV have more to say about OM than those of the ṚV and YV combined. But the Sāmavedic discourses offer more than just sheer bulk—we will see below that many of the themes and aphorisms that characterize OM as a sacred syllable in the Upaniṣads and beyond have clear antecedents in Sāmavedic hermeneutics of the Brāhmaṇa period. Within Sāmavedic traditions, there is another clear disparity: the singer-theologians of the Jaiminīya branch cultivate a strong interest in OM in their Brāhmaṇa, while those of the other Sāmavedic branches (Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya) scarcely mention it in theirs.²¹

The reflections of the Jaiminīyas are a watershed in OM's history: indeed, the earliest explicit correlation of OM with the Vedic doctrines of sacred sound, organized under the rubric of the terms *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*, occurs in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*. More than any other text of its age, the JB strives to integrate these inherited doctrines into its discussions about OM. Moreover, the JB develops

²¹ The Kauthuma counterpart to the JB, *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa*, while treating many of the ritual contexts in which OM is used—e.g., *ādi*, *aniruktagāna*, *upagāna*—does not make a single mention of OM. Indeed, the only sustained reflections on OM in a Brāhmaṇa of the Kauthuma branch occur in the *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (1.1.8; 1.2; 4.5.2), a late and derivative work that does not play a significant role in OM's emergence. By contrast, the Kauthumas suddenly cultivate an interest in OM in their Upaniṣad; see ch. 9.

and crystallizes the idea—already emergent in the AB, as we saw above—that OM is a sonic embodiment of the three Vedas, the sound that unites different recitational practices across the *śrauta* liturgies. Throughout, the JB discourses on OM bear the stamp of the branch's liturgical specialization: they are attuned to issues of sonality, melody, non-lexical meaning, and musical "essence" (*rasa*). The Jaiminīyas also formulate influential aphorisms that will resurface in the Upaniṣads, defining OM as a sacred syllable for centuries to come. By tracing these aphorisms to their Jaiminīya source, I argue that the seminal discursive construction of OM takes place in a Sāmavedic milieu in the Brāhmaṇa period. More specifically, I credit the members of the Jaiminīya branch as OM's champions and explain how their musical sensibilities, combined with Sāmavedic liturgical expertise, shape their reflections on OM.

The tracing of many of the most influential OM discourses to the Sāmavedic JB is one of the most significant contributions this study has to offer. As I noted in the last chapter, a number of scholars had already intuited the Sāmavedic affinity for OM, but had not been able to pinpoint its precise sources. Previous scholars had not collected the JB lore on OM, and therefore had not considered the implications of discovering such early reflections on OM in a Sāmavedic milieu. They failed to do so largely due to the relative inaccessibility of Jaiminīya textual materials of all strata, from the Saṃhitā to the Śrauta Sūtra. As for the Brāhmaṇa, the JB is a notoriously corrupt and difficult text. Caland gave up on his attempt to produce a critical edition, and a more recent effort by Gerhard Ehlers has not yet been published. No complete translation of the JB has been published, only selections by Caland 1919, Bodewitz 1973 and 1990, Oertel 1896, and Doniger 1985. For many of the passages considered below, no existing translation was available to me for reference. The unavailability of a critical edition *and* translation has compounded the usual difficulties of analyzing Brāhmaṇa prose. Nevertheless, in spite of the uncertainties inherent in working with the JB, I believe the analysis below

will show that this text contains significant testimony on OM's early history that must no longer be ignored.

§3.1 Like honey in grains

The recitational practices with OM that inform the JB discussions are largely drawn from the Sāmavedic liturgy (*audgātram*). Foremost among these is the *ādi*, wherein OM is interpolated into the lyrics of a praise-song (*stotra*) before the Udgātṛ's portion called the *udgītha*.²² Throughout the Jaiminīya discourses on OM, the terms *ādi* and the *udgītha* are often elided, so that the mention of the latter usually implies a reference to the former: when the Jaiminīyas speak of the *udgītha* and OM together, often the *ādi* is the particular liturgical application they have in mind. That's the case here, where it is suggested that adding OM to the *udgītha* improves its performance (JB 1.322; see also 1.336):

In this already praiseworthy melody, still more praise is made when the singer begins with *om*. This syllable is that sun up there. This syllable is the unpressed part of the triple Veda. When he begins with *om*, he places that sun at the beginning/in his mouth. Just as he might mix grains with honey, in the same way he places sap in the melody with this very syllable. Thus he makes it swell. By means of this swollen melody full of sap, praise is made.²³

The initial correlation links "this syllable" OM with the sun, Āditya. A likely basis for this relation is easy to discover: OM occurs at the beginning of the *udgītha*, just as the sun rises at the start of the day.²⁴ Hence the singing of OM takes on a cosmic resonance: as he adds the *ādi* to the beginning

²²This interpolation of OM is prescribed only for performance, and the sound is not recorded in the actual text of the song. See ch. 3, §2.2.

²³...*tasminn u praśasta eva saty eṣā bhūyasī praśamsā kriyate yad etad om ity ādatte / 'sau vā āditya etad akṣaraṃ / tad etad trayasya vedasyāpīlitam akṣaraṃ / sa yad om ity ādatte 'mum evaitad ādityaṃ mukha ādhatte / sa yatha madhunā lājān prayuyād evam evaitenākṣareṇa sāman rasaṃ dadhāti / tad āpyāyayati / tenāsyāpīnena rasavatā stutaṃ bhavati /*

²⁴ Another possibility is that the melody under discussion is said to begin the midday liturgy, sung when the sun is at its zenith. The passage treats the start of the midday service but identifies the *āmahīyava sāman* incorrectly as the opening melody, which should in fact be the *gāyatra*. See Bodewitz 1990, 311n2.

of his recital, the singer "places the sun at the beginning (*mukhe*)."²⁵ The expression *mukhe* literally means "in his mouth"—this polyvalence underlines the correlative framework of this passage. Through the mesocosm of ritual performance (OM as the *ādi*), the macrocosm (the sun) and the microcosm (his body) are connected: OM begins the song, OM is the rising sun at dawn, and OM is the sound in his mouth. The next correlation states that OM is the *akṣara* of the Vedas that could not be pressed out. This recalls AB 5.32 and the triads (three gods, three Vedas, three sounds), which are successively compressed and culminate in the irreducible sound OM; it also previews later Jaiminīya discourses on the irreducibility of OM.²⁶ The next correlation tells us more about OM's irreducible essence: when added as "sap" (*rasa*) to the melody, OM makes it swell.²⁷

This leads to a striking simile that likens the mixing of OM's sap in the melody to that of honey in grains.²⁸ It seems almost certain that the *ādi*, the adding of OM to the *udgītha*, is the liturgical point of reference for this comparison. A teacher running through the basics of the Sāmavedic *stotra*, or a circle of experts discussing the esoteric secrets of Sāmavedic performance, might well have posed the question: "Why do we add OM to the *udgītha*?" A comparison from daily life provides the answer: just as honey sweetens a meal, making it tastier, so OM added to the *udgītha* sweetens and improves the performance. The benefits of adding OM to an existing mantra were also mentioned in an earlier

²⁵ The present passage speaks of "taking up, beginning with" OM (*ā + dā*), a verb root that is cognate with *ādi* (see also LŚS 6.10.13, where interpolating OM at the start of the *udgītha* is termed *ādānam* "the taking on, receiving"). Thus the diction here plays on the liturgical topic at hand: he "begins" (*ādatte*) OM in the song but "places" (*ādhatte*) the sun "at the beginning."

²⁶ See the parallel passage in JUB 1.8.4, which provides the key to understanding these expressions: Prajāpati presses out all three Vedas save for one syllable, the *akṣara* OM which is full of "sap" (*rasa*); see ch. 5, §5, 7; and Bodewitz 1990, 311n4.

²⁷ In the context of the Soma sacrifice, the diction (*āpyāyati*) evokes the rite of swelling the *soma* (*somāpyāyana*; see Caland & Henry 1907, 62ff.) before it is pressed as well as the juice (*rasa*) that flows when the pressing is underway. Thus the addition of OM to a *sāman* swells it like *soma* and fills it with juice.

²⁸ Repeated verbatim in the Upaniṣad of the Jaiminīyas (JUB 1.8.4); it also appears again in the JB (see §3.3).

Yajurvedic text with reference to another reflex of liturgical OM, the Ṛgvedic *praṇava* (see ch. 5, §2.7).

This passage adapts the same idea to a Sāmavedic context.

This is the first passage we have considered where OM is individuated by the use of the term *akṣara*. Most JB passages about OM use this term, often in collocation with the demonstrative adjective *etad*, as here, to point to something just mentioned or well known: "*this* syllable." The diction alone does not necessarily imply the preeminence of that sound—we have seen already that in grammatical terms, OM would naturally be classified as an *akṣara*, a simple "syllable" (cf. §2.6 above).²⁹ Yet in our passage OM is rather more than this—it is the *akṣara* of the triple Veda that was not pressed out; it contains an essence that cannot be further reduced. I read this claim of irreducibility as a strong suggestion that OM here is becoming integrated into the *akṣara* doctrine as the "Syllable" *par excellence*.³⁰ This passage from a Brāhmaṇa of the SV strongly hints that Sāmavedic singers were among the first to hear OM as the preeminent great Syllable. We will see further on that other excerpts from the JB reinforce this impression.

§3.2 *Truth is a weapon*

Another aspect of OM's potency in the JB grows from its correlation with truth (*satya*). The metaphor of truth wielded as a weapon has a deep resonance in Vedic narrative, where the exponents of truth (*satya*) and order (*ṛta*), are often pitted against the forces of untruth and chaos (*anṛta*).³¹ This

²⁹ Jamison 1986, 161-162; Thompson 1995b, 32.

³⁰ Neither this passage, nor other material from the JB on OM, was addressed by van Buitenen in his efforts to connect OM and *akṣara*.

³¹ For discussion and references in the Veda, see Lévi 1898, 39. The gods are not above using *anṛta* to assure their victory (Lévi 1898, 57).

brief story locates OM within this cosmic struggle—singing with truth in the form of OM means death for one's rival (JB 1.323):³²

...This syllable *om* is truth. The finales of the *yaudhājaya* melody are indeed a thunderbolt. Having sung with this truth called '*om*,' by means of the *yaudhājaya* finales the Devas struck at evil—their rivals, the Asuras. And so when the one who knows thus sings with this truth called '*om*,' by means of the *yaudhājaya* finales he strikes at hateful evil—his rival...And now these very thunderbolts, having struck away all evil in these worlds, rise to the heavenly world with only *om*.³³

This passage continues the Jaiminīya convention of referring to OM as *etad akṣara*, "this (well known) syllable." This excerpt also follows a rhetorical structure that we have observed above (JB 1.322): two correlations are stated, followed by an analysis that weaves them together. The first correlates OM with truth (see ŚB 4.3.2.12-13 and discussion below); the second correlates the finales (*nidhana*) of the *yaudhājaya sāman* with thunderbolts.³⁴ Like the gods, who employed these esoteric insights to kill demons, the human singer may use the same knowledge to kill his rival. When the song is over, the thunderbolt-finales rise to heaven through the power of OM alone (*om ity eva*), in an echo of the Aitareya aphorism "OM is the world of heaven" (AB 5.32).³⁵ In this way, OM serves to fulfill two of the key aims of *śrauta* sacrificial culture: to vanquish one's rival, and to attain a place in heaven. This agonistic theme—OM to do violence— is unprecedented in speculations about OM; by contrast, the

³² Depictions of violent attacks on demons and the killing of rivals are no rarity in the Brāhmaṇas. The violent tone of this passage may have been influenced by the name of the *sāman* under discussion, *yaudhājaya*, which contains a derivative of the root √*yudh* "to fight."

³³ ...*tad etat satyam akṣaram yad om iti / vajrā ha khalu vā ete yad yaudhājayasya sāmno nidhanāni / te devā etena satyenābhigīya om ity etair yaudhājayasya nidhanair asurān pāpmānaṃ bhāṭṛvyān aghnan / evam evaivaṃ vidvān etena satyenābhigīya om ity etair yaudhājayasya nidhanair dviṣantaṃ pāpmānaṃ bhrāṭṛvyam hanti...atho hāsyaite eva vajrā eṣu lokeṣu sarvaṃ pāpmānam apahatya om ity eva svargaṃ lokam ārohati //323//*

³⁴ The *nidhanas* of the *yaudhājaya sāman* do not contain OM (see CH §178b for sample lyrics). It seems likely that OM introducing the *udgītha* (the *ādi*) is intended.

³⁵ *om iti vai svargo loka* (AB 5.32).

soteriological theme—OM to win heaven— continues to develop in Jaiminīya discourses, becoming one of its defining features.

§3.3 Honey comes last

Beyond hints of a connection between OM and the *akṣara* doctrine, the JB also furnishes us with evidence that OM is in the process of being assimilated into the closely related doctrines of sacred sound, those of *vāc* and *brahman*. Intimations of this appear in the reflections on another part of the SV liturgy in which the syllable is prominent, the *subrahmaṇyā* rite (see ch. 3, §2.9). Beyond its use as a technical term of liturgy, *subrahmaṇyā* means "with a fine formulation" and serves as an epithet for the goddess Voice. In the rite, Subrahmaṇyā is invoked by the triple repetition of her name interpolated with *-om* as the final syllable, *subrahmaṇyom*. The following passage offers an interpretation of this invocation (JB 2.78-79):

"*Subrahmaṇyom, subrahmaṇyom, subrahmaṇyom*," he says three times. Subrahmaṇyā is indeed voice. In this way he takes hold of voice first. Now voice is *brahman*, and the sound *om* is sap. With sap, he gratifies this same one, the goddess Voice. Some call out like this: "*om subrahmaṇyā*." They explain that breath is in the beginning, then voice. But that is not so. It would be as if someone were to pour the honey on first, then mix in the grains—but that would be backwards. So he should call out only this way:
"*subrahmaṇyom*."³⁶

Here, *subrahmaṇyā* is correlated with *vāc*—and so the singer harnesses her power with his invocation that repeats her name. Next, two more correlations are formulated: *vāc* with *brahman*; and the "sound

³⁶ *subrahmaṇyom subrahmaṇyom subrahmaṇyom iti trīr āha / vāg vai subrahmaṇyā / tad etāṃ vācam prathamata ārabhate / atho brahma vāg, rasa omkāra / tām etāṃ vācam rasena prīṇāti / tad dhaitad eka om subrahmaṇyety āhvayanti //78// —prāṇo hy agre 'tha vāg iti / tad dha tan na tathā / yathā madhv āsicya lājān āvapet, tad anyadheva syāt, tādṛc tat / tasmāt subrahmaṇyom iti evāhvayet /*

om" (*omkāra*)³⁷ with "sap" (*rasa*). By uttering the invocation, the singer gratifies the goddess with OM's essence. The proof for this is evident in the morphology of the mantra: the union of the morphemes *brahman*- and *-om* in *subrahmaṇyom* implies the corresponding union of their correlates, that is, of the goddess Voice with sap.

The passage then criticizes a rival practice whereby OM precedes *Subrahmaṇyā*, so that the invocation would run *om subrahmaṇyā*. The passage reports that "some" (*eke*) have defended this reordering by adducing other correlations: because OM is connected with breath (*prāṇa*),³⁸ and breath precedes voice, therefore *om* should precede *subrahmaṇyā*. The Jaiminīyas reject this rival teaching by repeating the comparison of OM in Sāmavedic recitation to honey in grains (see above §3.1): just as one would never sprinkle a condiment (honey) before serving the main ingredients (the grains), so OM should never begin the *subrahmaṇyā* invocation. This simile rationalizes their preferred practice of singing *subrahmaṇyom*, as opposed to the rival formulation *om subrahmaṇyā*, the equivalent of adding honey to the plate before grain! Note, however, that this inverts the logic of the exact same simile in the previous passage, where OM's honey was added to the beginning of the *udgītha*.

³⁷ Denoting *om* with the term *omkāra* places it in the company of other ritual utterances (e.g., *hiṃkāra*, *vaṣaṭkāra*)—many other Brāhmaṇa accounts use *om iti*, which is roughly equivalent to putting it between quotation marks: "*om*." Oertel (1897, 35) gives an alternate reading, *okāra*. Thompson (1995b, 35) suggests that the *-kāra* suffix (from *kr*, "to act, do, make") in Vedic "indicates an early awareness of speech-utterance as *act*."

³⁸ On *prāṇa* and its symbolism in the Brāhmaṇas, see Eggeling 1882, 19n2 and Lévi 1898, 13, 17. On the symbolic development of *prāṇa* in the Veda, culminating in the exaltation of *prāṇa* over other human faculties and divine entities, see Bodewitz 1992, 51-54. I have not found the correlation between OM and *prāṇa* elsewhere in the Brāhmaṇas, but the present passage may exemplify *prāṇa*'s emerging importance (cf. JB 2.77 and ŚB 11.6.3, where Yajñavalkya calls breath the "one deity"; discussed in Lévi 1898, 37) and association with other entities often connected to OM, namely the sun, *brahman* (Bodewitz 1992, 52, 54), and the *sāman* (JB 1.111; cf. Gonda 1986a, 6). That said, *prāṇa* becomes important in OM discourses in the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads (ch. 9, §5.3).

§3.4 Musical rays of light: the release of brahman

Above we considered evidence that OM in the JB is well on its way towards becoming individuated as the preeminent *akṣara*; and we have just seen how the JB brings OM into engagement with two other terms integral to Vedic conceptions of sacred sound, *vāc* and *brahman*. In the Jaiminīya excerpts considered so far, OM is an instrument of transformation that is realized in ritual—with it, a singer controls the sun, adds praise to a melody, and pleases the goddess Voice. (The syllable's instrumentality is reflected in a grammatical sense as well, for OM or its correlates often appear in the third, or "instrumental" case.³⁹) The sound is an additive that sweetens the song, and a catalyst that brings a performance towards fulfillment. On the whole, the message of the JB so far is that by means of OM a song is brought closer to articulating the inherited cosmic ideals of sacred sound.

We turn now to a long story that further illuminates how OM serves as an instrument of *brahman*. Like so many Brāhmaṇa narratives, this one tells how Prajāpati created the gods (*devas*) and demons (*asuras*) and how the two sides fought each other.⁴⁰ While they are fighting, the Devas leave *brahman* in Prajāpati's care. Returning victorious from the conflict, they ask for it back. But it seems Prajāpati has stored the precious *brahman* in the waters, where he sends them in search of it. The Devas catch sight of *brahman* rising in the waters "like the head from the back"⁴¹ and they resolve to rescue it using *om* (JB 3.355-56):

They said: "We will release *brahman* from here!" By means of this syllable *om*, from this eastern direction they released the *rathantara* as rays of light. Then the noise of fire was released next. Therefore at the *stotra* of the *rathantara* they churn fires. By means of this syllable *om*, from this southern direction

³⁹ See *etenākṣareṇa* in the present passage, plus *madhunā*, *akṣareṇa*, *āpīnena rasavatā* (JB 1.322); and *rasena* (JB 2.78); cf. also *praṇavena* (VS 19.25; ŚB 1.4.1).

⁴⁰ On this constantly recurring theme in the Brāhmaṇas, see Lévi 1898, 31-35, 42-61, 74, 146-147.

⁴¹ *yathā pṛṣṭhāt kakud*. This may also be translated with a topographical sense: "like a mountain peak from the ground."

they released the *br̥hat* as rays of light. Then the noise of the thunderstorm was released next. Therefore at the *stotra* of the *br̥hat* they cause drums to sound...⁴²

"By means of this syllable *om*," the Devas are able to generate a suite of six songs from the primordial source: *brahman*, nestled in the waters. Each of these *pr̥ṣṭhastotras*⁴³ emerges in the form of rays of light.⁴⁴ Echoing each one is a signature sound related to the ritual context in which it is sung: the *rathantara* accompanies the churning of fires, the *br̥hat* the beating of drums, and so on.⁴⁵ Sonality organizes the mythic narrative: sounds, syllables, melodies, and noises are emphasized throughout.

OM, referred to once again as this *akṣara*, is the sonic catalyst for the release of *brahman* in musical form. The implication seems to be that OM is a unique "syllable," powerful enough to coax the elemental forms of the Sāmavedic liturgy from a cosmic source. The particle *iti* in this context (*om ity etenākṣareṇa*) brings out the performativity of text and narrative: we can hear "the syllable 'om'" intoned by the Devas as they stand gazing on *brahman* rising from the waters.⁴⁶ I would suggest that the *ādi* once again furnishes the liturgical context for this story—just as the Sāmavedic officiant sings

⁴² ..te' bruvaṇ sr̥jāmahā ita iti / ta om ity etenākṣareṇāsyai [3,355] pr̥ācyai diśo rathantaraṃ bhā asr̥janta / tad agner ghoṣo 'nvasr̥jyata / tasmād rathantarasya stotre agniṃ manthanti / ta om ity etenākṣareṇāsyai dakṣiṇāyai diśo br̥had bhā asr̥janta / tat parjanyaśya ghoṣo 'nvasr̥jyata / tasmād br̥hat stotre dundubhīn udvādayanti...

⁴³ On this suite of songs, which elsewhere is represented as the enveloping womb to the embryo (= melody) inserted between them, see Eggeling 1885, 339n2 (note on ŚB 4.3.3.19), and 403n2 (on 4.5.4.3). All six melodies constituting the group of *pr̥ṣṭhastotras* are mentioned, and the completeness of this grouping makes it an apt counterpart to the holistic *brahman*.

⁴⁴ The story goes on to tell how the sun "took" (*ādita*) these rays of light, thereby earning his name *āditya* (Ehlers, pers. comm.).

⁴⁵ Compare parallel passages in PB 7.8 and JB 1.118, 143. Caland (1931, 154-155) explains the relation of each sound to its ritual context: for instance, the singing of the *br̥hat sāman* at the *pr̥ṣṭhyāśaḍaha* is accompanied by the beating of drums. For the most part, the passages agree on the sound assigned to each melody; however, the churning of fire is associated in other passages with the *vairāja* melody, not the *rathantara*, which is more aptly followed by the noise of the "chariot" (*ratha*).

⁴⁶ Thompson has argued that the suffix *-kāra*, too, highlights the performativity of a mantra (see note 37 above). In any case, this narrative in particular, and the JB treatment of OM more broadly—where saying *om* makes something happen—may be fruitfully considered in light of the growing discourse on mantras as speech acts. See Witzel 1979; Thompson 1995b, 24-25, 35, 38; Wheelock 1989; Taber 1989. For a dissenting view, see Staal 1989a.

OM to introduce the main portion of each *stotra*, the gods sing OM to bring the songs into being. On the whole, the term *brahman* here seems to encompass both its meanings of "perfect formulation" and "the Absolute"—abiding in the waters, *brahman* generates one archetypal song after another in response to the Devas' utterance of OM.

§3.5 *Two drops*

The use of OM to generate the parts of the Sāmavedic liturgy is also found in a parallel JB story. In this version, an unnamed creator (likely Prajāpati) emits "two drops" (*dvau drapsau*; of rain? of semen?) at a time to create the pairs of months that make up the year (JB 3.362):

He spoke to those two drops: "May you be released!" "In what direction, papa?" "This way." Those two, by means of this sound (= *vāc*) *om*, were released. Falling in this direction, those two came to rest. After them the *rathantara* melody was released as rays of light.⁴⁷

The basic sequence of creation is parallel to the previous excerpt: by means of OM, the various *prṣṭhastotras* beginning with the *rathantara* come into existence. For my purposes, the main interest of this excerpt is a modification of the usual turn-of-phrase to denote OM. Instead of denoting OM as *akṣara* "syllable,"⁴⁸ this passage calls OM *vāc* "sound, voice." This diction conveys an even stronger sense of OM's sonality in this passage: *vāc* is the sound and voice not only of human speech but also of a range of natural and cosmic entities (see TS 6.1.4; PB 6.5.10-13). But the substitution of *vāc* for *akṣara* in this passage suggests to me something else at work under the surface. In an echo of JB 2.78-79, the composers of the JB bring OM into collocation again with the term *vāc*, just as they have done

⁴⁷ *tāv abravīt sṛjyethām iti / kām diśaṃ tateti/ imām iti /tāv om ity etayā vācāsrjata / tāv etasyām diśi patitvā pratyatiṣṭhatām / tau rathantaram bhā anvasṛjyata /*

⁴⁸ As above in 3.355: *om ity etenākṣareṇa*; cf. also *etad akṣaram* in 1.322.

repeatedly with *brahman* and *akṣara*. The variation and redundancy of this diction speak to their deliberate efforts to construct discursive OM as the paragon of Vedic sacred sound.

§3.6 *The perfect reckoning*

So far in our survey of the JB, we have seen multifarious attempts to construct OM in relation to teachings about Vedic sacred sound and ritual utterance, most notably by employing the terms *akṣara*, *brahman*, and *vāc*. I now turn to a passage that evokes earlier iterations of these doctrines even more directly. This excerpt demonstrates that the Jaiminīyas are aware of the *akṣara* doctrine of the Ṛgvedic Riddle Hymn; and that they consciously strive to integrate OM into their reception of these teachings. To bring out the intricacies of this difficult passage, let me first revisit the idea of using OM in the hermeneutic of syllable-counting.

The ancient teachings about *akṣara*, first attested in the ṚV Saṃhitā, hold that the unlimited creative potential of the goddess Voice (*vāc*) emanates from a single, imperishable Syllable (*akṣara*) flowing infinitely in the highest heaven. While beyond measure at its source, this primordial power can be measured when it finds expression in ritual speech: it becomes manifest as a series of discrete, irreducible "syllables" (*akṣara*) that may be parsed and counted (see van Buitenen 1959, 179; Brown 1968, 394). We have also seen how this insight into the segmentation of language leads to the construction of a meta-linguistic discourse whereby ritual elements—meters, mantras, poems, songs—are numerically correlated based on their syllable counts (Jamison 1986; Thompson 1995a, 5, 9). An overarching aim of this discourse in Vedic prose is to achieve a *sampád* ("numerical correlation, proper reckoning") between two elements.⁴⁹ The term *akṣara* has been central to the examples of numerical

⁴⁹ With reference to other passages, Bodewitz (1987, 211) translates *sampád* as "numeral equation or correlation;" Gonda translates as "numerical congruence" (1986a, 106); while Eggeling (1882, 143) prefers the less technical "consummation." On *sampád* in Vedic prose texts, see Bodewitz 2003, 242-253 with additional references.

correlations that we have considered, but only in the sense of the grammatical category "syllable"—so far, the cosmic sense of *akṣara* has not been evident in the hermeneutics of enumeration.

The importance of enumeration continues to grow in Jaiminīya speculations about OM. We now take up a passage where the grammatical and cosmic senses of *akṣara* finally overlap in the sound OM: in this story, OM serves as the countable "syllable" that fulfills the desired reckoning, but at the same time it is the only (*eva*) syllable that will do the job. The discussion centers on the *virāj*, a word that denotes fecundity of female creation, a forerunner of the *prakṛti* of later theological discourses. As the Brāhmaṇas often observe, "Virāj is food" (Bodewitz 1990, 233n2)—she sustains those who sacrifice properly. Virāj also lends her name to a ten syllable meter with several decimal correlates, including the number ten, its multiples, and the Sāmavedic liturgy in its entirety (made up of 190 *stomas*—also a multiple of ten).⁵⁰ The sense of a bounteous female potency encompassing the liturgy leads the tenfold Virāj to be apotheosized as the goddess Voice herself, even taking on her bovine mythology.⁵¹

In this passage, the sages discuss a set of ten verses, "this Virāj;"⁵² beyond the level of liturgy, they also refer to Virāj in the divine sense, as a flowing power that increases by tens. Worrying that Virāj is out of balance somehow,⁵³ the sages seek a solution in OM (JB 2.10):

⁵⁰ See Caland's note on PB 6.3.6 (Caland 1931, 102n1). As a multiple of one enumeration of totality in the liturgy (the 190 song-verses of the Sāmavedic repertoire), the ten-syllable *virāj* becomes correlated with the Soma sacrifice as a whole (cf. KauṣB 25.5).

⁵¹ The number ten is also called the "highest step of Voice" (*paramaṃ vācaḥ krāntam*, JB 1.235), "the light of the meters" and "the light of Voice" (*virāṭ chāndasām jyōtis / virāṭ vāc[āḥ]*, TS 7.1.1). See also Eggeling's note on ŚB 1.1.2.1 (1882, 11n1) and Weber 1868, 36n4. Further on the number ten, *virāj* and Sāmavedic numerical correlations, see Bodewitz 1987, 207-214 and 1990, 286n21. For her bovine qualities, see JB 1.236, where Virāj has breasts; and ŚB 1.5.2.20, where Virāj is referred to as cow and earth.

⁵² The verses, corresponding to Caland's JS 3.31.17-26, are based on ṚV 9.4.1-10.

⁵³ The risk of disturbing the perfect, decimal reckoning of Virāj is proverbial: "One should not sacrifice beyond the Virāj, so they say" (*virāṇ nātiyaṣṭavyety āhur*, JB 1.233, trans. Bodewitz). Using a *stoma* that is not a multiple of ten is a very serious business in the JB, leading to chariot accidents and starvation (see JB 1.233-234). Bodewitz (2003, 252) adduces another JB passage with diction quite close to the present one (JB 2.50: *mohayanti amūṃ*

Then they said: "This Virāj is unnatural—she should be helped somehow. She confounds the proper reckoning. Only this syllable *om* should be sung." For this syllable is indeed this whole world; just as leaves are perforated by a pin, so these worlds are perforated by this syllable. This syllable, having penetrated, makes Virāj flow indeed tenfold, a hundredfold, a thousandfold; therefore just this syllable *om* should be sung...⁵⁴

The remedy for the defective Virāj lies in the syllable OM; again, the sound serves to improve and perfect ritual performance. When OM is sung, Virāj becomes exponentially greater by tens: tenfold, a hundredfold, a thousandfold. OM is at once the *akṣara* that fulfills the *sampad* and the *akṣara* from which Virāj draws her power—grammar and cosmos come together in this sound. The exponential increase of Virāj "flowing...a thousandfold" echoes the diction of the Riddle Hymn—the *locus classicus* for the *akṣara* doctrine—where oceans "flow" (*kṣaranti*) from the bovine Vāc "with her thousand syllables" (*sahasrākṣarā*; see ṚV 1.164.41-42 and my ch. 5, §1.3). More explicitly than any other passage we have considered, this tale of Virāj integrates the syllable OM into the inherited doctrines of sacred sound.

§3.7 *The only and the all*

The sages' turn of phrase ("*only* this syllable *om* should be sung") highlights the innovative Jaiminīya reception of these ancient doctrines: these singer-theologians are identifying precisely OM—and no *other* syllable—as the preeminent *akṣara*. The adverbial particle *eva* carries a restrictive emphasis: "just, only, precisely" (*evā*) singing OM will achieve the proper reckoning and the multiplication of Virāj's power. This prefigures the Upaniṣadic stance, where OM in particular—from

vairājas sampadam; cf. also JB 3.303: *sampadam ha tu lobhayanti*). In the *Jaiminīya Śrauta Sūtra*, the option of singing an extra, thirteenth *stotra* is rejected because to do so would "confound the Virāj" (*virājaṃ lobhayati*; JŚS 1.8.6).

⁵⁴ *tad āhuḥ kṛtrimevaiṣā virāḍ upakāryeva / sampadam lobhayaty / om ity etad evākṣaram geyam ity / etad dha vā idam sarvam akṣaram / yathā sūcyā palāśāni samṭṛṇṇāni syur evam etenākṣareṇeme lokās samṭṛṇṇāḥ / daśadhā vā etad atividhyemāṃ kṣarati, śatadhemāṃ, sahasradhāmūṃ / tasmād etad evākṣaram geyam iti /*

among the thousands of other syllables that make up the Vedic corpus—is recognized as "the *only* syllable" (see KaṭhU 2.15; and my ch. 10, §4.2), the unitary embodiment of *brahman*. The next statement also encodes a theological reference to *brahman*: "for this syllable is indeed this whole world," *sarvam* being another name for the holism of this highest theological principle (Gonda 1955; Olivelle 1998, 493n; see also my ch. 7, §9.3). No ordinary syllable could inspire such a claim, which anticipates the famous Upaniṣadic dictum, "this whole world is OM."⁵⁵

§3.8 *The leaves and the pin*

Following this claim to cosmic holism comes a vivid comparison that likewise anticipates Upaniṣadic imagery and diction:

Just as leaves are perforated by a pin, so these worlds are perforated by this syllable.

The term *palāśa* ("leaf" in the neuter) also denotes tree of the same name, the *palāśa* (masculine; identified today as the *butea frondosa*, Monier-Williams 1899, s.v.), which is used in *śrauta* ritual for implements and other purposes (Minkowski 1989). This tree has a special resonance in the Sāmavedic context, for the Subrahmaṇya priest carries a branch of *palāśa* as a standard in the welcoming parade for King Soma; as he walks with the branch, he invokes Subrahmaṇyā, another name for the goddess Vāc, with a call that contains OM: *subrahmaṇyom!* (*Jaiminīya Śrauta Sūtra* 1.3.2). Moreover, *palāśa* is conventionally correlated with *brahman* in the Brāhmaṇas (e.g., ŚB 1.3.3.19; Eggeling 1882, 90n1). It is not clear whether the present simile refers directly to those liturgical and hermeneutic contexts—the passage may simply compare the perforation of a sheaf of leaves by a pin to the penetration of the three worlds by the syllable OM. We will return to this important simile in the chapters to come, for it

⁵⁵ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1.8: *om itīdaṃ sarvam*. It also closely prefigures ChU 2.23.3 (trans. Olivelle, with changes): "This whole world is only OM" (*omkāra evedaṃ sarvam*). See also *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 1, in which the whole work is styled as an "explanation" (*upavyākhyāna*) of a similar statement: *om ity etad akṣaram idaṃ sarvam*.

is attested later in two Upaniṣads of the SV, the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, a fact that previous scholars have not adequately explored. The JUB repeats the JB simile verbatim and strengthens the association with Vāc and the *akṣara* doctrine by adducing excerpts from the Riddle Hymn, while the diction and context changes somewhat in the ChU. The Upaniṣadic iterations of this simile have inspired multiple interpretations and it will be worthwhile to examine them side-by-side (JUB 1.10.3; ChU 2.23.3; see ch. 9, §6.2). What's more, the recycling of the simile in two different Upaniṣads implies a transmission of ideas first within the Jaiminīya branch, from the JB to the JUB, and then beyond it, from the JUB to the ChU.⁵⁶ Following the transmission of ideas in later texts will help us understand a phenomenon that is central to this study: the growth of the most celebrated discourses on OM from a single Sāmavedic branch into a broad ideology stretching across the Vedic corpus.

While the imagery may admit of multiple interpretations, OM's transcendence and penetration through the Vedas and Vedic cosmology are patently clear. On the whole, this passage strongly suggests that the earliest integration of OM into discourses on *vāc*, *akṣara*, and *brahman* can be traced to the Jaiminīya branch in the Brāhmaṇa period. The other JB excerpts already considered above support this claim: they likewise discuss OM in collocation with *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*. Therefore I argue that the first glimpse of OM as a sacred syllable—in the sense of serving as a unitary embodiment of the Vedic theology of sacred sound—can be located here in the JB.

§3.9 *Three Vedas, united in OM*

I now return to a key theme in the construction of discursive OM that we first met with in Aitareya reflections on the syllable, its tri-Vedic unity: the idea that this sound, because it is shared by

⁵⁶ On the formation and transmission of these texts, see Fujii 1997.

all three Vedas, thereby encompasses them—in short, that the disparate and complex Vedic liturgies coalesce in the sound OM. For the Aitareyins, *o3m* (with the three beats of *pluti*) was the culminating link in a chain of triads including the three Vedas. Prajāpati kept on taking the sap of each triad until only OM, the purest distillation of knowledge, remained. In the Jaiminīya formulation, OM is the "sap" (*rasa*) of the Vedas, the one syllable of the three Vedas that cannot be "pressed out," that is, further reduced. Such an irreducible essence evokes other ideas we have been discussing, notably the paradoxical *akṣara*, which is at once the irreducible unit of speech and the primordial source of its infinitude. We have also seen that numbers and numerical correlations play a key part in these reflections: whether one is reducing by division down to atomistic simplicity, or expanding by multiplication up to celestial infinity, OM is the unique syllable suited to every reckoning.

§3.10 *Counting up praises*

Continuing in this vein, we now delve further into the technicalities of Sāmavedic vocal performance, which inspire numerical hermeneutics that lead to renewed expressions of OM's tri-Vedic nature. Each "praise-song" (*stotra*, *stuti*) is composed of underlying Ṛgvedic verses sung to melodies. As the metrical verses are transformed into songs, they undergo a number of changes, including the repetition, extension, and interpolation of sounds (*stobha*). But beyond these text-internal modifications, external rearrangements are likewise important. Through the application of *stomas*, the verses are manipulated to yield a number of Sāmavedic song segments (*stotriyā*) suited to the exigencies of different songs: nine, fifteen, seventeen, twenty-one, etc.⁵⁷ The *stoma* of each *stotra* is equal to or greater than the one preceding, resulting in an ascending enumeration of "praise" (the literal meaning of *stoma*) over the course of the pressing-day. Together with other increases (in the

⁵⁷ See Eggeling 1882, 308n2, 310n1; Caland & Henry 1907, xii-xiii; Caland 1931, 18-19; Parpola 1969, 12; Howard 1977, 18-19.

Ṛgvedic *śāstras*, the length of meters), this contributes to an ascending liturgical structure, one that assists the participants as they move upward towards heaven. To illustrate the relevance of these practices and categories on the emergence of OM, let's turn now to another story from the JB (3.321-322).

§3.11 *Addition, division, and surplus*

The tale begins with Prajāpati alone. Desiring to reproduce himself,⁵⁸ he generates eighteen primordial syllables. This number right away demands an explanation, because it is one greater than the traditional correlation of Prajāpati with the number seventeen, which, as we saw above, derives from enumerating the seventeen total syllables of five key mantras.⁵⁹ The Jaiminīyas arrive at eighteen by adding the single syllable OM to Prajāpati's proverbial seventeen; this extra syllable becomes the focus of the story.

Prajāpati divides his eighteen primordial syllables into two sets of nine, which become two liturgical elements personified, the *Stoma* and the *Gāyatrī*. This *trivṛt stoma* (a masculine word) is the schema for singing the first *stotra* of the Soma sacrifice; it is "threefold" because it consists of three triplets of the *gāyatrī* (feminine), the meter in which the verses of the song are composed.⁶⁰ Both elements are therefore used simultaneously and in overlapping fashion. The *stoma* is correlated with

⁵⁸ On the "motif of Prajāpati's wish to become more" and his association with the number seventeen, see Gonda 1986a, 31 plus further references in index.

⁵⁹ See ch. 5, §2.5. The formulas, according to *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 1.4.11 and ŚB 1.5.2.16, are *o śrāvaya, astu śrauṣaṭ, yaja, ye yajāmahe*, and *vauṣaṭ*. An enumeration of the seventeen syllables and their relation to Prajāpati follows in paragraph 17 of the ŚB. The discussion of this numerical correlation in precisely the *seventeenth* paragraph may suggest a meta-correlation at the level of composition; or else it is a coincidence of redaction.

⁶⁰ The song in question is the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*, a song that has attracted intense discussion since the late Vedic period; see ch. 3, §2.4.

nine because this is the number of song segments (*stotrīyās*) it contains.⁶¹ As for the *gāyatrī*, which is an eight-syllable meter, "the *praṇava* was the ninth for her"⁶²—in other words, the addition of OM in the form of the *praṇava* furnishes her with nine total syllables. This resonates in broad liturgical terms, for the *praṇava* is *-om* added to an existing Ṛgvedic verse so as to substitute for the final syllable (see again ch. 3, §3.1).

§3.12 *Come together: sexual union, liturgical union*

The gender opposition of the pair of terms, as well as the fact of their overlapping in the same song, lends itself to a metaphor of sexual intercourse. And so the Stoma approaches the Gāyatrī: "Come on, let's have sex." The problem is that "the two being the same"—generated alike from nine primordial syllables—they are mismatched partners.⁶³ The solution proposed by the Stoma is for the Gāyatrī to adjust herself by pushing her extra ninth syllable out of the way. (Conveniently, this furnishes an etymology for the *praṇava*: "Precisely that one became the *praṇava*."⁶⁴) By removing this ninth syllable, she becomes eight again, and one less than her partner; as a heterogeneous pair, the two can mate productively.⁶⁵ For Vedic thinkers, homosexuality is problematic only insofar as it produces no offspring, and not for any other reason.

⁶¹ The nine *stotrīyās* are produced through the three repetitions of the "rounds" (*pāryāya*), each one consisting of a *gāyatrī* triplet. For more on the technicalities of the *stoma*, see Eggeling (1885, 308n2).

⁶² *praṇavas tasyai navama āsīt /*

⁶³ "This threefold Stoma said to the Gāyatrī: 'Come on, let's have sex.' But the two of the being the same, they could not have sex." *tām ayaṃ trivṛt stoma 'bravīd gāyatrīm, ehi sambhavāveti / tau samau santau nāśaknutām sambhavitum /*

⁶⁴ *sa eva praṇavo 'bhavat*

⁶⁵ That the male is one greater than the female in matters of procreation accords with PB 4.8.3, where the male has a "plus" (*atirikta*) and the female a "minus" (*ūna*). As Caland explains (1931, 61n2): "The male has a plus, the

Before the act is consummated, there is a brief excursus on a seemingly unrelated insight: that the identical sound *om* is used in four different liturgical contexts, namely *praṇava*, *pratigara*, *udgītha*, and *āśrāvaṇa*, by the priests of the ṚV, YV, SV and YV/ṚV, respectively. Picking up from the etiology of the *praṇava*, the the passage goes on to say (JB 3.321-322):

Precisely that one became the *praṇava*. // That same syllable is the *pratigara*, the *udgītha*, the *āśrāvaṇa*. Therefore he hums the *praṇava* as 'om', he responds with the *pratigara* 'om', he sings the *udgītha* with 'om', he calls for *śrauṣaṭ* with 'om'.⁶⁶

Though each has its own name and ritual application, these four recitational practices share a common sound: OM.⁶⁷ By revealing this shared feature, this passage emphasizes OM's sonic unity over its liturgical diversity, illustrating how the syllable transcends local, particularized contexts. As Hock has argued, this also makes explicit the rationale for the prominence of this syllable in particular, as opposed to the thousands of others in the Vedic corpus: OM is the *akṣara* shared by the three Vedas and their respective branches.⁶⁸ Perhaps more than any other idea, the construction of OM as the essence of the three Vedas will have a profound influence on the syllable's trajectory within the Upaniṣads and the discourses of Classical Hinduism.

As we saw in the last chapter, the idea of the three Vedas connected by the resemblance of certain recitational practices first appears in Yajurvedic texts. The TS held that the *udgītha*, *praṇava*

member, the female has a minus, the vulva; in accordance with this plus and minus, *i.e.* out of it are born young ones." See also PB 23.3.8, Caland 1931, 430nn2-3.

⁶⁶ ...sa eva praṇavo 'bhavat// 321 //sa pratigaras sa udgīthas tad āśrāvaṇam / tasmād om iti praṇauty om iti pratyāgrṇāty om ity udgāyaty om ity āśrāvayati ...

⁶⁷ All have attested variants besides OM; still, this passage takes OM to be the archetypal form of each. See ch. 3, §2.2, 3.1, 3.5, 3.6, and 4.1.

⁶⁸ See Hock 1991, 109: "...The syllable *om*, therefore, lends itself most readily as the ONE *akṣara* that embodies and is shared by the three Vedas—and that which transcends them. The fact that it can be analyzed into THREE component parts, *a*, *u*, and *m*, no doubt further supported this 'triune' character of *om*, as did perhaps the fact...that *om* frequently has TRImoric, pluta pronunciation."

and *pratigara* were "on the same level," presumably because all three use some form of OM (see ch. 5, §2.6). Interestingly, that Yajurvedic passage subsumed all three practices under the Sāmavedic term *udgītha*, while the present Sāmavedic passage organizes a similar grouping under the Ṛgvedic term *praṇava*. This hermeneutic of synthesis effaces the heterogeneity of liturgical praxis as well as the technical terminology that separates the three Vedas, affirming "the common bond that exists between different priests, their functions and performances in the ritual, and their respective branches of the Veda" (Hock 1991, 109). In this way, formerly parochial, exclusively technical terms take on a pan-Vedic currency. The discursive construction of *udgītha* and *praṇava* in particular continues into the Upaniṣads, where each one becomes virtually synonymous with OM in the transcendent sense of sacred syllable (see ch. 9, §5.1).

As it turns out, this excursus is not thematically unrelated to the larger narrative. Indeed, the liturgical union of recitational practices with OM fits nicely into the ongoing story of the sexual union of the Stoma and the Gāyatrī. Just as OM is the syllable whereby four diverse recitational practices coalesce, it likewise helps the two mismatched partners to come together. Her extra ninth syllable becomes individuated as its own entity—the *praṇava*. This transforms the nine-syllable Gāyatrī into eight once again, making her one less than her male companion. In this way, the partners—a plus and a minus—finally become compatible:

He spoke to her: "At last we are able to do this; since now we may procreate, come on, let's procreate!"⁶⁹

§3.13 *Summing up: the reflections of the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*

My consideration of these half-dozen passages from the JB shows that the Jaiminīyas do more in the Brāhmaṇa period than the thinkers of any other branch to discursively construct OM. For the

⁶⁹ *tām abravīd etarhi vai tasmā alaṃ svo yat prajānaye va ehi prajānaye veti /*

first time anywhere in the Vedic corpus, the Jaiminīyas explicitly integrate OM into inherited discourses on *vāc*, *akṣara*, and *brahman*. They do this by spinning a web of new correlations with OM at its center: OM is honey, sap, truth, sex—in short, "this whole world." It is "the only syllable," the one that fulfills every numerical reckoning. Similes are central to the Jaiminīya imaginary: like honey added to grains, the addition of OM to the melody improves the song; like a pin through leaves, OM penetrates the worlds. Also important is OM's sonality, the way its sound unifies diverse recitational practices, allowing the complex and elaborate Vedic liturgies to come together in a single syllable. In pursuit of this hermeneutic agenda of synthesis and holism, the Jaiminīyas have pushed OM's multiformity to the background: throughout these passages, OM is textualized consistently as *om*, never as any its variants (e.g., *o3*, *o3m̐*) that come about in ritual performance. In this way the Jaiminīyas significantly contribute to the construction of discursive OM, reifying it as a unitary sound that can now serve to organize an array of cosmological, theological, and soteriological themes. Most importantly of all, they have identified OM as "the only syllable," the single *akṣara* that embodies the doctrine of unlimited sonic creativity.

Throughout these passages, the imprint of the Sāmavedic liturgical specialization has been in evidence. The Jaiminīyas organize their reflections around topics from the Sāmavedic liturgy (*ādi*, *udgītha*, *subrahmaṇyā*) and they emphasize musical categories such as "melody" (*sāman*) and "praise-song" (*stotra*). Even their rhetoric strikes the ear as musical: OM sweetens and swells, pierces and penetrates, flows and encompasses all. Their musical orientation notwithstanding, the Jaiminīyas refrain from asserting Sāmavedic particularity—quite the opposite, for they develop a tri-Vedic discourse that regards OM as the essence of all the Vedas, the *akṣara* that unites the different liturgies, and a sonic embodiment of their transcendent sameness. In this way Sāmavedic hermeneutics promote OM as a focal point for a much broader trend, discernible in the Brāhmaṇa period but becoming much

more evident with the Upaniṣads: the construction of a pan-Vedic religious identity that crosses boundaries of family, branch, and region. And it is precisely this all-encompassing message around OM that has tended to obscure the contributions of specific thinkers and discourses over the years: the more successfully OM emerges as the sound of "this whole world," the less readily one can locate the individual efforts that went into constructing its holism.

§4 *Yajurvedic reflections on OM: the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*

To close this chapter, I want to consider the construction of discursive OM in the YV Brāhmaṇas. Unlike the ṚV and SV Brāhmaṇas, these texts have very few sustained discourses on OM. The near silence of the extant YV Brāhmaṇas on the topic suggests that the construction of discursive OM in the Brāhmaṇa period is overwhelmingly a Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic affair. Still, the scattered mentions we do find tend to confirm the conclusions we have already drawn about the construction of OM in the Brāhmaṇa period.

There is only one surviving YV Brāhmaṇa that discusses OM at any length: this is the Brāhmaṇa "of a hundred paths," the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* of the Vājasaneyi branch.⁷⁰ The composers of this text are notoriously prolix—discussing virtually every aspect of *śrauta* ritual at great length—and yet their discourses on OM total less than a paragraph. Certain details show the influence of the older Yajurvedic stratum on these Brāhmaṇa excerpts; while other details suggest an awareness of Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic liturgical as well as hermeneutic contexts.

⁷⁰ The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* attests the syllable only in a series of marriage mantras addressed to Prajāpati (2.4.6.7), where it seems to function as a particle of assent. On the fragmentary *Kāṭhaka Brāhmaṇa* of the Kāṭhaka branch, portions of which have been appropriated by the Taittirīyas, see ch. 7, §3.5.

§4.1 No sacrifice without melody

The ŚB dwells on OM in a discussion about the Ṛgvedic Hotṛ's recitation of the "kindling" verses (*sāmidhenī*), which he introduces by saying the mantra *hiṃ bhūr bhuvā svar o3m*. This mantra is known by the name of its very first term, *hiṃkāra* (also known as *abhihiṃkāra*; see ch 3, §4.4). The kindling verses are further modified by the substitution of the *praṇava* (*-o3m*) for the final syllables (Hillebrandt 1879, 76-79). Honing in on *hiṃ* and *o3m*, the composers of the ŚB reveal the arcane effects of employing these syllables in sacrifice (ŚB 1.4.1.1):

Uttering the *hiṃ* sound, he then recites. "There is no sacrifice," so they say, "without the *sāman*." Nor is the *sāman* to be sung without uttering the *hiṃ* sound. In that he says *hiṃ*, the essential nature of the *hiṃ* sound is produced; and just by means of the *praṇava*, the sacrifice assumes the essential nature of the *sāman*. With this call—"o3m! o3m!"—his whole sacrifice becomes permeated by the *sāman*.⁷¹

To unpack this compressed and complicated passage, it is necessary to recall a few liturgical facts beyond those already noted. For one thing, the singing of SV sets the Soma sacrifices apart from other non-*śrauta* liturgies, where Sāmaveda is not usually performed; hence, "there is no sacrifice...without the *sāman*." Next, among its many liturgical applications, the *hiṃkāra* (taking the short form *hiṃ*, *huṃ*, or *hm*) also introduces new rounds of the Sāmavedic *stotras* on the pressing-day, and thus no *sāman* is sung "without uttering the *hiṃ* sound." As I have emphasized time and again, OM is frequently heard in Sāmavedic performance, whether as the *ādi* to introduce the main part of the song or as a *stobha* in the song's lyrics. As Eggeling observed, "both syllables *hiṃ* and *om* are essential elements in the recitation of *sāman* hymns" (Eggeling 1882, 100n1; cf. Parpola 1981a, 202).

In concrete terms, the message of this passage is as follows: when the Hotṛ of the ṚV speaks his introductory mantra with *hiṃ* and *o3m*, and follows it with a recitation repeating the *praṇava* ("o3m!

⁷¹ *hiṃkṛtyānvāha /nāsāmā yajño 'stīti vā āhur na vā ahiṃkṛtya sāmā gīyate ma yaddhiṃkaroti taddhiṃkārasya rūpam kriyate praṇavenaiva sāmno rūpam upagachaty o3m o3m ity eteno hāsyaīṣa sarva eva sasāmā yajño bhavati*

o3m!"), the result will be a "sacrifice endowed with *sāman*" (*sasāma yajñah*). By interweaving Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic recitational practices in a single hermeneutic context, the ŚB assimilates the two different liturgies to one another on the basis of the syllables they share. This calls to mind the Jaiminīya passage considered above, which similarly invokes the Ṛgvedic *praṇava* in a Sāmavedic context. It also echoes the earlier Yajurvedic discourse of the Taittirīyas, which posited the essential identity of recitational practices belonging to different Vedas on the basis of a common element (presumably, but not explicitly, OM; see ch. 5, §2.6). The present passage emphasizes the special relation between OM and the Sāmavedic liturgy, as well as integrating OM and its technical terminology into an ongoing discourse about the underlying unity of the Vedas. (Such unity is further attested by the fact that this reflection on Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic recitation has been composed by Yajurvedic experts.) Another inherited discourse is also relevant: by emphasizing the far-reaching effects of the two liturgical syllables *hiṃ* and *o3m*, this passage echoes the *akṣara* doctrine as formulated in the Ṛgvedic Riddle Hymn, where the syllable *hiṃ* is singled out as an embodiment of the *akṣara*'s cosmic potential.

The diction and the hermeneutic strategy of this passage merit comment. The claim is that the utterance of one element simultaneously has an effect on its "essential nature" (*rūpam*) or that of its correlates. The utterance of *hiṃ* produces its own "essential nature," while the *praṇava* allows the sacrifice to take on the "essential nature" of its correlate, the *sāman*. The formula of using one element to "make" (*kr-*) and "approach" (*upa √gam-*) the "essential nature" (*rūpam*) of another recalls that of the ŚB's parent text, the VS, which likewise discusses the *praṇava*: "by means of the *praṇavas* the essential nature of the *śāstras* is fulfilled..."⁷² This attests to continuity, in the Vājasaneyi branch, of diction and hermeneutics in the discursive construction of OM and its associated terminology.

⁷² ...*praṇavaiḥ śāstrāṇāṃ rūpaṃ...[āpyate]*; VS 19.25; see ch. 5, §2.7.

§4.2 OM alone

Another excerpt from the same text concerns the Yajurvedic liturgy more directly. Here the topic is the *pratigara*, the Adhvaryu's "response" to the Hotṛ's recitation. This mantra has a number of variants according to branch and precise context, including *madā modaiva* and *othā modaiva vāk* (see ch. 3, §3.5). The Vājasaneyins prefer the responses ending in *-om*, e.g. *othā modaivom* in the course of the Hotṛ's *śastra*, and *om* by itself at the end of the recitation (Eggeling 1885, 331n1; ŚB 4.3.2.13):

And then some respond with *othā modaiva vāk*. "The *pratigara* is *vāc*," they say, "and this way we obtain voice." But he should not do it like that. However he responds, voice is obtained by him anyway—for he utters the *pratigara* with his voice! And so he should respond only with *om*. That is truth, as the gods know.⁷³

This particular example is telling, for the choice is between *vāc* and *om*, two terms that are at the center of the historical currents we are exploring. The Vājasaneyins rationalize their branch's preference for *om* alone by stating that it is divine truth (*satya*).

This passage has several points of interest. First, we have seen above that the use of the restrictive particle *eva* seems to point to the individuation, among the Jaiminīyas, of OM as the exclusive realization of the primordial *akṣara* that flows from the goddess Voice (*vāc*). Remarkably, the Vājasaneyins refrain from using the term *akṣara*, an omission that only increases the significance of the Jaiminīya formulation. However, the Yajurvedic theologians *do* employ *eva* (e.g., *om ity eva*), a usage that can be read on several levels. In liturgical terms, it refers to Vājasaneyi praxis, which prefers responses that end in *-om* or consist of *om* by itself. In hermeneutic terms, it concurs with the view—as espoused by the Jaiminīyas—that OM has a unique status as the preeminent sound in the realm of ritual

⁷³ *taddhaikē / othāmodaiva vāg iti pratigrṇanti vāk pratigara etad vācam upāpnuma iti vadantas tad u tathā na kuryād yathā vai kathā ca pratigrṇāty upāptaivāsya vāg bhavati vācā hi pratigrṇāti tasmād om ity eva pratigrṇīyāt taddhi satyam taddevā viduḥ /*

speech (*vāc*). This latter claim is implicit not only in the use of *eva* but also in the passage's insistence that while every response grants access to *vāc*, "only" OM is the truth of the gods.

Next, adding to the Jaiminīya parallels, we have already encountered the correlation between OM and truth (*satyam*) in the JB above: "OM is indeed truth" (see §3.3 above).⁷⁴ The present passage presents this as a secret known to the gods. Similarly, in the Jaiminīya excerpt, the gods rely on OM's truth for success: "having sung with this truth called '*om*,'...the Devas struck at evil—their rivals, the Asuras." There are also echoes here of the Aitareya passages where OM is associated with a divine, as opposed to human speech; and of AB 5.32, which textualizes the *praṇava* as OM. With these parallels, the ŚB justifies its own predilection for the *pratigara* with OM and also participates in a wider effort, carried out across branches, to integrate OM into hermeneutic reflections on *vāc*.

§4.3 *Summing up: the reflections of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*

These two excerpts are the sum total of the ŚB contributions to the construction of discursive OM. The first brought together divergent Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic recitational practices based on the shared use of the syllables *hiṃ* and *o3m*, then used this affinity to explain how a recitation by the Ṛgvedic Hotṛ could result in endowing the sacrifice with the *sāman* of the SV. By using OM as a way to talk about bridging the gaps between the different liturgies, this passage implicates OM into the burgeoning discourse on tri-Vedic unity; by associating OM most strongly with the SV, the composers of the ŚB seem to acknowledge the intense activities of the Jaiminīyas in this realm. The second passage promoted the Vājasaneyi preference for using OM in the Adhvaryu's response, justifying this teaching with the correlation, known also to the gods, between OM and truth. The debate over the substitution of OM for *vāc* in certain mantras is not only a recitational detail, but perhaps also a gesture towards the

⁷⁴ See also similar correlations in JUB 1.10.2, 11; KaṭhĀ 2.2; and TĀ 2.3.6, 10.27.1, 10.29.1.

interpretive agenda of correlating OM with *vāc*. In terms of diction and content, the ŚB recalls discussions from a range of texts and strata, from its own Vājasaneyi branch to the Taittirīya, Jaiminīya, and Aitareya.

§5 *The construction of discursive OM in the Brāhmaṇas*

Having considered reflections on OM in the Brāhmaṇas of the ṚV, SV, and YV, I now offer some conclusions. The construction of discursive OM begins in the Aitareya branch of the ṚV and takes on a much more definite shape in the Jaiminīya branch of the SV. It is in the Sāmavedic JB that we find OM consistently presented as the preeminent syllable, the essence of the three Vedas, and a sonic realization of "this whole," or *brahman*. The Vājasaneyi branch also participates in the construction of discursive OM, both by updating inherited YV discourses and by affirming the newer reflections of the Jaiminīyas in particular. Many of the passages bear the imprint of the liturgical specialty of their composers: the Ṛgvedic discourses emphasize their own liturgy (*hautram*) along with phonetics, metrics, poetics, and lexical analysis; while the Sāmavedic discourses emphasize their liturgy (*audgātram*) along with melody, songs, and non-lexical analysis (including frequent recourse to figurative language). The Yajurvedic discourses—though brief—also testify to the influence of liturgical specialization: in positive terms, by talking about OM in terms of the Yajurvedic liturgy (*ādhvaryavam*), and negatively, by acknowledging the prominence of OM in Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic traditions, a prominence lacking on the Yajurvedic side.

To conclude this chapter, we may say that, to varying degrees, *all three Vedas contribute to the construction of discursive OM*. This meshes well with one of the key themes of this emerging discourse, namely that OM is the essence of the three Vedas; it seems fitting that all three Vedas should participate to some extent in promoting OM as a sound that transcends their liturgical specializations

and differences. Although conscious of the multiformity of OM in the liturgies, the composers of the Brāhmaṇas aim to reveal its underlying unity. Collectively, they inaugurate the construction of OM as a single, transcendent entity, thereby establishing its preeminence for centuries to come.

At the same time, however, we notice that the singer-theologians of the Jaiminīya SV devoted much more space to the discursive construction of OM than did the experts of the other Vedas. As we will see in the next chapters, the Jaiminīya passion for OM only grows as they develop these discourses in new textual genres and strata. Uncovering the substantial musical contribution to OM's emergence prompts me to wonder: *why* did the singers of Jaiminīya SV take such an interest in OM? Again I look for the answer in what I have been calling their Sāmavedic sensibility: the nature of the Sāmavedic corpus, which is composed in large part of non-lexical syllables; and the manner of its performance, which involves the group vocalization of these syllables into a seamless flow, predisposed its specialists to the idea that one great syllable might transcend all language; and that *brahman* itself might be embodied in such a form.

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTO THE WILDERNESS: OM IN THE ĀRAṆYAKAS

The next four chapters consider the ongoing construction of discursive OM in the remaining strata of Vedic interpretive texts, the *āraṇyakas* and *upaniṣads*. This is a great mass of material that will take us well into the late Vedic period and serve as a bridge from Brahmanism to the discourses of Classical Hinduism. These middle to late Vedic genres integrate the Brāhmaṇa reflections on OM into new hermeneutic contexts, notably the interpretation of certain dangerous and arcane rites within the Soma paradigm. They also explore the soteriological dimensions of using OM in ritual performance. The doctrines of sacred sound, as significant as ever to the construction of OM, are presented in an increasingly metaphysical framework. This is exemplified by the steady transformation of *brahman* during this period into a term that refers more and more often to absolute reality, and less and less to ritual utterance *per se*. On the whole, the trajectory of OM as sketched over the remainder of this study corresponds to broader shifts in Vedic theology and discourse, especially the transition from ritual action (*karma*) to salvific knowledge (*jñāna*). That said, this transition never surfaces as a stark discontinuity within the corpus—there is no outright break with ritual and its elements. As we continue to survey the reflections on OM across strata, we will find a transition so sustained and continuous as to be at times imperceptible. As always in the Vedas, ritual retains its primacy as *the* organizing principle.

In this chapter, I focus mostly on works known as *āraṇyakas*, "wilderness texts." I begin by discussing the construction of discursive OM in the Āraṇyakas of the Ṛgveda and Yajurveda. While brief, these excerpts show how the Āraṇyakas develop discourses on OM by combining tradition—material from the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas—with their own innovations. The impact of liturgical specialization on the shape of these discourses remains strong, especially on the Ṛgvedic side. Next, I

move to the main task of this chapter, which is to show how the Jaiminīyas continue their strong interest in OM. They present new material in a seminal but neglected text that has been called "the earliest Upaniṣad" (see below §4.2). The extensive Jaiminīya reflections on OM in this phase demonstrate once again the familiar pattern of synthesis and integration: they synthesize discourses from earlier strata and then integrate these with an innovative soteriological doctrine about ascending to the sun to win immortality. The Sāmavedic sensibility of the Jaiminīyas is even more clearly expressed in this period, as they discuss the sound, melody, and music of OM with reference to one type of singing in particular, "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*).

§1 *An esoteric turn in Vedic discourse*

As a prelude to taking up these later texts of the Vedic corpus, we must revisit the concepts of stratum and genre. As I noted in my introduction, the stratification of the texts is much more complex than the received division into Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads would suggest. A text's title must always be critically examined, and its claims to a given genre must be checked against what is known about the formation and transmission of that text within its own branch. In the case of those texts commonly known as Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads, the evidence suggests that they were often composed as elaborations of a branch's existing Brāhmaṇa. As such, they exhibit affinities with the Brāhmaṇa stratum in subject matter, liturgical focus, and hermeneutic approach. In many cases, the new strata were incorporated within the existing ones and transmitted as a single, massive composite repertoire of interpretation. Though details may vary and exceptions are the rule, the overall trend is continuity from one stratum to another (Keith 1925, 492; Witzel 1997a).

While it is not always easy to draw a line separating a Brāhmaṇa from an Āraṇyaka from an Upaniṣad, nevertheless there are differences in style and content that contribute to the sense of

independent genres arising from these stratified compilations. The Brāhmanas proper, devoted to a comprehensive exploration of the meanings of entire liturgies, give way to an esoteric turn in Vedic discourse, focused on certain rites of arcane character and the discovery of soteriological knowledge. These teachings were deemed too secret and dangerous to be expounded anywhere but in the "wilderness" (*araṇya*), hence the name given to some of them, *āraṇyaka* (Witzel 1972; 2004, xxviii-xxx). In keeping with the Brāhmana hermeneutic of *bandhu*, such texts continue to posit correlations between human, ritual, and cosmic entities; indeed, *upaniṣad* is a technical term for the hidden "connections" (Olivelle 1998, 24; Renou 1946, 55-60) that undergird reality.¹ Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads have much in common, often overlapping or coming together as hybrid works appended to the larger Brāhmana. Renou's remarks on these genres are useful as a point of departure. He defines the Āraṇyaka loosely as an extension of the Brāhmana in an esoteric direction, and the Upaniṣad more precisely as an agonistic dialogue on the topic of *brahman* (*brahmodya*) (Renou 1953, 139-141). As such, the Upaniṣad proper with its signature structure is often "grafted" onto the Āraṇyaka or the Brāhmana; indeed, Renou's opinion is that the two best known early Upaniṣads contain opening sections better identified with these other genres. Broadly, I see the Āraṇyaka as differing from the Brāhmana in its sustained focus on a *particular* rite, usually arcane (e.g. *mahāvratā*, *pravargya*), while the Upaniṣad distinguishes itself by its intense focus on personal soteriology and other meta-ritual concerns. Still, the cautionary remarks of Gonda and Keith, warning of the heterogeneity of the Āraṇyakas and the lack of an absolute distinction between them and other genres, must be kept in mind (Gonda 1975, 424-426; Keith 1925, 492).

In this chapter we focus on several texts that go by the name *āraṇyaka* and one that goes by the unfamiliar appellation *upaniṣad-brāhmana*. Names aside, these texts come to us embedded within the

¹ For further discussion and literature, see Cohen 2008, 3.

traditions of their respective Vedic branches, and this is the criterion most useful for grouping them together as representative of a certain phase of religious thought. All key discourses on OM in this phase concern interpretations of rituals regarded as secret and dangerous; several of the most significant also touch on *brahman* and issues of personal soteriology. The differences between them do not arise from obvious differences in genre or stratum, but from the continuing influence of their respective liturgical specializations. Let's now take up the contributions of this "esoteric turn" to the history of OM.

§2 *The wilds of Ṛgvedic tradition: the Aitareya Āraṇyaka*

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Aitareyins in their Brāhmaṇa show a distinctly Ṛgvedic approach to OM, one oriented towards phonetics, metrics, lexical analysis, and a doctrine of primordial speech and sound. As we turn to the next stratum of text in the Aitareya branch, we will see that this hermeneutic program still holds to a large extent, but with a significantly different outcome. The *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, building on the precedent of the AB, moves the discussion past OM, proposing instead the syllable 'a' as the apotheosis of speech, as *brahman*. In this way, we can trace how the application of correlative thinking across strata within a single branch delivers an outcome that is quite unexpected and unlike the one we will follow in the Jaiminīya branch. This shows that in the Āraṇyakas and similar late Vedic texts, the preeminence of OM is not unchallenged —there is substantial competition for the title of sacred syllable.

The *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* treats the Ṛgvedic liturgy of the *mahāvratā*, a Vedic ritual of the Winter Solstice, which has become notorious for its antinomian features, from wrestling to profanity to sexual intercourse (Rolland 1973; Wilke & Moebus 2011, 397). The Āraṇyaka attests OM several times. Where the syllable appears in mantras, its form and praxis agree with those given in the AB. Thus, Ṛgvedic

verses are given with praṇava (-o3m) already embedded (AĀ 5.1.6, on ṚV 8.69.2): ...*nadaṃ yoyuvatīno3m*; and OM is mentioned in passing as part of the Adhvaryu's *pratigara* (*om ukthasā*, AĀ 5.3.2). Carrying forward the AB's concerns with phonetic precision, these instances serve to exemplify normative recitation practices among the Aitareyins. Only two passages in the AĀ take up OM in hermeneutic discourse; in both cases the syllable appears in relation to the particle *na*. In this regard, the Āraṇyaka shows the influence of its parent Brāhmaṇa passages on OM and *na*, although the AĀ discusses *na* only as a particle of negation (rather than comparison, as in the AB; see ch. 6, §2.5).

§2.1 Yes and no: the path of moderation

All the OM examples in the AĀ occur within an extended analysis of the Hotṛ's "great recitation" (*mahaduktha*), composed of one thousand stanzas. According to the text, this massive recitation is the apex of speech, made up of five elements: the measured, the unmeasured, music, the true, and the untrue. This leads to a taxonomy of utterance based on these five categories (AĀ 2.3.6):

A *ṛc*, a *gāthā*, and a *kumbyā*—these are the measured. A *yajus*, a *nigada*, and casual talk—these are the unmeasured. Now a *sāman* and any kind of singing is musical sound. *O3m* is the true, *na* is the untrue. The man who speaks the truth, the flower and the fruit of voice, can become glorious and have a splendid reputation...²

The specific forms of utterance mentioned here are mostly technical terms of ritual.³ By exploring the opposition of *o3m* and *na*, the composers of the Āraṇyaka betray a debt to their Brāhmaṇa, which also discusses the relation of these two terms. The main categories are mostly predicated on opposition:

² *ṛg gāthā kumbyā tan mitaṃ yajur nigado vṛthāvāktad amitaṃ sāmātho yo kaś ca geṣṇuḥ saḥ svava o3m iti satyaṃ nety anṛtam / ...sa heśvaro yaśasvī kalyāṇakirtir bhavitoḥ puṣpaṃ hi phalaṃ vācaḥ satyaṃ vadati /*

³ *Ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus* need no introduction, while the *gāthā* is a form of popular verse (cf. Horsch 1958; and my ch. 3, §3.6). Following Sāyaṇa, Eggeling defines *kumbyā* as a "verse...conveying some precept of conduct" (Eggeling 1900, 101n1). *Nigada*, often translated as "litany" or "invocation," is a non-metrical formula such as the one that follows the *subrahmanyā* call (see ch. 3, §2.9).

first, between metrical ("measured," *mītam*) and non-metrical ("unmeasured," *amītam*) types of speech; then the musical, without an opposed term; followed by the opposition of the true (*satyam*) and the untrue (*anṛtam*), a familiar dichotomy found throughout the Brāhmaṇas, with the Devas arrayed on the side of truth and the Asuras against them (see Lévi 1898; and my ch. 6, §3.2).

The lesson at first appears to be that a man must always speak the truth and avoid untruth, which would favor the utterance of OM over *na*. However, hard on this teaching comes a warning against always speaking the truth embodied in the syllable OM. In this formulation, *om* and *na* alike are dangerous extremes (AĀ 2.3.6):

This syllable *o3m* is directed outwards and is empty. If a man says *om*, right then the thing is taken from him. So if he should say *om* to everything, he would empty himself and experience no pleasures. On the other hand, this syllable *na* is full and directed towards oneself. So if a man should say *na* to everything, he gets a dismal reputation and destroys himself there on the spot.⁴

By pairing *om* and *na*, this passage clearly understands *om* as an affirmative particle. As a syllable of assent, OM is "empty" because it betokens indiscriminate generosity, which in turn leads to poverty. A man should not go around constantly agreeing to everything, lest he lose all he has. On the other hand, habitual denial with the syllable *na* leads to a bad reputation and destruction. The way forward lies in moderation:

Therefore he should give just at the proper time, and at other times he should not give. This way he unites the true and the untrue. From their union he thrives and increases.⁵

By charting the middle path, resorting equally to *om* and *na*, truth and untruth, a man finds prosperity.

⁴ *parāg vā etad riktam akṣaram yad etad o3m iti tad yat kiñcom ity āhātrevāsmāi tad ricyate sa yat sarvam om kuryād riñcyād ātmānaṃ sa kāmebhyo nālaṃ syāt /athaitat pūrṇam abhyātmam yan neti / sa yat sarvaṃ neti brūyāt pāpikāsyā kirtir jayeta saināṃ tatraiva hanyāt /*

⁵ *tasmāt kāla eva dadyāt kāle na dadyāt tat satyānṛte mithunīkaroti tayor mithunāt prajāyate bhūyān bhavati*

§2.2 Measuring the path to heaven

The next example reiterates this teaching in soteriological terms. *Om* and *na* appear again in a *yajñagāthā*, one of a series of traditional enigmatic verses on metaphysical doctrines (*ātman*, *brahman*, *prāṇa*) which immediately precede the Upaniṣad section of the Āraṇyaka (AĀ 2.3.8):

In speech, what is *om* and what is *na*; and what is savage and what is bizarre—keeping free from these, the sages found their way. Depending on names, they delighted in what they heard (*śruti*).
Indeed, they delighted in what they heard—for it is there, completely united, the gods abide. Warding off evil through the perfect formulation (*brahman*), the man-in-the-know approaches the heavenly world.⁶

The verse tells how the poets, in their quest for deeper insights, set aside *om* ("yes") and *na* ("no") and another pair of extremes ("savage" and "bizarre"). This path between extremes leads them to discover "that which is heard" (*śruti*). These auditory revelations are the Vedic corpus itself, conceived here as a literal place where the gods reside. This is a soteriological teaching: resorting to the revelations of *śruti*—those "perfect formulations" (*brahman*) discovered by primeval poets—and charting a path between the polarity of yes and no, the "man-in-the-know" (*vidvān*) rises to heaven. We will see below that the singing of OM plays an important role in Sāmavedic soteriological doctrines; by contrast, in this Ṛgvedic formulation, the utterance of OM is a positive extreme that must be balanced by its negative. In keeping with the "measured" (*mītam*, i.e. metrical) form of the Ṛgvedic corpus, the AĀ teaches a measured approach.

⁶ *yad vāca om iti yac ca neti / yac cāsyāḥ krūraṃ yadu colbaṇiṣṇu / tad viyūyā kavayo anvavindan / nāmāyattā samatṛpyaṅchrute 'dhi //3//*
yasmin nāmā samatṛpyaṅ crute 'dhi / tatra devāḥ sarvayujo bhavanti / tena pāpmānam apahatya brahmaṇā / svargaṃ lokam apyeti vidvān //4//

§2.3 The whole of speech: going beyond A + U + M

Broadly, the Aitareya discussion of OM revolves around the manifestations of speech (*vāc*) and its esoteric meanings. (In keeping with the Ṛgvedic tendency towards lexical, metrical, and phonological analysis, I mostly translate the polyvalent *vāc* in this section as "speech" rather than "voice.") Composed of one thousand verses and many more thousands of individual syllables, the "great recitation" (*mahaduktha*) furnishes more than enough grist for the interpretive mill of the Aitareyins. However, their analysis of specific parts of the *mahaduktha* is balanced by hermeneutic attention to the undifferentiated "whole of speech" (*sarvā vāc*) which underlies the recitation. Evoking the ancient doctrine of *vāc*, the composers of the Āraṇyaka conceive the *mahaduktha* as a "modification" (*vikāra*) of this totality: "He who knows that speech (*vāc*) of which the *mahaduktha* is a modification—such a man is clever" (AĀ 2.3.6).⁷ What is the holistic, essential *vāc* that underlies the multiformity of this gargantuan recitation? In their Brāhmaṇa speculations on the sonic essence of all utterance, the Aitareyins arrived at OM by way of its constituent phonemes; in the same vein, the Jaiminīyas sought to give the great *akṣara* a definite form by connecting it to OM. Now in their Āraṇyaka, the Aitareyins propose a particular sound to encompass the totality of *vāc*, but it is *not* OM (AĀ 2.3.6):

The whole of speech is the sound *a*. Manifesting itself through the stops and sibilants, this (*vāc*) becomes abundant and multifarious. In a whisper, it is breath; out loud, it is body. Therefore that is hidden, so to speak—for the bodiless is hidden, and breath is bodiless. But aloud it is body, thus perceptible—for the body is perceptible.⁸

This takes the phonetic insights of the AB—that OM can be divided into three constituent phonemes, *a*, *u*, and *m*—and pushes them further. In keeping with the thrust of the present discussion, wherein *om* is

⁷ *yo vai tāṃ vācaṃ veda yasyā eṣa vikāraḥ sa sampratitit /*

⁸ *akāro vai sarvā vāk saiṣā sparśoṣmabhir vyajyamānā bahvī nānārūpā bhavati / tasyai yad upāṃśu sa prāṇo 'tha yad uccais tac charīraṃ tasmāt tat tira iva tira iva hy aśarīram aśarīro hi prāṇo 'tha yad uccais tac charīraṃ tasmāt tad āvīr āvīr hi śarīram //6//*

an extreme to be avoided, the composers of the Āraṇyaka drop the latter two phonemes (*u, m*) in favor of the single phoneme *a*. In this innovative formulation it is "the sound *a*" (*akāra*) alone that is "the whole of speech" (*sarva vāc*).

This passage thus promotes the sound *a* as the functional equivalent of the primordial Syllable, the germ from which all forms of *vāc* sprout. Through the addition of other phonemes (e.g., "the mutes and sibilants") this primordial sound becomes multiform. The AĀ has upped the ante of the AB: it has proposed an essence of speech beyond even OM, simply *a*. In Vedic phonology *a* is an elemental vocalization through the opened mouth, lacking any tongue movement or stop whatsoever. As a whisper, it is not far removed from breath (*prāṇa*), as the passage observes; spoken aloud, it is "perceptible" by its "body" (*āvis, śarīram*). Lacking the body, it is "hidden" and "incorporeal" (*tiras, aśarīram*). The twin concepts of embodied and bodiless sound will be integral to Sāmavedic hermeneutics about OM, as we will see below (ch. 8, §4.1). The present context deploys these concepts to a very different end, not to elevate OM but to dismantle it.

§2.4 OM's rival: exalting the syllable A

Completely displacing OM as a hermeneutic ideal, the AĀ advances another candidate as the sonic essence of the Veda. This sound *a* has many characteristics that we will come to associate with OM in the same capacity: it is the "whole of speech" (*sarvā vāc*); it embodies the unity of the Vedic corpus where gods reside; knowledge of it leads to heaven. More than that: the sound *a* also names that which is beyond naming and individuation, the transcendental holistic principle of *brahman* (AĀ 2.3.8): "*Brahman* is '*a*' and '*aham*' is contained therein."⁹ With this flourish, the sound *a* is exalted as the sacred syllable of the Aitareyins: by saying *a*, one names the unnameable, the holism wherein ego is

⁹ *a iti brahma tatrāgatam aham iti*

encapsulated.¹⁰ (This is not only a matter of theology but also of phonetics and morphology—the word *aham* literally nestles inside the word *brahman*.) Wilke & Moebus (2011, 398-399), following a variant reading (*aḥ iti*; cf. Keith 1909, 117n4), have interpreted this statement as referring to *aḥ*, that is, the *a* sound with aspiration (*visarga*). Extending the hermeneutics already noted above, they argue that *aḥ* is *a* with breath—incorporeal, hidden—and hence the supreme sound. Given the explicit mention of *akāra* earlier in the passage and the precedent of the AB, I am inclined to read this simply as *a* without aspiration. Be that as it may, the point still stands: following the arc of Aitareya hermeneutics, we witness the birth of a new sacred syllable, rival to OM.

§2.5 *Summing up: the dead letter OM*

As these Āraṇyaka speculations give way to the Aitareya Upaniṣad—which begins in the very next section—OM becomes a dead letter, so to speak. This is not because the Aitareyins lost interest in the basic discourses associated with OM in their Brāhmaṇa: in the spirit of the AB, the AĀ remains absorbed in phonology, metrics, lexical analysis, and the doctrine of *vāc* embodied in a single, primordial syllable. But in their Āraṇyaka, the Aitareyins push these speculations to the limit, especially in the realm of phonology. The composers of the Brāhmaṇa had discovered that the syllable OM could be further divided in to three constituent phonemes, an analysis that to some extent undermined the hermeneutic claim that OM was the final essence of the Vedas and the cosmos. Indeed, how could it remain the primordial, irreducible syllable when it could be further divided? The composers of the AĀ heard this inconsistency as an opportunity to innovate and to promote another sound in OM's place. Devising an argument based on the lexical interpretation of OM and the danger of always saying "yes," they rationalized its displacement by another syllable, the "sound *a*" (*akāra*). On

¹⁰ *Sarvā vāc* is also known to the Jaiminīyas as one of *brahman*'s names; see below §9.3.

the cusp of composing their Upaniṣad, they did OM one better. Picking up the hermeneutic thread from the Brāhmaṇa and running with it in the Āraṇyaka, they pushed OM right out of the discussion.

§3 *The wilds of Yajurvedic tradition*

Let's turn now to the wilds of Yajurvedic tradition, where we find reflections on OM in the Āraṇyakas of the Kāṭhaka and the Taittirīya branches. Theologians in both branches offer brief but significant reflections on OM from a Yajurvedic perspective. Given that neither the Kāṭhakas nor the Taittirīyas evinced a strong interest in the syllable in the Brāhmaṇa period, this renewed engagement with OM's liturgical and discursive contexts may speak to a broader awakening of interest across the branches of the Black YV.

§3.1 *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*

The Kāṭhakas do not mention OM in their Saṃhitā, which is among the oldest YV Saṃhitās; however, their fragmentary *Kaṭha Brāhmaṇa* contributes at least one important discourse on OM, which was appropriated by the Taittirīyas and which I will examine below. Several attestations of liturgical OM and reflections on the syllable also occur in the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*. The Kaṭhā deals with the *pravargya*, the rite of the hot-milk offering, which is to be performed several times within the larger framework of the Soma sacrifice. Tradition regards the *pravargya* as a species of esoteric initiation as well as among the most dangerous rites in the *śrauta* system of ritual (Witzel 2004, xxix-xxx).

§3.2 *The truth of voice*

The most significant Kaṭhā passages about OM concern the *vyāhṛti* mantra in its expanded form: *bhūr bhuvā svar om̐* (see ch. 3, §4.3). The first of these gives the mantra, followed by a brief hermeneutic statement (KĀ II.2, 56):

He says: "*bhūr bhuvā svar, om̐*." This is the truth of voice. Since it is the truth of voice, together with that he performs the sacrifice.¹¹

This excerpt discusses the *vyāhṛti* mantra with OM as it is used in the *prasava*, where it is part of a longer formula ending with the command to "perform!" (*pracarata*). By means of this "truth of voice" (*vācas satyam*) the priest performs the sacrifice. By virtue of its being used in this mantra that impels many ritual actions, OM adds truth-value to the sacrifice as a whole. We saw in the previous chapter that a similar correlation between OM and truth occurs in both Jaiminīya and Vājasaneyi texts (ch. 6, §3.2, 4.2).

§3.3 *Unexpressed praise of the sun*

Another passage from the Kaṭhā also discusses the *vyāhṛti* mantra and OM, but in quite a different permutation. The context is the Adhvaryu's *sāman*, where OM along with other *stobhas* is woven into lyrics based on the *vyāhṛti* mantra. Although this section of the Kaṭhā is fragmentary, it seems clear that the passage glosses, piece-by-piece, an "unexpressed" (*anirukta*) rendering of the text associated with this melody. The first terms in this underlying text are *bhūr bhuvā svar*. Succeeding these are others: *bhuvo nṛmṇo nidhis svar jyotis*, "atmosphere, manhood, treasure, heaven, light." When sung by the Adhvaryu, these words are modified; through the interpolation of non-lexical vocables, they become the lyrics of "unexpressed praise-songs" (*aniruktas stutayas*), a mode of singing

¹¹ *bhūr bhúvas svàr; óm ity. etád vái vācás satyám. yád evá vācás satyán, ténainam̐ sahá prácarati...*

that we have discussed in detail (see ch. 3, §2.3). This excerpt describes the effects and purpose of the resulting lyrics, which contain a reflex of liturgical OM in the *stobha* pairing *o vā*. (KĀ III, 230-231):

"He is set down, *o vā*, he is set down, *o vā*." He sings with a melody. By means of that he establishes himself in treasure. He sings: "*E*, the light is heaven." The light is indeed that sun up there. By means of that he makes the sun prosper...These are the unexpressed songs in praise of that sun. By means of these songs, he praises that sun.¹²

Playing on the etymological connection between "set down" (*ni vdhā*) and "treasure, hoard" (*nidhi*), the Kāṭhakas here teach that by singing the first part (*nidhāyy ovā*), he makes himself wealthy. More significant is the next part, which identifies the quoted lyrics as "unexpressed songs" in praise of the sun. As noted in my earlier discussion (ch. 2, §3.5), this identification is significant because of what it tells us about OM in the early Vedic period: it suggests that one of the earliest attestations of liturgical OM in the YV, a parallel lyric in the MS, may also be unexpressed song. But it is even more significant for what it tells us about the late Vedic period, for this coalescence of OM, "unexpressed" singing, and solar worship in Kāṭhaka hermeneutics parallels Jaiminīya developments, where the same elements coalesce and become the topic of sustained reflection (see next chapter).

§3.4 Heavenly bodies

In his study of the *pravargya* rite on the basis of the Kāṭhā, Witzel has observed that one of the chief aims of the rite is soteriological, namely the Yajamāna's ascension to heaven and the provision of a new, heavenly body (2004, xxviii, lxiv). To get there, the Yajamāna must follow a solar pathway: "The heavenly world was believed to be in the sun or to be reached through the sun" (lxv). (Solar themes, of course, have a deep resonance in this rite centered on the circular, red-hot *gharma* vessel, which is often identified with the sun; cf. Witzel 2004, lx.) Further, he reenacts the myth of Rudra, the primary

¹² *nīdhāyy ovā nīdhāyy ovēti vāi sāmno [dgāyati. (231) ténaivā nidhāu prātiti]ṣṭhata. é svār jyōtīr ity. asāu vā ādityā [etaj jyōtis. ténaivāinaṃ sāmardhayat]y. [...] etā vā etāsyāniruktās stūtayas. tābhir evāinaṃ abhiṣṭuvanty.*

deity associated with the rite, who ascended to heaven by assuming a new body. "The Pravargya offers a spectacular event that makes the Yajamāna go to heaven with a substitute body...Like Rudra, he gains a new bodily form, *svargākṛti...*, a 'heavenly body' " (lxvi). The ascension itself is accomplished by the singing of a particular *sāman* at the end of the rite (lvi). The Kaṭhā attestation of OM in the Adhvaryu's *sāman* must be analyzed in light of this nexus of heavenly ascension, the sun, a new body fashioned through ritual, and *sāman*-singing. As we will see in the next chapter, all of these elements crystallize in a much more explicit fashion in the discursive construction of OM in the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*.

§3.5 *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*

Interpretive discourses about OM in the Taittirīya branch of the YV begin very early, in the Saṃhitā, where the fundamental unity of the three Vedas is expressed through correlating *udgītha*, *praṇava* and *pratigāra* (TS 3.2.9.5-6): three different recitational practices, one from each Veda, are said to be "on the same level;" we may infer from later codifications that this is because the three have OM in common. While there are no mentions of OM along these lines in the Brāhmaṇa, a similar discourse surfaces again in the Āraṇyaka, affirming the notion of tri-Vedic unity and exalting OM further by correlating the sound with *vāc* and the highest *akṣara*.

The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* is more diverse in its contents than the other Āraṇyakas we have touched upon, treating the piling of the fire altar (*agnicayana*), the *mahāyajñas*, which are five daily rites for Brahmins, the *pravargya*, and other assorted offerings. This diversity is due in part to the fact that the TĀ has been compiled from a range sources, including some outside of its own branch. As Schroeder (1898, 59-60) has demonstrated, Taittirīya and Kāṭhaka texts converge in their Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka strata, with the Taittirīyas appropriating portions of the fragmentary *Kaṭha Brāhmaṇa* in

their *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (3.10-12) and TĀ (1, 2). This borrowed material is even known to later Taittirīya tradition as the "eight Kāṭhaka sections" (*aṣṭau kāṭhakāni*), a label that admits their non-Taittirīya provenance, further confirmed by the presence of distinctive Kāṭhaka phonetics in these sections (Witzel 1989, 73). The reflections on OM we are about to consider, occurring in the last of these Kāṭhaka sections (=TĀ 2; Malamoud 1977, 1), therefore originated in Kāṭhaka circles before being appropriated wholesale by the Taittirīyas. This speaks to the broadening development of OM in the Black YV during the late Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka periods. It also suggests that the Kāṭhakas rather than the Taittirīyas were the ones who most actively contributed to OM's discursive construction in this middle Vedic phase.

§3. 6 *The svādhyāya with OM*

The only sustained interpretive reflection on OM in this text comes in the discussion of *svādhyāya*, a form of ritualized daily "récitation personnelle"¹³ (TĀ 2.11.4):

Having placed his hands and feet with the right over the left, wearing a grass-ring, the sacrificer tackles his recitation with *om*. For indeed, this *yajus* is the same as the triple Veda, it is voice, it is the supreme syllable.¹⁴

I have already mentioned this passage as an antecedent for the widespread practice, codified in the later Śāstras (e.g., *Mānava Dharmasāstra* 2.74-75), of beginning recitation of the Veda with OM. But its hermeneutic claims also mark the passage as important, especially the integration of OM into inherited discourses about the three Vedas, *vāc*, and *akṣara*.

¹³ Thus Charles Malamoud (1977, 1) in his translation and study of the *svādhyāya* section of the TĀ. This chapter, occurring right on the cusp between Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka, is traditionally known as the *svādhyāyabrāhmaṇa*.

¹⁴ *dakṣiṇottarau pāṇi pādau kṛtvā sapavitrāv om iti pratipadyata etad vai yajus trayīm vidyām praty eṣā vāg etat paramam akṣaram*. Compare the original KaṭhB version (Schroeder 1898, 59-60): *dakṣiṇottarau pāṇī kṛtvā sapavitrā o3m iti pratipadyata etad vai tad yajus trayīm vidyām praty eṣā vāg etat paramam akṣaram*/Note that the Kāṭhaka version gives *o3m* with *pluti*.

Let's examine more closely how this series of correlations is formulated: "Because this *yajus* is the the triple Veda (*trayī vidyā*), it is voice (*vāc*), it is the supreme syllable (*akṣara*)." First, it classifies OM as *yajus*, the characteristic utterance of the Yajurvedic liturgy. This classification, rarely met with—especially when compared to the widespread denotation of OM as the Ṛgvedic *praṇava* or Sāmavedic *udgītha*—suggests an effort to present the sound as an integral part of the Yajurvedic tradition, to claim OM as a Yajurvedic property. Next, by equating OM with "the triple Veda," the composers of the passage move beyond Yajurvedic parochialism to speak in tri-Vedic terms, asserting that OM is a realization of the Vedic corpus as a totality. In embracing this broader synthesis, the passage echoes the Saṃhitā of the Taittirīyas, where this idea was first textualized. OM is then correlated with *vāc*, an expansive term that at once refers to sound, speech, ritual utterance, and its apotheosis as the goddess Voice. Finally, OM is the highest *akṣara*, the primordial embodiment of Voice's infinite potential. This diction evokes Ṛgvedic antecedents, where *parama*- ("supreme, highest") describes the dwelling place of both Voice and Syllable (cf. ṚV 1.164.35, 39, 41).

§3.7 *The supreme syllable*

These resonances were not lost on the composers of the text, who quote a verse from the Ṛgvedic Riddle Hymn in the very next sentence (TĀ 2.11.5-6; ṚV 1.164.39, trans. Jamison & Brereton):

5. As the verse goes: 6. "The syllable of the verse, upon which all the gods have settled, is in the highest heaven—he who does not know that syllable, what will he accomplish by his verse? Only those who know it sit together here."¹⁵

The Taittirīyas and Kāṭhakas evidently took this verse, ancient even by their time, to be referring to OM, and they invoke it here as a way of authorizing the practice of using OM to begin the daily

¹⁵ *tad etad ṛcābhyuktam / ṛcō akṣāre paramé vyòman yásmin devā́ ádhi víśve niṣedúḥ / yás tán ná véda kím ṛcā́ kariṣyati yá ít tád vidús tá imé sám āsate //*

svādhyāya. While I do not think that the composers of this verse necessarily had OM in mind when speaking of *akṣara* (see ch. 5, §2.1, 2.2), this does not diminish the significance of this quotation in the TĀ, which shows how the Ṛgvedic *akṣara* doctrine is received in later Vedic texts. By singling out OM as the "supreme syllable" and adducing this verse, these Yajurvedic theologians prove that by this time OM was regarded in their traditions as the foremost *akṣara*—the great Syllable exalted above all others in the Vedas. Although they were not the first to frame OM in this way—I have shown that Jaiminīya thinkers had already made these connections— this is a watershed moment for Kāṭhaka-Taittirīya hermeneutics about OM.

§3.8 *Summing up: reflections in the Yajurvedic Āraṇyakas*

While the Yajurvedic Āraṇyakas do not have a lot to say about OM, their contributions advance the construction of the syllable in significant ways. Lacking any mentions of OM in their own Saṃhitā, the Kāṭhakas nevertheless reflect on OM in several passages. First, OM in the *prasava* is the "truth of voice" (*vācas satyam*), serving to authorize ritual performance. Next, OM is a non-lexical vocable in the Adhvaryu's *sāman*, whose the lyrics bring material and soteriological success. The Kāṭhā identifies this song with OM as one of the "unexpressed praise-songs" (*aniruktas stutayaḥ*), establishing continuity with an earlier YV Saṃhitā of a rival branch (MS) as well as with contemporary reflections among the Sāmavedic Jaiminīyas. In their Āraṇyaka, the Kāṭhakas demonstrate the extent to which OM has made liturgical and hermeneutic inroads into their *śākhā* traditions.

The Taittirīyas, for their part, appropriate material from the fragmentary Brāhmaṇa of the Kāṭhakas and incorporate it into their own Āraṇyaka. The passage on OM, which probably attests to the earliest Kāṭhaka construction of the syllable, correlates the syllable with the three Vedas, *vāc*, and the supreme *akṣara*. While the claim of tri-Vedic unity resonates with the Saṃhitā of the Taittirīyas, the

explicit integration of OM into the doctrines of *vāc* and *akṣara* is something new. (They follow this by quoting a verse from the Ṛgvedic Riddle Hymn, thus leaving no room for doubt about the hermeneutic implications.) These reflections are rooted in speculations about the *svādhyāya*, the daily recitation that is here codified for the first time as beginning with OM. The Kāṭhakas-Taittirīyas also refer to OM as a *yajus*, the signature utterance of the Yajurvedic liturgy, suggesting a deliberate attempt to make OM more amenable to the Yajurvedic sensibility.

On the whole, the Yajurvedic Āraṇyakas attest to a renewed interest in OM in the Yajurvedic branches, which, as we saw in the last chapter, have little to say about OM in the Brāhmaṇa period. By engaging Yajurvedic liturgical contexts and categories (*prasava*, *yajus*), the Kāṭhaka and Taittirīya reflections on OM bear the imprint of their ritual specialties. On the other hand, their orientation towards interpretive contexts relating to soteriology, doctrines of sacred sound, and tri-Vedic synthesis speaks to the gathering momentum for a pan-Vedic discourse on OM, one that transcends the boundaries of liturgy and branch.

§4 *The wilds of Sāmavedic tradition*

Having surveyed the OM reflections in the Āraṇyakas of the ṚV and YV, I now turn to those of the SV. As is the case in the Brāhmaṇa period, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya branch continues to ignore OM as a topic of reflection, while the Jaiminīya branch only sharpens what is already its keen interest in the syllable.

§4.1 *The heritage of the Jaiminīya branch*

The Saṃhitā of the Jaiminīyas attests what are perhaps the oldest OMs in South Asia: OM in these ancient songs is a *stobha*, a non-lexical vocable that is sung to a melody and conveys no semantic

information. Although the syllable shows up in collocation with certain other *stobhas* and forms recurring patterns, the fundamentally musical nature of the Sāmavedic material ensures that there is little discursive construction of OM in this earliest stratum of Jaiminīya texts. At best, we find evocative collocations that resonate with themes we have been pursuing: for example, the collocation *om̐ vāk* in the Wilderness Songs—as a variation on the familiar pairing *o(m̐) vā* in the Village Songs—evokes Vedic discourses on the goddess Voice (Vāc); while the frequent collocation of OM with the finale *svaṛ jyotiḥ* ("heaven light") suggests a burgeoning concern with soteriology (see ch.2, §3.4). In their Brāhmaṇa, the Jaiminīyas take up the discursive construction of OM in earnest. Their copious and sustained reflections on the topic exceed those of all other Vedic Brāhmaṇas combined. The JB contributions are a milestone in OM's history, for they are the first to explicitly integrate the syllable into the inherited Vedic discourses on *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*. The JB also develops the idea that OM as a sound embodies the three Vedas, uniting a range of different recitational practices under a single rubric.

§4.2 *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa: a transitional text*

In the stratum that concerns us now, the Jaiminīya branch continues its strong interest in discursively constructing OM. In this phase, the Jaiminīyas elaborate themes inherited from their Saṃhitā and Brāhmaṇa, while making a concerted effort to push the discourse in the direction of personal soteriology. We now take up the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*, a seminal text that makes influential contributions to the emergence of OM. Like its parent Brāhmaṇa (JB), the JUB is a dense and difficult text, lacking a published critical edition and an up-to-date translation. Masato Fujii, who has worked on the JUB for three decades, has graciously furnished me with the text of his critical edition in preparation and helped me resolve a number of thorny problems of interpretation. I have also relied on

Fujii's impressive series of articles on the doctrines and practices presented in the JUB, as well as its relation to other Vedic texts. Before Fujii, Hans Oertel was the only scholar to work on the text as a whole. I have used Oertel's 1896 translation as a reference for my own, even though I often make different choices.

In terms of content, style, and relative chronology, the JUB is closely akin to the *Āraṇyakas* we have considered in this chapter. As I have already noted, the *Āraṇyakas* constitute an esoteric turn in Vedic discourse, a movement in which the JUB participates (Fujii 2009, 30):

The JUB was produced in the movement among the Vedic schools of composing *Āraṇyaka* and (proto-) *Upaniṣad* texts, which deal with special rituals or ritual acts mostly with secret characters like the *Mahāvratā* in the Ṛgvedic *Āraṇyakas* and the *Pravargya* in the Yajurvedic *Āraṇyakas*.

However, the *Sāmavedic* branches seem not to have favored "*Āraṇyaka*" as a label for texts in this vein. Hence the relatively unfamiliar moniker *upaniṣad brāhmaṇa*, which was employed by both the *Jaiminīya* and *Kauthuma* branches to designate compositions of this type. (It is a little known fact that the most famous *Sāmavedic Upaniṣad*, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, was known earlier in its history as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*.)¹⁶ Historically, the JUB was an amalgamation of several discrete texts known to their composers and commentators as "*Upaniṣads*." Indeed, Fujii has argued that the JUB deserves recognition as the "*earliest Upaniṣad*," even though it has been excluded from the canonical *Vedāntic* grouping (Fujii 2004; 2009, 30-31, especially n100).¹⁷ If we accept Fujii's assessment, then the JUB is the first of its kind, a pioneering text in the emerging genre of *upaniṣad*. As such, the JUB is

¹⁶ On the name "*Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa*," see Fujii 1997, 96n36. On the "*Chāndogya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa*," see Fujii 2009, 31n100.

¹⁷ Fujii observes that the JUB has "not only yielded fame as the first 'full-fledged' *Sāmavedic Upaniṣad* to the *ChU*...but also failed to be acknowledged as an *Upaniṣad* proper except for the *Kena-Upaniṣad* portion (JUB 4.18-21) in the *Vedānta* traditions, even though the whole JUB has been handed down and respected as the *Upaniṣad* within the *Jaiminīya* traditions in South India..." (2009, 30-31). These observations would seem to suggest that the fact of Śaṅkara's commenting on the *Kena Upaniṣad* (but not on the rest of the JUB) influenced its later *Vedāntic* reception.

necessarily a hybrid, transitional text, explicating the secrets of ritual performance (like an Āraṇyaka) but tending towards speculations on soteriology and ultimate reality (like an Upaniṣad).

§4.3 *The unexpressed gāyatra melody*

The central aim of the JUB is to introduce the "unexpressed *gāyatra* melody" (*anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*) and explain its significance (Fujii 1984). We have already dwelt in detail on the practice of "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*), which involves the wholesale substitution of *stobhas* for every syllable of the underlying verse of the *udgītha*, the Udgātṛ's portion of the Sāmavedic *stotra* (see ch. 3, §2.3, 2.4). As opposed to the rival Kauthuma-Rāṇāyaṇīyas, who chiefly substitute *o*-sounds, the Jaiminīyas in the JUB codify the substitution of a different sequence: *o vā o vā o vā hum bhā o vā* (or some close variation thereof). The text teaches that this innovation has tremendous soteriological power: sung in this manner, the melody assists the sacrificer in transcending his physical body and attaining immortality. By singing with OM, the Sāmavedic singers guide him on a journey up through the sun and beyond.

§4.4 *OM and Vāc: the coalescence of liturgy and discourse*

Our main interest lies in two monosyllables of this lyric in particular: *o vā* and their multiforms *o3 vā*, *ovā3c* and *oṃ va3c*.¹⁸ (These syllables of course recall the early forms of *aniruktagāna* that we found in Yajurvedic sources, where both *oṃ vā* and *o vā* were attested; see §3.3 above.) The JUB regards

¹⁸ The multiforms of the lyrics include:

o3 vā3 o3 vā3 o3 vā hum bhā o vā (JUB 1.3.1)

o vā o vā o vā hum bhā o vā (JUB 1.2.3, attributed to the Śailanas)

oṃ vā3c oṃ vā3c oṃ vā3c hum bhā oṃ vāc (JUB 4.8.9)

ovā3c ovā3c ovā3c hum bhā vo vā (JUB 4.14.2)

These readings, based on Fujii's unpublished critical edition, tend to reduce the overall multiformity of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* when compared with Oertel's earlier readings (1896).

these syllables as the sonic representations of the "divinities" (*devatā*) OM and Vāc, the goddess "Voice;" speculations along these lines occur throughout the work (JUB 1.1-2, 3.13-14, 4.8). It is often impossible to decide whether a given passage speaks of *om* and *vāc* in the sense of liturgical syllables or in the sense of the divine made audible—indeed, this may be precisely the point. The two syllables are also intimately connected to discussions about soteriology, with intimations of rebirth: for example, *om* leads to the sun and the world of the gods, while *vāc* leads to the moon and back to the world of men (JUB 3.13-14; Fujii 1984, 3; see also my discussion in the next chapter, §5.8-9). Innovations in singing OM and in reflecting on OM proceed together (Fujii 2009, 29):

...The *gāyatra-sāman* in this final form [in the JUB] has been invented as a result of, or at least in parallel with, the development of philosophical speculations on *om* and *vāc*. The JUB expands various speculations on *om* and *vāc*, including theories about the attainment of the heavenly world by means of *om* and *vāc*...

In positing the soteriological effects of OM even as it codifies liturgical practices using the syllable, the JUB collapses the distinction that we have made for heuristic purposes throughout this study, between liturgy and discourse. As we will learn as our analysis proceeds, the liturgical facts do not simply inform the discourse here—they quite literally *structure* it. Some of the most important reflections on OM in the JUB are textualized in a sequence corresponding precisely to the sequence of the syllables of the *anirukta-gāyatra*. As such, this rich and complex text contains passages wherein the separation between liturgy and discourse collapses and liturgical OM and discursive OM coalesce. I will argue that this recommends the JUB as perhaps the single most important text for signalling the emergence of OM as a sacred syllable.

§4.5 Tradition and innovation in the Jaiminīya construction of OM

With the JUB, the Jaiminīyas continue to outstrip all other Vedic branches in their reflections on OM. The syllable shows up hundreds of times throughout the text. To manage these voluminous discussions, I divide them into two categories. The first category contains a high proportion of Jaiminīya material inherited from an earlier stratum, including aphorisms, figures of speech, and diction appropriated directly from Brāhmaṇa interpretations of OM; this will occupy us for the remainder of the present chapter. The second category, to which I shall devote the next chapter in its entirety, concerns the innovative formulation of a soteriology of song, a secret teaching for achieving immortality by singing with OM.

The composers of the JUB reinforce inherited teachings on the syllable's significance in cosmology and ritual, including themes by now familiar from the JB and other earlier Vedic texts: the cosmogonic activities of Prajāpati and his efforts to find the essence of the Vedas; the primordial sources of speech; the mutual relation of OM, *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*. But even as they revisit these themes, the Jaiminīyas reshape and reinterpret them, carefully assembling a traditional framework that will support their innovations in ritual performance and personal soteriology.

§5 Prajāpati's pressings: cosmogony, irreducibility, and performance

The motif of OM as the essence of the Vedic corpus and union of the three liturgies can be traced at least as far back as the AB, with clear antecedents in the YV Saṃhitās. The Aitareyins develop this motif in a story of Prajāpati's acts of creation, laying particular stress on a traditional set of cosmological correlations that bind the gods, the Vedas, the three worlds, and the syllable together. In their Brāhmaṇa, the Jaiminīyas reflect on OM along similar lines, treating it as the syllable that unites the diverse liturgical roles of the three lead officiants. Whereas the Aitareyins divided OM into three

constituent phonemes, the Jaiminīyas speak of OM as the irreducible "sap, essence" (*rasa*) of the Vedas: "This syllable is the unpressed part of the triple Veda" (JB 1.322). They also highlight its beneficial effects on vocal performance: the sap of OM makes the *sāman* swell. The composers of the JUB combine Aitareya and Jaiminīya interpretations in a series of stories featuring Prajāpati, cosmological correlations, and the pressing of the Vedas to find their essence. Above all, they emphasize OM's cosmogonic potency, fundamental irreducibility, and ritual performance.

§5.1 *The unpressed syllable: a sonic cosmogony*

In the narrative that opens the JUB, Prajāpati considers how to protect the cosmos he has won by means of the "triple Veda" (*trayī vidyā*). He worries that if other gods sacrifice using the same Vedic knowledge, they will threaten his mastery. His solution is to "take the sap" of the Vedas (*rasam āvdā*), to distill them into their essential forms and so protect them (JUB 1.1.3-7):

3. Saying *bhūr*, Prajāpati took the sap of the Ṛgveda. That became this earth. The sap of it, flowing out, became Agni—the sap of the sap. 4. With *bhuvas*, he took the sap of the Yajurveda. That became this atmosphere. The sap of it, flowing out, became Vāyu—the sap of the sap. 5. With *sva*, he took the sap of the Sāmaveda. That became the sky up there. The sap of it, flowing out, became Āditya—the sap of the sap. 6. But of one syllable alone he could not take the sap—of just that one, *om*. 7. That became the goddess Voice. Indeed, she is really *om*. Her sap is breath.¹⁹

The four terms of the mantra *bhūr bhuvas svar om* structure Prajāpati's cosmogonic activity in this narrative, which recalls the influential narrative in the Ṛgvedic tradition at AB 5.32. Here, each term of the mantra spoken by Prajāpati has a cascading cosmogonic effect: for instance, when he says "*sva*," he takes the sap of the SV, which becomes the "sky" (*dyaus*), which in turn flows to form Āditya, the

¹⁹ [3] *sa bhūr ity evargvedasya rasam ādatta / seyam pṛthivy abhavat/ tasya yo rasaḥ prāṇedat/ so 'gnir abhavad rasasya rasaḥ /* [4] *bhuva ity eva yajurvedasya rasam ādatta / tad idam antarikṣam abhavat / tasya yo rasaḥ prāṇedat / sa vāyur abhavad rasasya rasaḥ /* [5] *sva ity eva sāmavedasya rasam ādatta / sāsau dyaur abhavat / tasya yo rasaḥ prāṇedat / sa ādityo 'bhavad rasasya rasaḥ /* [6] *athaikasyaivākṣarasya rasan nāśaknod ādātum ity etasyaiva /* [7] *seyaṃ vāg abhavat / om eva nāmaīṣā / tasyā u prāṇa eva rasaḥ /*

sun, which is thus "the sap of the sap" (*rasasya rasaḥ*). But what do you get when you take the sap of *om*? Prajāpati is stymied; he cannot take the essence of this irreducible syllable.

§5.2 Irreducibility and infinity

This is a hoary old problem: recall that already in their Brāhmaṇa, the Jaiminīyas have established OM's irreducibility. Although Prajāpati is unable essentialize OM, the composers of the JUB stand ready with their own solution to the quandary of the unpressable OM. "OM," they say, "became *vāc*"—that is, the syllable transforms into the goddess Voice, the infinitely creative matrix of speech and language. They justify this transformation with a freshly minted correlation, attested here for the first time in the Vedas: "She (=Voice) is indeed OM." With this nominal sentence—the archetypal syntax of the *bandhu* hermeneutic—the composers of the JUB articulate an essential bond between OM and Vāc. The irreducibility of the syllable and the infinity of speech, they claim, abide together.

These qualities of irreducibility and infinity echo the Ṛgvedic *akṣara* doctrine, which envisions a primordial, essential *akṣara* flowing in the milk of the bovine goddess Voice. This is the fundamental message of the JUB: OM is the primordial *akṣara*; the irreducible essence of knowledge, divinity, and the cosmos; and the limitless source of language. Wilke & Moebus (2011, 436) take this passage as strongly articulating OM's "inexhaustible" quality, contrasting it with the three words pressed by Prajāpati:

The three other "primordial words" *bhūḥ*, *bhuvah*, *svah* have a semantic meaning, so at some stage they can be "exhausted." By contrast, the syllable OM always remains "inexhaustible," because OM is language [=Vāc] and language is infinite. This means that the creative function, which was allocated to the cryptic "thousand-syllabled monosyllable" [=akṣara of ṚV 1.164] in the riddle of Dīrghatamas, is now ascribed to an actual syllable with a definite physical sound character, i.e. the ritual syllable OM...

This is a useful observation but stands in need of qualification. Paraphrasing the JUB correlation between OM and Vāc, Wilke & Moebus assert that "OM is language." But as Malamoud has shown (2005,

23), *vāc* is more accurately translated into English as 'speech' or even, as is my preference, 'voice'; she is the source of language and its vocal realization, but never 'language' itself. Next, as I have shown in the previous chapter, the Jaiminīyas have proposed OM as the solution to Dīrghatamas's riddle long before this JUB passage, explicitly identifying OM as the "only *akṣara*" already in their Brāhmaṇa (JB 1.322; cf. JB 2.10). Therefore, the JUB does not make an original claim about OM and *akṣara* with this passage; rather, it reaffirms an inherited teaching.²⁰ Nevertheless, Wilke & Moebus's fundamental point is well taken: OM is inexhaustible because it is the primordial current through which Vāc flows; the "creative function" of language bubbles up through this syllable.

§5.3 *Saps and saps of saps*

The JUB version of Prajāpati's sonic cosmogony presents us with a network of correlations.²¹ Each element is the essence of the one preceding, producing an abstract enumeration of eight essential elements that make up the cosmogony. Wilke & Moebus have published a useful schematic of these correlations, which I reproduce here with some changes (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 437):

²⁰ Wilke & Moebus (2011, 438): "Revealingly we find the earliest mentions of OM as an Akṣara or original syllable in the Āraṇyaka texts of the *Sāma-Veda* schools, or to be more precise, in the texts of the Jaiminīya branch and the Talavakāra branch (i.e. in the *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad*)." The basic idea expressed here is correct, for Sāmavedic thinkers were indeed the first to conceive of OM in terms of the Ṛgvedic doctrine of *akṣara*. However, some details stand in need of correction. As shown in the previous chapter, the correlation of OM with *akṣara* was advanced earlier than "the Āraṇyaka texts of the *Sāma-Veda* schools"—rather, this momentous correlation is attested in the Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīya (aka Talavakāra) branch. The similar speculations found later in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*—which belongs not to the Talavakāra but to the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya branch—are due entirely to Jaiminīya influence, as I will show in the next chapter.

²¹ Notice that Prajāpati in this cycle of stories is modeling the discovery procedure called *bandhu*: he asserts a basic correlation (*svar* :: SV) and then spins out other correlations in a metaphysical version of the commutative property (*svar* :: SV :: sky :: Āditya). He is manipulating correlations that are already established and accepted: the correlation between each of these three elements *bhūr bhuvah svar* and ṚV/"earth"/Agni, YV/ "atmosphere"/ Vāyu, and SV/"sky"/ Āditya, respectively, is widespread in the Vedic corpus (cf. my discussion of AB 5.32 in ch. 6, §2.1, 2.2).

Veda	vyāhṛti	"sap"	"sap of sap"
ṚV	<i>bhūr</i>	"earth"	Agni/"Fire"
YV	<i>bhuvā</i>	"atmosphere"	Vāyu/"Wind"
SV	<i>svā</i>	"heaven"	Āditya/"Sun"
[—]	<i>om</i>	[= Vāc/"voice"]	<i>prāṇa</i> /"breath"

The two left columns list the three Vedas and the terms of the mantra to which they correspond; notice that *om* is not correlated with a particular Veda, for the syllable stands for the entire unified corpus.

The two columns on the right give us the four pairs of "saps" and "saps of saps," for a total of eight essential elements.²²

§5.4 The eightfold bridge to brahman

The composers of the JUB make use of this grouping of eight essences as they continue their reflections. They conclude by dwelling on the eightfold enumeration and its relation to *brahman* (JUB 1.1.8):

There are eight of these. The *gāyatrī* has eight syllables. The *sāman* is based on the *gāyatrī*. The *gāyatrī* is *brahman*. And so the *gāyatra sāman* becomes *brahman*.²³

This correlative series links the eight essences to the eight syllables of the *gāyatrī* meter, the *sāman* to the *gāyatrī*, and finally the *gāyatrī* to *brahman*. It is imperative to analyze these correlations in light of what has come before: *brahman* is the ultimate distillation of the series of essences produced by Prajāpati. The story, which began with the three Vedas and their distinct liturgies, now ends in their holistic and transcendental realization. Having surmounted the unpressable OM with recourse to Vāc, the Jaiminīya thinkers now arrive at an essence that encompasses all the others. Building on themes

²² Strictly speaking, Vāc is not the "sap" of *om*—remember that OM cannot be pressed. But since OM "became" Vāc, she is the functional equivalent of OM's sap and occupies that space within the taxonomy.

²³ [8] *tāny etāny aṣṭau / aṣṭākṣarā gāyatrī / gāyatraṃ sāma / brahma u gāyatrī / tad u brahmābhisampadyate*

inherited from their Brāhmaṇa, they introduce a special song—the *gāyatra-sāman*—as the bridge between the differentiated Vedic liturgies and the undifferentiated holism of *brahman*. This bond between song and salvific knowledge will inform the entire text.

§6 OM and Vāc in performance

The correlation between OM and Vāc brings to the surface the relevance of this dense narrative to the main theme of the JUB, the ritual performance of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*. The lyrics to this song contain repeated iterations of the syllables *o vā*, which as the JUB says elsewhere (1.3.1), are esoteric names for the two divinities, OM and Vāc. Throughout the work, the JUB's composers treat the liturgical syllables (*o vā*) and their apotheosized counterparts (OM and Vāc) as identical (see above §4.4). This identity of ritual and theological elements is the crux of the text: liturgical OM and discursive OM coalesce completely in the Jaiminīya mind. The erudite singer becomes able to access divine OM and the goddess Voice in the midst of sacrifice, through his performance. Therefore, when an Udgātṛ possessed of this wisdom sings the unexpressed *gāyatra*, he is not merely singing a sequence of liturgical syllables—rather, he is making divine OM and Vāc audible, giving voice to their mutual relation.

In performance, a regular *sāman* is divided into five portions, which are apportioned to three different singers. But the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* is divided into only two: the "prelude" (*prastāva*), sung by the Prastotr; and everything else, called the "song" (*gīta*, JUB 3.38.9) or alternately the *udgītha*, sung by the Udgātṛ. The lyrics of this part are *o vā o vā o vā hum bhā o vā*. In keeping with the traditional hermeneutic of syllable-counting, the number of syllables in this lyric becomes the basis for linking the performance of the song with the cosmological correlations already discussed.

§6.1 Prajāpati's cosmogonic song

Although the main lyric contains ten syllables, the JUB enumerates these in different ways to suit its changing interpretive agenda.²⁴ In the present case—informed by the eight essential elements and the eight syllables in the *gāyatrī* meter—eight is the desired "reckoning" (*sampad*). Leaving aside *hum bhā*, the four repetitions of *o vā* add up to eight syllables in all: *o vā o vā o vā (...)* *o vā*.²⁵ The four pairs of "saps" and "saps of saps" can be integrated seamlessly into such a reckoning. If he is well-versed in the doctrines contained in the JUB, the Udgātṛ's singing of these eight syllables has far-reaching effects, the performance of each syllable acting on its cosmic correlates (JUB 1.2.1-2):

When we say *om*, that is fire. The earth is what we call *vāc*. Wind is *om*. The atmosphere is *vāc*. The sun is *om*. The sky is *vāc*. Breath is *om*. Voice is *vāc* itself. 2. When he who knows thus sings the *udgītha*, then just by saying *om*, he takes Agni and establishes him on earth; with *om*, he takes Vāyu and establishes him in the atmosphere; with *om*, he takes Āditya and establishes him in the sky; and with *om*, he takes breath and establishes it in Voice.²⁶

"He who knows thus" (*ya evaṃ vidvān*) transforms his liturgical role into a cosmogonic role on the model of Prajāpati's world-shaping agency: with every singing of the paired syllables *o vā*, the singer establishes a divine entity (correlated with OM) within its cosmological realm (correlated with Vāc)—with the first, Agni on earth; with the second, Vāyu in the atmosphere; and with the third, Āditya in

²⁴ See, for example, the alternative enumeration at JUB 4.8.6, where all ten are counted as eight: "The first two syllables are *om̐ vā*, the third and fourth ones are *om̐ vā*, the fifth and sixth are *om̐ vā*, and the seventh and eighth are *hum bhā om̐ vāc*" [6] *om̐ vā iti dve akṣare / om̐ vā iti caturthe / om̐ vā iti ṣaṣṭhe / hum bhā om̐ vāg ity aṣṭame /*

²⁵ The first and most important context for singing the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* in the Jaiminīya liturgy is the *bahiṣpavamānastotra* (discussed at length in ch.3, §2.4; see also ch.8, §3.1), which consists of nine rounds. The first of these, the so-called "seminal (part)" (*retasyā*), is exceptional in that the lyrics omit *hum bhā: o vā o vā o vā (...)* *o vā*; see Fujii 1986, 14-15. Thus the present passage, focusing only the four pairs of *o vā*, neatly reflects this liturgical fact.

²⁶ [1] *sa yad om iti / so 'gniḥ / vāg iti pṛthivī / om iti vāyuh / vāg ity antarikṣam / om ity ādityaḥ / vāg iti dyauh / om iti prāṇaḥ / vāg ity eva vāk /* [2] *sa ya evaṃ vidvān udgāyati / om ity evāgnim ādāya pṛthivyām pratiṣṭhāpayati / om ity eva vāyum ādāyāntarikṣe pratiṣṭhāpayati / om ity evādityam ādāya divi pratiṣṭhāpayati / om ity eva prāṇam ādāya vāci pratiṣṭhāpayati /*

heaven. This perfect symmetry even extends to his own physiology, for the fourth pair establishes breath in speech.

Wilke & Moebus (2011, 437) have argued that the cosmological entities here associated with Vāc—earth, atmosphere, heaven—are "substrates," while the divine entities associated with OM—Agni, Vāyu, Āditya—are "essences of substrates." In their reading, the "essences" animate the "substrates." In other words, OM animates Vāc, just as Agni/Fire animates the earth, Vāyu/Wind animates the atmosphere, Āditya/Sun animates the sky, and breath animates speech. For Wilke & Moebus, this echoes the AĀ, which also attests "the notion that breath is the esoteric basis of all language" (438; as above, I would substitute "speech" or "voice" for "language"). But as we saw earlier in the chapter, the AĀ settles on a different syllable, "the *a*-sound" (*akāra*), to serve as the rubric for these speculations on the primordial source of speech. In Vedic phonology, *a* is perhaps the most elemental vocalization, its sound overlapping with that of natural exhalation. Wilke & Moebus observe that the *a*-sound is thus the perfect evocation of breath and the source of speech; it is "symbolic" in the sense of not corresponding to a specific mantra. By contrast, "OM is a syllable in ritual use..., solely derived from the audible and the musical" (438). I would attribute this difference to the liturgical specialty of the two traditions, Ṛgvedic poetic recitation on the one hand, and Sāmavedic "sound rituals"(423ff.), on the other. As specialists in sound, Sāmavedic singers were keen to develop a hermeneutic system with sound as the organizing principle, as our close reading of the JB in the previous chapter has already demonstrated. This sonic awareness only grows in the JUB, where a specific way of organizing sound in ritual—the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*—is promoted above all others.

§7 *Prajāpati's pressing of knowledge (redux)*

The motif of pressing the Vedas to discover OM recurs several times in the JUB. In another iteration, we encounter Prajāpati once again in a state of anxiety about protecting his hard-earned wisdom from the gods. To keep his knowledge secret, again he presses the Vedas—and again he is unable to take the sap of OM (JUB 1.8.4-6):

4. He pressed this triple Veda. Press as he might, one syllable alone he could not press—this one, *om*. 5. For that is truly full of sap. The threefold knowledge of the one who knows thus likewise becomes full of sap. 6. Prajāpati, once he had pressed this sap, set it aside and ran upward.²⁷

Here, paradoxically, the knowledge of OM's fundamental irreducibility is the solution to overcoming it: the one who knows thus—namely, that OM is full of unpressable sap—effectively transfers its essence to himself. Having solved this puzzle, Prajāpati duly presses OM's sap and ascends—where, we are not told: simply "upward" (*ūrdhvas*) and away from the Devas hot on his trail. Indra, Candra, Rudra, and Samudra observe that the sap has now become Prajāpati's "heat" (*tapas*; JUB 1.8.8-9).²⁸ Calasso has argued against the standard translation of *tapas* as "austerity" or "asceticism," emphasizing instead the "ardor" given off by Prajāpati's mental effort (Calasso 2014, 99-102). Following Calasso, I understand *tapas* here as referring to the spark of Prajāpati's insight: his deep contemplation on OM catches fire and fuels his ascent. This is perhaps a glimmer of OM's future in contemplative traditions, anticipating the centrality of the syllable in meditation.

²⁷ [4] *sa imaṃ trayam vedam apīdayat / tasya pīdayann ekam evākṣaran nāsaknot pīdayitum om iti yad etat /* [5] *eṣa u ha vāva sarasaḥ / sarasā ha vā evaṃvidas trayī vidyā bhavati /* [6] *sa imaṃ rasam pīdayitvāpanidhāyordhvo 'dravat/*

²⁸ 8. What had been sap before, now became heat. 9. The gods looked after this sap. They realized: "Truly this has become heat." [8] *sa yo 'yaṃ rasa āsīt/ tad eva tapo 'bhavat/* [9] *ta imaṃ rasam devā anvaichan/ te 'bhyapaśyan / _tapo vā abhūd iti /*

§7.1 *The heat of knowledge: grains with honey*

The flash of Prajāpati's brilliance brings attention to what he sought to obscure, for the Devas are now able to discover OM for themselves (JUB 1.8.10-12):

10. Once they had really grasped this triple Veda, they discovered within it precisely that same unpressed syllable—that very one, *om*. 11. For that is truly full of sap. With that they mixed the Veda, just as one might mix grains with honey, in the same way. 12. They heated themselves up. As they were heating themselves up, their knowledge became swollen. And through this heating up and their swollen knowledge, they earned the victory that Prajāpati had won. Now all these gods are of equal measure with Prajāpati—so they ask: "Is he this one? Is he that one?"²⁹

As they mix the "unpressed syllable" (*akṣaram apīḍitam*) with the Vedas and heat the mixture with their own insights, their knowledge swells. The combination of heat and swollen knowledge allows them to achieve parity with Prajāpati (*prajāpatimātra*). Precisely what Prajāpati had feared has come true—discovering OM at the heart of the Vedas, the Devas have matched his hermeneutic conquests.

The simile of grains and honey is recycled from the JB. Comparing the earlier version shows how the development of OM hermeneutics from one stratum to the other tracks with broader shifts in Vedic discourse (JB 1.322; cf. my ch.6, §3.1):

Just as he might mix grains with honey, in the same way he places sap in the melody with only that syllable. Thus he makes it swell. By means of this swollen melody full of sap, praise is made.

The Brāhmaṇa's guiding concern is maximizing ritual performance: just as one might add honey to grains, so the singer adds sap to the melody when he sings with OM, yielding more praise for the gods.

Using the same simile and much of the same diction, the Upaniṣad has tilted the discussion from action towards knowledge, thereby anticipating what later commentators will characterize as a broad

²⁹ [10] *imam u vai trayam vedam marīmṛṣitvā tasminn etad evākṣaram apīḍitam avindann om ity yad etat* / [11] *eṣa u ha vāva sarasaḥ / tenainam prāyuvan / yathā madhunā lājān prayuyād evam* / [12] *te 'bhyatapyanta / teṣām tapyamānānām āpyāyata vedaḥ / te 'nena ca tapasāpīnena ca vedena tām u eva jitim ajayan yām prajāpatir ajayat / ta ete sarva eva prajāpatimātrā ayā3m aya3m iti* /

Upaniṣadic shift from *karma* to *jñāna* (see Cohen 2008, 2, 6). In this section of the JUB, OM remains at the center of the discourse, but its valence shifts: whereas the JB made the comparison in order to show the effects of liturgical OM (the *ādi*) on performance, the JUB uses the simile to highlight OM's transcendent qualities: it is the irreducible *akṣara*, the essence of Vedic knowledge, and the fruit of arduous insight. However, in contrast with subsequent Upaniṣadic conceptions of *jñāna* (discussed in ch. 10), salvific knowledge among the Jaiminīyas is always closely intertwined with the ritual praxis that inspires it.

§7.2 *Doubt and indeterminacy*

A strange flourish concludes this story of the gods' vying with Prajāpati for mastery. Consider that the four gods Indra, Candra, Rudra, and Samudra have just managed the impossible—they have distilled the essence of the Vedas and discovered OM; they have followed their progenitor and reached the summit of wisdom. And as the Devas match Prajāpati's wit, they all assume his form, so much so that one cannot tell who is who: "Is he this one? Is he that one?" Strange to find that precisely at the apex of knowledge, confusion abides. This is the indeterminacy, the indistinctness of Prajāpati, which Calasso has called an acknowledgement of the "silent doubt [that] lingers behind all speculation." He argues that the Vedic ritualists who composed texts such as the JUB were "men of doubt," forever testing their discoveries with new questions (Calasso 2014, 93). Just such a question is this one, its querulousness emphasized by drawn out *pluti: aya3m?* "Is he this o-o-one?" The unsettled tone betrays an anxiety—on the part of the gods and the ritualists alike—that is there something beyond the progenitor, something they have missed. As our investigation of Prajāpati and OM in the JUB continues, we will see that indistinctness lies at the core of the Jaiminīya innovations in liturgy and soteriology alike. They sing an unexpressed melody because that which is indistinct is transcendent in its

indistinctness: it is not limited or circumscribed. This is why Prajāpati, to whom all *anirukta* ("unexpressed") mantras are addressed, will always excel the *nirukta* ("expressed") gods like Indra and the others in the end. And it also explains why OM, that syllable of the Vedas that can never be pressed, serves as Prajāpati's perfect, audible counterpart. (For further discussion of Prajāpati, *anirukta*, and OM see next chapter, §6.)

§8 OM alone: the foundation of the triple Veda

The motifs of threefold knowledge, sap, irreducibility and ascent—central to the other JUB stories we have considered—recur in another short narrative about OM (JUB 3.19.2-4, 6):

2. The gods, by means of this threefold knowledge full of sap, climbed up to the heavenly world. Fearing that mortals might follow along after them, they pressed the triple Veda. 3. Press as they might, one syllable alone they could not press—this one, *om*. 4. For that is truly full of sap. The threefold knowledge of the one who knows thus likewise becomes full of sap. [...] 6. Now the foundation of threefold knowledge is this very syllable. Saying *om*, the Hotṛ stands firm. With *om*, so does the Adhvaryu. With *om*, likewise the Udgātr.³⁰

The previous stories spoke of Prajāpati's fear of the Devas and his efforts to evade them by ascending upwards with the sap of his knowledge. In this excerpt, the Devas fear humans and try to stymie them in the same way. Just as Prajāpati once failed at this, so the Devas fail to press the syllable OM. As the "foundation" (*pratiṣṭhā*) of the three Vedas, it is unshakeable. The three lead officiants of the *śrauta* liturgies—Hotṛ, Adhvaryu, and Udgātr—all "stand firm with OM." This observation that OM is shared across the liturgies echoes the JB passage (3.322) that correlates the recitational practices of all three priests on the same basis.

³⁰ [2] *devā vā anayā trayyā vidyayā sarasyordhvā[s] svargaṃ lokam udakrāman / te manuṣyāṇām anvāgamād bibhyatas trayam vedam apīlayan / [3] tasya pīlayanta ekam evākṣaran nāśaknuvan pīlayitum om iti yad etat / [4] eṣa u ha vāva sarasaḥ / sarasā ha vā evaṃvidas trayī vidyā bhavati / [...]* [6] *etat dha vā akṣaran trayyai vidyāyai pratiṣṭhā / om iti vai hotā pratiṣṭhitaḥ / om ity adhvaryuḥ / om ity udgātā /*

This triadic correlation of the three main officiants resonates with the liturgical context under discussion, which is the Yajamāna's "follow-up mantra" (*anumantraṇa*) to the *stomabhāga*, the Brahman's permission for the singing of the Sāmavedic praise-songs. The exegetes of the JUB prescribe a very short form of the *anumantraṇa*: "with *om* alone" (*om ity eva*; JUB 3.19.7; see Fujii 1991, 1052). This "established rule" (*sthiti*) contravenes a version of the *anumantraṇa* used by others, the *vyāhṛti* mantra, *bhūr bhuvā svar*. When the text claims that the three lead officiants of the three Vedas "stand firm with OM," this reflects the longstanding correlation of the three terms *bhūr*, *bhuvā*, and *sva* with the ṚV, YV, and SV respectively. Substituting "*om* alone" for the three terms guarantees the three officiants a firm foundation, but on a new footing: OM is strong enough to support all three.

The end of the story further elaborates the triadic nature of OM (JUB 3.19.7):

Now the triple heaven of the Vedas is this very syllable. Putting the Yajamāna in this syllable, the priests together carry him up to the heavenly world. For this reason, one should utter the *anumantraṇa* with *om* alone.³¹

The notion of the celestial region being divided into three is widespread in the Vedas; of these the "third heaven" is the highest.³² This turn of phrase emphasizes OM's exalted status and perhaps alludes to earlier cosmologies, where the *akṣara* flows in the highest realm. It may also hearken back to the Jaiminīya formulation of the "three heavens of melody" (*trayas sāmnaḥ svargās*, JB 1.325; Gonda 1976, 55), one of which is the *ādi*, that is, OM inserted into the Sāmavedic praise-song.³³ The imagery of the final sentences, telling how the priests convey the Yajamāna to heaven enveloped in the syllable OM,

³¹ [7] *etad dha vā akṣaram vedānān triviṣṭapam / etasmin vā akṣara ṛtvijo yajamānam ādhāya svarge loke samudūhanti / tasmād om ity evānumantrayeta //*

³² Gonda (1976, 56) reads *triviṣṭapa* as formed on analogy of *tridiva*- "third heaven," the highest heaven which is the realm of Indra; he adduces GB 1.5.25 and AV (Śaunaka) 10.9.5 as parallels.

³³ The JB observes (1.323): "the *ādi* is the heavenly world; he should place himself in this" (*ādis svargo lokas, tasminn ātmānaṃ dadhyāt*).

ties into the soteriological theme of the JUB, which is conceived as an ascent to the heavenly world by means of OM (see next chapter).

§9 *A teaching moment: what becomes of the verse and the melody?*

It should be evident by now that liturgical details permeate the JUB reflections on OM, grounding these heady reflections in the nitty gritty of praxis. More than any other text we have examined, the JUB integrates liturgy and discourse into a seamless structure. One reason for this sustained and microscopic focus on ritual was surely pedagogical—as a number of scholars have noted, Upaniṣadic and Brāhmaṇic passages furnish text-internal evidence of having been composed in the course of instruction, with a teacher doing a live run-through of the liturgy and explaining its hermeneutic implications.³⁴ Looking at the JUB through this lens allows us to imagine more concretely how the process of discursively constructing OM might have occurred. A teacher gathers students or colleagues around him and poses an open-ended question about the ritual. Pondering the question then becomes an occasion for the transmission of inherited material and the formulation of new insights. Here, a teacher's question about the lyrics of the *anirukta-gāyatra* melody serves a "prompt" for ensuing meta-ritual speculations (JUB 1.9.1-2):

They ponder this: "When *o vā o vā* is sung, what becomes of the verse in this, and what becomes of the melody?" 2. Well, the melody is what we call *om*, and the verse is *vāc*. Mind is *om*, voice is *vāc*. Breath is *om*, voice is just *vāc*. Indra is *om*, all the gods are *vāc*. And that is why all the gods follow Indra.³⁵

³⁴ The most compelling evidence is the frequent use of deictic pronouns, which are used in such a way as to refer to entities known and present to listeners ("*this* fire..."; "in *that* way"). See Caland 1926, 81; Minard 1949, II, 17; Bodewitz 1973, 143n9; Witzel 1996, 3; Olivelle 1996, lix.

³⁵ [1] *tad āhur yad o vā o vā iti gīyate / kvātrarg bhavati / kva sāmēti / [2] om iti vai sāma / vāg ity ṛk / om iti mano / vāg iti vāk / om iti prāṇo / vāg ity eva vāk / om itīndraḥ / vāg iti sarve devāḥ / tad etad indram eva sarve devā anuyanti /*

Recall that in the singing of the *anirukta-gāyatra*, the syllables *o vā* replace the underlying verse. The opening query thus pertains to the modalities of text and performance—when these syllables are substituted, what happens to the underlying verse (*rc*) and melody (*sāman*)? On the surface, the verse disappears and the melody is filled out with syllables, alternating between *o* and *vā*. But in terms of praxis, the verse does not simply disappear—it undergoes a process of mentalization. According to the codifications of the Śrauta Sūtras, as he sings *o vā* out loud in the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*, the Udgātṛ mentally (*manasā*) runs through the *rc* in his head (see ch.3, §2.3).

These details would have been well-known to all participants. And so the answer does not dwell on such technicalities but puts forth a series of correlations instead. In a manner that echoes the eightfold organization of the previous passages, the alternation of *o* and *vā* in the lyrics forms the framework for the correlations. Look at the eight syllables and their correlates schematically:

<u>1. o</u>	<u>2. vā</u>	<u>3. o</u>	<u>4. vā</u>
OM	Vāc	OM	Vāc
melody	verse	mind	voice
<u>5. o</u>	<u>6. vā</u>	<u>7. o</u>	<u>8. vā</u>
OM	Vāc	OM	Vāc
breath	voice	Indra	All the Gods

Taking for granted that *o* and *vā* correspond to OM and Vāc respectively, the passage adduces correlates for each of the eight syllables: OM is correlated with melody, mind, breath and Indra; Vāc with verse, voice (twice), and all the gods. In this correlative taxonomy OM evokes melody, mentalization, breath, and the king of the Devas; by contrast, Vāc evokes verse, speech, and the Devas as a group. In this intricate, lattice-like counterpoint of OM and Vāc, we find a perfect coalescence of ritual and interpretation, of liturgical praxis and its discursive construction. The song and its

interpretation share the same structure and mirror each other exactly. Catalyzed by this knowledge, the act of singing becomes an act of theological speculation.

§9.1 *OM's greatest hits*

But the reflections in response to the teacher's prompt have only just begun. The JUB now launches in to what can be best described as a "greatest hits" collection of ancestral lore on OM. Aphorisms, similes, and pithy turns-of-phrase—a great volume of inherited material now finds its way into the lesson. This is an occasion for passing on the established knowledge of the Jaiminīya branch, to be sure, but like all great "teaching moments" it is equally an occasion for formulating new insights. Like gems recut and placed in new settings, every borrowing from the earlier stratum is modified, elaborated, and recontextualized.

§9.2 *Baka Dālbhya and the power of just this syllable*

The inherited Jaiminīya discourses chiefly concern the relations between *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*. Recall that the Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīyas signaled OM's status as the preeminent and primordial *akṣara* through deixis ("*this syllable*;" *etad akṣaram*, JB 1.322) and restriction ("with *om* only;" *om ity eva*, JB 1.323). With these rhetorical strategies, the Jaiminīyas became the first Vedic thinkers to explicitly name OM as the sound at the heart of the ancient *akṣara* doctrine. The JUB combines these strategies from its parent text to introduce OM's greatest hits (JUB 1.9.3):

Just this syllable is *om*. By means of this syllable at a Soma contest, a man could force Indra away from his rival. Indeed, by means of this Baka Dālbhya forced Indra away from the Ājakeśins. Using only this one syllable *om* he led him along.³⁶

³⁶ [3] *om ity etad evākṣaram / etena vai saṃsave parasyendram vṛñjīta / etena ha vai tad bako dālbhya ājakeśinām indram vavrja om ity etenaivā nināya*

This appeal to older ritual models reinforces OM's credential as the only *akṣara* worth caring about. A "Soma contest" (*sāmsava*) is conducted in agonistic fashion: two sacrificers, each with a team of officiants, vie side-by-side to lure Indra to their sacrifice to the exclusion of the rival (Heesterman 1985, 29). The text recalls a time when Baka Dālbhya, an ancient ritualist with a long and complex biography (Koskikallio 1999; see further discussion in my ch. 11, §5.4), relied on OM to compel Indra to his sacrifice to the exclusion of the Ājakeśins (on this obscure family, see Keith 1912, II, 53). Consider the grandiosity of this claim: a single syllable, OM, suffices to summon the King of the Devas! However, the mere utterance of OM by anybody is not intended here; rather, the singer must be in the mold of Baka Dālbhya, capable of mastering the secrets that inform the syllable's use in performance. (We will encounter Baka Dālbhya again in the ChU; see my ch. 9, §7.)

§9.3 *The names of brahman*

Foremost among these secrets are the names of *brahman*, which are revealed in the next section. This section has a parallel in the Āraṇyaka of the Aitareyins, which Keith takes to be the primary source (AĀ 5.3.2; Keith 1909, 294n3).³⁷ As much as possible, I follow Keith's translation of this dense and difficult passage (JUB 1.9.5-1.10.1):

5. These are *brahman*'s names: Indra, imperishable action, immortality, the celestial realm, the limit of voice, the manifest, the greater, the whole, higher than everything, the light, order, truth, conquest, judgment, what cannot be denied, all that was before, the whole of Voice—giving milk, she overflows

³⁷ Keith closely compares and comments on our version, noting that its parallelism with the AĀ escaped Oertel's attention. It is interesting to note that the AĀ litany is addressed to the great Ṛgvedic "hymn" (*uktha*) of the Mahāvrata. This shows that when borrowing this Aitareya material, the Jaiminīyas consciously adapted it to their own ends, addressing their version of the litany to *brahman*.

this whole world, that way and this, [1.10.1] a flood with lightning, milking desires, imperishable...³⁸

This litany of names places *brahman* in close company with the imperishable *akṣara* and the flowing *vāc*. In common with these sources of sound and speech, *brahman* is at once manifold and holistic, multiform and uniform. The bovine embodiment of *Vāc*, streaming with milk, drives the ebb and flow of *brahman* between these extremes. Having named the unnameable, the passage adds still more descriptive epithets (JUB 1.10.1):

...joined with breath, the eye, the ear, manifest in voice, pervaded by mind, fierce of heart, the Brahmin-sustainer, rich in food, rain-purifier, cow-protecting, beyond the earth, having heat as a body, with the shelter of *Varuṇa*, with *Indra* as champion, having a thousand syllables, possessing ten thousand streams, milking immortality, she flows through all these worlds—so they say...³⁹

Interspersed among these mostly neuter epithets of *brahman* are several feminines, agreeing with the goddess *Voice*, the cosmic cow. This makes for some awkwardness in translation, but conveys in poetic terms the mingling of *vāc* and *brahman* that is the theme of this passage. Bringing to a close the list of names and epithets, the particle *iti*—"...so they say"—seems to acknowledge that the litany is drawn from a longstanding tradition of speculation on ultimate reality and the font of sound and speech. Following Keith, we may surmise that the *Jaiminīyas* drew inspiration from the speculations of the *Aitareyins*.

³⁸ [5] *tasyaitāni nāmāni / indraḥ karmākṣitiḥ / amṛtaṃ vyomānto vācaḥ / bahir bhūyas sarvam / sarvasmād uttaram jyotiḥ / ṛtam satyaṃ vijigyānam / vivācanam aprativācyam / pūrvaṃ sarvaṃ sarvā vāk / sarvam idam api dhenuḥ pivate / parāg arvāk / [1] sapruk salilaṃ kāmādughākṣitiḥ /*

³⁹ *prāṇasaṃhitam cakṣuś śrotram / vākprabhūtam manasā vyāptam / hṛdayogam brāhmaṇabhṛtram / annaśubhaṃ varṣapavitram / gobhagam pṛthivyuparam / tapastanu varuṇavavyatanam / indrasreṣṭham sahasrākṣaram / ayutadhāram amṛtaṃ duhānā sarvān imān lokān abhivikṣaratīti /*

§9.4 Revisiting the simile of the leaves and the pin

The composers of the JUB now return to OM with a familiar refrain from their own Brāhmaṇa, comparing OM's penetration of the three worlds to a pin's perforation of leaves (JUB 1.10.2-6):

2. This syllable *om* is truth. On it the waters rest, on the waters the earth, on the earth these worlds. 3. Just as leaves are perforated by a pin, so these worlds are perforated by this syllable. 4. That syllable, having penetrated her,⁴⁰ flows tenfold, a hundredfold, a thousandfold, ten-thousandfold, a millionfold, many millionfold, ten-millionfold, a hundred-millionfold.⁴¹

"This syllable OM is truth" (*tad etat satyam akṣaram yad om iti*) is borrowed from JB 1.323, where the exact same diction appears. In the Brāhmaṇa, the Devas brandished the syllable as a weapon in their war with the Asuras; here in the JUB, however, the truth of OM establishes it as an all-encompassing foundation, the bedrock on which the whole of the cosmos rests: waters, earth and the three worlds. Coming hard on the list of *brahman*'s names, one of which is "this whole" (*sarvam idam*), this claim to cosmic holism would seem to imply the closeness, verging on identity, between the *akṣara* OM and *brahman*. The Brāhmaṇa version of the classic simile explicitly correlates OM with "this whole world" (*idam sarvam*) (JB 2.10, cf. my ch. 6, §3.8):

For this syllable is indeed this whole world; just as leaves are perforated by a pin, so these worlds are perforated by this syllable. This syllable, having penetrated, makes Virāj flow indeed tenfold, a hundredfold, a thousandfold...⁴²

In its Brāhmaṇa setting, the simile serves a discourse on adding OM to the melody so as to make the meter Virāj—like Vāc, conceived as a cosmic cow—flow; in much the same way, the JUB uses the simile

⁴⁰ "Her" (*imām*, in Fujii's edition) seems to refer back to the feminine deity alluded to in the list of *brahman*'s names, the goddess Voice. Oertel, however, reads *imān*, taking it to refer to "these (worlds)." In favor of Fujii's reading, the JB iteration of this simile also involves the feminine deity Virāj aka Voice (although not in this exact collocation).

⁴¹ [2] *tad etat satyam akṣaram yad om iti / tasminn āpaḥ pratiṣṭhitāḥ / apsu pṛthivī pṛthivyām ime lokāḥ / [3] yathā sūcyā palāśāni saṃtṛṇṇāni syuḥ / evam etenākṣarenme lokās saṃtṛṇṇāḥ / [4] tad imām atividhya daśadhā kṣarati / śatadhā sahasradhāyutadhā prayutadhā niyutadhārbudadhā nyarbudadhā /*

⁴² *etat dha vā idam sarvam akṣaram / yathā sūcyā palāśāni saṃtṛṇṇāni syur evam etenākṣareṇeme lokās saṃtṛṇṇā / daśadhā vā etad atividhyemām kṣarati, śatadhemām, sahasradhāmūm /*

to express the flowing of bovine Vāc and the holism of *brahman*. Note how the JUB amplifies OM's potency: terms like "one hundred-fold, one-thousand fold" (as in the JB) are not enough—here, OM flows "a millionfold, many millionfold, ten-millionfold, a hundred-millionfold" (*prayutadhā niyutadhārbudadhā nyarbudadhā*). One senses here the composers' desire to outdo their Brāhmaṇa forbears.

The innovative adaptation of this traditional material continues with a simile not found in the Brāhmaṇa (JUB 1.10.5-6):

5. As a flood flowing out ever further becomes wider, in just the same way, this syllable flows ever further and becomes wider. 6. Now these very worlds are stacked upwards, one on the other. And these consist of thirteen months.⁴³

Building on the image of OM as a pin penetrating and ultimately exceeding the worlds, this simile compares the syllable to a flood that covers more and more ground as it flows. Such an image aptly conveys the attitude of these Jaiminīya thinkers towards OM: it is limitless, ever-expanding, uncontained. In the cosmology assumed here, the three worlds lie stacked one on top of the other, "thirteen months" high—thirteen months is one reckoning of the Vedic year.⁴⁴ In exceeding the series of large numbers, the three worlds and the year, OM exceeds numerical, spatial and temporal conceptions of magnitude, that is, it transcends all cosmological metrics.

⁴³ [5] *yathaughō viṣyandamānaḥ paraḥparovarīyān bhavati / evam evaitad akṣaram paraḥparovarīyo bhavati / [6] te haite lokā ūrdhvā eva śritāḥ / ima eva trayodaśamāsāḥ /*

⁴⁴ When mentioning the "thirteen months," the composers of the JUB may have also had Virāj in mind (TS 5.6.7.1-2): "The year has thirteen months. The Virāj is the year" (*trāyodaśa māsāḥ saṃvatsarāḥ saṃvatsaró virājī*). That Virāj is included in this nexus of relations suggests a further resonance with the JB, where Virāj is explicitly discussed.

§9.5 *Ṛṥṥṥu Vainya, the Vrātyas, and the cosmic foundation*

A short anecdote that follows also speaks to OM's capacity to encompass the cosmos in its entirety. It recounts an exchange between an ancient sage, Ṛṥṥṥu Vainya, and a band of wandering, antinomial para-Brahmins, the *vrātyas* (see Falk 1986). This excerpt memorializes an agonistic exchange of knowledge, what in other contexts has been called a *brahmodya*, and what Renou has identified as one of the core motifs that characterize *upaniṣad* as a genre (see §1 above). The Upaniṣadic teacher Yājñavalkya was a master of such match-ups, and from accounts of his exploits, we learn that the stakes could be high: you might stand to win a thousand cows with horns wrapped in gold, or else have your head burst to pieces from the mental strain (cf. Calasso 2014, 23-44). In this case, we know little of the context—only the question and the answer (JUB 1.10.9-11):

9. Once Ṛṥṥṥu Vainya posed this question to the divine Vrātyas: "They say that the sun is a post supporting the sky; that the sun, whose foundation is the earth, is in the atmosphere; and that the earths, which carry so much, rest on the waters. So tell me: on what do the great waters stand?" 10. They replied: "Truly they do say that the sun is a sky-supporting post; that the sun, whose foundation is the earth, is in the atmosphere; and that the earths, which carry so much, rest on the waters. On truth the great waters stand!" 11. Truth is just this syllable *om*. It is *this* on which the waters stand.⁴⁵

This image of a solar post, spanning earth and heaven, resonates with that of OM as a pointed implement pervading the three worlds. Ṛṥṥṥu Vainya asks: if the sun supports the sky, the earth supports the sun, and the waters support the earth, then what supports the waters? Truth, the Vrātyas respond, and this is the end of the story, as far as tradition goes. But the composers of the JUB see an opportunity to add their own conclusion, revealing a new dimension to the tale. Whereas the Vrātyas let truth stand as the last word, the Jaiminīyas have discovered something beyond truth, something

⁴⁵ [9] *tad dha ṛṥṥṥur vainyo divyān vrātyān papraccha / sthūṇām divastambhanīm sūryam āhur antarikṣe sūryaḥ ṛṥṥṥivīpratiṣṥṥhopsu bhūmīś śīśyire bhūribhārāḥ kiṃ svin mahīr adhitiṣṥṥhanty āpa iti / [10] te ha pratyūcuḥ / sthūṇām eva divastambhanīm sūryam āhur antarikṣe sūryaḥ ṛṥṥṥivīpratiṣṥṥhopsu bhūmīś śīśyire bhūribhārās satyam mahīr adhitiṣṥṥhanty āpa iti / [11] om ity etad evākṣaram satyam / tad etad āpo 'dhitiṣṥṥhanti /*

that serves the same function of supporting the waters, earth, sun, and sky. In Jaiminīya hermeneutics, "truth" (*satyam*) is one of the names of *brahman*, as well as a correlate of OM. Once again, OM exceeds the measure of the cosmos, and stands revealed as the true cosmic foundation.

§9.6 Answering the teacher's prompt, fulfilling every desire

I understand the sequence of reflections analyzed above (§9-§9.5) as a lengthy answer to what I have called the "teacher's prompt." This discourse on OM's transcendence stems from a response to a technical question about Sāmavedic ritual performance: what happens to the *ṛc* and the *sāman* when you sing the syllables *o vā*? The answer is a chain of correlations. Retracing the links in this chain, one finds that the trajectory moves from a discrete liturgical context (the singing of monosyllables in the *anirukta-gāyatra* melody) to an all-encompassing hermeneutic discovery: that OM is the sonic foundation on which the entire cosmos rests. This is all in a day's work for the composers of these texts and their students. After all is said and done, the stunningly expansive knowledge formulated here has a practical application: the participants depend on it for their sacrificial vocation. Accordingly, once the "answer" has been given, the discussion returns to its starting point, explaining the implications for ritual performance (JUB 1.10.7):

He who, knowing thus, sings the *udgīthā*—that very man passes beyond these worlds. By means of this syllable *om* he places that sun in his mouth. Truly this syllable is the sun. He attains the whole, he wins the whole—for him no desire whatsoever remains unfulfilled, if he knows thus.⁴⁶

When he sings the *udgītha* in full possession of these teachings, the singer's performance has soteriological effects: fueled by the cosmological transcendence of OM, the song conveys him "beyond these worlds." Again, we are reminded that in the correlative worldview of the Brāhmaṇas and early

⁴⁶ [7] *sa ya evaṃ vidvān udgāyati / sa __ evaitān lokān ativahati / om ity etenākṣareṇāmum ādītyam mukha ādhatte / eṣa ha vā etad akṣaram /* [8] *tasya sarvam āptam bhavati sarvaṃ jitam / na hāsya kaś cana kāmo 'nāpto bhavati ya evaṃ veda /*

Upaniṣads, knowledge and action are intertwined: for the "one who knows" and then *acts* on that knowledge, anything is possible, from the fulfillment of every desire to union with *brahman*.

The influence of the parent text is evident even in this conclusion, for the solar correlations are adapted from the Brāhmaṇa (JB 1.322): " This syllable is that sun up there...When he begins with *om*, he places that sun at the beginning/in his mouth."⁴⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, the JB brings the sun into the discussion in order to elucidate the recitational practice known as the *ādi*: the insertion of OM at the start of the song has affinities with rising of the sun. The JUB, for its part, recontextualizes the Brāhmaṇa statement to explain the soteriological effects of ritual performance on the patron's fate after death. (As we will see below, the sun/*āditya* and the solar realm are frequently invoked in the JUB's discussions of immortality and *brahman*.)⁴⁸

§9.7 *Compiling the greatest hits of OM*

Summing up, the passages we have been discussing represent the deliberate compilation of material from an array of teachers, narratives, and conversations. (In this respect, the JUB resembles most Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads, which serve as compendia for the secret insights of the Vedic branches on a variety of topics.) The compilers begin with an unattributed question about singing *o vā*, briefly acknowledge Baka Dālbhya's use of OM in the *saṃsava*, consider a list of "the names of *brahman*," rehash the imagery and doctrines of Dīrghatamas's Riddle Hymn, and recontextualize aphorisms and

⁴⁷ *asau vā āditya etad akṣaram/[...]/sa yad om ity ādatte 'mum evaitad ādityaṃ mukha ādhatte*

⁴⁸ For this reason, the literal translation of *mukhe* "in his mouth" seems preferable for the JUB: when he sings OM, the singer vocalizes a correlate of the sun, and therefore places the sun itself "in his mouth," that is, he embodies the sun and provides the patron with access to this solar realm. On the other hand, it may also make sense to speak of placing the sun "at the beginning," since the JUB *udgītha* begins with a non-nasal variant of OM: *o vā...*

similes from three different passages of the JB—such are OM's greatest hits as recorded in the Jaiminīya branch.

§9.8 *Summing up: reflections of the Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa, part one*

This concludes the first part of our foray into the Jaiminīya contributions to the esoteric turn in Vedic discourse. We have seen so far that the composers of the JUB synthesize and integrate a great mass of inherited lore on OM, most notably by borrowing aphorisms, similes, and diction wholesale from the earlier textual stratum of the Jaiminīya branch, JB. The JUB also features an extended cycle of stories on the motif of Prajāpati's pressing the Vedas to find their essence. These narratives echo not only the JB but also the Brāhmaṇa of the Aitareya branch, which advances OM as the common bond between the Vedas, the gods, and the three worlds. Above all, the Jaiminīyas reiterate their Brāhmaṇa's pioneering insight that the primordial *akṣara* of the ṚV and other early Vedic texts has a sound and a name: it is OM. They push the Brāhmaṇa material as far as it can go, stressing OM's close connection with *brahman*, the all-pervading principle of wholeness, truth, and speech. In its reception, this material is transformed to suit the main purpose of the JUB, which is to formulate and transmit teachings on the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*. As such, certain lyrics of this *sāman*—the repeated monosyllables *o vā*—inform the rhetorical structure of many passages, bringing an emphasis on the mutual relation of OM and Vāc, who are also known here as "divinities" (*devatā*): the apotheosized OM and the goddess Voice. As a result, the composers of the JUB manage to build a traditional framework for their arguments to come, a foundation that will support their innovative soteriology in much the same way that OM is said to support the three worlds. In the next chapter we will explore the JUB's soteriological teachings, which show how singing OM can propel a man across the three worlds and into the midst of the sun, where he vies for immortality.

§10 *Summing up: reflections on OM in the Āraṇyakas*

In this chapter I have tried to blaze a path through these wilderness texts in order to reveal their crucial contributions to OM's construction. The Āraṇyakas textualize a decisive phase in OM's emergence as a sacred syllable: already individuated and exalted thanks to Brāhmaṇa authors, OM stands on the brink of establishing its preeminence not only within specific branches but within the Vedic corpus as a whole. Nevertheless, the outcome varies according to branch and liturgical specialization. Sāmavedic and Yajurvedic theologians build a case for OM in the Āraṇyaka period, while Ṛgvedic theologians dismantle it.

Among the Ṛgvedic Aitareyins, OM teeters on the brink of apotheosis—recall that the AB was the earliest Brāhmaṇa to exalt it with the $a + u + m$ equation—then falls like a stone. Picking up on the AB lexical analysis of OM as "yes," the AĀ holds that *om* and *na* are two extremes to be avoided. Instead they teach a path of moderation—a "measured" approach suited to the metrical nature of Ṛgvedic mantras. These Ṛgvedic thinkers diligently apply their Brāhmaṇa's hermeneutic of phonetic analysis, but with a different result: instead of OM, they exalt one of its constituent phonemes, the "sound *a*" (*akāra*). In their Āraṇyaka, the Aitareyins regard *a* (not OM!) as the unitary realization of the entire Vedic corpus, the preeminent syllable, the essence of speech, and the embodiment of *brahman*. And they deny OM a place in their ensuing metaphysical and soteriological reflections: the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* never mentions OM. (Although it must be admitted that the sound *a* is likewise discarded, joining the ranks of other syllables which tried to outstrip OM but fell short.)

The Yajurvedic Āraṇyakas express more enthusiasm for OM. The Kāṭhakas, who never touched on OM in their Saṃhitā, reflect on OM in their fragmentary Brāhmaṇa in the context of beginning daily recitation with the syllable (see below). In their Āraṇyaka, they integrate the syllable into their reflections on the *pravargya* rite. In keeping with their Yajurvedic sensibility, they call the syllable in

the *vyāhṛti* mantra the "truth of voice"—that is, it serves to authorize ritual actions. The Kāṭhikas also provide important testimony about OM in the Adhvaryu's *sāman*, where it stands alongside other syllables as the lyrics of unexpressed songs in praise of the sun. I argued that OM in the Kāṭhā must be understood against the broader theological background of the *pravargya*, where solar themes, *sāman* singing, and ascension to heaven all converge in an arcane set of soteriological teachings.

For their part, the Taittirīyas combine their own traditions with appropriated material from the Kāṭhikas to fashion an Āraṇyaka presentation of OM and its significance. Reproducing a KāṭhB passage, the TĀ codifies the utterance of OM at the beginning of daily recitation, the *svādhyāya*. (This has important consequences for post-Vedic recitational conventions, where the use of OM to introduce the recitation of any and all sacred texts becomes widespread.) In a clear bid to appropriate OM's growing prestige for the Yajurvedic milieu, the composers of the passage claim OM in this capacity as a *yajus*, the characteristic utterance of the YV. Significantly, the passage refers to earlier Taittirīya traditions when it exalts OM as the unitary embodiment of the triple Veda and as the "supreme syllable." This integration of OM into the doctrines of *vāc* and *akṣara* is made explicit by the quotation of a verse from the Ṛgvedic Riddle Hymn. At this point, it should be quite clear that Dīrghatamas's composition serves as a charter document for theologians who seek to foster OM's emergence.

Finally, the Sāmavedic reflections on OM in the Āraṇyaka period are too voluminous to be dealt with in a single chapter. The fact that the Sāmavedins have *so much* to say about the syllable is itself significant, adding more weight to my argument that these singers play a decisive and influential role in OM's emergence. Under the heading of Sāmavedic "Āraṇyaka," the primary work is the Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīyas: like other Āraṇyakas of the period, the JUB focuses predominantly on a single ritual context or arcane character, the unexpressed *gāyatra* melody. (However, to the extent that the JUB also stresses metaphysical discourses and personal soteriology, the work has clear affinities

with the burgeoning Upaniṣadic genre.) The Jaiminīya construction of OM in this phase serves both to synthesize inherited Brāhmaṇa material and to integrate these stories, aphorisms, and similes into innovative contexts. I have discussed at length the ways in which the JUB recontextualizes the Brāhmaṇa reflections on OM, *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman* to suit its focus on the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*. Above all, the composers of the JUB draw on their branch traditions to present OM and Vāc as the divine made audible in Sāmavedic performance. But to what end? As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, the main concern of the JUB is to teach its innovative soteriological doctrine: how singing with OM can transport a man through the sun towards immortality.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SONG AS SOTERIOLOGY: INTO THE SUN WITH OM

Think of this Āraṇyaka period as an untamed wilderness, where the Vedic branches grow from their Brāhmaṇa roots and shoot off in different directions. When it comes to cultivating OM, we saw in the previous chapter that the Aitareyins let their traditions wither, opting to foster the growth of another syllable; the Taittirīyas and Kāṭhakas, for their part, cultivated OM with some enthusiasm, but only as an offshoot of their main discourses. The Jaiminīyas, however, took their Brāhmaṇa's considerable teachings on OM and produced a harvest of speculations on the syllable unmatched by any other branch of the Vedic family tree. We have already examined the first part of this harvest, focusing on the ways that the JUB reformulated and recontextualized earlier material. This chapter examines the second part, revealing something new sprouting up from Jaiminīya roots: an innovative soteriology of song and sound with OM at the center. In what follows, I will show how the soteriological reflections of the JUB construct OM in ways that have a lasting influence on the syllable in the Upaniṣads and beyond.

§1 Vedic soteriologies

The middle to late Vedic period is a transformative period for religious thought, when the older conceptions of life and death in the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas show signs of being in flux, gradually sharpening into the meticulously articulated eschatologies and soteriologies of the Upaniṣads and later texts. These articulations acknowledge the growing importance of doctrines previously unattested in the Brahmanical milieu: renunciation, karma, rebirth, and non-violence. The longstanding debate over how such doctrines find their way into Vedic texts remains contentious. One side stresses what Jan

Heesterman has termed the "orthogenetic" development of these ideas from strictly Brahmanical antecedents (Heesterman 1985, 39-40; see also Biardeau & Malamoud 1976; Tull 1989), while the other side emphasizes the contributions of non-Brahmanical religious currents (Dumont 1960; Bronkhorst 2007).¹ Recently, Matthew Sayers has offered an alternative to this stale dichotomy. Rather than focus so acutely on Brahmanical versus non-Brahmanical, Sayers instead speaks of two soteriologies with deep roots in the religions of ancient South Asia, and an ongoing tension between the "heaven-oriented soteriology" of the ritualist tradition and the "liberation-oriented soteriology" of the renunciatory tradition (Sayers 2013, 140). One well-known reflex of this tension is the Upaniṣadic teaching of the two paths: the ritualistic "path of the ancestors" (*pitṛyāna*) leads to the moon and rebirth, while the renunciatory "path of the gods" (*devayāna*) leads to the sun and liberation.

As Fujii has shown, the Jaiminīya tradition furnishes significant early testimony on the prehistory of the "two paths" concept. Jaiminīya texts allude to a single path leading to immortality: having shed his mortal body at death, a man ascends along this route, assembling a new body which he will integrate with a divine self in heaven (Fujii 2011). The duality of this journey becomes evident only in the final outcome: the successful aspirant is reborn in the sun with a new heavenly form, while the failed aspirant is cast back to earth. Thus the Jaiminīyas are decidedly "heaven-oriented" in that their soteriology is based on ritual and strives above all for immortality. And yet they can also be described as "liberation-oriented," in that they predicate the winning of immortality on the shedding of the human body and release from earthly existence. On the whole, we find in the Jaiminīya milieu an innovative soteriology rooted in ritual but anticipating some of the goals of the later renunciatory tradition.

¹ For a summary of the debate with further references, see Kaelber 1989, 101-124; and Olivelle 1992, 20-21.

§1.1 *The Jaiminīya soteriology of song*

In formulating its soteriological and eschatological teachings, the JUB carries forward very old ideas about life, death, and the aims of sacrifice. The germ of these ideas is summed up in the oft-quoted Ṛgvedic verse (8.48.3): "We have drunk the *soma*; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods" (trans. Jamison & Brereton).² It is through the Soma sacrifice that one transcends death, enters the light, and communes with the divine. The same idea can be found in post-Ṛgvedic texts, where sacrifice remains the primary soteriological strategy. In such texts, the goal of sacrifice continues to be immortality or something closely akin—often "heaven" or the "heavenly world" (*sva*, *svargaloka*)—along with the usual material goals: strength, acclaim, progeny, prosperity, nourishment, cows, and so on (Witzel 2004, lxi-lxii; Keith 1925, 463). In this regard, the JUB is quite conservative, for its fundamental faith in sacrifice remains unshaken; there is nary a glimmer in this text of sacrificial critique. The innovation of the JUB is to frame this quest for immortality through sacrifice exclusively in terms of the Sāmavedic liturgy: the Jaiminīyas teach a soteriology of song based on the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*. The Jaiminīyas also innovate by encoding a detailed narrative of this heavenly ascent in their liturgy as well as in their interpretive texts: singer and sacrificer depart from the sacrificial ground, traverse the three worlds, and enter into the sun, where a final interview with a mysterious figure decides the outcome. Every step of the way, it is OM that propels them forward.

In this chapter, I present the Jaiminīya soteriology of song from several different perspectives. I begin with a close reading of a story that deals with soteriological themes: how the gods warded off death by taking refuge in OM. I argue that this literary construction of the soteriology taught in the JUB serves as a model throughout the text. Next, I consider the primary liturgical context for the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*: this is the "outside praise-song for the purified (*soma*)" (*bahiṣpavamānastotra*) and its

² *ápāma sómam amṛtā abhūmāganma jyótir ávidāma devān /*

associated rites as codified in the *Jaiminīya Śrauta Sūtra*. This sequence of gestures, mantras, and song is the most important of several rites in the Jaiminīya liturgy that enact an ascent to the sun in search of immortality, constituting what I call the "ritual narrative" of the Jaiminīyas in this period.

Examining the praxis in detail illuminates the interplay between song and soteriology that is so crucial to OM's construction.

Returning to the JUB proper, I examine the discursive construction of this heavenly ascent with OM, exploring passages that reflect on stages of the journey: climbing the cosmic tree, flying on wings of sound, and entering through the door of the sun. In these excerpts, the composers of the JUB regard syllables of the lyric (notably the pairing *o vā*) as corresponding to particular stages. As the singer progresses through the song, he and the sacrificer travel higher and higher until they reach the threshold of immortality, where the utterance of OM propels them into the sun. Then I dwell on the ultimate trial in this quest for immortality: an enigmatic exchange with a divine figure, in which the sacrificer must prove his mastery of Jaiminīya doctrines about eschatology and the nature of action. The fundamental precept concerns the unity of human and divine agency—there is no difference between the human seeker and the god who grants immortality. Upon proving himself, the sacrificer claims the heavenly self that he has fashioned through a lifetime of sacrifice; he is reborn in heaven.

Finally, I take a broader perspective to account for the prominence of the category of "unexpressedness" (*aniruktatva*) in the Jaiminīya construction of OM. I argue that what is *anirukta* in the liturgy derives its potency precisely from the fact of its being indistinct and undetermined. Like Prajāpati, the divine paragon of this category, the *anirukta* cannot be limited, circumscribed, or ever fully known. This helps explain why the Jaiminīyas have chosen an unexpressed *sāman* as the main topic of the JUB: with the words of the verse obscured by OM and other syllables, the performance of the *anirukta-gāyatra* melody evokes ineffability and transcendence. I also argue that OM in

particular—multiform but shared by all liturgies alike—is the perfect realization of Prajāpati's unexpressedness. This leads me to conclude that among the Jaiminīyas, the emergence of OM and the ascendancy of Prajāpati are closely parallel and mutually reinforcing.

§2 *Taking refuge in OM*

Let's begin by examining how soteriological concerns inform a cycle of stories in Jaiminīya traditions: the tale of how Prajāpati and the Devas warded off Death by taking refuge in OM. The Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīyas tells a story about Prajāpati's battle with "Death" (*mṛtyu*; JB 2.69-70). According to Heesterman, who has made this vignette a touchstone of his theory of the violent origins of Vedic ritual, "the interesting part of the story lies in the way Prajāpati overcomes Death, namely through the revelatory vision of (numerical) equivalence..." Prajāpati's decisive advantage comes from his mastery of the secret bonds between the elements of the sacrifice: verses, melodies, and meters. "Prajāpati's breaking the deadlock of the lasting contest with Death is the ritualists' breakthrough from the vicious circle of contest and threatening ruin...[I]t proclaims the monistic doctrine of sacrifice that invalidates the agonistic sacrificial contest" (Heesterman 1993, 3). Whether or not one accepts Heesterman's take on the history of Vedic sacrifice, the central message of the narrative is clear enough: Death is a problem, and the sacrifice, embodied by Prajāpati, is the way to overcome it. Death and what to do about it—an all-too-human quandary, from which even the great creator god himself is not immune.

There are echoes of this contest in a story from JUB, one that we might regard as a charter myth for the text's soteriological doctrine of singing to attain immortality. In it, several groups of gods—the Vasus, the Rudras, and the Ādityas—are plagued by Death. They approach their father Prajāpati and complain (JUB 1.18.2): "Why did you create us if you planned to create Death, evil, right

after us?"³ Again, Prajāpati's solution involves an element of sacrifice. He tells them to bring together the various meters (*chandas*; JUB 1.18.3): "Enter these, each of you in your own place. Then you will shield yourselves from Death, from evil."⁴ The gods dutifully bring together the meters and "enter" them, where they remain concealed. But Death discovers them in their hiding place (JUB 1.18.8-9):

8. Death discovered them in this verse with no tone. Just as someone might perceive the jewel-thread in a jewel, so he perceived them. 9. They entered tone. Since they were in tone, he did not discover them. But by the noise of tone, he went after them.⁵

This striking passage tells how the gods tried—and failed—to hide away from Death by successively taking refuge in liturgical elements that are at the center of Jaiminīya hermeneutics: first, in the meters of the verse (*rc*), and next, in the melody (*sāman*). A *sāman* has a musical character referred to as "tone" (*svara*); in technical terms, *svara* is the movement and contour of pitch that makes a melody (Howard 1977, 38). The verse has no tone (*asvara*), so there is no risk of being overheard by Death; still, he manages to detect them as one would discern a string running through a jewel. From the Sāmavedic perspective, metrical verses, such as those collected in the ṚV or the *ārcika* sections of the SV, are never part of the liturgy proper—they serve only to structure the melodies that come alive in performance. Hence, the metrical verses are threads that connect the gems of the Sāmavedic liturgical repertoire. Their next refuge is the musical tone (*svara*) to which the verse is sung. Although Death does not visually recognize the Devas hidden in *svara*, the audible "noise" (*ghoṣa*) is a dead giveaway.

Having tried the verse and the melody without success, the gods' final resort is OM (JUB 1.18.10):

³ *kasmā u no [']sṛṣṭhā mṛtyuñ cen naḥ pāpmanam anvavasrakṣyann āsitheti /*

⁴ *tāni yathāyatanam praviśata / tato mṛtyunā pāpmanā vyāvartsyatheti /*

⁵ ...[8] *tān asyām ṛcy asvarāyām mṛtyur nirajānāt / yathā maṇau maṇisūtram pariṣāsyed evam / [9] te svaram praviśan / tān svare sato na nirajānāt / svarasya tu ghoṣeṇānvait /*

Om—together they climbed onto this syllable. The threefold knowledge is this very syllable. Taking refuge in the immortality that burns yonder, from then on they shielded themselves from Death, from evil.⁶

Recall that in one of the JUB stories about Prajāpati and the Devas discussed above (ch. 7, §7), the sap of OM became "heat" (*tapas*; JUB 1.8.8-9); in the present story, OM is the "immortality that burns" (*yad...amṛtaṃ tapati*) and provides a refuge for the gods. While the *ṛc* and *sāman* failed individually, OM as the compressed essence of "threefold knowledge" shields the Devas from Death. We have seen how OM's tri-Vedic unity is central to OM's discursive construction in the Brāhmaṇas. Here, the composers of the JUB explicitly integrate this idea into their soteriology of song.

§2.1 *Singing for two: re-enacting the gods' escape*

In keeping with the familiar structure of these stories, once the core teaching has been epitomized, the conclusion leaves the narrative frame and describes the effect of ritual performance informed by such a teaching. Having acquired the gods' secret knowledge through this story of finding refuge from Death in OM, the officiants are now capable of re-enacting the mythic narrative and reaping the benefits. Note that this re-enactment is conceived as an ascent: by climbing onto OM, both the singer who knows and the one for whom he sings can escape death and achieve immortality. The conclusion runs (JUB 1.18.11):

In this way he who knows thus, once he has climbed onto this very syllable *om*, and once he has taken refuge in the immortality that burns yonder, from then on shields himself from Death, from evil. The same goes for the one for whom such a knowledgeable man sings the *udgītha*.⁷

⁶ [10] *ta om iti / etad evākṣaraṃ samārohan / etad evākṣaran trayī vidyā / yad ado [']mṛtaṃ tapati tat prapadya tato mṛtyunā pāpmanā vyāvartanta*

⁷ [11] *evam evaivaṃ vidvān om ity etad evākṣaraṃ samāruhya yad ado [']mṛtaṃ tapati tat prapadya tato mṛtyunā pāpmanā vyāvartate / atho yasyaivaṃ vidvān udgāyati /*

The language here speaks to a tension running through *śrauta* ritual culture: Vedic ritual is work-for-hire, and the priests put their know-how to work for their patron, the "sacrificer" (*yajamāna*), to whom the spiritual and material rewards of sacrifice accrue. In the typical Brāhmaṇa formulation, the patron wins cows, progeny, long life and a place in heaven through the priests' efforts. While there are opportunities for priests to act in their own interests—and sometimes even *against* the interests of their patron (Keith 1925, 463)—such action goes against the grain of *śrauta* culture, which is predicated on the patronage of wealthy, non-priestly sponsors. It is interesting to note that this excerpt, which treats not material rewards but personal salvation, explicitly addresses the soteriological interests of patron and priest alike: "knowing thus," both sacrificer and singer shield themselves from Death with OM. This anticipates a trend in the subsequent Upaniṣads, which conceive of Vedic ritualism not merely as work-for-hire but also as a path to personal salvation.

§2.3 *A charter myth for singing with OM*

I referred to this story as a kind of charter myth for the JUB because it evokes a primeval antecedent for singing with OM as a soteriological strategy. Although couched in a traditional narrative framework, this core teaching of the JUB constitutes a bold, even revolutionary, claim: the old standbys of Vedic sacrifice, the *ṛc* and *sāman*, no longer do the job; only the singing of OM in the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* will truly ensure the participants' salvation. In this way, the story of Death and the Devas establishes a mythical authority for the exhaustive and often technical exposition of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* that makes up the bulk of this seminal text.

§2.4 Immortality and ascension

We now turn to the sections of the JUB that explain exactly how singing with OM propels a singer and his patron towards immortality. "Immortality" is most often my direct translation for *amṛtam* in Vedic (as above 1.18.10), but I shall also use it as an umbrella term to express the suite of Jaiminīya ideas about overcoming death, ascending to the heavenly world, and escaping through the sun. As we take up passages that deal with these ideas, we will assemble a much more detailed picture of how the composers of the JUB conceived of immortality, eschatology, and soteriology; and how their reflections along these lines contributed to the construction of discursive OM. Overall, the picture is quite coherent: the Jaiminīyas conceive of immortality as a destination, a lofty place beyond the door of the sun to which a mysterious figure grants access. To make this journey, a man must shake off the encumbrance of his body and ascend through the mediation of a qualified specialist, the Udgāṭṛ. And the special competence that allows the specialist to succeed is his knowledge of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*, a song known also as "bodiless" and "endless" (see §4.1, 4.3 below). Through his song, the Udgāṭṛ enables the Yajamāna to climb aboard the syllable OM and reach his destination beyond Death, just as Prajāpati and the Devas have done before him.

§3 Ascending to heaven in the Jaiminīya Soma liturgy

Ascension to the heavenly world is an overarching theme of the Jaiminīya liturgy.⁸ As I have shown elsewhere (Gerety forthcoming c), there are numerous rites within the Jaiminīya liturgy that enact cosmic ascents. Together, these rites constitute what we might call a "ritual narrative" of the Jaiminīyas: the experts of the Jaiminīya SV guide the sacrificer on a dangerous ascent and assure his

⁸ Indeed, ascent in the sense of expanding towards a higher goal is encoded in the very structure of the liturgy itself, which uses verses of *increasing* metrical length and songs assembled from an *increasing* number of repetitions (*stoma*) as it unfolds (cf. Howard 1977, 19).

access to the heavenly world through the door of the sun. The most explicit enactment of this ascent comes in the early morning of the final day of the *agniṣṭoma*, during the rite that leads up to the singing of the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*. This *stotra* is the first of twelve that the Sāmavedic officiants sing on this day, and it corresponds to the first of three pressings of *soma* that take place in the morning, midday, and afternoon. The *bahiṣpavamānastotra* is based on nine rounds of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*; therefore this *stotra* provides the liturgical context *par excellence* for the material that the JUB endeavors to explain. As we will see below and in the rest of this chapter, speculations inspired by this *stotra*, its characteristic "unexpressed" (*anirukta*) mode of singing, and its accompanying rites permeate the JUB. Accordingly, I will briefly sketch the so-called "*bahiṣpavamāna* ritual," as codified by the *Jaiminīya Śrauta Sūtra* (JŚS 1.10-11; Fujii 1986). No other rite in the Jaiminīya liturgy crystallizes as effectively what it means to "sing oneself to the other world" (Wilke & Moebus 2011, 440) with OM. In this section I rely heavily on the translations and penetrating analysis of Masato Fujii.

§3.1 *The bahiṣpavamāna ritual*

Before dawn, the Adhvaryu—whose name can be analyzed etymologically as 'path-finder' (Witzel, pers. comm.)—leads a procession made up of the three Sāmavedic priests, the Yajamāna, and the Brahman. Their manner of movement is "serpentine" (*sarpaṇam*): each man places his hand on the shoulder of the one ahead so as to form an unbroken chain. They cling to one another and stoop, like a group of mountain climbers making a difficult ascent (see Fujii 1986, 4; cf. JB 1.85). Crouching, they advance slowly eastward. Along the way, each man pauses at the *āhavanīya* fire on the northern altar (*uttaravedi*) to make a pair of offerings (*pravṛtahoma*) with mantras (JŚS 1.10.9-10, trans. Fujii, with changes):

May I be agreeable to Voice, agreeable to the lord of voice! O goddess Voice,
what is sweet in your voice, place that in me. *Svāhā* to Sarasvatī!

Let the god Sun protect me from the demons in the sky, Wind from those in the atmosphere, Fire from those on the earth. *Svāhā*⁹

These mantras suit the context: the singers invoke the sweetness of the goddess Voice for the songs they are about to sing, and the protection of the divine triad of Sun, Wind, and Fire as they ascend.¹⁰

Next they turn "northwards" or rather, in keeping with the ascensional motif, "upwards"—the word *udañc* carries both meanings (JŚS 1.10.11). Their destination lies outside the great altar (*mahāvedi*) and enclosure that demarcate the sacred space; hence the name of the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*, "outside praise-song for the purified (*soma*)" (Fujii 1986, 3). Just outside the northeastern boundary of the sacrificial ground is a large pit (*cātvāla*), formed where dirt has been excavated to construct the main altar. They seat themselves along the rim of the pit on grass strewn beforehand: the Sāmavedic officiants sit in the center (Udgātṛ facing north, Prastotṛ facing east, Pratihartṛ facing west; JŚS 1.11.1-3), with the other officiants arrayed behind them to the south. At this point they all participate in an obscure rite called *devasomabhakṣaṇa* "partaking of the *soma* of the gods," a mimetic enactment of *soma*-drinking that ensures the full benefit of the entire sacrifice for those present (Fujii 1986, 7-8; cf. JB 1.89). Now the Adhvaryu hands over to the Udgātṛ a bunch of grass that he has carried throughout the procession, a signal that marks the transfer of ritual activity to the Sāmavedins. The singers "grab ahold" (*prati vgrah*) of the *stotra* with a series of muttered pressing-mantras (*pavamānajapa*) that mention honey, *soma*, food, progeny, and wealth (JŚS 1.11.4). The Prastotṛ asks for permission to sing from the Brahman (JŚS 1.11.8), who grants it with a formula containing another reflex of liturgical OM, the *prasava*: "OM, sing!" (*oṃ stuta*, BŚS 7.8).

⁹ [9] *juṣṭo vāco bhūyāsaṃ juṣṭo vācaspatyur devī vāk / yat te vāco madhumat tasmin mā dhāḥ / svāhā sarasvatyā iti* / [10] *sūryo mā devo divyebhyo rakṣobhyaḥ pātu vāta āntarikṣebhyo 'gniḥ pāṛthivebhyaḥ / svāheti* /

¹⁰ The *pravṛtahomas* may also serve to establish the ritual authority of the Sāmavedic officiants, who otherwise lack an official rite of election (*pravara*); the mantras here resemble those uttered by other officiants at their *pravara*. See Fujii 1986, 5; Gerety, forthcoming c.

§3.2 Yoking the praise-song

At this point, the trio of Sāmavedins "set about" (*upadadhatī*; JŚS 1.11.9) singing. Fujii argues that the verb *upa vdhā* refers not to the commencement of singing, but to a sequence of preparatory actions: the singers look at the *cātvāla* pit, a water jar set near it, and the sun itself—recall that this rite takes place at dawn, when the sun is just rising. Following the medieval Jaiminīya commentator Bhavatrāta, Fujii identifies this sequence as the "yoking" (*yukti*), which he glosses as "a kind of mental concentration" in preparation for singing. The JUB gives more information (JUB 3.5.4-5, trans. Fujii with changes):

4. Then the Udgāṭṛ saw the *stotra* spread out in the atmosphere, greatly shining. He also saw its "yoking" (*yukti*). 5. After sitting down for the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*, he should do thus—breathing out—and also thus—breathing in—with the voice. He should wish to see with the eyes, he should wish to hear with the ears; thus his mind becomes yoked to the *stotra* itself.¹¹

This passage suggests that the *yukti* also has a spiritual quality. As Fujii observes (1989, 29):

The *yukti* is not just a mental preparation for the *sāman*-chant but is, so to say, the realization of the transcendent *sāman*. As a means of this realization the act of regulating breath also must be connected with the transcendental being such as the breath pervading the world.

Sitting down, the Udgāṭṛ extends his awareness to his breath, voice, eyes, ears, and mind so as to become one with his performance. Building on Fujii's analysis, we may analyze these features of the *yukti* from several points of view. From a historical perspective, the features under the rubric of *yukti*—seated posture, visualization, concentration, breath control, cultivation of sensory awareness and mindfulness—might well be regarded as antecedents for later traditions of meditation and yoga,

¹¹ [4] *tato haiva stoman dadarśāntarikṣe vitatam bahu śobhamānam / tasyo ha yuktin dadarśa /* [5] *bahiṣpavamānam āsadya tītra viyi prāṇya iti kuryāt tītra grhitra apānya iti vācā / didṛkṣetaivākṣibhyam / śusrūṣetaiva karṇābhyām / svayam idam manoyuktam /*

broadly conceived.¹² The cognate relation of the words *yukti* and *yoga*, as well as the liturgical context—an extended recitation of OM—only strengthens this impression. Then there is the perspective of performance. To anyone who has spent time backstage before a concert, this kind of warm-up will come as no surprise: the singer harnesses his senses, draws himself inward, and attunes himself to his breath before taking the stage. But the unexpressed style of singing requires an even more literal yoking of mind, voice and song. As I have already discussed in detail, the Udgātṛ "mentally" (*manasā*) replays the lyrics of the *stotra* while simultaneously replacing them out loud with *o*, *vā*, and other monosyllables. This "integrative praxis" therefore yokes the singer's mind and voice in the most intimate and direct way to his song (Gerety forthcoming a). He quite literally embodies the *stotra* as he sings it.

Finally, there are cosmic resonances in this sequence of actions. Before turning their awareness inward, the singers gaze intently on the pit and on the rising sun. Why? Texts from various branches agree in correlating the *cātvāla* pit with the sun (JB 1.87; PB 6.7.24; ŚB 4.2.5.5, 9; see Fujii 1986, 12), which in Vedic cosmology is a brilliant hole in the vault of the sky, a veritable "sun door" (Coomaraswamy [1977] 1997, 225-26; see further discussion below §4.6). Thus the *cātvāla* is "the path to heaven" (*svargyaṃ panthānam*, ŚB 4.2.5.5) and its excavation reveals "the opening of the sky" (*diva ākāśaḥ*, JUB 1.5.5). These correlations explain why the singers must gaze on the pit and sit along its rim: the reason, according to Fujii, is so that they can sing the *bahiṣpavamānastotra* "at the entrance to the heavenly world" (Fujii 1986, 13). This marks the final phase of their ascent and the stakes could not be higher: they sing now to help the Yajamāna win immortality (as we will see in greater detail below).

¹² Calasso (2014, 168-169) makes a similar point about the "yoking" mentioned in ŚB 1.1.1.13: "Here the yoking resembles what occurs in *yoga* ('yoke', 'junction'). It is a gesture of the mind taking hold of itself."

§3.3 On the wings of a song

The song that crowns this narrative of ascent is the *bahiṣpavamāna-stotra* sung to the *anirukta-gāyatra* melody, the details of which I have treated in a previous chapter (see ch. 3, §2.3, 2.4) and elsewhere (Gerety forthcoming a). The song begins with the unison chanting of *o hum* before launching into nine rounds, each one introduced by a lexical verse with the final syllable *-om*, then giving way entirely to the non-lexical monosyllables *o*, *vā*, *hum*, and *bhā*, and accompanied throughout by back-up singers who intone OM in a continuous fashion, drawing it out to the length of fourteen beats. This is OM's wall of sound, a flood of rounded-mouth vowels and nasals.

Once the song has been sung, the Yajamāna mutters a series of mantras addressed to the Udgātṛ (JŚS 1.11.13; trans Fujii, with changes):

You are a falcon, *gāyatrī* is your meter. I take hold of you from behind, carry me across safely. May the praise-song of the praise-song come to me! Joined with Indra, may we win! May we gain progeny and nutriment! I obtain, fully obtain, fully obtain all these things with the *sāman*!¹³

These formulas give some idea of the Yajamāna's goals for performing the *bahiṣpavamāna* ritual. Chief among them is the fulfillment of wishes encountered again and again in Vedic texts, for victory, progeny, and nourishment. But the first mantra in the series, termed in Yajurvedic texts the "ascending after" formula (*anvāroha*; see Fujii 1986, 17), points to a different set of concerns. The Yajamāna calls the Udgātṛ a bird of prey in the form of the *gāyatrī* meter; he announces that he has taken hold of this avian-metrical hybrid and begs to be carried safely across. Given the praxis discussed above, this can only be a reference to the dangerous crossing between the terrestrial world and the heavenly world. These formulas reconfirm the ritual narrative of a cosmic ascent, an airborne journey on the wings of a song.

¹³ *śyeno 'si gāyatrācchandā anu tvārabhe / svasti mā sampārayā mā stutasya stutaṃ gamyād / indravanto vanāmahe / dhukṣīmahi prajāṃ / iṣam āpaṃ samāpaṃ sāmna samāpam /*

§3.4 *Between two worlds*

According to authorities in the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya branch, the Yajamāna speaks these formulas "over the bunch of grass which represents himself and which will be thrown into the *cātvāla* pit that again represents the entrance to the heavenly world" (Fujii 1986, 17; cf. LŚS 2.1.6; DŚS 4.1.7).

According to the Jaiminīya commentator Bhavatrāta, the grass should be divided so that one blade is thrown within the *mahāvedi* and one without. Paraphrasing the JB on this idea, Fujii observes (1986, 17; cf. JB 1.86):

...If he throws the grass only within the *mahāvedi*, the sacrificer belongs to the heavenly world but is cut off from this world; if he throws it only outside the *mahāvedi*, he is settled on this world but is cut off from the heavenly world; by throwing it both within and outside the *mahāvedi*, he causes the sacrificer to belong to the heavenly world and not to be cut off from this world...Here the *mahāvedi* is identified with the heavenly world and the outside ground with this world. It appears that, with the *bahiṣpavamāna* [*stotra*] as a turning point, the *mahāvedi* becomes the celestial territory for the sacrifice.

Thus, crucial parameters of sacrifice and the success of the Yajamāna's journey hinge upon the apparently trivial matter of where the blades of grass are thrown. Fujii's analysis shows that the performance of the *bahiṣpavamānastotra* catalyzes a total transformation of the sacrificial coordinates. On the way to their singing-place, the great altar is earthly terrain to be traversed, ascended, and left behind; as they cross beyond its boundaries, they are floating in space. Seated on the rim of the pit, the officiants sing at the threshold of the sun and the heavenly world. But once the song is finished, everything flips: the area *outside* the altar is now terrestrial and the area *inside* the great altar is celestial. For the remaining duration of the sacrifice leading up to his final bath, the Yajamāna and his officiants will operate within the great altar space, that is, in the heavenly world. Seated in the "sitting place" (*sadas*) at the center of this space, they will drink *soma* and chant in the company of the gods, high above the earth. And the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*, the melodic basis of the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*,

is the musical propulsion that makes this journey possible. In the words of a Brāhmaṇa of the YV (ŚB 4.2.5.10, trans. Eggeling; cf. Fujii 1986, 20): "The *bahiṣpavamāna* chant truly is a ship bound heavenwards: the priests are its spars and oars, the means of reaching the heavenly world."¹⁴

§3.5 Two types of ascension

Another action also speaks to the Yajamāna's reluctance to leave this world behind entirely. After the song is finished but before they proceed to the *sadas*, the Udgātr makes him bestride the northern edge of the great altar, the boundary that separates the terrestrial from the celestial. Facing east, with one foot on either side of the boundary, he mutters (JŚS 1.11.22-23, trans. Fujii with changes): "Don't cut me off from the heavenly world! Nor from this world!"¹⁵ While we might take this as a classic *śrauta* gesture of equivocation, it is just as much an acknowledgement of the humanity of the participants: they are performing a ritual in the prime of their lives; they have material as well as spiritual goals; this particular journey is one from which they will yet return. When the *soma* has been drunk, the gods have been praised, and the pressing business of preparing their future salvation has been concluded, they will alight once more upon earth's solid ground. This suggests, as Fujii has argued, that there are two types of "ascension processes" for the Jaiminīyas in this period. The *bahiṣpavamāna* exemplifies the first type: this ascent takes place during the sacrifice and serves to convey the participants to heaven, but only temporarily; after feasting the gods with *soma* and praise, they return to earth (cf. JUB 1.1-7). The second type of ascension, which we will encounter below (cf. JUB 3.11-14), concerns the sacrificer's journey after death to claim the immortality that his lifetime of sacrificial worship has earned him (Fujii 1987).

¹⁴ *naur ha vā eṣā svargyā / yad bahiṣpavamānaṃ tasyā ṛtvija eva sphyāś cāritrās ca svargasya lokasya sampāraṇās...*

¹⁵ *mā svargāl lokād avācchetsīr.../ māsmād...*

§3.6 *Summing up: the bahiṣpavamāna ritual*

To summarize, the *bahiṣpavamāna* ritual evokes a heavenly ascent through its sequence of gestures, its mantras, and its interpretation across a range of Vedic texts. The sacrificer and his officiants creep slowly eastwards, in the direction of the rising sun, and then turn sharply northwards—that is to say *upwards*—until they are all seated at the edge of the sun itself. The sun is a hole in the solid vault of the sky, a door through which they must enter. The ritual evidence shows that the singing of the *stotra* with the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* is decisive for reaching the sun and gaining admission, for once the song is finished, the sacrificer and his officiants find themselves within the heavenly world. But how, exactly, does singing OM transport them upwards? What is beyond the door to the sun? And how does the singing of the unexpressed *gāyatra* confer immortality? Let's return now to the JUB, where these questions are answered.

§4 *The dynamics of Jaiminīya soteriology: form and function*

To understand how the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* serves as the musical cornerstone of Jaiminīya soteriology, we must reacquaint ourselves with the structure of the song and its manner of performance. The unexpressed *gāyatra* is an iteration of "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*), a mode of singing wherein the verse (*ṛc*) in the central portion of the *sāman*, the *udgītha*, is completely replaced by monosyllables. For the Jaiminīyas, this liturgical feature has significant hermeneutic implications, particularly in the formulation of soteriological doctrine. In other words, the form of the song suits its function in Jaiminīya soteriology. The composers of the JUB stress this dynamic by correlating the song's structure and characteristics with the stages of ascent and other soteriological themes

§4.1 *The bodiless melody*

Because the verse is largely replaced, one name of the *anirukta gāyatra* in the JUB is "the melody without a verse" (*anṛcanñ sāma*, JUB 1.15-16). Another JUB epithet, "the bodiless melody" (*aśarīrañ sāma*, JUB 3.29-31), is a reference to the same idea (Fujii 1984, 1-2). In this latter formulation, the "body" is the verse (*ṛc*), and hence the melody (*sāman*) that eschews the verse becomes "bodiless." This terminology plays into the overall soteriological theme of the text: the melody "with a body" (*śarīravat*) is vulnerable to death, while the melody "without a body" (*aśarīravat*) is immortal (JUB 3.38-42; cf. Howard 1987, 165).¹⁶ In the logic of correlative hermeneutics, it follows that the singing of an immortal song brings immortality for its performers. "By reason of its bodilessness, [the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*] makes a person for whom it is sung go beyond the mortality of his corporeal existence and attain immortality in the heavenly world" (Fujii 1987, 16).

§4.2 *The ghost and the hermit*

The JUB tells a ghost story that sheds some light on how singing a "bodiless" melody helps a man shake off his body and ascend to the divine realm (JUB 3.29-31). The story concerns two powerful Kṣatriyas, Uccaiśśravas Kaupayeya, the king of the Kurus, and his nephew Keśin Dārbhya, the king of the Pañcālas. Upon the death of his uncle, Keśin Dārbhya goes hunting to assuage his grief. There in the woods, Uccaiśśravas appears to him as an apparition. The nephew tries to hug him, but in vain: it is "as if he were approaching smoke, or wind, or empty space, or the glint of fire, or water—thus he eluded

¹⁶ Howard draws our attention to a statement of the song's immortality near the end of the text (JUB 3.42.2; trans. Howard 1987, 167): "That is the immortal *gāyatra*. And what other songs exist, they are for worldly desires only; they are for worldly desires only." *tad etad amṛtaṃ gāyatram / atha yāny anyāni gītāni / kāmyāny eva tāni / kāmyāny eva tāni //*

him."¹⁷ Uccaiśśravas explains that a Brahmin who knew the *anirukta-gāyatra* sang the melody on his behalf: "with the bodiless melody he shook off my bodies." Bodiless, he was able to go to "the very same world as the divinities" (JUB 3.30.2).¹⁸ Citing primeval models for this practice, he tells how Pataṅga Prājapatya, the son of Prajāpati, sang it for the ṛṣis to shake off their bodies and Prajāpati himself sang it for the gods to shake off theirs. (We will have more to say about Prajāpati's relevance to this unexpressed *sāman* below, §6.3, 6.7.) With this in mind, Keśin Dārbhya goes about searching for an Udgātṛ to do the same for him. He looks high and low, finally finding the right person in the wilderness, a solitary man on the margins of society. This is the Brahmin Prāṭṛda Bhālla, "lying concealed in a cremation ground or a forest" (JUB 3.31.3).¹⁹ In this way, the narrative portrays the Brahmanical expertise sought by the two Kṣatriya kings as truly arcane: the secret of the "bodiless" melody is revealed by a ghost and is known among the living only by a cremation-ground hermit. In this way, the composers of the JUB use literary means to attach deep mystery and high value to their soteriology of song.

§4.3 *The endless melody*

Another epithet for the *sāman* that resonates deeply with the soteriological message of the JUB is "endless" (*ananta*). Like its bodilessness, the endlessness of the *anirukta-gāyatra* may also be traced to its structure and to how it is performed. The ring-like structure of the lyric itself evokes an endless cycle: *o vā o vā o vā hum bhā o vā*. The paired syllables *o vā* both introduce and conclude the song, coming around again and again as it is repeated in performance. Similarly, Howard emphasizes the JUB

¹⁷ ...*yathā dhūmaṃ vāpīyād vāyuṃ vākāśaṃ vāgnyarciṃ vāpo vā / evaṃ ha smainaṃ vyeti /*

¹⁸ ...*sa me [']śarīreṇa sāmṇā śarīrāṇy adhūnot /... devatānām eva salokatām gamayat[i]...*

¹⁹ "Wandering around in just this way, he ran up to a man lying concealed in a cremation ground or in a forest." *sa ha tathaiva palyayamānaś śmaśāne vā vane vāvṛtīśayanam upādhāvayāṃ cakāra /*

teaching that the Udgāṭṛ must sing his part, the *gīta*, in a single breath (JUB 3.12.3; 3.13.8), which he relates to the more general proscription on the taking of breath at any time during the performance (JUB 3.3.1). He suggests that such respiratory restrictions could be motivated by the aim to achieve continuity in the flow of sound; we saw in our treatment of liturgical OM that such an aim is articulated by ancient ritual authorities in a closely related context (the "back-up singing," *upagāna*; see ch. 3, §2.6). Howard points out that in modern ritual performance, the Nampūtiri Jaiminīyas "achieve the impression of continuous melodic flow by overlapping sections: before the Prastotṛ finishes chanting the *prastāva* the Udgāṭṛ begins his rendition of the *gīta*, and before the end of the *gīta* the Prastotṛ starts chanting the next chant" (Howard 1987, 166).

The JUB contains figurative language that supports these ideas. The various portions of the *sāman*, the text says, repeat again and again in cycles, with the end of one meeting the beginning of the next. This cyclical quality correlates with the returning seasons of the year, the circular layout of the settlers' wagon train (*grāma*), and the coils of a snake. "Indeed, as a necklace is coiled all around the neck, so is the endless melody (*anantaṃ sāma*). He who knows thus this endless melody, conquers endlessness itself!" (JUB 1.35.7-8; cf. 1.12.7-8).²⁰ The conquering of eternity through the *anirukta-gāyatra* evokes the frequent claim that the melody leads to immortality (cf. Howard 1987, 166).

§4.4 Song structures speculation

The "bodilessness" and "endlessness" of the *anirukta-gāyatra* exemplify how fundamental features of the song's structure and performance can be directly connected to the formulation of soteriological doctrine. Continuing in this vein, the composers of the JUB give a detailed account of how specific pieces of the song's lyric correspond to specific phases of the sacrificer's journey: ascent

²⁰ *tad yathā ha vai niṣkas samantaṃ grīvā abhiparyaktaḥ / evam anantaṃ sāma / sa ya evam etad anantam sāma veda / anantatām eva jayati //*

through the three worlds, vanquishing of death, and, ultimately, release through the midst of the sun. Such instances exemplify the interpenetration of liturgy and discourse in the JUB. In the wilds of Jaiminīya speculation, these two categories coalesce completely in OM.

§4.5 *Climbing the cosmic tree*

The main lyric as taught in the JUB is *o vā o vā o vā hum bhā o vā*. I have already noted in the previous chapter that this sequence of syllables structures many of the speculations about OM and Vāc throughout the JUB. Consider this series (JUB 1.2.1):

When we say *om*, that is fire. The earth is what we call *vāc*. Wind is *om*. The atmosphere is *vāc*. The sun is *om*. The sky is *vāc*..²¹

Fujii (1989, 16) argues that the three pairs *om* and *vāc* parallel the first three pairs of *o* and *vā* in the lyric. According to the correlations presented here, these three iterations of *o vā* correspond to the three worlds and their natural divinities: earth/fire, atmosphere/wind, and sky/sun. Interpreted this way, the three *o vā* pairs map the route from the earth to the heavenly world. As the Udgātṛ sings them, he ascends along this route. The text makes this quite plain (JUB 1.3.1-2):

1. *o3 vā3 o3 vā3 o3 vā hum bhā o vā*—he sings it like this. With the help of these two divinities, Om and Vāc, he attains a full lifespan. 2. As one would go on climbing a tree step-by-step, in just the same way, joining these divinities pair-by-pair, he goes on climbing these worlds..²²

This excerpt is valuable because it clearly correlates the sequence of *o vā* pairs in the lyric with the paired divinities OM and Vāc. Singing the syllables, "joining these divinities pair-by-pair," his performance builds a ladder to support the ascent across the three worlds. The diction of the simile suggests that OM and Vāc are the steps up the cosmos-spanning tree. The promise of a full lifespan

²¹ *sa yad om iti / so 'gniḥ / vāg iti pṛthivī / om iti vāyuh / vāg ity antarikṣam / om ity ādityaḥ / vāg iti dyauh /*

²² [1] *o3 vā3 o3 vā3 o3 vā hum bhā o vā iti / karoty eva / etābhyāṃ sarvam āyur eti / [2] sa yathā vṛkṣam ākramaṇair ākramamāṇa iyāt / evam evaite dve-dve devate sandhāyemān lokān rohann eti /*

(*sarvam āyus*) suggests that thus far the ascent is aligned primarily with the thisworldly goals of the Soma sacrifice, including one hundred years of prosperity and fertility for the sacrificer; further on we will encounter discussion of the otherworldly goal of immortality after death.

§4.6 *The door to the sun*

A.K. Coomaraswamy has shown that the Jaiminīya conception of this cosmic ascent accords with a broader Vedic view of how the cosmos is arranged. In this cosmology, a tree or post spans the three worlds, stretching from the earth to the sky. This is the *axis mundi*, the route along which all manner of cosmic ascents are attempted according to a range of Vedic texts (see Gerety forthcoming c). Upon reaching the top of the tree, one arrives at the entrance to heaven, conceived as a hole in the sky or a "sun-door" (Coomaraswamy [1977] 1997). In the present version, as the Udgāṭṛ and his patron ascend, they are pursued by death, here in the form of ravenous hunger (*aśanā*). The next pair of syllables, *hum bhā* (also known as *hiṃkāra* and the "response," *pratihāra*) keeps death and hunger at bay (JUB 1.3.3-4):

3. It is Death alone that follows, in the form of hunger. 4. Next he sings the *hiṃkāra* (*hum bhā*). Now the *hiṃkāra* is the moon, and the moon is food. With food, they kill hunger.²³

Making use of a widely attested conception of the moon as a vessel of Soma and hence nourishment for the gods (e.g., AB 7.11; ChU 5.10; cf. Macdonell 1897, 112), the *hiṃkāra* is correlated with the moon and with the food it contains. Singing *hum bhā*, therefore, feeds Hunger and overcomes Death.

The singer now comes to the last pair of syllables in the lyric, *o vā*, the portion of the lyric aligned with immortality. He has arrived at the climax of his journey, facing the sun (JUB 1.3.5-7):

²³ [3] *eka u eva mṛtyur anvety aśanayaiva* / [4] *atha hiṃkaroti / candramā vai hiṃkāraḥ / annam u vai candramāḥ / annenāśanayāṃ ghnanti /*

5. Having killed all kinds of hunger with food, then with *om* he escapes into this very sun, which is a hole in the sky. 6. Just as the axle-hole of a cart or a chariot might be, so is this hole in the sky. That is completely obscured by solar rays—it cannot be seen. 7. What comes after the *hiṃkāra* is the immortal part of the *gāyatra* melody. He should place himself there; and also the sacrificer.²⁴

In this vision of Vedic cosmology, the sun is a "hole in the sky" (*divaś chidram*), comparable to the axle-hole of a chariot (cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.15.1, discussed in ch. 9, §10.3). Above the sky is a realm of radiant light, whose brilliance can only be seen from below through this fissure. Obscured by the rays that converge there, the sun is this opening in the heavenly vault. As such it must be entered, for the ultimate destination of the ascent lies through that door. The syllable *om* propels him forward: in the diction of the text, through OM he is literally "released beyond" (*ati v̄muc*) the sun. With the claim that this portion of the *sāman* is "immortal," we arrive at the crux of the JUB's soteriological doctrine: the three worlds, the sun, immortality itself—all abide in sound, melody, and syllable. Installing himself and the sacrificer in this final repetition of OM, he reaches his destination.

§4.7 *Wings of sound*

Fujii shows that a parallel "ascension process," likewise structured by the sequence of syllables in the lyric, occurs in another part of the JUB (Fujii 1989, 17; see also below §5). Most of this second account echoes what we have already discussed: with the three repetitions of *o vā*, the Udgātṛ acquires mastery over the three worlds (JUB 3.12.1); with the *hiṃkāra*, he keeps death and hunger at bay (3.12.2-3). However, this version differs in its treatment of the last *o vā*, which it denotes by the technical term "finale" (*nidhana*). This explanation of the "finale" furnishes information about the final phase of the ascent and OM's role in it (JUB 3.13.7-10):

²⁴ [5] *tān-tām aśanayām annena hatvom ity etam evādityaṃ samayātimucyate / etad eva divaś chidram / [6] yathā khaṃ vānasa[s] syād rathasya vā / evam etad divaś chidram / tad raśmibhis sañchannan na dṛśyate / [7] yad gāyatrasyordhvaṃ hiṃkārāt / tad amṛtam / tad ātmānan dadhyāt / atho yajamānam /*

7. Truly the *nidhana* is the melody's end, heaven is the worlds' end, and the summit is the end of the ruddy sun. 8. Thus with this syllable *om* the Udgātṛ places the Yajamāna in the end, in the heavenly world. 9. Now a wingless man who goes to the top of a tree falls down from it. But when a winged man sits on a treetop, or on a sword's edge, or on a razor's edge, he certainly does not fall from there. For he sits suspended by his two wings! 10. Thus the Udgātṛ with this syllable *om* bestows wings of sound on the Yajamāna and places him in the end, in the heavenly world. Just as a winged man would sit without fear, so the Yajamāna sits without fear in the heavenly world. And more—he moves around!²⁵

Singing the last syllables, he reaches the three "ends" (*anta*): that of melody, heaven, and sun. But right away a doubt occurs to the ever-questioning ritualists: how can one stay aloft at that dizzying height? A man is in need of wings to keep from falling down, wings that would support him even—in another remarkable turn of phrase—"on a treetop, or on a sword's edge, or on a razor's edge." OM is the solution, for with that syllable the singer gives the sacrificer "wings of sound." Fearlessly perched, he flits across heaven at will.

§4.8 *Ascending by syllables*

To summarize, the pairs of syllables of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* structure two parallel accounts of ascension in the JUB. By tracing the correlations that connect each syllabic pair with specific phases in the celestial journey, we learn more about the Jaiminīya soteriology and its application in performance. With the first three *o vā*'s, the participants move through the three worlds; with *hum bhā*, they ward off death and hunger; with the final *o vā*, called the "immortal" part of the melody, they are released into the midst of the sun. The syllables *o vā* are represented throughout by their apotheosized counterparts, OM and Vāc; this speaks again to the intertwining of liturgy and

²⁵ [7]...*anto vai sāmno nidhanam anta[s] svargo lokānam / anto bradhnasya viṣṭapam / [8] tam etad udgāta yajamānam om ity etenākṣareṇānte svarge loke dadhāti [9] ya u ha vā apakṣo vṛkṣāgraṃ ga[c]chaty ava vai sa tataḥ padyate / atha yad vai pakṣī vṛkṣāgre yad asidhārāyāṃ yat kṣuradhārāyāṃ āste na vai sa tato [']vapadyate / pakṣābhyāṃ hi saṃyata āste / [10] tam etad udgātā yajamānam om ity etenākṣareṇa svarapakṣaṃ kṛtvānte svarge loke dadhāti / sa yathā pakṣy abibhyad āsīta / evam eva svarge loke [']bibhyad āste / atho carati /*

discourse. In ritual performance, the Udgātṛ sings "o vā" (or some variant thereof), while in hermeneutic reflection, he conceives of these syllables as the deities OM and Vāc. For these experts in the Sāmavedic liturgy, OM's value is predicated on the sacrificial context. In order to be effective, ritual performance must be informed by theology, and *vice versa*.

§4.9 *Into the sun: who knows?*

The soteriological doctrine of the JUB is encoded in the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* both in its lyrical form, which maps the cosmic ascent, and in the manner of its performance, which evokes the "bodilessness" and "endlessness" of this journey towards immortality. But certain important details still elude us about the solar realm to which OM affords access. What does it mean to "be released beyond the sun?" What, or who, will the celestial seekers find on the other side of that "hole in the sky?" These questions do not admit of easy answers; indeed, they are just the sort of enigmas that Sāmavedic sages love to ponder. Consider the following meeting of the minds (JUB 1.6.1-5; cf.

Coomaraswamy [1977] 1997, 226):

1. Next, Gobala Vārṣṇa said: "Who (*ka*) is capable of going into the Sun? From far off, indeed, he radiates down on this spot. That is why the Udgātṛ has the path of melody before him. Bringing that place near with his mind, he deposits the Yajamāna above even the Sun, in immortality itself." 2. Then Śātyāyani spoke. "Going straight into this one—who (*ka*) knows how to do that? If he invokes these waters all around, or the wind, then the Sun parts his rays for him." 3. And then Ulukya Jānaśruteya said: "This very immortality is where the Sun burns. If one obtains this immortality, then he shields himself from Death, from evil. 4. That which is beyond the Sun, below this atmosphere with no dwellings—who (*ka*) knows that? 5. Now this is immortality. This is what you will help me reach! Only this I shall never despise!"²⁶

²⁶ [1] *atha hovāca gobalo vārṣṇaḥ / ka etam ādityam arhati samayaitum / durād vā eṣa etat tapati nyañ / tena vā etam pūrveṇa sāmaphaḥ / tad eva manasāhṛtyopariṣṭād etasyaitasminn amṛte nidadhyād iti / [2] tad u hovāca śātyāyaniḥ / samayaivaitam enam kas tad veda / yady etā āpo vā abhitaḥ / yad vāyaṃ vā eṣa upahvayate / raśmīn vā eṣa tasmai vyūhātīti / [3] atha hovācolukyo jānaśruteyaḥ / yatra vā eṣa etat tapati / etad evāmṛtam / etac ced*

The words of the three sages all follow the same rhetorical pattern. Each question begins with the interrogative pronoun *ka*: "Who (*ka*) is able...?" "Who (*ka*) knows that?" With each question an enigma is formulated; each sage then supplies his own answer. While the answers are almost as enigmatic as the questions themselves, the shared diction offers a clue: already in the Brāhmaṇas, *Ka* is the esoteric name of Prajāpati, an acknowledgement of the creator god's association with the uncertain, the indistinct, the silent (Gonda 1986b; Calasso 2014, 67-94; see further discussion below §6.3). Therefore in the present passage one may simultaneously read these questions as declarations by taking the interrogative pronoun as a name instead: "*Ka* is able..." "*Ka* knows..." We will see below that the esoteric knowledge of how to employ Prajāpati's secret name *Ka* is decisive in gaining admission to the heavenly world.

The three sages here speak of the Sun (*āditya*), who is a masculine divinity; where "he" burns, far off in the sky, there one finds immortality (*amṛtam*). They wonder how to reach him, how to enter into him, and what lies on the other side. The journey is an ordeal; to make it, the sacrificer must depend on his erudite officiant. Gobala Vārṣṇa points out that the Sun's burning downward offers a trail of sorts, a "path of melody" (*sāmapathas*) that the singer may mentally follow so as to establish the sacrificer above Āditya himself, in the realm of immortality. Śāṭyāyani, for his part, holds that whenever the officiant calls on the wind or the waters, Āditya obligingly extends his rays. Ulukya Jānaśruteya counters that immortality can be found where the sun burns, and also beyond it. This sage's disdain for mundane life is palpable when he drily asserts: "Only this"—immortality—"I shall never despise."

*vāi prāpnoti / tato mṛtyunā pāpmanā vyāvartate / [4] kas tad veda / yat pareṇādityam antarikṣam idam
anālayanam avareṇa / [5] athaitad evāmṛtam / etad eva māṃ yūyam prāpipaiṣata / etad evāhan nātimanya iti/*

§4.10 Ascending the solar rays

Of some interest here is the emphasis placed on Āditya's "burning downward from afar" and the parting of his rays. While previous discussions conceived of the *anirukta-gāyatra* as a ladder of song extending *upwards* to meet the sun, these reflections emphasize instead the extension of the sun's rays *downwards* to meet the singer. The rays reach everywhere, offering their own path to the one who can recognize it. A similar idea is found in another aphorism attributed to Śāṭyāyani (JUB 1.30.1):

"Now just as paths might converge on a mountaintop," Śāṭyāyani would always say, "even so the Sun's rays approach the Sun from all sides." Knowing thus and beginning his song with *om*, a man approaches the Sun from all sides along his rays."²⁷

In the long discourse on the sun that precedes this, Śāṭyāyanī speaks of seven rays with infinite reach, expanding exponentially to connect every level of the cosmos, animating gods above and creatures below. Solar rays naturally converge back at their source, just as many paths converge at the peak of a mountain. Here we find another reflex of the holism associated with the syllable: singing OM, one travels to the source by all rays, all paths. Śāṭyāyani's emphasis on *beginning* the journey with OM suggests a liturgical context other than the *anirukta-gāyatra*: most probably the *ādi*, the "beginning" of the *udgītha* with OM. But where do these solar paths end? What is at their source? Śāṭyāyani explains that there are "three persons" (*trayaḥ puruṣāḥ*), one reflected in the eye, one in the sun, and one in the lightning (JUB 1.27.1-7). I want to focus on this threefold "person," who is implicated in other Upaniṣadic iterations of ascension (notably ChU 4.15.1-5). Through the gnomic utterances of Sāmavedic teachers, we have learned that *someone* will greet the singer and sacrificer when they come to the door of the sun. Let's now meet this mysterious figure and hear what he has to say.

²⁷ [1] *tad yathā girim panthānas samudiyuḥ / iti ha smāha śāṭyāyaniḥ / evam eta ādityasya raśmayaḥ / etam ādityaṃ sarvato [']piyanti / sa haivaṃ vidvān om ity ādadāna etair etasya raśmibhir etam ādityaṃ sarvato [']pyeti.*

§5 Seeking admission to the sun-door

In the JUB, there are two accounts of the climactic encounter with the figure at the door to the sun. Each of these passages fits into a longer sequence describing the ascent to the heavenly world, which I have already discussed above. There is no doubt that the two accounts describe the same basic exchange between the sacrificer who seeks admission and the deity who grants it. However, as Fujii has argued (1987, 1004), the first account describes an ascent that transpires during the Soma sacrifice, while the second addresses the climax of a final ascent that transpires after the sacrificer's death.

§5.1 The first interview: the truth about action

The immediate reception for one who desires to enter is less than friendly. A "roguish divinity" (*khalā devatā*) turns most seekers away, denying them for the wrongs they have done. The sacrificer's strategy for winning admission is expounded in the JUB; it is a matter of making the correct reply (JUB 1.5.1-3):

1. This same roguish divinity stands there, fending him off, saying: "Truly you have done evil in this place—you will never get in here. The one who is a do-gooder, he will get in here." 2. Let him reply as follows: "You saw what I have done. You would not have caused *me* to do that—it is *you* who are the doer of the thing." 3. The divinity knows: "He has told me the truth." For this divinity is Truth. As such, the divinity is unable to fend him off. He simply invokes the truth.²⁸

Accused of doing wrong, the sacrificer is barred; only a "do-gooder" (*punyakṛt*) may enter. But his response turns the tables: the sacrificer points out that the relation is not causal, with the divinity causing a man to act as he does; rather, the divinity *himself* is the agent, the "doer" (*kartṛ*). In this way the sacrificer demonstrates his knowledge of the true relations between man and god: the divinity is

²⁸ [1] *sā haiṣākhalā devatāpasedhantī tiṣṭhati / idaṃ vai tvam atra pāpam akar nehaiṣyasi / yo vai punyakṛt syāt / sa iheyād iti / [2] sa brūyāt / apaśyo vai tvan tat / yad ahan tad akaravam / tad vai mā tvan nākārayiṣyaḥ / tvam vai tasya kartāsīti / [3] sa ha veda satyam māheti / satyaṃ haiṣā devatā / sa ha tasya neśe yad enam apasedhat / tam upaiva hvayate /*

revealed as the ultimate agent of humanity's actions. Being truth (*satyam*) incarnate, the divinity must acknowledge the truth of the sacrificer's response. The sacrificer will not be driven away like all the others, for he has made an appeal to truth. Here the potency of the *bandhu* is unassailable, for the sacrificer's knowledge of the bond between himself and this divinity is decisive.

With the approval of this divinity, the sacrificer finally earns his entrance into the sun. Who exactly is the divine gatekeeper? Fujii identifies the divinity as the Sun himself (Fujii 1989, 17), but we will see below that there is evidence elsewhere in the Jaiminīya tradition for doormen who stand guard, granting access to the solar realm of immortality. Be that as it may, the long ascent is over and he reaches his destination. The journey has been an ordeal, arduous as a mountain climb:

As one might approach a great height, coming up even with it, in just this way with the help of this divinity he passes around towards this immortality, the place where this one burns.²⁹

§5.2 *The first interview (redux)*

Another section of the JUB also treats this cryptic dialogue. Fujii has argued that this version of the exchange is eschatological, treating the climax of the sacrificer's journey after death. As I will explain at greater length below, the basic idea is that the sacrificer, having shed his mortal body with the "bodiless" *sāman*, assembles a heavenly body during his ascent which he then integrates with a divine self (*ātman*) produced by a lifetime of sacrifice (Fujii 2011, 108-115). To properly understand this version of the dialogue, it helps to know that the composers of the JUB have borrowed it *verbatim* from their Brāhmaṇa (JB 1.18; see Bodewitz 1973, 52-53), from a section that explores the eschatological implications of performing the daily fire-offering (*agnihotra*). Bodewitz summarizes the JB context: "the father is reborn in the son but he also produces a second self [*ātman*] in heaven by offering the

²⁹ *sa yathocchrāyam pratyasya prapadyeta / evam evainam etayā devatayedam amṛtam abhiparyeti yatrāyam idan tapatīti //*

agnihotra in the *āhavanīya*...After death he rises to heaven in order to be united with his second self" (Bodewitz 1973, 52). Upon his arrival in heaven, he must face two trials. First, he meets the seasons (*ṛtu*), who are the sun's doorkeepers (*dvārapa*); to them he must speak a verse asserting that his actions do not belong to him alone, that he is an agent (*kartr*) of divinity. If he succeeds here, the seasons lead him on toward immortality, to the one who gives out heat (*tapan*).

§5.3 *The second interview: who are you?*

Having passed the first interview with the doorkeepers, he now comes to the second round, which takes a dialogic form. I follow Bodewitz and Fujii in identifying the two speakers in this dialogue as the sacrificer and the Sun. The prize is a divine "self" (*ātman*), which the sacrificer has built through his sacrificial labors during his lifetime. If he passes this second test, he will assume this divine self and become immortal. If he fails, he has to take the self back to earth to begin another mortal existence. The JUB parallel passage begins here, with cautionary advice about how the final interview may go wrong (JUB 3.14.1-2 = JB 1.18, trans. Bodewitz with changes):

1. Once he has arrived, the Sun asks him: "Who (*ka*) are you?" To the one who replies with his own name or that of his family, the Sun says: "This self of yours which has been mine—let it be yours again." 2. Once the self has been returned to him, the Seasons encircle him, grab him by the feet and drag him away. Night and day take over his world.³⁰

Individuating himself by his own name or family name (*gotra*) leads to a bad outcome: the Sun rejects him, giving back the heavenly self (*ātman*) that he has constructed through sacrifice. He must now take it back, and along with it his chance at immortality. The seasons drag him by the feet and cast him out of heaven. He returns to the earth, the realm where night and day revolve ceaselessly. (This outcome

³⁰ [1] *taṃ hāgatam pr[c]chati / kas tvam asīti / sa yo ha nāmnā vā gotreṇa vā prabrūte / taṃ hāha / yas te [']yam mayy ātmābhūt / eṣa te sa iti / [2] tasmin hātman pratipratta ṛtavas sampalāyya padgrhītam apakarṣanti / tasya hāhorātre lokam āpnutaḥ /*

may foreshadow the Upaniṣadic path of the fathers, which leads through the moon back to the world of men; see §5.8 below.) To ascend such a summit after a lifetime of sacrificial labor, only to fail the final test—it is difficult to imagine a more crushing defeat in the sphere of Brahmanical soteriology.

§5.4 *Answer: I am Ka*

How can a man avoid such a defeat? Having reviewed the wrong answer, the Jaiminīya traditions now teach the correct ones (JUB 3.14. 3-6 = JB 1.18, trans. Bodewitz, with changes):

3. He should reply to the Sun as follows: "I am Ka, you are heaven. As such I have come to you, the heavenly heaven." 4. Prajāpati indeed is Ka. He who knows thus is a 'heaven-goer' (*suvarga*), for he goes to heaven (*suvar gacchati*). 5. So to him the Sun says: "The one you are, am I. The one I am, are you. Come!" 6. He enters this sap of his own good deeds.³¹

The solution is brilliantly simple. The sacrificer must show that he understands the secret purport of the second-person question *ka tvam asi* ("who are you?") by reformulating it in the first-person, *ko [']ham asmi*. Although grammatically this response could mean "who am I?", the context proves that it is meant as an emphatic statement, "I am Ka."³² He follows this with another statement that shows he recognizes his interlocutor and the nature of the final refuge: "...you are heaven. As such I have come to you, the heavenly heaven." Although *suvar* is conventionally translated as 'heaven', it is more precisely the highest bright sky illuminated by sun, or even, in the earliest Vedic texts, the 'sun' itself (Mayrhofer 1992-2001). With his ascent he has become a literal 'sun-goer' (*suvargas*). As Bodewitz points out, such repeated iterations of the "etymological figure" *suvar* √*gam* stress the strong connection between himself and the deity (Bodewitz 1973, 61n33). The sun agrees: "The one you are,

³¹ [3] *tasmā u haitena prabruvīta / ko [']ham asmi suvas tvam / sa tvām svargyaṃ svar āgam iti / [4] ko ha vai prajāpatiḥ / atha haivaṃvid eva suvargaḥ / sa hi suvar ga[c]chati / [5] taṃ hāha yas tvam asi so [']ham asmi yo [']ham asmi sa tvam asy ehīti / [6] sa etam eva sukṛtarasam praviśati*

³² See Calasso 2014, 92 for a similar dialogue featuring *ka* at ŚB 11.5.4.1-2.

am I. The one I am, are you" (*yas tvam asi so [']ham asmi yo [']ham asmi sa tvam as[i]*). The poetics of the sun's reply—with a sequence of interlocking pronouns and verbs, all arranged in a chiasmus—reinforce this bond between them.

§5.5 *The continuity of human-divine agency*

Integral to this account, as well as the previous one (JUB 1.5.1-3; see above), is the idea of a continuum of human-divine agency. A man's actions, good and bad alike, may all be traced back to the radiant power of the sun—in both accounts the solar divinity is the "agent" (*kartr*). In this context, individuality and personal responsibility have no place; all that matters is the awareness of the fundamental unity. This awareness alone will lead him to his final destination, immortality, where a divine *ātman* awaits him. Although *brahman* is not mentioned in these passages, the underlying doctrine is quite close to the salvific knowledge of monism that will be articulated in the Upaniṣads.

§5.6 *Re-enacting Prajāpati's ascent*

The Jaiminīya formulation of unity between the divine and the human remains firmly rooted in the sacrifice and its mythology. The successful seeker presents himself as Ka, that is, Prajāpati, the embodiment of the sacrifice as a totality. The declaration "I am Ka" adds a new dimension to the speculations on ascent through song in the JUB. It is evident now that the singer and the sacrificer, in their performance of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*, have reached the sun by re-enacting the ascent myth of Prajāpati. Like Prajāpati, who pressed the Vedas, discovered OM and Vāc, and ascended by his own mental "ardor" (*tapas*), the singers have compressed their repertoire, reducing it to two essential syllables *o* and *vā*, and ascended through great mental effort. Like Prajāpati (and the Devas after him),

who beat Death by taking refuge in elements of the sacrifice, the singers have overcome death through the syllables of their song, and found final release through the utterance of OM.

§5.7 *Entering the sap of good deeds*

It is remarkable that already in these middle to late Vedic texts, the JB and JUB, the prize of immortality hinges on a karmic negotiation of sorts. Although the outcome is ultimately decided by a battle of the wits in the spirit of a *brahmodya*, the dialogue is initially framed as an adjudication of the sacrificer's actions during his life. These eschatological accounts of the Jaiminīyas therefore have important implications for understanding the development of karma and rebirth doctrines in the Brahmanical context. The core idea is that the sacrificer is reborn in heaven. As such, this rebirth doctrine is quite different from its "classical," Hindu iteration (see Doniger O'Flaherty 1980): he does not take on a new human form, but a divine one.

Beyond the sun he gains access to the storehouse of his actions—the sum total of his sacrificial activity during his lifetime, stockpiled in the moon. "Come!"—with this single command from the Sun, the sacrificer is welcomed into the "sap of his good deeds" (*sukṛtarasa*).³³ Bodewitz (1973, 61n35), summarizing the JUB version, writes

...*sukṛtarasa* seems to designate the food which has been stored up by the sacrificer in the moon, even as for an embryo food has been stored up in the breasts of the mother. As the child drinks the milk after its birth so the sacrificer who is reborn in the sun drinks the essence of his good deeds out of the moon.

Further, the JUB states that "truly a man is unborn as long he does not sacrifice" (JUB 3.14.8).³⁴ Fujii draws attention to the prominence of this "birth motif" at the apex of the ascent (1989, 18-19):

³³ For more on *sukṛta*, see Tull 1989, 31.

³⁴ *ajāto ha vai tāvat puruṣo yāvan na yajate*

What is noteworthy is that this ascension after death is considered to be the process of birth in the heavenly world. And so the abrupt question by the sun "Who are you?" ...must be addressed to the very person that is in the process of this rebirth. Its connection with birth is also suggested by the interesting fact that similar questions are prescribed by the Gṛhyasūtra at both of the two birth ceremonies...

Everything that happens in seeking admission to the sun—the reflections on the goodness or badness of a person's actions, his rebirth through sacrifice, his prospects of winning immortality—adds up to an elaborate, if somewhat obscure, set of eschatological and retributive doctrines. It is remarkable to me that the Jaiminīya construction of OM as the key to immortality also integrates the construction of karma and rebirth in this incipient form. Beyond their relevance to the history of OM, these Jaiminīya passages constitute a significant—though largely untapped—early source for the development of the doctrines of karma and rebirth in the Vedas.

§5.8 *The prehistory of the two paths doctrine*

The relevance of this material to history of karma and rebirth only increases with the frequent references in the JUB to the two cosmic realms that figure in the journey: on the one hand, the "world of the gods" (*devaloka*) and the sun; on the other, "the world of men" (*mānuṣyaloka*) and the moon (JUB 3.13.11; 3.14.9-10). These evoke the familiar pair of Upaniṣadic paths that may be traveled by the deceased, the "path of the gods" (*devayāna*), associated with the sun; and the "path of the ancestors" (*pitryāna*), with the moon (BĀU 6.2.15-16; ChU 5.10.1-10). The Upaniṣadic iterations of this doctrine propose a bifurcation that occurs immediately after death; upon dying, a man takes one path *or* the other. But according to Fujii, the JUB has a different conception: after death, the sacrificer takes a single journey, visiting a number of "temporal and spatial entities"—including the sun *and* the moon—taking from each the parts necessary to assemble the body for his rebirth (Fujii 2011, 107). This is why it is most appropriate to sing a "bodiless" melody: by shaking off his mortal body, he makes way for his

immortal form. Having died once as a mortal, he now prepares to transcend the "redeath" (*punarmṛtyu*) in heaven so dreaded across the Vedic corpus (Fujii 2011, 115; also n43). This rebirth in heaven is conceived as the integration of the bodily parts collected during the ascent with the divine self (*ātman*) fashioned through sacrifice (Fujii 2011, 115). Along with the bond between human and divine agency discussed above, this single trajectory after death speaks to the unitary nature of Jaiminīya eschatology.

§5.9 Unity of doctrine, unity of performance

The unity of Jaiminīya eschatology finds its counterpart in the unity of Sāmavedic performance, exemplified above all in the complementarity of OM and Vāc. Remember that the Jaiminīya ascent narrative is predicated on the singing of the *anirukta-gāyatra* melody, in whose lyrics the syllables *o* and *vā* alternate—that is, the paired syllables work together, constituting a unitary performance. As a fixed pair, these syllables have several correlates: the eschatological pairing of the world of the gods and that of men; the cosmological pairing of sun and moon; and the divine pairing of OM and Vāc (JUB 3.13.11-13):

11. For it is these two syllables that are the world of the gods and the world of men. These two syllables are the sun and the moon. 12. The world of the gods is the sun, the world of men is the moon. The sun is *om*, the moon is *vāc*. 13. In this way the Udgātṛ makes the Yajamāna go to the world of the gods with this syllable *om*.³⁵

And just like their syllabic correlates, the divine OM and Vāc operate in tandem, procuring complementary benefits for the sacrificer during his ascent. With *om*, the Udgātṛ propels the sacrificer into the sun; with *vāc*, he provides an endless store of food for the afterlife (JUB 3.14.9-10):

³⁵ [11] *te ha vā ete akṣare devalokaś cāiva manuṣyalokaś ca/ ādityaś ca ha vā ete akṣare candramāś ca / [12] āditya eva devalokaḥ / candramā manuṣyalokaḥ / om ity ādityaḥ / vāg iti candramāḥ [13] tam etad udgātā yajamānam om ity etenākṣareṇādityan devalokaṃ gamayati /*

9. For with this syllable *om* the knowledgeable Udgāṭṛ makes the Yajamāna go to the sun, to the world of the gods. And with the next syllable *vāc* he procures him the moon, sustenance, and imperishableness. 10. But an ignorant singer of the *udgītha* cannot make him go to the world of the gods, nor make him prosper with sustenance.³⁶

This excerpt clearly shows that in the JUB, there is no choice between the fixed pairs OM and Vāc, sun and moon, gods and men. Rather, the singer *who knows* takes all, while the singer *who does not know* gets nothing. There are not two paths, but one; if there is any hint of a bifurcation, it comes only at the climax of the journey, with the outcome of the final test. Mastery of the Jaiminīya practices and doctrines associated with OM and Vāc is the difference between success and failure. The composers of the JUB have meticulously woven performative, mythological, cosmological, and eschatological elements into an arcane set of wilderness teachings with a distinctly Sāmavedic sensibility; and they have formulated an innovative soteriology of song with OM at the center.

§5.10 *Summing up: different perspectives on Jaiminīya soteriology*

I have now sketched the Jaiminīya soteriology of song from several different perspectives: its literary construction in the story cycle of Prajāpati, the Devas, and their escape from Death; its ritual expression in the liturgy of the *bahiṣpavamāna* and the ascent narrative that informs that rite; its encoding in the lyrics of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*, wherein the pairs of syllable correspond to stages of the ascension; and its eschatological climax, the arcane dialogue between the sacrificer and the sun on the unity of divine and human agency. Together, these add up to a Jaiminīya roadmap for the winning of immortality by singing with OM. To bring the chapter to a close, I want to consider this soteriology of song from a broader viewpoint. In the concluding section, I consider the category of

³⁶ [9] *taṃ ha vā evaṃvid udgātā yajamānam om ity etenākṣareṇādityan devalokaṃ gamayati / vāg ity asmā uttareṇākṣareṇa candramasam annādyam akṣitim praya[c]chati / [10] atha yasyaitad avidvān udgāyati na haivainan devalokaṃ gamayati no enam annādyena samardhayati...*

"unexpressedness" (*aniruktatva*) within the Vedic corpus. My aims in this section are to better understand why the Jaiminīyas choose this mode of singing as the foundation for their soteriological reflections in the JUB; and to ponder the implications of this choice for OM's emergence.

§6 *Pondering the unexpressed*

"Unexpressedness" (*aniruktatva*) is central to the JUB. This is evident above all in the composers' preferred liturgical context, the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*. The form and content of the JUB are based almost entirely on this particular iteration of the Sāmavedic mode of "unexpressed song" (*aniruktagāna*). The special features associated with singing in this fashion—the audible delivery of non-lexical syllables, the silent contemplation of the lexical verse, the overall emphasis on sound and melody over semantics—speak to the prominence of indistinctness, ineffability, and inexpressibility as the organizing principles of this phase of Jaiminīya hermeneutics. Beyond the ritual sphere, unexpressedness, construed in the sense of secrecy and silence, is also a theme in the mythical narratives, notably in Prajāpati's discovery of OM as the secret essence of the Vedas, and the Devas' silent concealment from Death in OM. Finally, unexpressedness is decisive in the soteriological climax of the JUB: recall that in answer to the question "who are you?", the man who plainly speaks his name is rejected, while the man who stakes his identity on the indistinctness of an interrogative pronoun—"I am Ka (Who)!"—wins immortality.

§6.1 *Anirukta in the Vedas*

The JUB's emphasis on *aniruktatva* must be understood in relation to the wider deployment of the term *ánirukta* in Vedic texts. *Nirukta*, meaning 'distinct, explicit', and its opposite *anirukta*, 'indistinct, unarticulated', are technical terms of Vedic ritual (Renou & Silburn 1954, 68-71). According

to Renou, in the Brāhmaṇas a mantra (and by extension, the rite of which it is a part) is *nirukta* when its meaning and use "result 'distinctly' from its content alone, which is 'explicit' by itself, from the fact that it contains a characteristic element, a *liṅga*." By contrast, the *anirukta* mantra "does not contain a 'distinct' meaning [that] would allow it to be affected to a 'determined' mythic or ritual zone" (1954, 71). In most cases, *nirukta* means that the deity's name appears somewhere in the mantra and liturgy of a given rite. For instance, the *subrahmaṇyā* rite is "expressed" when accompanied by the litany that mentions Indra by name; it is "unexpressed" when such a litany does not occur (JŚS 1.3.2; Parpola 1969, 44n on LŚS 1.2.20=DŚS 1.2.27; see also my ch. 3, §2.9). The significance of naming the deity lies in "the appropriation of the so-designated offering by the divinity named, [and] marks the intention and limits of the ritual act" (Renou & Silburn 1954, 72). Put simply, to name a god in a mantra is to say, *this offering is for you*. (One can trace the migration of this technical term of ritual into another realm: Yāska's early lexicographic work, *Nirukta*, uses it in the sense of defining or interpreting words.)

§6.2 *Aniruktagāna*

Some ritual contexts do not articulate a specific divine recipient, or else render a *nirukta* liturgy *anirukta* by replacing explicit names and epithets with their "cryptic" (*parokṣam*, glossing *aniruktam* PB 18.1.3) equivalents.³⁷ Sāmavedic authorities fastened onto this taxonomy of *nirukta* and *anirukta*, classifying *sāmans* as one or the other depending on whether the name of the deity appears in the lyric. As already discussed in in this study, Sāmavedic singers took the idea a step further, transforming a normal rendition of a song into something radically different. They codified ways to replace the lexical text of the *sāman* with non-lexical syllables, thereby obscuring not only the god's

³⁷ E.g., *indu* instead of *soma*, *śakra* instead of *indra*. For discussion and references, see Renou & Silburn 1954, 72.

name but every other specific referent, as well. Unexpressed song (*aniruktagāna*) became central to the liturgy and hermeneutic reflections of the Jaiminīya branch in particular, as we have seen.

§6.3 *Prajāpati ascending*

The ascendant deity during the Brāhmaṇa period was also the *anirukta* deity, the one least likely to be named in the mantras and rites. Under the name Prajāpati, he was "lord of the creatures" and universal progenitor; above all, he was an embodiment of the institution of sacrifice (*yajña*) as systematized in the YV Saṃhitās and interpreted in the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas.³⁸ Prajāpati is scarcely mentioned in the ṚV (Macdonell 1897, 118), the earliest Vedic Saṃhitā from which so many mantras of the *śrauta* liturgies are culled. This posed a problem for ritualists of the middle Vedic period: although he was regarded as the great god who pervades the liturgies, he was seldom explicitly named. As their Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka compositions amply attest, they constantly reflected on Prajāpati in their theological discussions, and yet their highest god received little "air-time" in the course of ritual performance. The category of *anirukta* provided a welcome solution (Renou & Silburn 1954, 72, emphasis added):

...it was tempting to describe as *ánirukta* a certain deity whose presence at the rite was ardently wished for, and *whose complete absence could be so much the more regretted in the most sacred formulas*, those of the Ṛksaṃhitā: to wit, Prajāpati.

And so we find in the Brāhmaṇas that Prajāpati is described as *anirukta* (e.g., "Prajāpati is indeed unexpressed," KauṣB 23.9.9;³⁹ cf. PB 18.6.8). With this designation, he becomes the *de facto* recipient of all mantras without specified gods.

³⁸ The middle Vedic period bears witness to the ascendance of the sacrifice as an institution and the corresponding preeminence of Prajāpati as the deity associated with the sacrifice as a whole (Gonda 1986a).

³⁹ *anirukta u vāi prajāpatiḥ*

§6.4 *The limitless and formless*

In keeping with this epithet, the texts also correlate Prajāpati with other entities exhibiting qualities of indefiniteness, limitlessness, and formlessness. Remember that he is the one whose name slips away as you say it: *Ka*, "Who." Calasso (2014, 169) observes that

...all that is *anirukta* belongs to *Ka*: it is the implicit that can never become explicit, it is the "limitless unexplicit" ... [*l'inexplicite illimité*, Malamoud 2005, 106], the unsaid that can never be said, the indefinite that will always escape definition. The whole liturgy is a tension between the form that is expressed (*nirukta*) and the indistinctness (*anirukta*) from which it arises. The latter is Prajāpati's part.

According to Renou (1954, 73), this indistinct sense of Prajāpati is confirmed by his correlation with the gods as an undifferentiated group, as well as with abstractions, numbers, surplus, totality, mental activity, and silence.⁴⁰

§6.5 *The mind*

The silent and hidden whirrings of thought provide another mirror for Prajāpati's activities.

Calasso emphasizes Prajāpati's frequent correlation with "mind" (*manas*) (Calasso 2014, 94):

Prajāpati: the background noise of existence, the steady hum that goes before every sound graph, the silence behind which we perceive the workings of a mind that is *the* mind.

We have already discussed at length the prominence of "mentalization" and mental activity in the performance of the *anirukta-gāyatra*, exemplified by the use of the term *manasā* in its codifications. "Mentally"—that is inaudibly, in silence—the Udgātṛ must recite the verse, even as he sings OM out loud. And here is another way that the Jaiminīya singer identifies himself with *Ka*. This single world, *manasā*, does more than codify a singing a technique—it manages to evoke the progenitor of all creatures and his primeval cosmogonies, accomplished through the "ardor" (*tapas*) of intense but silent

⁴⁰ On silence in Vedic ritual, see Renou 1949b; Bodewitz 1983.

mental activity (cf. Renou & Silburn 1954, 73). And thus what Calasso says above about the unexpressed god Prajāpati could just as easily be extended to the preeminent unexpressed syllable: OM is the *sound* behind which we perceive the workings of a mind. The Udgāṭṛ's mentalization while singing OM reenacts Prajāpati's primeval model.

§6.6 *The power of anirukta*

In sum, Vedic texts develop a preference for *anirukta* over *nirukta* because it is not circumscribed by names and language. It is precisely from this lack of definition that its unbounded potency arises: the undefined ritual act has a wider range of potential effects than an act that has been narrowly defined and limited.⁴¹ As a category, the undefined maximizes the benefits of ritual performance. Renou concludes (1954, 75):

The deep intention of the *aniruktatva* lies in the effort to specify beyond well-known things, beyond definite forms, a hidden zone where the things and forms take on an inorganic aspect...[that] makes them redoubtable...Born in the vocabulary of the Brāhmaṇas, this term has actually quite a tacit ascendancy...

This "tacit ascendancy"—quite literally *tacit*, for *anirukta* mantras are often uttered silently or in a low voice—parallels the rise of Prajāpati and the emergence of OM. By organizing their reflections around unexpressed song, the Jaiminīyas tap into all three currents: *aniruktatva*, Prajāpati, and OM. By predicating their soteriology of song on these three, the singer-theologians ground their reflections in the secret heart of Vedic hermeneutics.

⁴¹ Renou has collected a number of Brāhmaṇa statements in this vein: PB 12.9.12; ŚB 4.6.7.18; 5.4.4.13; KauṣB 11.4; and TS 6.2.7.3.

§6.7 Favoring *anirukta* in the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*

The composers of the JUB implicitly prefer the *anirukta* mode; after all, the goal of the text is to teach a soteriological doctrine rooted in unexpressed song. But they also explicitly discuss the taxonomy of *nirukta* and *anirukta*, using another story about Prajāpati to demonstrate the superiority of the undefined. Having created the *sāman* by arranging the union of heaven and earth, Prajāpati then allows the various Devas to claim shares of it. Their shares correspond to some feature of their mythical or ritual identity: Indra, for instance, claims the "fierceness" (*ugra*) of the *sāman*, while Vāyu chooses "distinctness" (*nirukta*; perhaps because Vāyu as the wind can be distinctly sensed). Moreover, each share brings with it some boon that falls under the god's ambit—for Indra, "fortune" (*śrī*), and for Vāyu, "domestic animals" (*paśu*). Prajāpati waits until the other gods have chosen to stake his own claim⁴² (JUB 1.52.5-6):

5. Then Prajāpati spoke. "I will make my choice after them." 6. He announced: "I choose the 'unexpressed' (*anirukta*) part of the melody, the heavenly part. The man who sings this shall come to possess the world of heaven. And as for the one who would curse the man who knows thus and sings this part— he shall have me of all the gods to deal with!"⁴³

This story epitomizes the potency of *aniruktatva* and Prajāpati's relation to it. The unexpressed part is the "heavenly" share and earns the knowledgeable singer a stake in the heavenly world. Although previous stories have shown the Devas to be quite greedy for access to heaven, and Prajāpati quite insecure about his possession of it, nevertheless he lets them choose first. He alone knows the correlation between *anirukta* and the heavenly world; if it were otherwise, he would not have risked losing it to the Devas by giving them first dibs. With this story, the composers of the JUB affirm the

⁴² Except for the dreaded Varuṇa, who takes the leftover, the last "wrong-sounding part" (*apadhvāntam*) of the *sāman*.

⁴³ [5] *atha prajāpatir abravīt / aham anuvarīṣya iti / [6] so 'bravīt / aniruktaṃ sāmno vṛṇe svargyam iti / sa ya etad gāyāt / svargaloka eva so 'sat / mām u sa devānām ṛcchād ya evaṃ vidvāṃsam etad gāyantam upavadād iti /*

ascendancy of Prajāpati and the preeminence of the *anirukta* mode. By revealing Prajāpati's secret, they also hint at their own mastery of the unexpressed in Sāmavedic performance.

§6.8 OM and *anirukta*

In a short addendum to Renou's article, Lilian Silburn argues that when "applied to defined and 'structured' things, *anirukta* is what completes and perfects them...;" and that "according to a quite Vedic paradox, *anirukta* is that which perfectly finishes by the very fact of its being unfinished" (Renou & Silburn 1954, 77). This insight certainly applies to Jaiminīya soteriology. The ascent to the sun, so intricately structured by the *sāman*, is crowned by a statement epitomizing the indefiniteness of *anirukta*: "I am Ka." Silburn's insight also applies to OM, for we have seen earlier in this study that the common thread running through OM's multiformity in ritual is the fact that it "completes and perfects" mantras and recitations. Pointing to its use as the *praṇava* and in *aniruktagāna*, she argues that OM is a "perfectly continuous sound, which represents...the highest manifestation of the *brāhman*, as the *ánirukta* is the highest one of Prajāpati." Moreover OM is, like other *anirukta* utterances (e.g., *svāhā*), an "indistinct phonation [that] condenses...all the values of an explicit recitation" (Renou & Silburn 1954, 76). Prajāpati, of course, discovered this when he pressed the Vedas and found their essence to be OM; and the Jaiminīyas, for their part, paid tribute to Prajāpati's primeval example by collecting an unprecedented volume of reflections on the syllable in the work now known to us as the JUB.

§7 Summing up: OM in Jaiminīya soteriology

In this chapter we focused on the Jaiminīya soteriology of song, with its core idea that one may ward off death and achieve immortality by singing OM in the Soma sacrifice. To fulfill this, a sacrificer

must have an expert Udgātṛ sing the "bodiless" and "endless" *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* on his behalf. The liturgical context associated with the performance of this *sāman* evokes a ritual narrative of ascension to the heavenly world; the alternation of the syllables *o* and *vā*, correlated with the apotheosized OM and Vāc, structure every step of this journey. Insofar as the discursive construction of OM in the JUB precisely reflects the syllable's ritual performance, the distinction between liturgical OM and discursive OM collapses. Of the syllables that make up the lyrics of the *anirukta-gāyatra*, OM in particular propels the participants across the final threshold of the door of the sun. Here, admission depends on demonstrating one's knowledge of the bond that connects the human and the divine.

In keeping with the unexpressed character of OM and the *sāman*, the sacrificer proves himself by declaring his identity with Ka, the indistinct epithet of that paragon of indistinctness, Prajāpati. For the Jaiminīyas, OM is the sound of Prajāpati: like him, it embodies the Vedic liturgies as a whole, defies efforts to define or circumscribe it, and is paired with the god's mythical consort, the goddess Voice (*vāc*). Throughout the JUB, Prajāpati's feats of insight provide a model that the Jaiminīyas seek to follow: just as the god discovers OM and then ascends skyward, so the Udgātṛ masters the arcane teachings on OM and ascends; and just as Prajāpati instructs the Devas to take refuge from Death in the syllable, so Jaiminīya teachers instruct their audience to resort to the syllable to attain immortality.

§7.1 *Wrapping up the Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*

This brings to an end my mammoth survey of OM's construction in the Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīyas. In this seminal text, equal parts Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad, the Jaiminīyas build on the hermeneutic foundations of their Brāhmaṇa to formulate a soteriology of song featuring OM. The sheer mass of material, spread out over the last two chapters, speaks to the richness, complexity, and significance of this crucial phase of OM's construction. While the basic parameters of OM as a sacred

syllable are already established in the JB, it is in the JUB that an expansive theology of OM as the pinnacle of sacred sound is finally articulated. More than any other single work in the Vedas, the JUB invests OM with the deep resonance and soteriological urgency that will define the syllable in the Upaniṣads and beyond. Although rarely acknowledged, the efforts of these singer-theologians to explain how syllables and song can lead to salvation exert a profound influence on subsequent texts. As we take up the Upaniṣads in the chapter, we will find that Jaiminīya influence silently pervades their OM reflections, much in the same way that Prajāpati silently pervades the sacrifice.

CHAPTER NINE

BROADCASTING SACRED SOUND: OM IN THE EARLY UPANIṢADS

We now turn to OM in the Upaniṣads proper, where we find ample evidence that Jaiminīya reflections on OM were broadcast beyond the confines of the Jaiminīya branch to become integrated into the Upaniṣads of other branches. Most of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring OM's construction in the Upaniṣadic reflections of the other Sāmavedic branch, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya. Like the Jaiminīyas, these singer-theologians have a great deal to say about OM; unlike the Jaiminīyas, however, their focus on the syllable represents a radical departure from the traditions of their *śākhā*. The Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas draw most of their inspiration and material from Jaiminīya antecedents. This demonstrates that the Sāmavedic construction with OM is not simply a peculiarity of the Jaiminīya branch, but rather a hermeneutic broadcast, reaching an ever-wider constituency. I conclude the chapter by examining discourses on OM that exemplify this growing audience, those of the Yajurvedic Taittirīya and Vājasaneyi branches. While these ritualist-theologians have comparatively little to say about OM, what they do say speaks to the continuity of much earlier Yajurvedic discourses as well as to the expanding influence of Jaiminīya ideas. I argue that the composers of these texts construct OM as the sonic embodiment of *brahman* and a syllable of matchless soteriological value. In this way, the preeminence of OM migrates beyond the boundaries of the Jaiminīya *śākhā* to become a defining feature of the theological and soteriological doctrines of the Upaniṣadic period. Sustained reflection on OM ceases to be a matter of arcane Sāmavedic doctrine and comes to echo across the corpus as a whole, even going on to shape post-Vedic religious developments.

§1 *Upaniṣad: what's in a name?*

As we trace the arc of OM's emergence in the Upaniṣads, we must find our way through a massive and ill-defined family of texts. Hundreds of works, spanning many centuries, go by the name "Upaniṣad." I circumscribe this unwieldy group with two basic criteria: relative chronology and relation to the Vedic *śākhās*. For the remainder of this study, when I speak of Upaniṣads, I have in mind the most ancient works of this genre, what have been variously called the "Vedic," "major," "principal," "early," or "older" Upaniṣads—that is, the dozen or so works regarded as the *mukhya* ("primary") Upaniṣads by post-Vedic traditions.¹ However, my strategy is not to approach these works as later traditions do, retroactively reifying them as their own separate canon. Rather, I approach these Upaniṣads by reading forward in time from earlier Vedic strata. From this perspective, a narrow majority of these works occupy a place in their respective branches comparable to the JUB: that is, they have been composed as part of a burgeoning movement to textualize esoteric teachings about ritual, soteriology, and metaphysical topics such as *prāṇa*, *ātman*, and *brahman*; and they have been transmitted within the traditions of their own branch. The Upaniṣads examined in this chapter, notably the *Chāndogya*, the *Taittirīya*, and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, all fit this description. (In the next chapter, I will take up several Upaniṣads with looser ties to the Vedic branches.)

§1.1 *Loosening the bonds between ritual and hermeneutics*

The integration of Jaiminīya reflections on OM into the Upaniṣads of other branches is marked by the gradual loosening of the bonds between ritual and hermeneutics that characterized OM's

¹ Medieval theological tradition lists ten "principal" (*mukhya*) Upaniṣads; see discussion in Deussen 1897, 533. Modern scholars have mostly followed suit in their presentation of the core Upaniṣads, although the total number may vary; most recently Olivelle has included twelve in his authoritative 1998 edition and translation, *The Early Upaniṣads*. Van Buitenen has observed that the categories into which the heterogeneous corpus of "Upaniṣads" has been divided remain "uncertain and arbitrary" (1962, 5); see also Sprockhoff 1976. For a recent analysis of these problems, see Cohen 2008.

development in the Brāhmaṇas and the Āraṇyakas. Recall that the coalescence of liturgy and discourse reaches a high point in the JUB, where speculations on OM are always grounded in ritual facts and often structured by specific liturgical contexts. With the Upaniṣads, the two currents—liturgical and discursive—that had remained in constant interplay in the earlier texts, now show signs of veering apart. Many Upaniṣadic discourses on OM, while speculating on ritual matters in general terms, make little or no reference to the syllable's use in specific liturgical contexts. This is emblematic of the broader shift in Upaniṣadic discourse from *karma* to *jñāna*, with an increasing focus on discovering the secret knowledge that underlies ritual, human anatomy, and the cosmos. In this way, discursive OM gradually takes on a trajectory of its own, flowing away from the liturgical currents that inspired it.

§1.2 *The Upaniṣads and liturgical specialization*

In spite of the general trend of loosening the bonds between ritual and hermeneutics, the Upaniṣads examined in this chapter show strong continuity with their respective branches. This is not surprising, for we have seen throughout this study that the liturgical specialty of a text's composers informs their approach to the discursive construction of OM. Still, it is a point that must be emphasized for the Upaniṣads, since the reception of these texts first in Vedāntic traditions and later in the West has tended to reify them as an independent corpus, representing a decisive break with the ritually oriented Brāhmaṇas.² From the point of view of the development of the Vedic branches, this is clearly not the case. Signe Cohen has recently demonstrated that the liturgical specialization of the branch plays a decisive role in shaping an Upaniṣad's content and interpretive strategies (Cohen 2008). In keeping with the pattern I have signaled for earlier strata, the Upaniṣads of the ṚV have a distinctly Ṛgvedic sensibility, those of the YV a Yajurvedic sensibility, and those of the SV—such as the JUB—a

²For critiques of this conventional wisdom, see Cohen 2008, 6-9; Calasso 2014, 17, 39.

Sāmavedic sensibility. Consider also the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya branch of the SV, which is a key text for the development of OM in this period. In focusing their speculations on the Sāmavedic liturgical elements such as the *udgītha* and the *sāman*, the composers of the ChU attest to the persistent influence of liturgical specialization. Because these singer-theologians were accustomed to thinking in terms of sound, melody and non-lexical syllables, they were attracted to OM as a topic of reflection and they constructed it in terms that made sense to them as singers. Even as they delve into metaphysical speculations on *ātman* and *brahman*, this Sāmavedic sensibility is in full effect. Of the ChU, Olivelle observes (Olivelle 1998, 95):

The preoccupation with these [Sāmavedic] chants is consistent with the fact that the authors were Sāmavedic priests. In a similar fashion, the works of the Ṛgveda speculate on the *uktha* (AĀ 2.3.1.4), the Ṛgvedic recitation..., and the Bṛhadāraṇyaka [Upaniṣad of the Yajurveda] begins with the parts of a horse, consistent again with the fact that the Adhvaryu, the Yajurvedic priest, is in charge of butchering the sacrificial animal.

Thus there are lines of continuity from one stratum to the next, both within each Veda and within each branch. Given the influence of liturgical specialization and branch traditions on these works, it is all the more telling when an Upaniṣad borrows material from another Veda or from another branch. As we explore the ongoing discursive construction of OM in the Upaniṣads, we will find many instances of borrowing across these boundaries. More often than not, as we trace these borrowings back to their earliest known sources, we find the hermeneutic fingerprints of the Jaiminīyas. These are evident in the echoes of diction, aphorisms, and similes drawn from Jaiminīya texts; in the emphasis on OM as a sonic essence of the Vedas; and above all in the prominence now given to OM in the formulation of Upaniṣadic soterologies.

§2 Tracing Jaiminīya influence among the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas

Jaiminīya influence resounds closest to home, in its own Veda—that is, in the Upaniṣadic compositions of the other active Sāmavedic branch, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya (hereafter, simply "Kauthuma"). The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is one of the oldest Upaniṣads and it shows a clear Sāmavedic sensibility. However, in electing to focus on OM—in preference to the numerous other topics furnished by the rich Sāmavedic liturgy—the Kauthumas in the ChU significantly realign the interpretive traditions of their own branch. Indeed, the major Brāhmaṇa of the Kauthumas, the *Pañcaviṃśa* or *Tāṇḍyamahā Brāhmaṇa*, while treating many of the ritual contexts in which OM may be used, *does not make a single mention of OM*.³ This is in marked contrast with the Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīyas, which, as we have seen, makes seminal contributions to the discursive construction of the syllable. The Kauthuma silence about OM in the Brāhmaṇa period is all the more striking in that the Upaniṣad they ultimately produce, the *Chāndogya*, is famous for its speculations on OM. What changed in the Kauthuma branch between the Brāhmaṇa and the Upaniṣad? How did OM go from being a non-issue in its voluminous Brāhmaṇa to becoming a central theme in its Upaniṣad? The answer has to do with the strong influence of the JUB on the ChU.

§2.1 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad: a variant of the Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*

The ChU as a whole is traditionally considered part of a larger *Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa*.⁴ However, like the BĀU, JUB, and other early works in the genres of Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad, what comes down to us as a stand-alone work is rather a compilation of aphorisms, stories, and speculations "that must have

³Thus, for example, the PB dwells on some applications of *anirukta* singing (PB 7.1.8; 7.9.17; 17.1.8) without ever bringing OM into the discussion.

⁴On the relation of the ChU and the *Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa*, see Renou 1953, 902; Śaṅkara on *Brahmasūtra* 3.25; Witzel 1977.

previously existed as separate texts" (Olivelle 1998, 95). Fujii has shown that the ChU occupies a place in the development of the Kauthuma branch corresponding to that of the JUB in the Jaiminīya (see ch. 7, §4.2); indeed, he points out that the ChU was known at some time in its history by the very same appellation, *upaniṣad-brāhmaṇa* (Fujii 2009, 31n100). The parallelism between the opening sections of the JUB and ChU is so close that Renou considered the ChU "comme une variante de JUB" (1953, 140 n3; cf. Fujii 1997, 90). Fujii's close comparison of the two works shows that the JUB is older and that the Kauthumas modeled their Upaniṣad on the example of the Jaiminīyas (Fujii 1997, 89-92). Claiming the JUB as the earliest Upaniṣad, Fujii argues that it inspired the rival Kauthumas to compose a similar work in this pioneering genre. But while they could recycle aspects of genre and theme from the JUB, core differences in liturgy and hermeneutics between the two branches led to inevitable differences in content: since the Kauthumas lacked the Jaiminīya *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman* and the accompanying tradition of speculation on that specialized topic, they chose to base their reflections on the *udgītha* and other generalized elements of Sāmavedic singing.

§2.2 Reflections on OM in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad

Like the JUB, the ChU furnishes us with ample testimony on OM, which I divide into half-a-dozen chunks. Most of the reflections on OM in the ChU cluster in the early part of the work (first *adhyāya*), constituting two self-contained disquisitions (*upavyākhyāna*) on the syllable, along with several shorter passages. The Kauthumas begin by arguing that OM is the supreme essence of the three Vedas; that it signifies assent; and that every time the three lead officiants utter it in sacrifice, they honor its exalted status. They also offer a series of speculations on the *ṛc* and *sāman*, correlating these liturgical elements with voice (*vāc*) and breath (*prāṇa*). In the second disquisition, the Kauthumas tell the story of how the gods escaped Death by taking refuge in OM. Like the Jaiminīya source on which it

is based, the Kauthuma version serves as a literary construction of OM's soteriological significance. Next, the composers of the ChU reflect on the identity of two recitational practices with OM, the Sāmavedic *udgītha* and the Ṛgvedic *praṇava*. By effacing the distinction between the Ṛgvedic and Sāmavedic liturgies, they find another way for OM to transcend the specific liturgical contexts with which it is associated. They reinforce this argument by extending the correlation to the sound of the sun, prompting a solar-themed excursus on OM.

In their OM reflections, the Kauthumas draw on a range of Jaiminīya material, from correlations to aphorisms to stories. The clearest example occurs in the fourth excerpt I consider, an adaptation of the classic Jaiminīya simile of the leaves and the pin. Comparing the Kauthuma and Jaiminīya versions side-by-side, I argue that by making a few changes in diction, the Kauthumas amplify the metaphysical resonance of the simile, engaging existing discourses about the articulation of *brahman* in particular syllables. This is indicative of a pattern I find throughout the work: even as the composers of the ChU borrow liberally from the JUB, they remain keen to adapt the material to their own ends.

Fifth, I touch on a curious passage where the Kauthumas negotiate Jaiminīya influence in a different way: through satire. The story of the "canine *udgītha*" tells how a group of dogs learn to sing for food; the lyrics they sing and their manner of performance resemble certain Jaiminīya songs and practices. While most scholars have interpreted this as pure satire, I argue that the story may also be an acknowledgement of the influence of the Vrātyas, who are often associated with dogs, on Sāmavedic traditions. Finally, I conclude my discussion of the ChU by returning to the all-important issue of soteriology. I analyze a passage that tells how the contemplation OM at death will convey the departed along the solar rays up to the sun, where he gains the salvific knowledge of his *ātman*. The parallels to the Jaiminīya soteriology of song are striking. Moreover, the Kauthuma emphasis on mentalizing OM at

the moment of death anticipates a fertile current of speculation along similar lines in subsequent Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and beyond (see next chapter).

In exploring the ChU reflections on OM, I will also attend to the Kauthuma employment of certain terms—notably *vāc*, *akṣara*, and *brahman*—which signal the ongoing integration of OM into the doctrines of sacred sound in the Veda. In earlier strata, the use of these terms in association with OM was innovative and striking: the Jaiminīyas, for instance, called OM *akṣara* well before other branches adopted this diction. The ChU is a good measure of how successful the Jaiminīya formulations come to be, for the Kauthumas routinely invoke *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman* in their construction of OM. This shows that OM's prominence in the doctrines of sacred sound is now becoming even more widely acknowledged.

§3 *Beginning with OM*

The theme of the first *adhyāya* of ChU is the *udgītha*, the main portion of the Sāmavedic praise-song (*stotra*) sung by the Udgātr̥; the majority of the discourses on OM occur in this section. Right away, this choice of theme suggests Jaiminīya influence: it is precisely the Udgātr̥'s part of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*—variously called *udgītha* and *gīta*—that is the main topic of the JUB. The ChU constantly correlates the *udgītha* with OM, as exemplified by its very first sentence (see below). Throughout the work, *udgītha* and OM are virtually interchangeable—in this way, the ChU discursively constructs not only the syllable OM but also *udgītha* as its synonym. (This parallels the discursive construction of *praṇava*, which is likewise a technical term of recitation that becomes a stand-in for OM in Vedic hermeneutics; more on *praṇava* in §4.1, 5 below.) This correlation of the *udgītha* with OM has a liturgical basis: in performance, OM is added to the *udgītha* as the "beginning" (*ādi*; ch. 3, §2.2).

§3.1 On the essence of OM: the first *upavyākhyāna*

The very first word of the ChU is OM. This prominent placement at the start of the work iconically signals the liturgical theme of the text: as the *ādi*, OM is likewise the very first sound of the *udgītha*. This opening disquisition proclaims itself an *upavyākhyāna* (1.1.1, 10; "further explanation") of OM. It begins (1.1.1-3, trans. Olivelle, with changes⁵):

1. *Om*—one should venerate⁶ the *udgītha* as this syllable, for one begins the *udgītha* with *om*. Here is a further explanation of that syllable.
2. The essence of these beings here is earth; the essence of the earth is the waters; the essence of the waters is plants; the essence of plants is man; the essence of man is voice; the essence of voice is the verse (*ṛc*); the essence of the verse is the melody (*sāman*); the essence of the melody is the *udgītha*.
3. This *udgītha* is the quintessence of all essences; it is the highest, the ultimate, the eighth.⁷

The opening statement, introducing the fundamental correlation of OM and *udgītha*, marks the first time in the Kauthuma tradition that OM is called *akṣara*, a formulation we have traced to the JB. Also inspired by Jaiminīya hermeneutics is the sequence of essences, in which each entity is the "essence" or "sap" (*rasa*) of what precedes it: (beings) > earth > waters > plants > man > voice > *ṛc* > *sāman* > *udgītha*. The list proposes eight essences in all, beginning with the earth and culminating in the *udgītha*. As the final, most distilled element, the *udgītha* is also "the quintessence of essences" (*rasānām rasatamaḥ*). Although OM is not included in the eight, the series can be understood as culminating in OM on some

⁵ All of the translations of Upaniṣads in this chapter, excluding those from Jaiminīya sources, are by Olivelle (1998). I have made small changes here and there, chiefly from the need to remain consistent with language adopted elsewhere in my study. In a few cases, however, my changes grow from differences in interpretation; I will signal these differences as they arise.

⁶ *upāsīta*. According to Olivelle (1998: 514), *upa√ās* literally means "to take one thing the same as another." As a specialized hermeneutic term, it is thus very close to *bandhu* or *upaniṣad*. For a Jaiminīya parallel, see JUB 1.43, with its long series of *upa√ās* expressions.

⁷ *om ity etad akṣaram udgītham upāsīta / om iti hy udgāyati / tasyopavyākhyānam //1// eṣām bhūtānām pṛthivī rasaḥ / pṛthivyā āpo rasaḥ / apām oṣadhayo rasaḥ / oṣadhīnām puruṣō rasaḥ / puruṣasya vāg rasaḥ / vāca ṛg rasaḥ / ṛcaḥ sāma rasaḥ / sāmno udgītho rasaḥ //2// sa eṣa rasānām rasatamaḥ paramaḥ parārdhyo 'ṣtamo yad udgīthaḥ //3//*

level, for it has already been established that *udgītha* and OM are correlates; moreover, the singing of the *udgītha* contains OM. The series of eight essences—albeit composed of different elements—appears in JUB 1.1.6-8, where the eight are further correlated with the eight syllables of the *gāyatrī* and then *brahman* itself. The epithets for this quintessence in the ChU ("the highest, the ultimate, the eighth") evoke the diction of the doctrines of *vāc*, *akṣara*, and *brahman*.⁸

The explanation now takes up several questions, each one introduced by a repetition of the indefinite pronoun *katama-*.⁹ Olivelle's translation ("what ultimately...?") aptly conveys the sense of these questions, which aim to penetrate the surface liturgical forms (*ṛc*, *sāman*, *udgītha*) to reveal their cosmic correlates (*vāc*, *prāṇa*, OM)—that is, their hidden, unmanifest forms (ChU 1.1.4-5):

4. What ultimately is the verse (*ṛc*)? What ultimately is the melody (*sāman*)? What ultimately is the *udgītha*? These questions have been the subject of critical inquiry.

5. The verse is just voice; the melody is breath; and the *udgītha* is this syllable *om*...¹⁰

The JUB contains a number of passages that formulate correspondences among similar elements: *ṛc*, *sāman*, voice, breath, and OM (but not *udgītha*; see JUB 1.1.6-7; 1.2.1-2; 1.9.1). In spite of differences in some individual correlations, both the JUB and ChU agree that the most essential elements in this nexus are *vāc*, *prāṇa*, and OM.

⁸ Cf. BĀU 2.2.3, where "the eighth" refers explicitly to *vāc* and *brahman*.

⁹ This rhetorical pattern evokes the milieu in which Upaniṣads like this one were composed: a teacher poses questions for gathered colleagues, pupils, or opponents in debate, then proposes his answer. A noteworthy parallel is JUB 1.43, where the same indefinite pronoun (*katama-*) appears in a series of questions, always signaling a turn in the rhetoric towards esoteric glosses and hidden meanings.

¹⁰ *katamā katamārkaḥ katamat katamat sāmā katamaḥ katamaḥ udgītha iti vimṛṣṭaṃ bhavati //4// vāg evark / prāṇaḥ sāmā / om ity etad akṣaraṃ udgīthaḥ /*

§3.2 Coital correlations

As the passage continues, two correlated pairs (*vāc* :: *prāṇa*, *ṛc* :: *sāman*), each composed of one feminine and one masculine substantive, lead to reflections on the sexual dimensions of ritual performance (ChU 1.1.5-7):

...voice and breath, the *ṛc* and the *sāman*—each of these sets, clearly, is a pair in coitus.

6. This pair in coitus unites in the syllable *om*, and when a pair unites in coitus, they satisfy each other's desire.

7. So, when someone knows this and venerates the *udgītha* as this syllable, he will surely become a man who satisfies desires.¹¹

These coital correlations bring up a number of issues relevant to the utterance of OM. First, the union of *vāc* and *prāṇa* is intuitive: voice and breath come together to produce human vocalization. The most elemental form of such a union may be something close to the sound OM; recall that the formulation of Jakobson discussed earlier in his study—"the most natural order of sound production is an opening of the mouth followed by its closure" (Jakobson 1962, 541)—is "a very apt description of the mantra OM" (Staal 1989a, 274; see ch.4, §3.2). Next, the "sexual pairing" (*mithuna*) of *ṛc* and *sāman* has a basis in ritual performance: the songs of the SV result from the union of the verse and melody; in the idiom of Sāmavedic texts, a melody is "sung on" a verse (*gai-* plus locative). This corresponds to the idea of the male *sāman* as the "dominant partner" mounting the female *ṛc* in intercourse (Cohen 2008, 102; see ChU 1.6.2).

The sexual union of *ṛc* and *sāman* is a well-attested trope in Jaiminīya hermeneutics. It is striking to discover the same pair of pairs, in the same order, in the JUB (3.34.1): "Voice and breath are

¹¹ *tadvā etan mithunaṃ yad vāk ca prāṇas caṅk ca sāma ca //5//
tad etan mithunam om ity etasminn akṣare saṃsṛjyate / yadā vai mithunau samāgacchata āpayato vai tāv
anyonyasya kāmam // 6// āpayitā ha vai kāmānaṃ bhavati ya etad evaṃ vidvān akṣaram udgītham upāste //7//*

a pair in coitus. *Ṛc* and *sāman* are a pair in coitus."¹² In the memorable formulation of the JUB (1.54.4), "they say that the *ṛc* and the *sāman* have sex in the mouth of the Udgāṭṛ; one should not gaze at the mouth of the Udgāṭṛ."¹³ The Udgāṭṛ's mouth—the site for the sexual union of voice and breath, verse and melody—is the place where the various couplings unite in OM.¹⁴ In keeping with Jaiminīya patterns, sex—its fecundity, its sonality, its secrecy—is a key part of the discursive construction of OM.

§3.3 *Saying yes in the triple Veda*

The explanation now moves to a more general discussion of OM's role in the Vedic liturgies, raising two themes that we have already had occasion to consider: OM as a way to say "yes" and OM as the unitary realization of the three Vedas. The explanation continues (ChU 1.1.8-9):

8. Clearly, this syllable signifies assent, for one says *om* when one assents to something. And assent is just fulfillment. So, when someone knows this and venerates the *udgītha* as this syllable, he will surely become a man who fulfills desires.
9. It is by means of this syllable that the triple Veda continues—the Adhvaryu delivers the *āśrāvaṇa* with *om*; the Hotṛ recites the *śastra* with *om*; and the Udgāṭṛ sings the *udgītha* with *om*. They do so to honor this very syllable, because of its greatness and because it is the essence.¹⁵

¹² *tad etan mithunaṃ yad vāk ca prāṇas ca /mithunam ṛksāme /* In an earlier chapter, we considered a story from the JB where the Sāmavedic *stoma* (masculine) and the Ṛgvedic *gāyatrī* (feminine) overcame certain incompatibilities to have intercourse (see ch. 6, §3.12); the JUB reprises the same story of incompatibility and eventual consummation (1.53, 1.56) with the *ṛc* and *sāman* as partners.

¹³ *atho āhur udgātur mukhe sambhavataḥ / udgātur eva mukhan nekṣeteti /* There is a corresponding rite devoted to the sexual union of verse and melody. On the night before the fasting-day (*upavasatha*), the *sadas* is enclosed so as to afford privacy to the *ṛc* and *sāman*, who copulate within (cf. JUB 1.54.3-5).

¹⁴ It seems possible that the onomatopoeic sense of the syllable is also intended, for the sound *om* (especially when repeated) evokes the sound of a human couple having sex.

¹⁵ *tadvā etad anujñākṣaram / yad dhi kiṃcānujānāty om ity eva tad āha / eṣo eva samṛddhīryad anujñā / samardhayitā ha vai kāmānām bhavati ya etad evaṃ vidvān akṣaram udgītham upāste //8// teneyaṃ trayī vidyā vartate / om ity āśrāvayati / om ity śamsati / om ity udgāyati / etasyaivākṣarasyāpacityai mahimnā rasena //9//*

As I have already had occasion to note, the first sentence in this excerpt provides unequivocal evidence for "assent" (*anujñā*) as a possible meaning of the syllable (see ch.4, §1). The notion that saying OM fulfills desires harkens back to Aitareya speculations on the syllable. The Aitareyins counseled a middle way between the extremes of assent (*om*) and denial (*na*); they warned against "saying yes (=OM)" to every request, lest it leave a man empty-handed (see ch. 7, §2.1). Here, the ChU presents the capacity to fulfill desires with OM in a different light, as an emblem of power and success.

The next sentence discusses the signature recitations by the three lead officiants of the three Vedas. The Adhvaryu's *āśrāvāṇa* (*om śrāvaya*, "OM, make him listen!") employs OM to cue a new round of mantras; the Hotṛ's recitation of the *śastra* substitutes OM (called the *praṇava*) for the final syllable of some verses; and the Udgātṛ adds OM (called the *ādi*) to begin his singing of the *udgītha*. These three uses of OM are alike in that they cue, close, or introduce recitations; as such, they foster the continuity of ritual performance, smoothing transitions from one officiant to the next, one mantra to the next, and one syllable to the next. Such liturgical uses of OM recur hundreds of times in the course of a single sacrifice. But the composers of the ChU do not explain OM's prominent role in terms of recitational details, which would have been well known to all involved. Instead, they present OM's convergence in the three liturgies as an indication of the "honor" (*apaciti*) accorded the syllable by all three priests in recognition of its "greatness" and "essence." In this way, the coalescence of these three uses of OM, one from each Veda, is invoked as a testament to the syllable's total pervasion of the ritual and a justification of its transcendence.

As we have already seen, the coalescence of different recitational practices in OM is a hallmark of similar discourses not only among the Jaiminīyas (JB 3.322; JUB 3.19), but the Taittirīyas as well (TS 3.2.9.5-6; TĀ 2.11.4). In fact, the closest parallel to ChU 1.1.8-9 is a contemporaneous passage from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (see §9.1-3 below), which also weaves together OM's capacity to signal assent with

its role in tri-Vedic synthesis. That the Kauthumas—lacking these teachings in their own hermeneutic tradition—incorporated them into their Upaniṣad evinces their interest in gathering material on OM from a range of sources, not only from the Jaiminīyas.

§3.4 *Summing up: the first upavyākhyāna on OM*

Though lacking continuity with earlier discourses in their branch, these teachings on OM were deemed important enough to take pride of place at the beginning of the Upaniṣad. This motivation to be "in the know" comes through clearly in the last section of this *upavyākhyāna* on OM (ChU 1.1.10):

10. Those who know this and those who do not both perform these rites using this syllable. But knowledge and ignorance are two different things. Only what is performed with knowledge, with faith, and with an awareness of the hidden connections (*upaniṣad*) becomes truly potent. Now then—that was a further explanation of this very syllable.¹⁶

The trope of esoteric knowledge disseminated only to a select few is attested as far back as the ṚV Riddle Hymn ("only those who know it sit together here;" ṚV 1.164.39); the same trope continues in new iterations in the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads (*ya evaṃ veda, evaṃvid, vidvān*). This section similarly posits two groups of ritual officiants, the knowledgeable and the ignorant. In a world where specialists from different branches would certainly have vied against one another for patronage, the Kauthumas could no longer afford to be silent on the topic of OM. Combining their own insights with those of their rivals and colleagues, they consolidated their knowledge in this *upavyākhyāna*. By doing so, they asserted their mastery of OM's "secret connections" (*upaniṣad*; see ch. 7, §1).

¹⁶ *tenobhau kuruto yaś caitad evaṃ veda yaś ca na veda / nānā tu vidyā cāvidyā ca / yad eva vidyayā karoti śraddhayopaniṣadā tad eva vīryavattaraṃ bhavati / iti khalv etasyaivākṣarasypavyākhyānaṃ bhavati //10//*

§4 *Evading Death: the second upavyākhyāna*

The ChU boasts a second *upavyākhyāna* on OM. While the first consolidated a range of speculations about the syllable, the second one addresses one topic in particular: soteriology. In this familiar story of how the gods evaded Death by resorting to OM, which harkens back to the JUB, we have our first glimmer of the Kauthuma appropriation of the Jaiminīya soteriology of song (ChU 1.4.1-5):

1. *Om*—one should venerate the *udgītha* as this syllable, for one begins the *udgītha* with OM. Here is a further explanation of that syllable. 2. When the gods feared death, what they did was to enter the triple Veda. They covered it with meters. The fact that the gods covered (*chad*) it with them gave the name to and discloses the true nature of the meters (*chandās*). 3. But death saw the gods there in the verses (*ṛc*), in the melodies (*sāman*), and in the formulas (*yajus*), just as one sees a fish in water. When the gods discovered this, they emerged from a *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*, and entered into the very sound (*svara*). 4. So when one finishes a *ṛc*, or a *sāman*, or a *yajus*, one makes the sound *om*. This syllable—the immortal and the fearless—is that very sound. Upon entering that syllable, the gods became immortal and free from fear. 5. A man who utters this syllable with that knowledge enters this very syllable, the sound that is immortal and free from fear. As the gods became immortal by entering it, so will he.¹⁷

Seeking a refuge from Death, the Devas enter the three Vedas, hiding themselves away by covering (*chad-*) the triple wisdom with meters (*chandās*); this diction furnishes an "exegetical etymology" of the term *chandās* (Lubin forthcoming). These afford no cover, and Death spies them as "one sees a fish in water." They emerge from the *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus* to enter "sound" itself (*svara*), which here denotes the syllable OM. Here they find refuge, gaining the syllable's immortality and fearlessness; the man who knows this (*evaṃ vidvān*) can follow their example. The ChU ascribes the attainment of

¹⁷ *om ity etad akṣaram udgītham upāsīta / om iti hy udgāyati / tasyopavyākhyānam //1// devā vai mṛtyor bibhyatas trayīm vidyāṃ prāviśan / te chandobhir acchādayan / yad ebhir acchādayams tac chandasām chandastvam //2// tānu tatra mṛtyur yathā matsyam udake pariṣāsyed evaṃ paryapaśyad ṛci sāmni yajuṣi / te nu vitvordhvā ṛcaḥ sāmno yajuṣaḥ svaram eva prāviśan //3// yadā vā ṛcam āpnoti om ity evātisvarati evaṃ sāmāivaṃ yajuḥ / eṣa u svaro yad etad akṣaram etad amṛtam abhayam / tat praviśya devā amṛtā abhayā bhavan //4// sa ya etad evaṃ vidvān akṣaram praṇauty etad evākṣaram svaram amṛtam abhayam praviśati / tat praviśya yad amṛtā devās tad amṛto bhavati //5//*

immortality to the generalized sounding of the syllable in the recitation of all three Vedas—the familiar theme of OM uniting the three Vedas comes into play again.

The fact that elements of the story have antecedents in both the Jaiminīya traditions (with OM) and Kauthuma traditions (without OM) suggests that they are drawn from a common stock of Sāmavedic lore (cf. JUB 1.18; PB 22.12.1; JB 2.69-70; see also my ch. 8, §2). The antecedent in the Kauthuma tradition, a highly abbreviated compression of the narrative, does little to help our analysis of the present passage. However, comparing the Jaiminīya reflex of this story in the JUB yields important insights into the ChU version. The stories are quite similar, with the gods moving from one ritual element to the next to avoid death, ultimately finding refuge only in OM, which the JUB also correlates with the triple Veda. Similarities aside, the two accounts show different levels of liturgical engagement. In the JUB, *svara* denotes not the "sound" of OM (as in the ChU) but the musical "tone" of Sāmavedic singing; thus the Jaiminīyas conceive a soteriology involving OM that can only be realized through song. Differently from the Jaiminīyas, the Kauthumas conceive of *svara* in broad terms, as the "sound" of OM across all three liturgies, in *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus* alike; one "makes the sound" OM (*atisvarati*) in all three types of recitation.¹⁸ This shows that the Kauthumas do not predicate the syllable's soteriological efficacy on Sāmavedic rites alone (as do the Jaiminīyas, for whom immortality hinges on the specialized performance of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*). Instead, Sāmavedic authority and praxis is downplayed in favor of bringing the liturgies of all three Vedas together in OM.

¹⁸ The word *atisvarati* can be traced to a Kauthuma source (PB 13.12.11), where according to Caland (1931, 347 n1; citing Simon 1908, 516) it has the technical Sāmavedic meaning of skipping one or more musical tones. This technical meaning does not fit the ChU, where the verb takes as its objects *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*.

§4.1 Why *praṇava*?

The tendency towards a synthesis of the liturgies is also evident in the last sentence of the excerpt. Olivelle translates: "A man who utters (*praṇauti*) this syllable with this knowledge..." The verb *pra√ṇu*, which literally means "to hum," is a technical term from ṚV recitation, denoting the replacement of the final syllable of a verse with OM (see ch. 3, §3.1). Thus, one could translate the same sentence with a more technical sense, as Deussen does (1897): "Wer, solches wissend, diese Silbe als Praṇava ertönen lässt..." Whatever translation one favors, the verb *pra√ṇu* is a striking choice of diction, especially when one compares the Jaiminīya parallel, which remains rooted in the Sāmavedic liturgy: "A man who sings the *udgītha* with this knowledge" (*evaṃ vidvān udgāyati*; JUB 1.18.11).

Why is the ChU, a Sāmavedic Upaniṣad, expressing itself with a technical idiom from the Ṛgvedic liturgy? On the one hand, the ṚV comes first in the standard enumeration of *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*; the priority given here to the Ṛgvedic liturgy may simply be a shorthand to reflect this traditional ordering. On the other hand, as Olivelle's translation suggests, the verb *praṇauti* may also convey a non-technical sense of "uttering OM" that sums up the narrative; no specific liturgical context need be intended. Either way, the ambiguity of the diction suggests that the composers of the ChU understand the technical terms associated with OM in a more expansive fashion. In the ChU, *praṇava*—much like the Sāmavedic technical term *udgītha*—often transcends its liturgical specificity to denote OM in general.

§5 *Praṇava* and *udgītha*

Throughout the ChU, the Kauthumas are keen to elaborate the theme of the fundamental sameness of the diverse liturgical practices using OM. For instance, we learn that the Ṛgvedic verse and the Sāmavedic melody are one and the same (ChU 1.3.4); and further that all three Vedas are embodied

in the three syllables *ud-* (SV), *-gi-* (YV), and *-tha* (RV) (ChU 1.3.7). As they insist on the synthesis of the liturgies in OM, the composers of the ChU discursively expand the technical terms associated with it. The terms *praṇava* and *udgītha* no longer refer only to distinct recitational practices with the syllable, they also refer to OM as a holistic, unitary sound that pervades the sacrifice. United by OM, the *udgītha* and the *praṇava* turn out to be identical (ChU 1.5.1):

So, then, the *udgītha* is the *praṇava*, and the *praṇava* is the *udgītha*. The *udgītha* is the sun up there, and the *udgītha* is also the *praṇava*, for as it moves it makes the sound *om*.¹⁹

The opening correlative statement is a chiasmus, poetically indexing the message of this passage, which is the union of the two technical terms. By leaving these terms untranslated, I aim to leave their liturgical resonance intact. By contrast, Olivelle's published translation renders *udgītha* as "High Chant" and *praṇava* simply as "OM." This obscures what is really being discussed here, namely the synthesis of the Rgvedic and Sāmavedic liturgies in a single syllable.

The next statement adds a third term to the correlation, the sun (*āditya*). As already discussed at length, the Jaiminīyas originated the correlation between OM of the *udgītha* and the sun (JB 1.322; see also JUB 1.10; 1.33, 1.36; 1.58), and in their Upaniṣad formulated an entire soteriology based on the singing of OM to enter into the sun. The Kauthuma innovation is to include the *praṇava*: in this way they extend Jaiminīya claims for Sāmavedic performance to Rgvedic performance and thus to sacrificial performance in general. As they did in earlier reflections (ChU 1.3.4, 7), the Kauthumas again emphasize OM's transcendence of narrow liturgical boundaries.

¹⁹ *atha khalu ya udgīthaḥ sa praṇavo yaḥ praṇavaḥ sa udgītha iti / asau vā āditya udgītha eṣa praṇavaḥ / om iti hy eṣa svarann eti //1//*

§5.1 *The sound of the sun*

The last sentence in this excerpt uses a demonstrative pronoun to indicate that *something* makes the sound OM as it moves. The syntax leaves room for at least two interpretations of the referent—does "it" (*eṣa*) refer to the sun (thus Olivelle, Deussen)? Or to the *udgītha*? The ChU has alluded in an earlier passage to the relation between the sun's "light" (*svar*) and the *udgītha*'s "sound" (*svara*) (ChU 1.3.2). Therefore I would argue that this syntactic ambiguity is intentional, reinforcing the correlation between the sun and the *udgītha*: the sun makes the sound OM as it moves across the sky, just as the song makes the sound OM as it moves through the singer's mouth. Olivelle, taking the language to refer to solar movement, surmises that this "could refer to the ritual acclamations to the rising sun...; then the sound is actually not made by the sun but only accompanies the rising sun" (Olivelle 1998, 535n). The *bahiṣpavamānastotra*, sung at dawn, is mentioned elsewhere in the ChU (1.11.7; 3.19.3) and furnishes the context for the Jaiminīya soteriological speculations about OM and ritual performance (see ch. 8, §3.1; also further discussion §7 below). Other passages in the ChU show that the correlation between *udgītha* and the sun has a basis not only in ritual, but also in wordplay. The prefix *ud-*, indicating "upward" motion, is shared by both: "as it rises (*udyan*), [the sun] sings the *udgītha* (*udgāyati*) for the creatures" (ChU 1.3.1); "the syllable *ud-* is the sun" (1.3.6).²⁰ In the logic of correlative hermeneutics, there need not be a distinction made between the sun and the *udgītha*; the movement of both produces the sound OM.

²⁰ 1.3.1: *udyan vā eṣa prajābhya udgāyati* / 1.3.6: *āditya evot* / Parpola and Olivelle both discuss AB 7.20, which interprets the sun's upward movement as a gesture of assent and correlates it with OM as expressing assent (Parpola 1981a, 205, Olivelle 1998, 535n).

§5.2 Singing to the sun for sons

These ideas continue to be explored as the passage turns to a story about the Ṛgvedic sage Kauṣītaki. Here speculations about the sun, *udgītha*, OM, and breath continue (ChU 1.5.2-4):

2. And this is what Kauṣītaki once told his son: "I sang the praise of only the sun. Therefore, I have only you for a child. Turn to its rays, and you will have many children." That is with respect to the divine sphere. 3. Now, with respect to the body (*ātman*): it is as the breath here within the mouth that one should venerate the *udgītha*, for as it moves it makes the sound *om*. 4. And this is what Kauṣītaki once told his son: "I sang the praise of only the breath within the mouth. Therefore, I have only you for a child. Direct your songs of praise at the breaths in their multiplicity with the thought, 'I am going to have many children.'"²¹

In the ṚV Brāhmaṇa that bears his name, Kauṣītaki is cited as an authority on the *praṇava* of Ṛgvedic recitation (KauṣB 11.5.1-9; see my ch. 3, §3.1n). It is not clear whether a specific form of recitation is intended here by Kauṣītaki's singing; the diction (*abhi√gai*) does not necessarily refer to Ṛgvedic or Sāmavedic recitation in particular. Interestingly, though, the advice attributed here to Kauṣītaki comes from not from Ṛgvedic tradition but from a Sāmavedic source, the JUB (2.6, 2.9.10), which tells how to sing the *udgītha* so as to get any number of sons, from one to a thousand. By concentrating on a certain enumeration of breaths, the corresponding number of sons will be born. To get the maximum number, however, one must concentrate on the rays of the sun. I would argue that by attributing this Sāmavedic lore to a Ṛgvedic teacher, the ChU is constructing a narrative rapprochement between SV and ṚV that reinforces the theme of this section, that the *udgītha* and the *praṇava* are identical.²²

²¹ *etam u evāham abhyagāsiṣaṃ tasmān mama tvam eko 'sīti ha kauṣītakiḥ putram uvāca / raśmīṃs tvam paryāvartayāt / bahavo vai te bhaviṣyanti / ity adhidāivatam //2// athādhyātman / ya evāyaṃ mukhyaḥ prāṇas tam udgītham upāsīta / om iti hy eṣa svarann eti //3// etam u evāham abhyagāsiṣaṃ tasmān mama tvam eko 'sīti ha kauṣītakiḥ putram uvāca / prāṇāṃs tvam bhūmanam abhigāyatad bahavo vai me bhaviṣyantīti //4//*

²² Cohen argues that as a general matter, the composers of the ChU show an affinity for Ṛgvedic traditions (2008, 101).

§5.3 Sun, song, and breath

The formulations "with respect to the divine sphere" (*adhidaivata*) and "with respect to the body" (*adhyātma*) frame Kauṣītaki's story, thereby reminding us that the familiar Upaniṣadic hermeneutic of macrocosm (sun), mesocosm (*udgītha*, *praṇava*), and microcosm (breath) organizes this section. Attention to the body reveals another way that *udgītha*, *praṇava*, and OM correlate—all are produced by the movement of breath in the mouth (cf. §5.1 above). Thus, the sage's advice is predicated on the knowledge of an esoteric relation that connects the divine, ritual, and human realms, namely that OM is the sound of the sun, an element of recitation, and the singer's breath. In keeping with the emphasis on human anatomy, here it is breath (*prāṇa*) and/or the *udgītha* (not the sun) that make the sound OM as they move as a flow of sound across the singer's mouth.

§5.4 Correcting a song with OM

If the *udgītha* and the *praṇava* are the same, and if Sāmavedic and Ṛgvedic liturgies coalesce, what, then, are the implications for ritual performance? This is addressed in the conclusion of the passage (ChU 1.5.5):

5. So, then, the *udgītha* is the *praṇava*, and the *praṇava* is the *udgītha*. That is why the Hotṛ priest from his seat rectifies an *udgītha* that has been sung improperly.²³

Here the composers of the ChU confront an issue that must have also engaged other Upaniṣadic thinkers as they sought the unity underlying the complexity of ritual. For it stands to reason that the constant formulation of new correlations, always tending towards holism and unity, would transform the internal dynamics of ritual performance. What does it mean for the Hotṛ to recite the *praṇava*, once he possesses knowledge of its identity with the Udgātr's *udgītha*? The correction and expiation of

²³ *atha khalu ya udgīthaḥ sa praṇavo yaḥ praṇavaḥ sa udgītha iti / hotṛ ṣadanāddhaivāpi durudgītam anusamāharatīty anusamāharatīti //5//*

mistakes in performance conventionally lies under the authority of the Brahman priest—that the Hotṛ priest of the ṚV, without ever leaving his seat, can rectify the performance of the Udgāṭṛ of the SV evinces a newfound potency for this officiant. The instrument of his new power is the mantra shared by all priests, regardless of their particular Vedic affiliation, the syllable OM.

§5.5 *Transforming earlier reflections*

So far, the core teaching on OM in the ChU is that the syllable is the unitary embodiment of the three Vedic liturgies. Fittingly, antecedents for this teaching can be found in the hermeneutic traditions of all three Vedas, most notably in the Aitareya (ṚV), Taittirīya (YV), and Jaiminīya (SV) branches. The Kauthumas, unencumbered by their own history of OM speculations, take this doctrine of tri-Vedic synthesis and push it to an extreme not yet reached by these other branches: they draw on correlations with OM to show that there is no functional difference whatsoever between different recitational practices. While making use of a Sāmavedic liturgical element, the *udgītha*, to organize their discussions, the Kauthumas nevertheless are at pains to show that their liturgy has no monopoly on OM: rather, as the ChU version of the story of the gods' escape from death shows, the "sounding of OM" is a soteriological strategy accessible by means of the three Vedas alike. This is in stark contrast to the teachings of the Jaiminīyas in their Upaniṣad: the JUB formulates a soteriology with OM that is only effective within the specialized context of the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*. On the whole it is clear that the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas borrow liberally from the Jaiminīyas, but never slavishly: the composers of the ChU always transform the Jaiminīya material to suit their own more expansive agenda.

§6 Exercise in intertextuality: the leaves and the pin

Given their close relation, it is instructive to read Kauthuma and Jaiminīya texts side-by-side—the aphorism attributed to Indologist Karl Hoffmann rings true here: "the best commentary on a Vedic text is another Vedic text" (Witzel, pers. comm.). Such an exercise in intertextuality brings insights into the antecedents, transmission, and reception of discourses on OM in the middle to late Vedic period. With this in mind, let's now take up a narrative attested in parallel versions, in several textual strata, and in both branches. The theme of the story is OM's pervasion of the three Vedas and the three worlds; as such, it is of primary importance to the Kauthuma-Rāṅṅāyānīya understanding of OM in the ChU. By studying it closely, we gain insight into how the Kauthumas grafted Jaiminīya source material onto their own branch.

§6.1 Prajāpati's sonic cosmogony

By now we are well acquainted with the cosmogonic narrative of Prajāpati's *tapas*, which we have encountered over and over across the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṅyakas. The composers of the ChU give a compressed retelling (ChU 2.23.2-3):

2. Prajāpati heated up the worlds, and, when they had been heated up, the threefold knowledge sprang from them. He heated up the threefold knowledge, and, when it had been heated up, these syllables *bhūr bhuvās svar* sprang from it. 3. He heated up these syllables, and, when they had been heated up, the sound *om* sprang from them. As all the leaves are bored through by a pin, so the whole of voice (*sarvā vāc*) is bored through by the sound *om*. This whole world is only the sound *om*.²⁴

Prajāpati, the worlds, the Vedas, the syllables *bhūr bhuvās svar*—the same core elements map out the correlated levels of a familiar sacrificial cosmology. Each, in its own way, is a holistic conception of the

²⁴ *prajāpatir lokān abhyatapat / tebhyo 'bhitaptebhya trayī vidyā samprāsravat / tām abhyatapat / tasyā abhitaptāyā etāny akṣarāṇi samprāsravanta bhūr bhuvāḥ svar iti //2// tāny abhyatapat / tebhyo 'bhitaptebhya oṅkāra samprāsravat / tad yathā śāṅkunā sarvāṇi parṇāni samṭṭṭṇānu evam oṅkāreṇa sarvā vāk samṭṭṭṇā / oṅkāra evedam sarvam oṅkāra evedam sarvam //3//*

cosmos. Prajāpati embodies the sacrifice as the undifferentiated cosmic whole, preceding and catalyzing creation (cf. Smith 1989, 62, 64); the worlds are the first elemental differentiation of this whole; the three Vedas express the differentiation of the whole in liturgical terms; the three terms of the mantra "earth, atmosphere, heaven" name and create its natural realms. The culmination in OM essentially brings this sequence around full circle, to its primordial state of holism; recall that Prajāpati is the "unexpressed" or indistinct god, as the Brāhmaṇa of the Kauthuma branch states (PB 18.6.8; see my ch. 8, §6.3).

The holism of OM is expressed here in two ways: first with a simile likening OM to a pin piercing leaves; and next with a correlation between the syllable and the whole—"this whole world is only the sound OM" (*oṅkāra evedam̐ sarvam*). This correlation succinctly expresses the holism of the single syllable: like Prajāpati, OM embodies the whole cosmos. The earliest known version of this aphorism comes in the Brāhmaṇa of the Jaiminīyas (2.10): "Now this syllable is indeed this whole world" (*etad dha vā idaṃ sarvam akṣaram̐*; see also TU 1.8 and my §9.1-2 below). The simile of the leaves and the pin follows in the JB; it is repeated (without the correlation) at JUB 1.10.2-3. That the Kauthumas have appropriated the correlation and the simile together suggests the JB as the ultimate source.

§6.2 *The simile of the leaves and the pin: a comparison*

The Kauthuma adaptation of this simile, whose fame has far outstripped that of its Jaiminīya antecedents, deserves closer scrutiny for several reasons. First, it confirms the broader tendency of the ChU to borrow material on OM from Jaiminīya sources. Next, as I will now argue, a close reading of the Kauthuma and Jaiminīya versions side-by-side elucidates the strategies used by the Kauthumas in adapting and recontextualizing discourses on OM. My reading suggests that previous scholars, in

emphasizing this simile's implications for the debate about writing in ancient South Asia, have overlooked its theological import.

The parallel texts of the simile are as follows:

yathā sūcyā palāśāni saṃtrṇṇāni syur evam etenākṣareṇeme lokās saṃtrṇṇā
(JB 2.10 = JUB1.10.3)
tad yathā śaṅkunā sarvāṇi parṇāni saṃtrṇṇāny evam oṅkāreṇa sarvā vāk
saṃtrṇṇā (ChU 2.23.3)

While the syntax is identical, there are differences in diction. The composers of the ChU have made a clear effort to put their own stamp on a traditional simile. The terms *palāśā-* and *parṇā-* are interchangeable synonyms. They convey the generic meaning of 'leaf' or refer to a specific plant known to us by the botanical identification *butea frondosa*. As for *sūcī* and *śaṅku*, both refer to some sharp-pointed instrument, but there is little evidence allowing for a more specific identification in the present context. (On these words, see Mayrhofer 1992-2001, s.v.) Another difference comes in the manner of denoting OM: the JB and JUB refer to it as *etad akṣaram*, "this syllable," while the ChU calls it *oṅkāra*, the "sound OM."²⁵ The latter is scarcely found in Jaiminīya texts (but see JB 2.78 for a rare instance) or in the Brāhmaṇas of other branches; but the use of *oṅkāra* predominates in later Vedic texts, especially the Upaniṣads and Śrauta Sūtras.

§6.3 *The whole of voice*

But perhaps the most significant difference comes towards the end of the simile: the JB and JUB speak of "these worlds" (*ime lokāḥ*) being penetrated by the syllable, while the ChU modifies this to "the whole of voice" (*sarvā vāc*). The latter formulation has antecedents that suggest the cosmic totality of voice and *brahman*, rather than simply "all words" as in Olivelle's published translation. For

²⁵ The suffix *-kāra* ("making") is conventionally appended in Vedic to the non-lexical utterances of ritual (e.g., *hiṃkāra*, *bhakāra*). We might idiomatically translate *oṅkāra* as "making (the sound) om."

example, in the paragraph preceding the JUB version of the simile (1.9), *sarvā vāc* is one of many names for *brahman*. In another section of the JB (2.244), we learn that: "(The syllable) *ho* is the whole of speech" (*ho iti hi sarvā vāk*; cf. PB 24.14.2-3). In a discourse on OM in the AĀ, the "sound *a*" (*akāra*) is correlated with both *sarvā vāc* and *brahman*, and exalted above OM as the most transcendent sound. In light of these examples, I argue that the Kauthuma choice to substitute *sarvā vāc* for *ime lokāḥ* has a definite theological end: it engages an existing discourse on the "whole of voice" as embodied in certain sounds; and the relation of these sounds to the holism of *brahman*. By making a few changes in diction, the Kauthumas bring into bold relief the metaphysical contours of this simile.

§6.4 *The leaves of a manuscript: OM and literacy*

Paul Thieme has compared the penetration of the pin through the palm leaves of a manuscript (so as to bind them together) to the pervasion of the syllable OM through the totality of unwritten, orally transmitted sacred speech (Thieme 1968, 17). Interpreted in this way, the simile has been invoked as early evidence for manuscript culture and writing in South Asia. Olivelle writes (1998, 541n; cf. Thieme 1968a; Ickler 1973, 116; Böhtlingk 1897a, 82):

...the leaves here probably refer to the leaves of a manuscript. These manuscript leaves were made with a variety of materials, including palm leaves and birch bark. To bind the separate leaves together with a string, one or two holes were bored through them... It is this image that the text is using to show how all of speech is penetrated by OM. If this interpretation is right, then it is an important piece of evidence both for writing in India and for the relative age of the final redaction of this Upaniṣad.

This is an elegant solution, but not without problems. The most obvious is that the earliest concrete evidence for writing in India comes with Aśoka's inscriptions ca. 250 BCE, several centuries after the accepted date of composition for the ChU (Falk 1993; Hinüber 1989). Next, even in cases where writing seems to have been present earlier, there is no indication that it had made inroads into Vedic cultures

of textualization and transmission, which remained staunchly oral. Thus, Witzel has spoken of a "dichotomy" between burgeoning literacy, on the one hand, and Vedic/Sanskritic orality, on the other. Pāṇini's grammar, which was composed in Gandhāra where manuscript culture got an early foothold, exemplifies this: while Pāṇini mentions a "script" (*lipi*) and even books "bound together" (*grantha*), he "stresses oral speech, whether of *bhāṣā* (his conservative local Sanskrit dialect), or of the Vedas (Saṃhitā and Pāda recitation)" (Witzel 2011, 494). Even assuming that forms of writing and binding leaves *were* known to the Brahmanical originators of this simile (which in itself is unlikely; see next paragraph), it seems far-fetched that they would have invoked such alien technologies of literacy to laud OM, the essence of their *oral* textual corpus.

On the other hand, Olivelle implies that interpreting this image as the leaves of a manuscript could also lead to another conclusion: rather than proving that writing on leaves was practiced in the late Vedic period, it could simply prove that the "final redaction" of the ChU did not occur until much later, when such forms of writing and binding *were* prevalent in India. But the final redaction of the ChU has little bearing on the simile itself: we have seen that the core imagery may be traced all the way back to the JB, several centuries before the ChU, perhaps ca. 700 BCE. The continuity with Jaiminīya sources proves that the simile was *not* a late addition to a much later redaction of the ChU, but rather an integral part of the Kauthumas' efforts to model their Upaniṣad on that of the Jaiminīyas. The secure attribution of the simile to the Jaiminīyas in the middle Vedic period makes it that much less likely that the original image refers to the bound leaves of a manuscript.

§6.5 *Leaves of brahman*

How, then, should we interpret this simile? And what are its implications for our understanding of OM? I would argue that to make sense of this image, the first recourse should not be to an

explanation involving manuscript culture. Why must it necessarily refer to manuscript binding, when layers of leaves might have been pierced, pinned, or stitched together for any number of purposes? For instance, across India today eating plates are fashioned by stitching leaves together with a needle and thread; we might just as reasonably surmise that the simile refers to such a rudimentary technology.

Let's focus on the plant in question, *palāśa*, also known as *parṇa*. *Palāśa* wood is widely used in *śrauta* ritual, and perhaps for this reason the Brāhmaṇas frequently correlate the *palāśa* with *brahman*.²⁶ A branch of *palāśa* has three leaves, with the central one larger than the others (Sāyaṇa on TS 1.8.6; Eggeling 1882, 439n2). The medieval theologian and commentator Śaṅkara offers a botanical interpretation of the simile that has gone largely ignored by Western scholarship but which I find instructive. He understands the image as the leaves of a plant pervaded by a common stalk, glossing the text as follows (*Śaṅkarabhāṣya* on ChU 2.23.3; *root text* in italics; trans. Gaṅganātha Jha 1942, 116): "*Just as all leaves—all parts of leaves—are permeated—pierced, i.e. pervaded—by the stalk—the twig to which the leaves hang—so, in the same manner is all Speech—all words—permeated by the syllable Om, which is Brahman...*"²⁷ Śaṅkara's interpretation hinges on the gloss of *śaṅku* as the "stalk" that connects the leaves rather than the sharp implement that pierces them.²⁸ While I hesitate to accept this as a viable contemporary interpretation—there is no evidence of such a meaning of *śaṅku* in the Vedic corpus—nevertheless it captures what I regard to be the overarching thrust of the image: the penetrating

²⁶ ŚB 1.3.3.19; 2.6.2.8; 5.2.4.18; 6.6.3.7; 12.7.2.15 Cf. Eggeling 1882, 90n1.

²⁷ *tadyathā śaṅkunā parṇanālena sarvāṇi parṇāni patrāvayavajātāni saṁtrṇṇāni nividdhāni vyāptāny ity arthaḥ / evam oṃkāreṇa brahmaṇā paramātmanah pratīkabhūtena sarvā vāk śabdajātaṁ saṁtrṇṇā /*

²⁸ The interpretation of leaves permeated by a stalk would make it possible to explain the imagery in terms of the Sāmavedic liturgy. In the rite to welcome King Soma according to Sāmavedic texts, the Subrahmaṇya officiant drives the oxen pulling the Soma cart with a branch of *palāśa* (JŚS 1.3.2; LŚS 1.2.17-22; DŚS 1.2.23-1.3.31). As they move around the great altar space, he delivers his signature call: *subrahmaṇyom!* The simile could be inspired by this ritual sequence: the singer carries a branch, the "stalk" (*sūcī, śaṅku*) of which penetrates its "leaves" (*palāśa, parṇa*). When he calls out *subrahmaṇyom!*, OM pervades "these worlds," the terrain of sacrifice. And because the deity addressed by his call, Subrahmaṇyā, is understood to denote the goddess Vāc, the syllable quite literally pervades *sarvā vāc*, for it is embedded in her final syllable.

holism of *brahman*. However one solves the mystery of the "leaves and the pin," the significance of the simile lies in the theological doctrine it conveys, namely OM's penetration of "the whole of speech," which is another name of *brahman*. Śaṅkara intuits this, and interprets accordingly. Other scholars, in their eagerness to implicate the image in debates over literacy and manuscript culture in ancient South Asia, have ignored its theological import.

§7 *Singing for supper: the canine udgītha*

So far we have seen that the Kauthumas rely heavily on material borrowed from the Jaiminīya branch, taking the form of aphorisms, stories, and soteriological doctrines. As discussed in the previous chapter, The Jaiminīyas predicated their soteriology with OM on the performance of the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*, which takes place at dawn and enacts the Yajamāna's ascent to the sun. Even though the Kauthuma liturgy boasts its own version of the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*—also with OM (Caland & Henry 1907, §134)—the Kauthuma reformulation of Jaiminīya soteriological discourses does not focus on that song, or any other specific ritual context; instead, the ChU attributes a potency to OM and the *udgītha* that is quite general.

Nevertheless, there is a remarkable story in the ChU about the *bahiṣpavamānastotra* and OM. The protagonist is one Baka Dālbhya (aka Glāva Maitreya), who is known in the Vedic corpus as a Sāmavedic virtuoso hailing from the Naimiṣa forest (ChU 1.12.1-5):

1. Next comes the *udgītha* of dogs. One day, while Baka Dālbhya—or it may have been Glāva Maitreya—was on his way to perform his daily recitation, 2. there appeared before him a white dog. Other dogs gathered around the white one and said to him: "Please, sir, find some food for us by singing. We are really hungry." 3. And he told them: "Come and meet me at this very spot in the morning." So Baka Dālbhya—or it may have been Glāva Maitreya—kept watch there.
4. Those dogs then filed in, sliding stealthily in just the same way as priests holding on to each other's back to sing the *bahiṣpavamānastotra*. They sat down together and made the sound *hum*. 5. They sang: " *om!* Let's eat! *om!*

Let's drink! *om!* May the gods Varuṇa, Prajāpati, and Savitr bring here food!
lord of food! bring here food! Bring! Bring! *om!*"²⁹

Baka ("the heron") Dālbhya is represented elsewhere in the ChU as an expert on the *udgītha* (1.12.3) and appears twice in the JUB (1.9, 4.7), always characterized as an expert singer. In the Brāhmaṇa of the Kauthumas (PB 25.15), his *alter ego* Glāva Maitreya participates in a *sarpasattra*, a ritual of serpent beings that connects the participants to the mythical past of sages and kings. In all cases, the milieu of the Kuru-Pañcālas is indicated, a large region from which both the Jaiminīya and Kauthuma branches emerge. Thus it seems that the figure of Baka Dālbhya/Glāva Maitreya is an expert singer from the shared history of both branches.³⁰

Early in the morning—so early that he has not yet performed his *svādhyāya*—Baka Dālbhya aka Glava Maitreya chances upon this meeting of dogs and keeps watch to find out more. The white dog stands out by virtue of his color; he also stands out by virtue of his knowledge—for he knows a song that will bring food to the group of hungry dogs. They return the next morning with a "sliding" motion that echoes the prescribed gait in the *bahiṣpavamāna*, where the priests and patron snake along crouched in a line, each holding on to the one ahead of him (Olivelle 1998, 537n; see also my ch. 8, §3.1). From our close study of this rite in the previous chapter, we can fill in further details: the rite takes place at sunrise; the singers sit down outside the sacrificial enclosure; they intone the sound *huṃ* (*hiṃkāra*) to begin singing; and the *stotra* proper consists of a series of non-lexical syllables substituted for the lexical verse, among these OM repeated several times. On the whole, the present story shows

²⁹ *athātaḥ śauva udgīthaḥ / tad dha bako dālbhyo glāvo vā maitreyaḥ svādhyāyam udvavrāja //1// tasmai śva svetaḥ prādurbabhūva / tam anye śvān upasametyocūḥ / annaṃ no bhagavān āgāyatam / aśanāyām vā iti //2// tāt hovācehaiva mā prātar upa samīyātetī/ tad dha bako dālbhyo glāvo vā maitreyaḥ pratipālayāṃcakāra //3// te ha yathaivedaṃ bahiṣpavamānena stoṣyamāṇāḥ saṃrabdhāḥ sarpanṭīty evam āsaṣpūḥ / te ha samupaviśya hiṃ cakruḥ //4// o3m adā3m o3m pibā3m o3m devo varuṇaḥ prajāpatiḥ savitā2nnam ihā2haradannapate3 'nnam ihā2harā2haro3m iti //5//*

³⁰ For an extensive study of Baka Dālbhya and figures with similar names, see Koskakallio 1999; I return to Baka Dālbhya and other Sāmavedic personalities in ch. 11, §5.4-5.

itself to be an informed engagement with the praxis of the *bahiṣpavamāna* ritual, which it reports in a manner consistent with the Śrauta Sūtra codifications. But beyond these basic ritual facts, what does this story tell us about the construction of OM in the ChU? Clearly we need to ponder what is really at stake in this strange tale of singing with OM.

§7.1 *Satirizing the Jaiminīyas*

It is easy enough to interpret the tale of the canine *udgītha* as satire, an iteration of the Vedic trope of hungry Brahmin officiants who feed themselves by conducting sacrifices-for-hire.³¹ The targets of this particular lampoon would be the Sāmavedic officiants: these performers of the *bahiṣpavamāna*, singing their nonsense songs outside the boundaries of the sacrificial arena at dawn, are no more than dogs howling for food and drink in the early morning. In support of this view, the canine *udgītha*, with its extended and garbled syllables, conveys a stereotypical representation of Sāmavedic singing: *o3m adā3m o3m pibā3m o3m...* Moreover, the triple repetition of OM recalls the lyrics of the *anirukta-gāyatra*, the melody on which the Jaiminīyas sing their *bahiṣpavamānastotra*. Unlike the lyrics of the "real" *stotra*, however, the canine lyrics are comprehensible enough to serve as a punchline. Perhaps the Jaiminīyas are the butt of this joke: their secret teaching on unexpressed song, as formulated in the JUB, is characterized by the Kauthumas in the ChU as no more than whining for food.³²

³¹ A parallel is the reception of the "Frog Hymn" (RV 7.103), whose core comparison between chirping frogs and chanting Brahmins has been taken by some as satire, and by others as "a seriously intended rain charm" (Jamison 1991-92). For a reflex of Veda-for-hire in modern India, see now Knipe 2015, 38-41.

³² With its opening triple repetition of *o3m*, the canine *udgītha* bears a passing resemblance to the Jaiminīya version of the *anirukta-gāyatra* as codified in the JUB (1.3.1; see my ch. 7, §4.4n), *o3 vā3 o3 vā3 o3 vā hum bhā o vā*. Indeed, the JUB records a number of multiforms for this song, some of which incorporate other strange sounds or words, e.g., *dadā3 tathā3 hantā3 him bhā ovā* (JUB 3.6.4). It is also notable that the JUB frequently discusses singing *sāmans* in relation to food and food-eating (JUB 1.3, 3.14; cf. 1.11).

§7.2 *Vrātyas, hungry dogs, and the wisdom of animals*

Other scholars have taken a different view, emphasizing the role of dogs, who live as beggars at the margins of human settlements. Hillebrandt thinks the story refers to a group of ascetics who have taken a "dog vow;" the song is their way of begging (1917, 313-14; cf. Olivelle 1998, 537n). David Gordon White, drawing on Harry Falk's thesis that connects the antinomian Vrātyas to dogs (Falk 1986; cf. Collins 2014, 112-114), points out that Baka Dālbhya appears in other Vedic texts as a Vrātya leader and that the Naimiṣa forest is a locale associated with Vrātyas and dogs alike (White 1991, 97). A story in the Kauthuma tradition recounts how the god Varuṇa deprived the Vrātyas of a share in the sacrifice, but they made up for it by performing rites that nourished the world, restoring its natural vigor in the lean and hungry winter months (PB 24.18.2-3; White 1991, 99). It seems possible that the ChU story is a spin-off from this cycle of myths about wandering Vrātyas, hungry dogs, and gaining nourishment through ritual performance.

While such arguments do not rule out interpreting the present story as satire—it *is* funny on some level—they draw out the more serious concerns that may underlie it: food, sacrifice, and the winning of knowledge. Cohen has suggested that this story is an instance of the widespread Upaniṣadic trope of a man gaining esoteric knowledge from animals (2008, 107-8). From this perspective, the canine *udgītha* learned by Baka Dālbhya is no mere parody but a secret song that can satisfy hunger. Such a food-winning song would not be unprecedented in the Upaniṣads. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*—without a trace of satire—records a *sāman* that is sung after death to win food, the cosmos, and the light of the sun. Its lyrics are not altogether different from those of the dogs' *udgītha* (TU 3.10):

hā u! hā u! hā u! I am food! I am food! I am food! I eat food! I eat food! I eat food!³³

³³ *hā3vu hā3vu hā3vu /aham annam aham annam aham annam /aham annādo3 'ham annādo3 'ham annādaḥ*

I understand the story of Baka Dālbhya aka Glava Maitreya in the ChU as a complex interweaving of all these ideas. Even in the midst of its apparent satire of the rival Jaiminīyas and their singing of OM at the *bahiṣpavamāna*, the narrative communicates a secret teaching about singing to win food. It accomplishes this by evoking the forest, so prominent in the imaginary of Vedic texts: this is the wilderness where the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads may have been composed, where sages glean arcane knowledge from animals. Above all, the story grants us another perspective on an expert singer of great importance to Sāmavedic lore and his deployment of OM. In the JUB (1.9.3), Baka Dālbhya relied on OM to lure the king of the gods away from his rivals; here in the ChU, the same figure discovers a song with OM that has the power to produce food. Maintaining their pattern of innovative adaptation of Jaiminīya material, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas elaborate Jaiminīya claims about the potency of the syllable in their own way.

§8 *Veins of the heart: contemplating OM at the moment of death*

Most speculations on OM in the ChU occur early in the text, a placement that finds a liturgical parallel in the initial position of OM as the *ādi*, first syllable of the *udgītha*. However, the final passage we consider comes near the end of the work, in which the sound OM is said to convey a dying man to the sun. This OM has nothing to do with the *udgītha* or the Sāmavedic liturgy *per se*. Instead, it is a special soteriological application of the syllable at the time of death; in this respect it is well placed at the conclusion of the Upaniṣad. The text teaches that the utterance of the syllable will ensure a successful ascent and access to the heavenly world. Crucial to this journey are the veins of the heart and the rays of the sun, which together link the human and divine spheres. The passage begins by establishing the correlation of the microsm (the body) with the macrocosm (the sun) (ChU 8.6.1):

1. These veins of the heart consist of the finest essence of orange, white, blue, yellow and red. The sun up there, likewise, is orange, white, blue, yellow and red.³⁴

Then it asserts the union of these two realms, solar rays merging with cardiac veins. In deep slumber, a man finds serenity there (ChU 8.6.2-4):

2. Just as a long highway traverses both the villages, the one nearby and the one far away, so also these rays of the sun traverse both the worlds, the one down here and the one up above. Extending out from the sun up there, they slip into these veins here, and extending out from these veins here, they slip into the sun up there. 3. So, when someone is sound asleep here, totally collected and serene, and sees no dreams, he has slipped into these veins. No evil thing can touch him, for he is then linked with radiance. 4. Now, when someone here has become extremely infirm, people sit around him and ask: "Do you recognize me?" "Do you recognize me?" As long as he has not departed from the body, he would recognize them.³⁵

Even if infirmity overtakes him in sickness or old age, he remains rooted in the human world, cognizant of those around him. There is a change of state, however, when he finally separates from his body (ChU 8.6.5):

5. But when he is departing from this body, he rises up along those same rays. He goes up with *om*. No sooner does he cast his mind towards it than he reaches the sun. This is the door to the farther world, open to those who have the knowledge but closed to those who do not.³⁶

³⁴ *atha yā etā hṛdayasya nādyas tāḥ piṅgalasyāñimnas tiṣṭhanti śuklasya nīlasya pītasya lohitasyeti / asau vā ādityaḥ piṅgala eṣa śukla eṣa nīla eṣa pīta eṣa lohitaḥ //1//*

³⁵ *tad yathā mahāpatha ātata ubhau grāmau gacchatīmaṃ cāmum caivam evaitā ādityasya raśmaya ubhau lokau gacchatīmaṃ cāmum ca / amuṣmād ādityāt pratāyante tā āsu nāḍīṣu sṛptāḥ / ābhyo nāḍībhyaḥ pratāyante te 'muṣminn āditye sṛptāḥ //2// tad yatraitat suptaḥ samastaḥ saṃprasannaḥ svapnaṃ na vijānāti / āsu tadā nāḍīṣu sṛpto bhavati / taṃ na kaścana pāpmā sṛṣāti / tejasā hi tadā saṃpanno bhavati //3// atha yatraitat abalimānaṃ nīto bhavati / tam abhita āsīnā āhur jānāsi māṃ jānāsi māṃ iti / sa yāvad asmāc charīrād anutkrānto bhavati / tāvaj jānāti //4//*

³⁶ *atha yatraitat asmāc charīrād utkrāmati / athaitatāir eva raśmibhir ūrdhvam ākramate / sa om iti vā hodvā mīyate / sa yāvat kṣīpyen manas tāvad ādityaṃ gacchati / etad vai khalu lokadvāraṃ viduṣāṃ prapadanaṃ nirodho 'viduṣāṃ //5//*

His ascent, along the rays that connect to the veins of his heart, is instantaneous: the utterance of OM, or even *just thinking of it*, brings him instantly to the door of the sun. If he is wise—that is, if he is conversant with Upaniṣadic teachings—he will gain access.

§8.1 *The space within the heart*

What is behind this door to the farther world? The present excerpt appears in the eighth *ādhyāya* of the ChU, which discusses the nature of the "self" (*ātman*) and its relation to *brahman*. The composers of the ChU locate the *ātman* deep within the recesses of the heart, in a small space within a lotus that grows there (ChU 8.1.1). They teach that this tiny cavity contains all of the cosmos—earth and sky, fire and wind, sun and moon, lightning and stars. Indeed: "As vast as this space here all around us, is that space within the heart" (ChU 8.1.3).³⁷ The core teaching is therefore the interpenetration of *ātman* and *brahman*, of the human and the cosmic. This helps to explain how the cardiac veins are connected anatomically to the solar rays, for in some sense the heart contains the sun itself. Asleep, a man slips into these veins but returns on waking; near death, a man slips into these veins but never returns, departing his body along the rays. Because the entire journey is encompassed in the vast "space within the heart," simply thinking OM is enough to make the ascent. The mentalization of this open-mouthed syllable *opens* the way to the heavenly world in the dying man's heart.

But the nesting of the immortal *ātman* within the mortal body can lead to delusion, as it does for the demon Virocana, who was tricked by Prajāpati into mistaking his beautifully adorned body for a reflection of his true self (ChU 8.8.4). Another key feature of the Kauthuma doctrine on *ātman* as expounded in this *ādhyāya* is the necessity of distinguishing the "self" from the "body" (both are possible meanings of *ātman*, although the term *śarīra* usually denotes the latter). One must not confuse

³⁷ *yāvān vā ayam ākāśas tāvan eṣo 'ntarhrdaya ākāśaḥ /*

the immortal self with the mortal body, which is only its container: the body decays and dies; but no pain or adversity can affect the immortal kernel deep in the heart (ChU 8.12.1). This is the salvific knowledge denied to Virocana but imparted to Indra as a reward for his one-hundred-and-one years' service as a "celibate student" (*brahmacārin*, ChU 8.11.3). As secret teachings go, it is dazzlingly simple: no action belongs to the true, immortal self, for it is thoroughly interpenetrated by *brahman*. There are glimmers here of the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth, which are formulated more explicitly in other parts of the ChU (ChU 5.10.1-10; see discussion in ch. 8, §5.8).

§8.2 *From musical to mental*

Many aspects of this soteriological doctrine featuring OM suggest Jaiminīya influence. In JUB 1.29-30, the sage Śāṭyāyani—the founder of the eponymous Śāṭyāyana branch that probably preceded both the Jaiminīya and Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya branches (Witzel 1997a, 307; Parpola 1973, 9; see details in my ch. 11, §5)—tells how the rays of the sun, connecting every level of the cosmos, converge at their solar source "as paths might converge on a mountaintop" (JUB 1.30.1; see also my ch. 8, §4.10). The one who possesses this knowledge, he continues, can reach the sun by singing OM. In another passage, with the utterance of OM at the climax of the ascent a man "escapes into this very sun" (JUB 1.3.5). As the Jaiminīyas put it, the singer enters the "hole in the sky" at this moment, an image that corresponds closely to the Kauthuma "door to the farther world" (*lokadvāram*). Knowledge as the condition of access to this heavenly realm has a specific parallel in the JUB (3.14.1ff; cf. 1.5.1-3), where the patron must answer a cryptic question to proceed. The correct response shows that he understands that individual agency is an illusion: as in the ChU, this salvific knowledge rests on an awareness of a fundamental link between human and cosmic action.

While the Jaiminīyas predicate their soteriology on a specific element of ritual, the *anirukta-gāyatra* melody, the Kauthuma formulation of the teaching is more general: invoking OM in a simple act of mentalization at the moment of death leads a man to the world of the sun. This transformation of the Jaiminīya doctrine and imagery exemplifies the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya contribution to the discursive construction of OM. The composers of the ChU appropriate material from the JUB and generalize it, beyond the boundaries of *śākhā* and even beyond the *śrauta* liturgy. In this respect, the ChU is participating in the broader Upaniṣadic trend of interiorizing *śrauta* ritual and exalting knowledge over action. As we will see in the next chapter, Kauthuma mentalization with OM influences similar contemplative sequences in several subsequent Upaniṣads. More broadly, it prefigures later contemplative currents in Hindu traditions, in which mentally focusing on the mantra OM is the path to liberation.³⁸

§8.3 *Summing up: the reflections of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad*

We have now surveyed the most significant discourses on OM in the ChU. At every turn—in diction, aphorisms, narratives, and soteriology—we have found the unmistakable influence of Jaiminīya reflections on OM. Lacking their own tradition of speculation on the syllable, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas drew inspiration from the hermeneutic traditions of the Jaiminīyas. Rooted in a shared Sāmavedic sensibility, this borrowed material was integrated easily into the overall theme of the ChU, which is metaphysical speculation on the *udgītha* and other elements of the *sāman*. However, the very fact of borrowing the material, along with differences in the liturgies of the two main Sāmavedic branches, ensured that the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya teachings on OM would not attest the same level of

³⁸ As, for example, in Pāśupata tradition, where "*omkāra* is Maheśvara himself insofar as he is present as the OM mantra in the act of contemplation...and, thus, out of his grace, effects the end of suffering; i.e., emancipation" (Oberhammer 1989, 216).

engagement with ritual performance as did those of the Jaiminīyas, which had grown organically from several generations of reflection.

But for the composers of the ChU, this was not a failure but an opportunity, for it permitted them to push the material beyond its liturgical structures and discursively construct OM in new ways. While they may have been drawn to OM *because* of their Sāmavedic specialization, they now pushed the syllable beyond these boundaries, emphasizing its transcendence and significance for burgeoning discourses on *ātman* and *brahman*. In short, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas picked up the job of "marketing" OM where the Jaiminīyas had left off. And history was on their side: with the composition of the ChU (and the BĀU), the trend in Upaniṣadic thought moved gradually but inexorably away from ritual, compressing it to such a degree that it could be internalized, and embracing the metaphysical reality that pervades it. That OM remained afloat in these new theological currents is due in large part to the ingenious efforts of the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas to promote it in their Upaniṣad as the sonic embodiment of *brahman*. My analysis shows that they did this quite systematically: first, by emphasizing OM's correlation with the signature elements of Sāmavedic and Ṛgvedic recitation, the *udgītha* and the *praṇava*; next, by insisting on the total identity of these two elements, to the point of effacing their narrow liturgical meanings; then, by strengthening its integration into the doctrines of sacred sound (*akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*); and finally, by repeatedly stressing the ancient doctrine of OM as the essence of all three Vedic liturgies. Along the way, the composers of the ChU wove in many existing discourses on OM, borrowing chiefly from the Jaiminīyas, but also from the Taittirīyas and the Aitareyins. In this way, their composition quite literally constitutes a synthesis of the three Vedas in OM, for the ChU incorporates the wisdom of the SV, YV, and ṚV alike in its construction of the syllable.

§9 Reflections in the early Yajurvedic Upaniṣads

For the rest of this chapter, we shift our focus to several Upaniṣads of the Yajurvedic branches, where we find little sustained discussion of OM. The syllable's diminished presence in these non-Sāmavedic Upaniṣads is a succinct, inverse proof of the main argument of this study: that the history of OM is wrapped up in melody and music, and that singers of SV did the most to foster the syllable's emergence. Nevertheless, when OM *does* appear in Yajurvedic texts, it often bears the stamp of not just Sāmavedic, but precisely Jaiminīya, influence. The broadcasting of Jaiminīya discourses on OM, which found such a successful reception in the ChU, now finds a wider audience, echoing across the Upaniṣads of the YV. (Significantly, however, the Ṛgvedic Upaniṣads make no mention of OM. Already in their Āraṇyaka the Ṛgvedic Aitareyins had moved beyond OM in favor of its constituent phoneme, the *a*-sound (see ch. 7, §2.4), while for the Kauṣītakins OM had never been a pressing concern.)

The appropriation of Sāmavedic diction and aphorisms on OM by experts in another realm of ritual leads to a further relaxation of the ties between liturgical OM and its discursive construction. Unlike the JUB—and, to a lesser extent, the ChU—which relied on the Sāmavedic liturgy to structure its discourses on OM, the Yajurvedic Upaniṣads invoke ritual elements in their reflections in a way that draws less on their own liturgical expertise, and more on a generalized *śrauta* sensibility. Tracing OM's career in these texts gives us a concrete perspective on the broad-based transformation of the Upaniṣadic hermeneutic agenda from *karma* to *jñāna*. I start with the construction of OM in the Taittirīya branch, then move to the contributions of two works of the Vājasaneyi branch. (For subsequent developments in other Upaniṣads of the YV, consult the next chapter.)

§9.1 *The reflections of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad*

The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, which comprises three chapters of the Āraṇyaka, shows substantial continuity with its own branch. The TU carries forward some of the signature concerns of the TĀ, such as daily study, the sequence of traditional rituals, and the *vyāhṛti* mantra (Cohen 2008, 149-152). Another important continuity between the TĀ and the TU is the focus on food and nourishment, which are natural hermeneutic elaborations of the milk-centered *pravargya*. All of these topics, which clearly show the influence of the Taittirīyas' Yajurvedic specialization, become the foundation for distinctly Upaniṣadic speculations on *ātman*, *brahman*, breath, mind, and other metaphysical matters (Cohen 2008, 153-154).

§9.2 *The whole Veda, the whole world*

We saw in an earlier chapter that the Taittirīyas in their Saṃhitā formulated some of the oldest reflections about the unity of different recitational practices involving OM (ch. 5, §2.6). When the Taittirīyas pick up this ancient thread again several centuries later in the composition of the TU, they integrate material from both Sāmavedic branches into their inherited discourses. In relation to OM, the composers of the TU mention several different liturgical contexts, with at least one from each Veda. This ritual engagement serves above all to portray OM as a holistic principle, transcending specific liturgical contexts (TU 1.8):

Brahman is *om*. This whole world is *om*. When one says *om*, it indicates compliance. Thus, they make him listen saying "O! make him listen..." With *om* they sing the *sāmans*; with *om śom* they recite the *śastras*. The Adhvaryu delivers the *pratigara* with *om*; the Brahman utters the *prasava* with *om*. One says *om* in giving one's permission to conduct the fire sacrifice. When a

Brahmin is about to recite publicly, he first says "om," and then, "May I grasp *brahman*." And he does, indeed, grasp *brahman*.³⁹

We find here the culmination of the interpretive thread begun in the Saṃhitā of the Taittirīyas, with its early statement of tri-Vedic synthesis, and stretching through their Āraṇyaka, which affirmed this stance and pushed it further, calling OM the highest *akṣara* (see ch. 7, §3.7). By correlating OM with *brahman*, the composers of the TU take the syllable's apotheosis to a new extreme—in theological terms, there is nothing beyond *brahman*, nothing beyond the whole. Their inspiration comes from Sāmavedic hermeneutics: the adjacent correlation of OM with "this whole world" (*idaṃ sarvaṃ*) can be traced to the Jaiminīyas, who use this exact diction already in their Brāhmaṇa (JB 2.10), altering it only slightly in their Upaniṣad in a litany of *brahman*'s names (*sarvaṃ idaṃ*, JUB 1.9.5). Another relevant Jaiminīya antecedent is the JB story about the gods' utterance of OM as a means to rescue *brahman* from its hiding-place in the cosmic waters (3.355-56).

§9.3 Engaging the multiformity of liturgical OM

To support their grand claims about the syllable, the TU (like the TS and the JB, as well) resorts to the by now familiar fact that OM is common to a diverse array of liturgical contexts from the Soma sacrifice. In a new twist, the composers of the TU explicitly engage OM's multiformity by listing its variations according to context: the syllable takes the form of "o" in some attestations of the *āśrāvaṇa*, "om" as the *ādi* sung in the *sāman*, "om śom" in certain iterations of the *āhāva* that begins the *śastra*, and "om" again in versions of the *pratigara* and *prasava*. That the passage groups these multiforms under a single rubric emphasizes the ongoing discursive construction of OM as a unitary syllable—and even more to the point here, as a holistic embodiment of ritual utterance, as *brahman*.

³⁹ *om iti brahma / om itīdaṃ sarvaṃ / om ity etad anukṛtir ha sma vā apy o śrāvayety ā śrāvayanti / om iti sāmāni gāyanti / om śom iti śastrāṇi śaṃsanti / om ity adhvaryuḥ / pratigaraṃ pratigṛṇāti / om iti brahmā prasauti / om ity agnihotram anujānāti / om iti brāhmaṇa pravakṣyannāha brahmopāpnuvānīti / brahmai vopāpnoti /*

§9.4 Grasping brahman: OM in public

Another Taittirīya innovation is to extend the discussion of OM beyond the Soma sacrifice proper. Thus, they point out that a man "assents" (*anujānāti*) to the *agnihotra* with "om" and also begins his public recitation of the Veda that way. The formula that follows OM on such occasions—"may I grasp *brahman*"—resonates with the main theme of the discourse, the syllable's embodiment of the Vedas and of *brahman*. (In extending their OM discussion to these daily rites of fire sacrifice and recitation, the TU is carrying forward a hermeneutic impulse from its *Āraṇyaka*, where the Brahmin's daily recitation served as the basis for OM's discursive construction.) The fact that the Taittirīyas see fit to represent their public Vedic identity with OM speaks to the syllable's growing prominence beyond the confines of liturgy-specific hermeneutics. The apotheosis of OM seems to have reached a new realm of pan-Vedic authority.

§9.5 Bringing OM into compliance

The glossing of OM as assent points to another thematic thread running through this discussion. Each of the contexts enumerated here uses OM to cue or introduce recitation; rhetorically, OM can be interpreted throughout as a way to grant permission or accede to it—in a word, as "compliance" (*anukṛti*). The collocation of this gloss with speculations on the diverse recitations with OM suggests the influence of another Sāmavedic branch, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyānīya. As discussed above (§3.3), the ChU adduces a similar gloss ("assent," *anujñā*) to explain OM's use in all three liturgies. (The use of the verb *anu√jñā* to "give permission" in the TU is perhaps another echo of the ChU.) Such glosses have been cited by some scholars to support etymological arguments for OM as a particle of assent, but I doubt that the glosses should be taken as literal definitions (see ch. 4, §2). The composers of these Upaniṣads, in the midst of their hermeneutic reflections, are not offering up literal

definitions of OM—rather, they are speculating on the bond (*bandhu*) that connects diverse recitational contexts with OM. They seek—and find—this bond in the realm of semantics: each context pertains to the rhetorical prompting or beginning of a recitation, therefore OM can be explained throughout as "compliance" and "assent." But this does not imply that liturgical OM, with all its multiformity, carries this meaning exclusively; Vedic correlations are never mutually exclusive. Note that what I have been calling a "gloss" in the TU is actually the third of a series of correlative statements about the syllable: *brahman* is OM, this whole world is OM, compliance is OM. From this perspective, *anukṛti* is no more relevant to OM's etymological history than *brahman* is!

§9.6 *Summing up: the reflections of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad*

My analysis shows that the Taittirīyas have sought to construct discursive OM by integrating material from Sāmavedic hermeneutics with longstanding interpretive traditions from their own branch. Indeed, the Taittirīyas may have been the first ever to speak of OM's tri-Vedic profile, a seminal insight that influenced many discourses in other branches in the Brāhmaṇa period. But now the Yajurvedic originators of this idea must acknowledge a debt to the Sāmavedic thinkers they inspired, notably the Jaiminīyas. The Taittirīya adaptation of the Jaiminīya dictum on OM's holism—"this whole world is OM"—signals the main theme of this TU passage, which is to assert OM's transcendence. The Taittirīyas manage to express the same idea even more directly than the Jaiminīyas had done, and in theological terms suited to burgeoning Upaniṣadic discourses: "OM is *brahman*." With this stark statement, they speak decisively in favor of OM's preeminence: there is nothing greater than *brahman*, and thus there is nothing greater than OM.

§10 *The reflections of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*

Like the Taittirīyas, the Vajasaneyins have their own traditions of speculating on OM, attested in their Saṃhitā and Brāhmaṇa. The former contains one of the earliest hermeneutic discussions of *praṇava* to be found anywhere (VS 19.25), while the latter contains two short but significant discussions of OM—one on the *praṇava*, the *hiṃkāra*, and the *sāman* (ŚB 1.4.1.1); the other on the *pratigara* and "truth" (*satya*; ŚB 4.3.2.13). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* of the Vājasaneyins, although it is closely allied to the earlier texts and traditions of the branch (Cohen 2008, 66), does little to develop Yajurvedic hermeneutics about OM.

§10.1 *From asseveration to ascension*

When OM is attested in the BĀU, it is chiefly as an asseverative particle in a dialogue, acknowledging what has been said in answer to a question. It is never the topic of discussion on its own terms. For example, when acknowledging Yajñavalkya's answers in debate, his opponent Śākalya replies, "OM, of course" (*om iti hovāca*, BĀU 3.9.1; cf. 5.2.1).⁴⁰ Beyond the passages attesting OM in this rhetorical capacity, there is one unusual passage that deserves closer consideration. Featuring OM in a mantra, this passage is the unique instance in the BĀU of the syllable in an ostensibly liturgical context. The mantra is preceded by several verses addressed to the solar deity Pūṣan and followed by a prayer to Agni. While it is difficult to identify the precise context, the impression is of a man's plea to be shown the path to the heavenly world (BĀU 5.15.1):

The face of truth is covered with a golden dish.
Open it, O Pūṣan, for me, a man faithful to the truth.
Open it, O Pūṣan, for me to see.

⁴⁰ This rhetorical use of OM has affinities with a Yajurvedic use of liturgical OM, the *pratigara*: just as the Adhvaryu responds to each *ṛc* with a mantra ending in OM, encouraging the Hotṛ to proceed, so Śākalya responds affirmatively with OM, encouraging Yajñavalkya to continue.

O Pūṣan, sole seer! Yama! Sun! Son of Prajāpati!
Spread out your rays! Draw in your light!
I see you fairest form. That person up there, I am he!

The never-resting is the wind, the immortal!
Ashes are this body's lot.
om! Mind, remember the deed! Remember!
Mind, remember the deed! Remember!

O Fire, you know all coverings;
O god, lead us to riches, along an easy path.
Keep the sin that angers far away from us;
And the highest song of praise we shall offer to you!⁴¹

§10.2 *Reaching the solar person*

In this prayer to solar deities, the dish of gold covering truth's face must "refer to the conception of the sun as the door to the heavenly world" (Olivelle 1998, 525n). The supplicant implores Pūṣan, a god who guides the dead and knows the celestial pathways (Macdonell 1897, 35-37), to grant him access. In quick succession he also invokes Yama, king of the dead; Sūrya, the sun itself and Yama's father; and an unspecified descendent of Prajāpati. The supplicant avows that he can perceive the sun's most beautiful form—this is the "person" (*puruṣa*) with whom he identifies himself. Next, a contrast is drawn between the mortality of the material "body" (*śarīra*), which will ultimately be reduced to ashes in the funeral fire, and the immortality of the wind or "breath" that animates the body (Olivelle 1998, 525n). Next we come to the mantra in question (*om krato smara kṛtaṁ smara krato smara kṛtaṁ smara*), where the supplicant addresses the powers of intellect and memory (*kratu*), imploring his faculties to "remember the deed." In the context of a journey after death, this may refer to the memory

⁴¹ *hiraṇmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpīhitam mukham / tat tvam pūṣann apāvṛṇu satyadharmāya dṛṣṭaye // pūṣann ekarṣe yama sūrya prājāpatya vyūha raśmīn samūha tejaḥ / yat te rūpaṁ kalyāṇatamaṁ tat te paśyāmi yo 'sāv asau puruṣaḥ so 'ham asmi // vāyur anilam amṛtam athedaṁ bhasmāntaṁ śarīram / om krato smara kṛtaṁ smara krato smara kṛtaṁ smara // agne naya supathā rāye asmān viśvāni deva vayunāni vidvān / yuyodhy asmaj juhurāṇam eno bhūyiṣṭhaṁ te nama uktiṁ vidhema //1//*

of his acts while alive; it may also refer to deliberate mental engagement with the task at hand.⁴² (I will return to the interpretation of this obscure mantra below.) One might argue that OM is appended here according to the convention of beginning mantras with the syllable; however, although there are precedents for such a practice already in the Yajurvedic Āraṇyakas, it is doubtful that it was widespread at the time of the composition of the BĀU. Instead I suggest that OM has a more organic relation with this mantra and with the soteriological context described by these verses. To make this argument, I revisit the Jaiminīya material, which is closely parallel.

As already discussed in a previous chapter and in relation to parallels in the ChU, the Jaiminīya soteriology with OM culminates in a dialogue between the dead man who seeks immortality and a solar figure who grants access to the world beyond. After having shaken off his "body" (*śarīra*) with the "bodiless" melody, he ascends. The divine figure who awaits him there is referred to in one passage as the "person" (*puruṣa*) in the sun (JUB 1.27.1-7); in others, he is the sun deity himself. To pass this interview and enter through the door of the sun, the seeker must avoid identifying himself personally; instead, he must assert his identity with the deity (JUB 3.14.1-6). He must also remind the deity of a fundamental "truth" (*satya*), that the deeds of mortals are also those of the sun—divine agency is implicated in action throughout the cosmos (JUB 1.5.1-3). Showing his approval, the sun affirms their shared identity and bids him enter.

Drawing on the detailed description of this heavenly ascent and dialogic exchange in the JUB, it is possible to argue for a parallel situation evoked by the cryptic verses of the BĀU. Declaring himself to be a man of "truth," the seeker urges Pūṣan to guide him and to open the door of the sun. As the sun obliges by spreading its rays (cf. JUB 1.30.1) and drawing its light upward, the seeker glimpses the solar *puruṣa* through the opening. Rapturously, he declares his identity with this solar figure: "That person

⁴² Citing Klaus 1992, Olivelle (1998, 565n) observes that here "*√smṛ* does not mean simply memory (remember) but close mental attention to something."

up there, I am he!" (*yo 'sāv asau puruṣaḥ so 'ham asmi*). This diction has a close parallel in the JUB, where the sun affirms (3.14.5): "The one you are, am I..." (*yas tvam asi so [']ham asmi*). Mindful of his own mortality—evoked here by the reference to the ashes that consume his body—he utters the mantra with OM, the cryptic exhortation of mind to remember "the deed" (*kr̥ta*). Here, too, the JUB provides a useful parallel, for it presents the seeker's awareness of the nature of action (*√kr̥, kartṛ*) as an essential prerequisite for gaining immortality. In this light, it is possible that the mantra in the BĀU refers to a similar scenario: its words, introduced by the potent soteriological syllable OM, stress the importance of cultivating an understanding of action in preparation for the journey after death.

§10.3 *A parallel passage in the Īśā Upaniṣad*

All strata of the Vājasaneyi branch come down to us in two recensions, the Kāṇva (K) and Mādhyam̐dina (M). My discussion of these verses so far pertains to the BĀU in its Kāṇva recension; the Mādhyam̐dina verses are truncated, furnishing little additional information (BĀU(M) 5.2.3; cf. Olivelle 1998, 525n). However, the verses also appear in another Upaniṣad belonging to the Vājasaneyi branch, the Īśā. The ĪśāU "shows many similarities in thought and expression" with the BĀU, although its theistic orientation suggests that it was composed later (Olivelle 1998, 405).⁴³ In this case, the Mādhyam̐dina recension of the ĪśāU attests several variants that support my arguments about the soteriological doctrine to which the verses allude. In the BĀU(K), the seeker announces his identity with "that person" (*yo 'sāv asau puruṣaḥ so 'ham asmi*). The ĪśāU(M) transposes this half-verse to the final position and makes it more specific, confirming that the figure in question is the *puruṣa* in the sun (ĪśāU(M) 17): "That person in the sun, I am he!" (*yo 'sāv āditye puruṣaḥ 'sāv aham*). This recension then concludes the verses with an extra mantra not found anywhere else: *oṣṇ̐ kham̐ brahma*. OM and

⁴³The ĪśāU is embedded in the Saṃhitā itself, forming the fortieth chapter of the VS.

brahman are well-known to us, while *kha* is "sky" conceived as a celestial opening covered by the sun (cf. JUB 1.3.6 and my ch. 8, §4.6). However one translates the mantra, the collocation of these terms is significant in itself, supporting my overall interpretation of these verses and affirming the prominence of OM in the soteriology they formulate.

§10.4 *Summing up: the reflections of the Vājasaneyi Upaniṣads*

Summing up, I suggest that the Vājasaneyins refer in their Upaniṣads to a soteriological doctrine with affinities to those taught in the Sāmavedic Upaniṣads. While the Sāmavedic theologians stress the prominence of OM in their soteriologies, their Yajurvedic counterparts are less direct, simply incorporating two OM mantras into a series of obscure verses. Still, the parallels are unmistakable: after death, the seeker of immortality ascends to the heavenly world, makes a plea to enter through the door of the sky, and earns access by proving himself in dialogue with a solar deity.

§11 *Summing up: reflections on OM in the early Upaniṣads*

This concludes my analysis of OM's discursive construction in the oldest Upaniṣads. In general, these texts tend towards continuity with the traditions of their respective branches, reflecting on ritual and knowledge through the filter of their ritual sensibilities. When it comes to OM, however, the Upaniṣads discussed in this chapter draw on sources beyond the boundaries of branch and Veda, adapting diction, aphorisms, figures of speech, narratives, and soteriological speculations from the Jaiminīyas to suit their own hermeneutic agendas.

This phenomenon is clearest among the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas, whose theologians—lacking a hermeneutic precedent in their own branch traditions—model significant portions of their Upaniṣad (ChU) on that of the Jaiminīyas (JUB). The common Sāmavedic sensibility of these two texts—attuned to

sound, melody, and non-lexical syllables—makes for a relatively smooth integration of the Jaiminīya material on OM: as in the JUB, the ChU grounds its speculations in Sāmavedic singing. However, there is a marked contrast in the way the composers of the two texts engage with the Sāmavedic liturgy. A specific iteration of the *sāman*, the "unexpressed" *gāyatra*, and a specific rite, the *bahiṣpavamāna*, inform Jaiminīya reflections on OM and their formulation of a soteriology of song. The Kauthumas, on the other hand, reflect on OM in more flexible terms: they correlate it with the *udgītha*, the main portion of all *sāmans*; they emphasize its identity with the *praṇava* of Ṛgvedic recitation; they stress the syllable as a locus for tri-Vedic synthesis; and they implicate it in a soteriological doctrine that does not depend on a particular rite. The bottom line is that the Kauthumas repackage OM in a way that makes it easily portable across the boundaries of branch and Veda. As a result, although Jaiminīya influence resounds throughout Kauthuma discourses, it is the ChU on its own that comes to be regarded as the *locus classicus* of OM speculations in the Upaniṣadic corpus. The Jaiminīyas may have invented OM as we know it, but the Kauthumas get most of the credit. The case of OM exemplifies differences in the broader reception of the ChU and the JUB, both in post-Vedic currents such as Vedānta and in modern scholarship. By virtue of its flexible engagement with Vedic ritual, the ChU becomes celebrated, while the JUB, with its narrow liturgical focus, remains neglected and all but excluded from the Vedāntic canon.⁴⁴

The composers of the Yajurvedic Upaniṣads construct OM by blending their own hermeneutics with material that resonates with Sāmavedic sources. Boasting a longstanding tradition of reflecting on OM as the synthesis of the three Vedas, the Taittirīyas continue to emphasize the syllable as a unitary entity in which different liturgical practices coalesce. The composers of the TU refer to Vedic ritual

⁴⁴ However, Śaṅkara's commentary on the last section of the JUB, *Kena Upaniṣad*, has assured the place of this short work in the Vedāntic canon. The JUB as a whole is not included in most modern collections of Upaniṣads (e.g., Deussen 1897; Olivelle 1998) or studies of the early Upaniṣads as a group (Cohen 2008; Lubin's 2009 review of the latter notes the omission).

through the lens of generalized expertise: adducing a half-dozen contexts where OM is used in different ways, they trade on this multiformity to argue for the syllable's pervasion of the ritual. Then they integrate this construction of OM with Sāmavedic ideas about the syllable as a transcendent, holistic entity: building on Jaiminīya precedents, they correlate OM with "this whole world" and with *brahman*.

Like the Taittirīyas, the Vājasaneyins also possess a longstanding tradition of reflecting on OM. However, their Upaniṣads do not give voice to these precedents. Instead, the BĀU attests a mantra with OM in verses that allude to an ascent to heaven and the gaining of immortality through the door of the sun; the ĪśāU(M) attests similar verses with variants that only strengthen the allusion. I argue that the Vajasaneyi evocation of this soteriological doctrine and eschatological scenario has affinities with the more detailed formulations of the JUB and ChU. This speaks to the growing prominence of soteriologies featuring OM in the Upaniṣadic period.

§11.1 Towards a pan-Vedic construction of OM

In sum, the broadcast of Sāmavedic ideas about OM is predicated on the gradual rupture of specific liturgical practices and interpretive discourse. The new trends in Upaniṣadic discourse, moving from *karma* to *jñāna*, increasingly deemphasize liturgical specialization as a basis for cosmological and soteriological reflection. This is not to say that the Vedas suddenly became unimportant, or that the legacy of Vedic ritual was unappreciated. Rather, as Vedic texts come to be reified as a holistic corpus, without regard to their diverse liturgical contents or branches, the ritual serves more and more as a touchstone, at some remove from the complexity of performance. In this new milieu, OM serves admirably as a shared, sonic embodiment of the Vedas as a whole; and as a watchword of their soteriological potency. In the next chapter we explore the pan-Vedic phase of OM's career, tracing its

ongoing construction in subsequent Upaniṣads and anticipating its reception in Brahmanism and the formative currents of Classical Hinduism.

CHAPTER TEN

TURNING INWARD: THE PAN-VEDIC OM

In this study so far, we have traced the emergence of OM up through several early Upaniṣads, electing to focus on works showing strong continuity with the Vedic branches in which they were composed and transmitted. The construction of OM in those Upaniṣads represents the final phase of a trajectory begun in the Saṃhitās, developed in the Brāhmaṇas, and extended into the Āraṇyakas. The constant interplay of ritual performance and reflections about ritual across these strata has resulted in a conception of OM as a unitary, apotheosized syllable, the essence of the triple Veda, and a watchword of immortality. Above all, OM has become integral to the formulation of ritual-based soteriologies, especially the soteriology of song developed by the Jaiminīyas and then broadcast to a wider audience. Jaiminīya reflections on OM—aphorisms, stories, and soteriological doctrines—have found a welcome home among their Sāmavedic counterparts, the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīyas, as well as among the Yajurvedic Taittirīyas and Vājasaneyins. What's next for OM?

§1 *From pan-Vedic to Hindu*

OM's career does not end there, for subsequent Upaniṣadic compositions signal a new trajectory: the syllable is on its way to becoming a pan-Vedic cultural property, claimed universally by Brahmanical theologians without reference to liturgical specialization or branch affiliation. In this chapter, we explore the construction of OM in the next wave of Upaniṣads, which have more or less tenuous links to the Vedic *śākhās*, their liturgies, and their distinctive hermeneutics. Although still resorting to the Vedas and sacrifice as touchstones of authority, the composers of these Upaniṣads now invoke the syllable to reveal a higher knowledge unattainable by sacrifice. They show a keen interest in

OM and contribute to its discursive construction in ways both traditional and revolutionary. On the one hand, they are influenced by the themes and diction of earlier hermeneutics, carrying forward material appropriated from the various branches concerning OM's tri-Vedic synthesis and soteriological importance. On the other hand, they eschew liturgical details and even criticize ritual as a soteriological option, instead stressing OM's role in interiorized rituals, contemplation, and devotional practices. The result is a *pan-Vedic discourse on OM* that emphasizes the cultivation of contemplation, devotion, and metaphysical knowledge over the old model of *śrauta* ritual expertise. If the *Āraṇyakas* and earlier *Upaniṣads* constitute an esoteric turn, this phase in OM's history marks an "inward turn" in the syllable's construction. From the perspective of the history of South Asian religions, this inward turn provides a window onto the crucial—yet often all too murky—transition from Vedism proper to Brahmanism and the formative currents of Classical Hinduism.

§1.1 *Common property of all Brahmins*

The new pan-Vedic discourse on OM corresponds to broader trends in Brahmanical theology during the centuries leading up to the Common Era: chief among these is a burgeoning interest in non-sacrificial forms of religiosity, including renunciation of ritual, asceticism, meditation, and theistic devotion; and the drive to distill the wisdom of the *Upaniṣads* into a systematic inquiry under the rubric of *Vedānta*. Of the milieu that will concern us here, Olivelle observes (1998, 10):

Towards the last centuries BCE and certainly by the first centuries of the common era, the role of sacrifice within religion and of the vedic branches within Brahmanical learning became less significant...Even within ritual and religious practice, Brahmanical thought came to consider the literature of all vedic branches—that is, the totality of the Veda—as authoritative over individuals in every vedic branch. The *Upaniṣads* themselves became somewhat detached from their respective vedic branches and became the common property of all Brahmins under the generic title "*Vedānta*," meaning the end or conclusion, and, in an extended sense, the essence of the Veda.

As with the Upaniṣads, so, too with their preeminent syllable: OM effectively becomes "the common property of all Brahmins" in this period. This is a striking departure from the earlier hermeneutic traditions of the Vedic branches, where the cosmological and soteriological significance of the syllable could only be grasped by the erudite ritual expert. In this period, OM's significance is predicated instead on other forms of expertise, including asceticism, meditation, and metaphysical knowledge. As such, cultivating the salvific knowledge of the syllable depends not on training in a particular *śākhā* but on the discipline and dedication of the individual seeker. Liberation ceases to be a cooperative enterprise undertaken by the sacrificer and his officiants; it becomes instead a solitary journey of introspection. In this chapter, the case of OM provides a concrete illustration of the growing preference for *jñāna* over *karma* in Upaniṣadic circles. With the benefit of our familiarity with earlier texts, however, we will be able to appreciate these changes as a continuous development from Vedic antecedents.¹ New modes of religiosity do not wholly replace sacrifice in the new discourses—they interiorize, personalize, and recontextualize it.

§1.2 *The next wave of Upaniṣads: affiliation and chronology*

In this chapter, we take up texts that form the relatively younger strata of the corpus of early Upaniṣads. As already noted, this corpus is based on the reception of the texts in later Vedāntic commentaries and currents of Hindu theology, and hence tells us little about the composition and early transmission of the texts themselves (see ch. 9, §1). For our purposes, it is more useful to speak of individual works in terms of their relations to the Vedic branches and to each other. Through this lens, a group of unassailably "oldest" Upaniṣads can be identified: these include the JUB, ChU, BĀU, and others with strong connections to *śākhā* traditions—such are the works we considered in the previous

¹ This is not meant to rule out influences from outside the Brahmanical milieu; however, such influences go largely unacknowledged within the Vedic corpus.

chapters. Against this background, the next wave of Upaniṣads is composed: though still ancient, these works are relatively younger. Moreover, in spite of claiming Vedic affiliation, many seem to have been composed as independent works at some remove from *śākhā* traditions. Finally, they seem to have exerted a strong mutual influence on each other, as attested by shared diction and themes.

My selection in this chapter includes two prose Upaniṣads, the *Praśna* and the *Māṇḍūkya*; three verse Upaniṣads (*Kaṭha*, *Śvetāśvatara*, and *Muṇḍaka*); and a number of verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* which are decidedly "Upaniṣadic" in their themes and diction. I limit myself to these works for two reasons: first, because of their close mutual influence; and second, because they represent the more-or-less sequential unfolding of this next period of Upaniṣadic composition. As such, they give us insights into the growing efforts to construct OM *without* relying on branch traditions or expertise in *śrauta* ritual. The case for mutual influence can be made on the basis of shared passages and a common interest in contemplation and theistic devotion. Olivelle observes that these verse Upaniṣads (together with the *Īśā*, mentioned in the previous chapter; and the *Kena*, which has no discussion of OM) "are probably the earliest literary products of the theistic tradition, whose later literature includes the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the Purāṇas" (Olivelle 1998, 13). As we will see below, Cohen has refined these arguments to identify a "meta-textual complex" that informs the composition of a specific subset of the verse Upaniṣads and the *Gītā* (2008, 201).

These texts are notoriously difficult to date, in both absolute and relative terms. Olivelle dates the three verse Upaniṣads to the final centuries before the Common Era, while he assigns the two prose Upaniṣads a somewhat later date around the turn of the Common Era (Olivelle 1998, 13). Cohen has proposed a relative chronology based on a linguistic, metrical, and conceptual analysis of the works (Cohen 2008, 287). Her scheme, though broadly in agreement with Olivelle's, differs in placing the *Praśna* before the verse Upaniṣads. Cohen's scheme is specific and thorough, and I make use of her

relative chronology to structure this chapter, proceeding from older to younger works. Be that as it may, the arguments I make below do not depend on any rigid chronology of texts; rather, I treat the Upaniṣads in this chapter as roughly synchronic manifestations of Brahmanical theologies around the turn of the Common Era. What matters most is the extent to which these Upaniṣads as a group adapt material on OM from the earlier Vedic strata; and how they integrate this theological inheritance into their own innovative formulations.

§1.3 *Claiming the authority of the fourth Veda*

In the development of this pan-Vedic discourse on OM, the Atharvaveda serves as a touchstone of Vedic status. Lacking clear lines of liturgical and hermeneutic continuity with the triple Veda, many composers of new treatises in the Upaniṣadic mode seem to have relied on this fourth Veda as an alternative source of authority. While very few—if any—of their compositions grow from genuine Atharvavedic antecedents, several of the relevant texts dealing with OM in this period assert a connection to the fourth Veda. The profile of OM only grows with the proliferation of these Atharvavedic Upaniṣads, and the syllable comes to be widely accepted as the sonic counterpart of *brahman* and emblem of the Vedas as a totality.

The AV, although containing some of the oldest mantras and hymns in the Vedic corpus, had no clear role in early *śrauta* ritual; instead its sphere of activity was confined to other realms: healing, sorcery, and magic. As such, Atharvavedic traditions seem to have been neglected and even scorned by exponents of the triple Veda as inferior (Witzel 1997a, 278; Gonda 1975, 268). While the *brahman* priest, the silent watchman and expiatory healer of errors in *śrauta* praxis, comes to be regarded as an exponent of the AV, the association of his liturgy (*brahmatvam*) with the AV is not consistently

recognized by the three liturgical Vedas and may represent an attempt by excluded Atharvavedins to claim the prestige of the *śrauta* tradition (Renou 1947, 11-12; Gonda 1975, 269).

Perhaps because of its marginal status *vis-à-vis* mainstream *śrauta* culture, Atharvavedic tradition in the late Vedic period and afterwards came to attract texts composed independently of the branches of the triple Veda. The "Upaniṣads" in this group kept increasing over time, a phenomenon that Deussen likens to an attack on a weak and poorly defended target (Deussen 1897, 531-32). Olivelle similarly cautions that "most later Upaniṣads that did not form part of any other vedic collection, were, almost by default, ascribed to the Atharvaveda" (1998, 43). While I agree that these claims to Atharvavedic affiliation are often inauthentic, I do not believe they lack significance. Instead, such claims speak to a broad-based movement by the composers of independent texts to gain authority by coopting the prestige of the fourth Veda. As Renou observes: "...le lien de ces tracts avec l'AV. est presque inexistant, et par cette affiliation on cherchait, tout en rehaussant la dignité du quatrième Veda, à permettre l'accession védique à des textes censément *śrauta*" (1947, 13). Beyond supporting such pretensions to *śrauta* status, the AV also provides a readymade source of authority for the non-*śrauta* modes of religiosity that these texts seek to expound. It makes sense that thinkers aiming to supersede the lower knowledge of sacrifice—but still retain the prestige of Vedic affiliation—would cast their lot with the AV, which traditionally had little participation in *śrauta* ritual.

§2 *Praśna Upaniṣad*

The *Praśna Upaniṣad* takes its name from the six "questions" (*praśna*) put to Pippalāda, the eponymous sage of the Atharvavedic Paippalāda branch, by six different seekers.² His answers make up the bulk of the work. Cohen takes Pippalāda's role in the narrative as evidence of the text's authentic

²Deussen (1897, 559) and Olivelle (1998, 456) have pointed out the influence of earlier texts on this six-question framework (ŚB 10.6.1, ChU 5.11.1).

affiliation with the Atharvaveda (2008, 168). On the other hand, the PrU has not been transmitted in the branch that bears his name; it seems more likely to me that Pippalāda's role was conceived precisely to lend credence to its dubious claim of Atharvavedic provenance. Therefore, as with other Atharvavedic Upaniṣads, the traditional attribution of the PrU to the fourth Veda probably indicates an effort to claim Vedic prestige for an independently composed text.

Pippalāda's questioners are all "in search of the highest *brahman*" (PrU 1.1, trans. Olivelle).³ The PrU recognizes two levels of *brahman*, the lower—accessible through ritual performance—and the higher—accessible through salvific knowledge and contemplative practices. By and large, however, the composers of the PrU treat Vedic ritualism sympathetically, formulating their new teachings on OM as a potent synthesis of the three liturgical Vedas. References to the core elements of *śrauta* ritual abound, but there is no sign of specialized engagement with particular rites or liturgies.

§2.1 *This whole world is breath*

As characterized by Olivelle, the six questions of the PrU share a common focus on "the centrality of breath within the cosmology and soteriology of the text" (Olivelle 1998, 456). Before we consider the reflections on OM that constitute Pippalāda's fifth discourse, we should examine how the syllable fits into the work as a whole. What is the relevance of OM to this treatise on breath? In the PrU, "lifebreath" (*prāṇa*) is preeminent and all-encompassing: it animates all divine and cosmic entities. "In the power of lifebreath is this whole world" (PrU 2.13, trans. Olivelle).⁴ Pippalāda explains that lifebreath arises from the *ātman* (PrU 3.3), which he locates in the heart, and that the heart connects to hundreds and thousands of veins and their branches, which circulate other forms of breath in the body

³ *paraṃ brahmānveṣamāṇāḥ*

⁴ *prāṇasyedaṃ vaśe sarvam*

(3.6). This physiological account informs a soteriology: it is the "up-breath" (*udāna*) that conveys a person after death to the world his actions have earned for him (3.7). But even breath depends on something beyond itself. As he unfolds his teaching, Pippalāda calls to mind a verse that identifies the "imperishable" (*akṣara*) as the foundation (*prati√ṣṭhā*) of everything, all beings and breaths included (PrU 4.11). The double meaning of *akṣara* comes into play here: it is the "imperishable" *brahman*, certainly, but at the same time it is the great "Syllable," which by this time is widely identified with OM. The discourse on OM is therefore integral to the thematic development of the PrU: even before he takes up OM as a topic, Pippalāda has already alluded to a secret truth of the highest order, namely that the *akṣara* is the foundation on which the universal *prāṇa* depends.

§2.2 *The fifth question*

It is the fifth question that inspires Pippalāda's remarks on OM. Cohen points out that the name of the questioner, Śaibya Satyakāma, recalls that of Satyakāma Jābala, a prominent Sāmavedic sage in the ChU who learns about *brahman* from conversing with wild animals (ChU 4; Cohen 2008, 169). If we accept such an identification, this passage furnishes another example of the abiding interest of Sāmavedic experts in the soteriological potential of OM (PrU 5.1, trans. Olivelle, with changes⁵):

1. Then Śaibya Satyakāma asked him: "Lord, if some man were to meditate on the sound *om* until his death, what is the world that he would win through meditation?"⁶

Śaibya Satyakāma raises the possibility of meditating on OM "until death" (*prāyaṇāntam*). It is not immediately clear whether this means taking a vow of some kind to contemplate OM for some

⁵ All of the translations of Upaniṣads in this chapter, excluding those from Jaiminīya sources, are by Olivelle (1998). On the nature of my changes to his published translation, see ch. 9, §3.1n.

⁶ *atha hainaṃ śabyaḥ satyakāmaḥ papraccha / sa yo ha vai tad bhagavan manuṣyeṣu prāyaṇāntam oṅkāram abhidhyāyīta / katamaṃ vāva sa tena lokam jayatīti //1//*

indeterminate period leading up to death, or rather to contemplate the syllable in a more immediate sense, at the moment of death itself. Either way, the verb "meditate" (*abhi√dhyai*) in collocation with OM and dying deserves comment. A possible antecedent for the mentalization of OM at death occurs in the ChU, where a dying man need only "cast his thought" (*kṣipyen manas*; ChU 8.6.5) towards OM to go straight to the sun. In light of this precedent, as well as similar Upaniṣadic passages to be discussed later in this chapter, I am inclined to understand Satyakāma as referring to the moment of death. More broadly, the idea of meditating on OM in the PrU introduces a new phase in the syllable's discursive construction, indicative of the rising profile of contemplative practices in this period.

§2.3 Higher and lower brahman

Pippalāda begins his response by explaining OM's relation to two forms of *brahman*, the "higher" and "lower" (*param, aparam*). In the PrU, OM grants access to both the higher path of soteriological knowledge and the lower path of *śrauta* ritualism⁷ (PrU 5.2):

2. He told Śaibya: "Satyakāma, the sound *om* is clearly both the higher and the lower *brahman*. Either of these two, therefore, can be attained through this same medium by a man who knows it."⁸

The idea of higher and lower forms of knowledge is widespread in the Upaniṣads considered in this chapter. That *brahman* may take two forms speaks to the ongoing theological innovations of Brahmanical discourse. We will see that this dichotomy serves to accommodate newly integrated forms of religiosity alongside the firmly established practices of Vedic ritual. As is so often the case in the development of Hindu ideas from Brahmanical antecedents, "both/and" beats out "either/or" as a hermenutic strategy.

⁷ The two forms of knowledge have a close parallel in MuṇḍU 1.1.4-5; see §3 below.

⁸ *tasmai sa hovāca / etad vai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yad oṅkāraḥ / tasmād vidvān etenaivāyatanenaikataram anveti //2//*

§2.4 *O3m* or *a + u + m*?

Pippalāda now reflects on several ways of meditating on OM and their different outcomes. As conventionally understood, his words refer to the division of OM into its constituent phonemes, *a*, *u*, and *m* (thus Olivelle, Deussen; see §2.5 below). But a close reading of this passage and comparison with earlier texts suggests another possible interpretation. The earliest attested triadic division of OM refers to its constituent phonemes as *varṇas* "sounds" (AB 5.32), a term absent from this passage. Pippalāda instead divides OM using three expressions with the suffix *-mātra*: *ekamātra*, *dvimātra*, *trimātra*. The sense of the passage rests on the proper interpretation of these terms. Parallels in the Prātiśākhya literature suggest that these are compound adjectives based on the term *mātrā*, which denotes the prosodic *mora*, a single "beat" or "instant" in the utterance of a phoneme (Monier Williams 1899, s.v. *mātrā*; Deshpande 1997, 43). As such, the terms in question may be understood as measures of time: "consisting of one syllabic instant," "consisting of two syllabic instants," and so on. As we have seen, OM is conventionally extended in recitation for the duration of three *mātrās*, represented as *o3m*; the normative duration of the syllable in ritual performance is therefore *trimātra*, "consisting of three syllabic instants."

Applying this line of thinking to the present context, let's examine the next sentence of the PrU, which begins: *sa yady ekamātram abhidhyāyīta...*(see §2.5 below). It is possible to understand *ekamātram* as an accusative used in an adverbial sense to express duration or direction, translating: "If he should meditate for one syllabic instant..."; or "if he should turn his thought towards a single syllabic instant..." The next term, the instrumental *dvimātreṇa*, could be interpreted in a similar adverbial sense; the final term, *trimātreṇa*, could impart a similar durational sense as an adjective modifying *akṣareṇa*. From this perspective, the passage considers the implications of meditating on OM for one, two, or three beats: the longer the duration, the greater the reward. In this way, the composers

of the PrU bring the liturgical recitation of OM (*o3m*) into engagement with new contemplative practices.⁹

To counter this interpretation and support the conventional reading, we have the evidence of the later *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, which divides OM into four *mātrās* and explicitly glosses them as the three phonemes (*a, u, m*), plus a fourth silent phoneme. Thus the MāṇḍU proves that the term *mātrā* may be understood (against Vedic precedent) in terms of phonetic quality.¹⁰ In that case, Pippalāda would be speaking of combining the phonemes in succession: first *a* alone, then *o* (= *a + u*), and finally *om* (= *a + u + m*). This interpretation would evoke Aitareya hermeneutic antecedents: in addition to the famous A + U + M equation, recall that in their Āraṇyaka, the Aitareyins proposed the sound *a* alone as the supreme expression of *brahman*. It would also evoke the multiformity of liturgical OM, since *o* is one of the syllable's many multiforms in recitation. Thus Pippalāda could be engaging these earlier discourses and proposing his own hierarchy of sound. In this hierarchy, the contemplation of the fully realized sound trumps its constituent phonemes.

§2.5 *Three mātrās, three Vedas*

In light of these uncertainties, it seems prudent to take *mātrā* in the more general sense of "division," allowing for both the durational and phonological readings. Pippalāda teaches that that meditation on the first and second *mātrās* leads to rebirth, while meditation on all three together leads to liberation (PrU 5.3-5):

3. "If a man meditates for a single *mātrā*, he gets his knowledge just from that; so he comes back to earth very quickly and is led to the human world by the

⁹ Nevertheless, instead of *o3m*, which would corroborate a durational reading of *mātrā*, the PrU attests simply *om*.

¹⁰ Since the MāṇḍU attests a high proportion of non-Vedic forms and expressions, I am less inclined to apply its idiosyncratic use of *mātrā* in my reading of the PrU (see below §7.4).

verses (*ṛc*). There, possessing a natural propensity for austerity, chastity, and faith, he enjoys greatness.

4. "If, on the other hand, a man becomes mentally absorbed through two *mātrās*, he reaches the intermediate region and is led up to the lunar world by the formulas (*yajus*). After enjoying sovereign power in the lunar world, he returns.

5. "A man who meditates on that highest person by means of this very syllable *om* consisting of three *mātrās*, on the contrary, enters into the effulgence in the sun. He becomes released from evil, just like a snake from his slough. He is led to the world of *brahman* by the melodies (*sāman*) and beholds the fort-dwelling person far beyond this entire mass of living beings."¹¹

Although mythically associated with the fourth Veda, Pippalāda here makes use of the familiar three-Veda hermeneutic of *ṛc*, *yajus*, and *sāman* to structure his reflections on the syllable's three *mātrās*. As we have seen throughout this study, the triad ṚV, YV, and SV corresponds to the cosmic triad "earth, atmosphere, heaven" (*bhūr bhuvā svar*). Pippalāda makes use of this triad, but with diction that departs from the traditional formulation (*jagatī* for *bhūh*, *antarikṣa* for *bhuvā*, *sūrya* for *sva*).

In his scheme, meditation on the first *mātrā* gains knowledge from the Ṛgvedic verses; but soon they lead a man back to earth (*jagatī*) and on to a virtuous and successful next life. Meditation on two *mātrās* earns something more—the formulas of the YV lead him to the atmosphere (*antarikṣa*) and a limited stay in the lunar realm of Soma (*somaloka*) before his return to earth. Only meditation on all three *mātrās* leads to eternal liberation: OM permits the contemplation of the highest *puruṣa*, transporting the meditator into the radiance of the sun. From there, the melodies of the SV lead him to the world of *brahman*, a realm beyond rebirth.

¹¹ *sa yady ekamātram abhidhyāyīta sa tenaiva saṃveditas tūrṇam eva jagatyām abhisampadyate / tam ṛco manuṣyalokam upanayante / sa tatra brahmacaryeṇa śraddhayā saṃpanno mahimānam anubhavati //3// atha yadi dvimātreṇa manasī saṃpadyate so 'ntarikṣam yajurbhir unnīyate somalokam / sa somaloke vibhūtim anubhūya punar āvartate //4// ya punar etaṃ trimātreṇom ity etenaivākṣareṇa paraṃ puruṣam abhidhyāyīta sa tejasi sūrye saṃpannaḥ / yathā pādodarastvacā vinirmucyata evaṃ ha vai sa pāpmanā vinirmuktaḥ sa sāmabhir unnīyate brahmalokam / sa etasmā jīvaghanāt parāt paraṃ purīṣayam puruṣam īkṣate //5//*

§2.6 Reaching the highest person through melody

By attributing soteriological potency to the combination of OM's *mātrās*, Pippalāda betrays a debt to the earliest iteration of the phonological analysis of the syllable, in a Brāhmaṇa of the ṚV (AB 5.32). In that passage, the utterance of the OM's constituent phonemes (*varṇa*) together in the *praṇava* leads a man to heaven (*svargaloka*). Pippalāda's doctrine also echoes the earlier Upaniṣadic teaching of the path of the ancestors (*pitṛyāna*), leading to the moon and rebirth, and the path of the gods, (*devayāna*) leading to the sun and liberation. On a rote level, it is perhaps unsurprising that the *sāman* leads to this higher realm—after all, the correlation of the SV with the sun and heaven (*āditya*, *svar*) is conventional in the three-Veda framework. But the fact that Sāmavedic thinkers substantially contributed to the development of soteriological doctrines featuring OM suggests that there is more going on here than the programmatic reprise of a familiar set of correlations.

Indeed, Pippalāda's teaching that OM and the Sāmavedic melodies lead to the sun and the "highest person" may indicate an awareness of the elaborate Sāmavedic soteriologies of the ChU and the JUB. Both texts teach that the utterance of OM leads to the sun after death. The JUB speaks of traveling into the sun along the "path of the *sāman*" (*sāmapatha*), a route leading to immortality which, like Pippalāda's meditation on OM, must be approached "with the mind" (*manasā*). When he reaches this solar realm where immortality is located, a man separates himself from death, from evil (JUB 1.6.1-5). According to the ChU, a "golden person" (*hiraṇmaya puruṣa*) identified as the *udgītha* and the Udgātr, presides over the worlds beyond the sun and the gods (ChU 1.6.6-8; cf. ChU 1.48.8). A similar "highest person" (*paramapuruṣa*, JUB 1.27.2) is likewise central to the soteriology of the Jaiminīyas: the JUB further correlates this *puruṣa* with breath, *sāman*, immortality and *brahman* (JUB 1.26.4).

§2.7 External, internal, and in-between

Pippalāda concludes his answer by quoting two *ślokas* (PrU 5.6-7):

"On this there are two verses:

6. The three *mātrās* lead to immortality, when they are combined, joined to one another, and not disjointed. When they are rightly combined in performances external, internal, or in between, a man who knows does not tremble.

7. With the verses, this world; with the formulas, the midregions; with the melodies, the place which poets proclaim. By the sound *om* alone as the refuge does a man who knows it attain that which is serene, beyond old age and death, free from fear, the supreme."¹²

Continuing the theme of union, the first verse stresses that only the proper joining of OM's three *mātrās* leads to immortality. The utterance of OM in this way suits three different kinds of "performance" (*kriyā*): "external, internal or in-between." Olivelle supposes this obscure classification may refer to the loud, soft, and medium pronunciations of the syllable (1998, 640n). I would add that the taxonomy may also refer to the "external" worship of *śrauta* ritual as opposed to the "internal" worship of meditation or interiorized sacrifice; the "intermediate" acts might refer to the combination of both aspects.¹³

¹² ... tad etau ślokaḥ bhavataḥ //5//
tisro mātrā (a)mṛtyumatyaḥ prayuktā
anyonyasaktā anaviprayuktāḥ /
kriyāsu bāhyābhyantaramadhyamāsu
samyak prayuktāsu na kampate jñāḥ //6//
rgbhir etaṃ yajubhir antarikṣaṃ
sāmabhir yat tat kavayo vedayante /
tam onkāreṇaivāyatanenānveti
vidvān yat tac chāntam ajaram amṛtam abhayaṃ paraṃ ceti //7//

¹³ As a third possibility, it could refer to the three types of ritual utterance, *ṛc*, *yajus*, and *sāman*: the "external" *ṛc* is a lexical text that is clearly recited; the "intermediate" *yajus* combines lexical and non-lexical texts in a delivery that is sometimes clear and sometimes mumbled; and the "internal" *sāman*, characterized by the non-lexical *stobha* and the concealment of underlying lexical verses, comes close to being pure sound.

§2.8 *Beyond the supreme*

The next verse speaks of two levels of soteriological attainment, recalling the earlier distinction between lower and higher *brahman*. Reprising the familiar tri-Vedic correlation, the verse enumerates the three worlds that can be won through the three forms of liturgical utterance. In a variation on the traditional scheme—where the *sāman* leads to "heaven" (*svar*)—the apex here is instead "the place that the poets proclaim," the ultimate goal according to the earlier generations of sages (*kavi*). But the verse in the PrU conceives a goal beyond even what was known to the poets: this is "the supreme" (*param*), accessible "by means of the sound OM alone" (*oṅkāreṇaiva*). As we have seen, the use of the restrictive particle *eva* with OM has antecedents in the Brāhmaṇas and earliest Upaniṣads, especially the discourses of the Jaiminīyas, which were the first to mark OM's preeminence with this diction. Similarly, in these older texts we also find statements to the effect that the single syllable is common to all three liturgies and embodies their essence. The verse quoted by Pippalāda pushes these ideas further: OM not only encapsulates the three Vedas, it supersedes them. In keeping with the initial theme of the discourse, the Vedas may lead to lower *brahman*, but OM alone leads its higher form. This is a reflex of what Wendy Doniger has called the "transcendent fourth"—the syllable transcends the established triadic series (see details in §7.1 below). Here, this strategy serves to expand the soteriological range of the syllable, advancing OM as the way to outstrip performers of tri-Vedic sacrifice and reach a higher plane through contemplation.

§2.9 *Summing up: the reflections of the Praśna Upaniṣad*

The testimony of the PrU exemplifies how the discursive construction of OM continues beyond the immediate authority of the Vedic branches. Although nominally affiliated with the AV—and featuring an Atharvavedic sage in a starring role—the aim of the text is the explication of the higher

brahman, which is beyond the scope of mere ritual performance. Instead, Pippalāda teaches salvific knowledge based on an understanding of breath (*prāṇa*) as the elemental power of the cosmos. But even breath rests upon a hidden foundation: the *akṣara*, with the twofold meaning of "imperishable" and "syllable." In response to a question about OM from a sage with possible Sāmavedic ties, Pippalāda reveals that OM leads to both the lower *brahman* of ritual expertise and the higher *brahman* of knowledge gained through meditation. He structures his teaching by correlating different degrees of soteriological attainment with the three *mātrās* of OM. Only the meditation on all three *mātrās* together leads to liberation, envisioned as a journey through the sun to the highest person in the world of *brahman*. In keeping with the traditional correlation of the SV with heaven, it is the songs of the SV that lead a man to this realm. Yet there are also echoes of specific teachings from the JUB and ChU, strengthening the impression of Sāmavedic influence on the composers of the PrU. To conclude, Pippalāda quotes two *ślokas* on the syllable. The first stresses its applicability to a range of recitational and ritual contexts; the second emphasizes the transcendence of "OM alone" over all three Vedas combined. In this way, the sage rounds out the discourse by predicating OM's preeminence on interiorized forms of religiosity such as meditation. This suits the overall theme of the PrU, which is to reflect on the cosmology and soteriology of *prāṇa*. In this regard, also, the PrU resonates with earlier Sāmavedic discourses on the significance of breath and its relation to OM.

§3 *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*

We now take up the construction of OM in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, a text that teaches a soteriology that shifts away from ritual expertise towards salvific knowledge. Like the PrU, the MuṇḍU expounds two forms of knowledge: a lower one based on sacrifice and a higher one based on speculations into ultimate reality. Unlike the PrU, however, the MuṇḍU evinces a clear antipathy

towards the lower path. "More than any other Upaniṣad, the MuṇḍU engages in a direct and frontal attack against both vedic ritualism and the vedic texts that embody the ritual tradition" (Olivelle 1998, 434). In its polemics, the MuṇḍU presents sacrifice as a deluded activity: the beguiling tongues of the sacrificial fire will fool the participants into thinking they have reached "the world of *brahman*" (*brahmaloka*), when really they will return to earth once more to be born and die (MuṇḍU 1.2.6-8). The text stresses the superiority of its own doctrines, which it styles *vedānta* (MuṇḍU 3.6).

The MuṇḍU encodes a claim to Atharvavedic status in its opening verses, which speak of Brahmā, "creator of all," teaching the knowledge of *brahman* to his firstborn son, Atharvan, and ultimately to his descendant, Aṅgiras, the two sages for whom the *atharvāṅgirasaveda* (=AV) is named. The sage Śaunaka, founder of the Atharvavedic branch of the same name, also appears (MuṇḍU 1.3). Cohen accepts these features as legitimizing the traditional ascription of the MuṇḍU to the AV (2008, 179). However, as with the PrU, I am inclined to draw the opposite conclusion: the prominence given to Atharvavedic founding fathers seems all too artificial, suggesting a conscious attempt to strengthen otherwise tenuous ties to the Vedic branches. Olivelle and Deussen have also questioned the MuṇḍU's affiliation with the AV (Olivelle 1998, 434; Deussen 1897, 544). If anything, the text has a close affinity to Yajurvedic tradition, as evidenced by the common stock of quotations and ideas it shares with the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (see further discussion below; cf. Cohen 2008, 179).

§3.1 *Shaved heads*

Whatever its precise relation to the Vedic branches, the MuṇḍU includes a number of features that speak to a changing religious milieu, from its mention of Brahmā, theistic embodiment of *brahman* and the totality of the Vedas, to its emphasis on asceticism, mendicancy, and meditation. Based on its contents as well as its tone of hostility towards mainstream Vedic tradition, a number of scholars have

linked the MuṇḍU with currents of asceticism. They point out that the word *muṇḍaka* in the title means "shaving" or "shaved," a possible reference to the initiatory vow of shaving one's hair (*śirovrata*) mentioned at the end of the work. Cohen argues that shaving is the text's central metaphor, serving to connect practice and doctrine: "by renouncing the world and becoming an ascetic with a shaved head, one may find the knowledge that will shave away or cut the knot of ignorance" (Cohen 2008, 180). Salomon, in his linguistic analysis of the MuṇḍU, stresses that the text's many vernacularisms may also indicate its origins in an extra-Vedic, even heterodox milieu (Salomon 1981, 100-102; Cohen 2008, 190).

§3.2 *The higher knowledge of akṣara: strike it!*

As I have noted, the composers of the MuṇḍU conceive of two forms of knowledge (*dve vidye*), the "lower" knowledge of Vedic texts and rituals, which leads to rebirth, and the "higher" knowledge of *brahman*, which leads to liberation (MuṇḍU 1.1.2, 4-5). According to the MuṇḍU, only mendicants can pursue this higher knowledge successfully, which leads them through the sun (1.2.11): "But those in the wilderness, calm and wise, who live a life of penance and faith, as they beg their food; through the sun's door (*sūryadvāreṇa*) they go, spotless, to where that immortal person is, that immutable self."¹⁴ This formulation of a journey through the sun to meet the deathless *puruṣa* on the other side clearly evokes the soteriological narratives we have met with in the older Upaniṣads. The ultimate destination of this path is knowledge of *brahman*, which the MuṇḍU frequently denotes as *akṣara* (e.g., MuṇḍU 1.1.5; 1.2.13), resonant with its twin meanings of "imperishable" and "syllable."

¹⁴ *tapaḥśraddhe ye hy upavasanty aranye śāntā vidvāṃso bhaiṣacaryāṃ carantaḥ / sūryadvāreṇa te virajāḥ prayānti yatrāmṛtaḥ sa puruṣo hy avyayātmā //11//*

The double valence of *akṣara* informs the MuṇḍU's reflections on OM. All striving, the text suggests, must be directed at an "imperishable" target deep within the body, miniscule but radiant (MuṇḍU 2.2.2):

2. What is smaller than the smallest and intensely bright, in which rests these worlds and those who live therein—
It is the imperishable *brahman*;
It is the breath, it is voice and mind;
It is the truth, the immortal.
It is what we must strike, my friend.
Strike it!¹⁵

§3.3 Bow, arrow, and target

"Strike it!"—with this command, the composers introduce the memorable formulation of their soteriological doctrine in the next verses, using the imagery of bow, arrow, and target. The bow is the Upaniṣad itself, the arrow is the seeker's attitude of worship, the tension in the bowstring is his mental tautness, and the target is his soteriological goal, *akṣara* (MuṇḍU 2.2.3):

3. Take, my friend, this bow, this great weapon of *upaniṣad*; place veneration on it as the whetted arrow; stretch it with the thought fixed on the nature of that; that very imperishable is the target, my friend. Strike it!¹⁶

The terms employed here—*upaniṣad*, *upāsā*, *cetas*¹⁷—suggest a broader analogy between the act of shooting an arrow and a particular brand of contemplation, namely, finding the *bandhu* ("bond") between two entities. Formulated in this way, the verse invites the listener to plumb its deeper meanings: what is the secret connection? The resonance of *akṣara* as both "imperishable" and "syllable" alludes to the answer, revealed in the next verse (MuṇḍU 2.2.4):

¹⁵ *yad arcimad yad aṇubhyo 'ṇu ca yasmiḥ lokā nihitā lokinaś ca / tad etad akṣaram brahma sa prāṇas tad u vān manaḥ / tad etad satyaṃ tad amṛtaṃ tad veddhavyaṃ somya viddhi //2//*

¹⁶ *dhanur grhītva upaniṣadaṃ mahāstraṃ śaram hy upāsāṃ niśitaṃ saṃdhayīta / āyamyā tadbhāvagatena cetasā lakṣyaṃ tad evākṣaram somya viddhi //3//*

¹⁷ On *upaniṣad* and *upāsā* in this passage, see Olivelle 1998, 632n; cf. 1998, 514n.

4. The bow is the *praṇava*, the arrow's the self, the target is *brahman*, they say. One must strike that undistracted. He will then be lodged in that, like the arrow, in the target.¹⁸

The *praṇava* (=OM) is the bow, the *ātman* is the arrow and *brahman* is the target—this is the solution. According to Olivelle, "OM must be viewed here as showing the hidden connection between *brahman* and the self" (1998, 632n). By means of the *akṣara* ("syllable"), he attains the *akṣara* ("imperishable"). As the bow, OM is the primary instrument for uniting *ātman* with *brahman*; the syllable actualizes the force that brings the seeker's individuality into total union with the universal. When he utters OM, he realizes *brahman* in his own body as an audible sound. Like the arrow embedded in the target, his self quite literally interpenetrates the whole. In this way, the syllable allows him to directly experience the salvific knowledge that he "consists of that [*brahman*]" (*tanmaya*; see Olivelle 1998, 633n).

In terms of diction, it is important to note that this verse actually uses the term *praṇava* to refer to OM. As we have seen throughout this study, the narrow meaning of *praṇava* as a technical term for liturgical OM in Ṛgvedic recitation gradually expands to include OM in the cosmological and soteriological senses. The composers of the ChU in particular pushed *praṇava* in this direction (see ch. 9, §5). Here in the MuṇḍU, *praṇava* betrays no hint of its technical meaning and clearly denotes OM as the apotheosized syllable. Discourses such as this one contribute to the parallel construction of *praṇava* in this broader, non-liturgical sense; *praṇava* will come to be the preferred name of the syllable in subsequent Hindu discourses.

§3.4 *The dike to the immortal*

Citing the previous verse among others (see also MuṇḍU 2.2.9), Cohen argues that knowledge of *brahman* in the MuṇḍU depends directly on knowledge of *ātman* (Cohen 2008, 180). To know the self is

¹⁸ *praṇavo dhanuḥ śaro hy ātmā brahma tal lakṣyam ucyate /
apramattena veddhavyaṃ śaravat tanmayo bhavet //4//*

to know the whole. But knowledge of the true nature of the self is elusive: while the *ātman* furnishes a passage to *brahman*, its inherent capacity to separate and divide can be an obstacle. Indeed, the MuṇḍU teaches that the *ātman* structures the cosmos, serving to organize its differentiated components and keep everything in its proper place. In an image borrowed from earlier Upaniṣads (BĀU 4.4.22, ChU 8.4.1), the self divides creation like a "dike" (*setu*) (MuṇḍU 2.2.5):

5. That alone is the self, you must understand, on which are woven the earth, intermediate region, and sky, the mind, together with all breaths. Put away other words, for this is the dike (*setu*) to the immortal.¹⁹

Olivelle takes the term *setu* to refer to the raised earthworks dividing cultivated lands.²⁰ In the ChU, this dike exists to separate ("to keep these worlds from colliding with each other"²¹) as well as to protect, for it shields *brahman* from the evils of difference, change, time, and decay (ChU 8.4.1). In this regard, the *ātman* is an obstacle to achieving immortality, as its capacity for differentiation blocks the seeker from realizing his union with the undifferentiated whole. However, while the chief function of a dike may be to separate, it can also serve to connect, like a bridge; the possibility of crossing the *setu* is clearly spelled out in ChU 8.4.2, where "passing across this dike" illuminates the world of *brahman*.²²

¹⁹ *yasmin dyauḥ pṛthivī cāntarikṣam
otaṃ manaḥ saha prāṇaiś ca sarvaiḥ /
tam evaikaṃ jānatha ātmānam anyā
vāco vimuñcathāmṛtasyaiśa setuḥ //5//*

²⁰ "This term probably refers to the raised earthen boundaries across paddy-fields that both allow one to walk across wet land and mark the boundaries between properties. The image is transferred to the cosmic sphere, where the self is seen as the boundary that keeps the various cosmic entities in their proper places..." (Olivelle 1998, 521n).

²¹ *vidhṛtir eṣāṃ lokānām asaṃbhedāya /*

²² *etaṃ setuṃ tīrtvā...* Olivelle (1998, 521n) criticizes Deussen's translation of *setu* as "bridge," although he allows for the dual function of a dike as a boundary and a crossing; see note 20 above.

§3.5 Veins of the heart

The implicit question of this section of the MuṇḍU is therefore how to overcome the *ātman*'s tendency towards differentiation, to pass beyond the boundaries it defends. The next verse locates the *ātman*'s sphere of activity in the nexus of veins in the heart. This is the realm of repeated births, where the *ātman* resides in body after body. Here the composers of the MuṇḍU find a solution, a single syllable that transforms the barrier of the self into a passage (MuṇḍU 2.2.6):

6. Where the veins come together, like spokes on the hub, in it that one (= *ātman*) moves, taking birth in many ways. "It is *om*"—meditate thus on this self; good luck to you as you cross beyond the darkness!²³

By meditating on the *ātman* with the syllable OM, one leaves the darkness behind and crosses into the illuminated world of *brahman*. OM liberates the self from the cycle of differentiation: instead of taking corporeal form in birth after birth, the *ātman* now embraces its true nature, discovering its union with the whole.

§3.6 Sāmavedic antecedents

As Deussen has emphasized both in general and in the case of the present passage, the MuṇḍU is greatly influenced by earlier Upaniṣads, chief among these the ChU (Deussen 1897, 545, 553).²⁴ My analysis of the ChU and the JUB in previous chapters leads me to extend Deussen's assessments with reference to OM and the MuṇḍU's soteriological doctrine. Let's take a closer look at possible antecedents in the Sāmavedic Upaniṣads. As just discussed, the *ātman* in the ChU is a "dike" (*setu*; ChU

²³ *arā iva rathanābhau saṃhatā yatra nāḍyaḥ*
sa eṣo 'ntaś carate bahudhā jāyamānaḥ /
om ity evaṃ dhyāyatha ātmānaṃ
svasti vaḥ pārāya tamasaḥ parastāt //6//

²⁴ According to Deussen's analysis (1897, 553), the verses just considered show the influence of KaṭhU (6.11), BĀU (3.8.7; 4.4.20; 2.1.19), ŚvU (6.19), and ChU (7.26.2). This influence is evident in the diction of the parallel passages but does not include specific material on OM.

8.4.1-2) and resides in a small space in the heart (ChU 8.1.2-4; 8.3.3). This gives way to a discussion of the "veins of the heart" (*hrdayasya nādyas*) as the place where a man deep in slumber abides (ChU 8.6.3), serene and shielded from outside world. As the ChU has it, these veins are connected to the rays of the sun, and a dying man "goes up with *om*. No sooner does he cast his mind (*kṣipyen manas*) towards it than he reaches the sun. This is the door to the farther world (*lokadvāram*)..." (ChU 8.6.5). I have argued that this part of the ChU shows signs of Jaiminīya influence, especially a passage from the JUB (1.3.6), where a singer ascends to the sun with OM and enters "the hole in the sky" (*divas chidram*). The present section of the MuṇḍU shows striking parallels with these earlier texts. Similarly calling the *ātman* a "dike" (*setu*) and locating it in the cardiac "veins" (*nādyah*), the text envisions a crossing "beyond darkness" by means of the contemplation of OM. Moreover, the MuṇḍU represents its soteriology as a journey "through the sun's door" (*sūryadvāreṇa*, MuṇḍU 1.2.11). Echoing the Sāmavedic Upaniṣads, the MuṇḍU teaches that knowledge of the syllable OM is the path to the sun and liberation from rebirth; note that both the ChU and the MuṇḍU emphasize the mentalization (MuṇḍU *√dhyai*, ChU *√kṣip + manas*), rather than the outright sounding, of the syllable.²⁵

§3.7 Summing up: the reflections of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad

Summing up, the composers of the MuṇḍU denigrate ritualism and promote meditation and asceticism as the true path to *brahman*. Polemics aside, however, Vedic authority still matters to the MuṇḍU: the Vedas furnish the standard by which the MuṇḍU measures its own superior teachings. And thus the encapsulation of the entire Vedic tradition in a single syllable admirably serves the hermeneutic agenda of this Upaniṣad, which is to foster alternative forms of religious expertise. By

²⁵ The main parallel for the mentalization of OM in the JUB pertains to ritual performance: before he sings the "unexpressed" *gāyatra-sāman* with OM, the Udgātṛ undertakes a "yoking" (*yukti*) of his mind to the song; see my discussion in ch. 8, §3.2.

employing OM in their speculations, the composers of the MuṇḍU can implicitly hang on to the authority of the triple Veda even as they explicitly dismiss it. And thus they formulate a new soteriological doctrine based on meditation in which the syllable is a prominent feature. This soteriology has roots in the older, more ritually oriented Upaniṣads, ChU and JUB; and yet the MuṇḍU adapts it to suit its own purposes. The comparison of the MuṇḍU reflections with their antecedents brings out important continuities that may not have been apparent before, most notably the mental engagement with OM as a soteriological strategy. This reminds us that in the case of OM, the broad-based transformation from *karma* to *jñāna* was not a decisive break with the past, but rather a re-tooling of its most salient teachings. In this way, the trajectory of OM continues well beyond the boundaries of the Vedic branches, arriving at the pan-Vedic phase of its construction.

§3.8 *A meta-textual complex?*

Before leaving the MuṇḍU behind, let me touch on its affinities with several other works to be discussed in this chapter. Based on parallel passages and shared ideas, Cohen has suggested that the MuṇḍU, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* belong to the same "meta-textual complex" (2008, 201). These texts of roughly the same age draw on a common stock of theological lore, perhaps the "popular collection of gnomic verses" which Cohen hypothesizes as a possible source for specific parallels in the KaṭhU and the BhG (Cohen 2008, 200). In their own ways, the four works all contain seeds of the philosophies later known as Sāṃkhya and Yoga. While the construction of OM in these works does not depend directly on their formulation of "possible proto-Sāṃkhya-Yoga ideas" (Cohen 2008, 194), the very fact of their intertextuality is significant for my study. Above all, it reveals the tendency of Upaniṣadic texts in this period to coalesce around shared theologies and soteriologies rather than shared liturgical specializations or branch affiliations. As we

will see below, this new mode of textualization has consequences for OM's ongoing development: liturgical details, so crucial to earlier discussions of OM among the Vedic branches but gradually on the wane, now disappear almost entirely;²⁶ soteriological speculations about OM, first attested in the Brāhmaṇas and steadily gaining prominence in the Āraṇyakas and oldest Upaniṣads, now come to dominate the discourse; and new forms of religiosity, especially contemplation and theism, assert themselves ever more clearly in reflections about the syllable.

§4 *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*

Let's take up the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, belonging to the Kaṭha or Kāṭhaka branch of the YV. While the Kāṭhakas do not mention OM in their Saṃhitā, they reflect on it in at least once in their fragmentary Brāhmaṇa, in a passage borrowed by the Taittirīyas (TĀ 2.11.4; see my ch. 7, §3.5-7). The Kāṭhakas take a further interest in the syllable in their Āraṇyaka: here we find the text of the Adhvaryu's *sāman*, containing repetitions of OM as a *stobha* and embedded in lyrics about "heaven" and "light;" we also find permutations of the *vyāhṛti* mantra with OM (see ch. 7, §3.1-4). This is largely liturgical material, with minimal theological exposition. By contrast, the KaṭhU contains several verses exalting OM, presenting us with a mix of material, old and new. To the extent that these verses have antecedents in the Vedic branches, they are to be sought not in in the Kāṭhaka branch, but in the hermeneutic traditions of the Taittirīyas and Jaiminīyas. More remarkable, perhaps, are the innovations in the KaṭhU's treatment of OM: through its teaching of "inner contemplation" (*yoga*) leading to a vision of the deity (*deva*) within, the Upaniṣad reveals that OM is the deepest secret of the Vedas and the supreme basis for introspection.

²⁶ A notable exception is the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, which engages *śrauta* praxis as a way of constructing a contemplative sequence featuring OM (see §6 below).

§4.1 *The last wish*

While the KaṭhU is not "an integral part" of the Kāṭhaka interpretive tradition (Olivelle 1998, 372), the work shows some continuity with its earlier branch traditions by adapting a frame story from its Brāhmaṇa (Witzel 1977; Cohen 2008, 193). In the KaṭhU version of the narrative, the young Naciketas seeks out Yama, the king of Death, and receives three wishes. His last wish is to learn the secrets of immortality and what happens after death, at the moment of "that great transit" (*sāṃparāye mahati*, 1.29). Yama responds by praising the boy's discernment—with this wish he has shown that he understands the value of soteriological and eschatological knowledge above all else. He also takes note of all that Naciketas has rejected: material wealth (2.3), gratification of desires, ceaseless ritual activity, and praise of the gods (2.11). The goal of soteriological attainment is something beyond all that, he says, something "smaller than the size of an atom, a thing beyond the realm of reason" (2.8).²⁷ This is the "primeval one" (*purāṇa*), whom the practice of "inner contemplation" (*yoga*) reveals to be a "god" (*deva*; 2.12). Based on parallels in later verses (e.g., 2.20-23), this cryptic language likely refers to the *ātman*, knowledge of which leads to the realization of *brahman*. Yama tells Naciketas that any mortal who has grasped this teaching will find death's house, with all it reveals, open to him (2.13).

§4.2 *OM is the answer*

Although assigning verses to the speakers in this conversation is not always easy, the context suggests that Naciketas now reiterates his wish as follows (KaṭhU 2.14):

14. Tell me what you see as—
Different from the right doctrine and from the wrong;
Different from what's done and what's left undone;

²⁷ *aṅīyān hy atarkyam aṅupramāṅāt //*

Different from what has been and what's yet to be.²⁸

The knowledge Naciketas seeks must transcend this series of opposites, expressed in terms of sacred doctrine (*dharma*), action (*kṛta*), and time. With this long wind-up, we arrive at the culmination of Yama's teaching, two verses that carry the exultant tone of a revelation. In a word, the answer is OM (2.15-17):

15. The word that all the Vedas disclose;
The word that all austerities proclaim;
Seeking which people live student lives;
That word now I will tell you in brief—
it is *om!*

16. For this alone is the syllable that's *brahman!*
For this alone is the syllable that's supreme!
When, indeed, one knows this syllable, he obtains his every wish.

17. This is the support that's best!
This is the support supreme!
And when one knows this support,
he rejoices in *brahman's* world.²⁹

These verses present us with a mix of traditional themes, borrowed diction, and notable innovations in OM's construction. Above all, the composers of the KaṭhU emphasize the well-worn trope of OM embodying the Vedas as a totality. The Vedas may be long, but Yama reveals how they can be conveyed "in brief" (*saṃgrahaṇa*): OM is the "word" (*pada*), the essence of all knowledge discovered by seekers through protracted mental effort (*tapas*) and the ascetic lifestyle of studentship (*brahmacarya*). (The *Bhagavad Gītā* attests a half-verse that is nearly identical to the second half of

²⁸ *anyatra dharmād anyatrādharmād anyatrāsmāt kṛtākṛtāt / anyatra bhūtāc ca bhavyāc ca yat tat paśyasi tad vada //14//*

²⁹ *sarve vedā yat padam āmananti
tapāṃsi sarvāṇi ca yad vadanti /
yad icchanto brahmacaryaṃ caranti
tat te padam saṃgrahaṇa bravīmi //
om ity etat //15//
etaddhyevākṣaraṃ brahma etaddhyevākṣaraṃ param /
etaddhyevākṣaraṃ jñātvā yo yad icchati tasya tat //16//
etad ālambanam śreṣṭham etad ālambanam param /
etad ālambanam jñātvā brahmaloke mahīyate //17//*

KaṭhU 2.15; we will discuss this important parallel in §5.4 below.) Here one recalls Prajāpati's *tapas*-fueled efforts to press the Vedas and take their sap; as in that Jaiminīya story cycle, the KaṭhU presents OM as the single, irreducible kernel within the massive corpus. In its transcendence, it stands alone—"only this syllable" (*etaddhyevākṣaram*) is *brahman* and "supreme" (*para*). The diction expressing OM's uniqueness recalls earlier Jaiminīya discourses: as I have emphasized throughout this study, the JB is the first Vedic text to qualify OM as the "only *akṣara*."³⁰ The KaṭhU iteration of these ideas also shows signs of Taittirīya influence; as we saw in the previous chapter, the composers of the TU were the first to explicitly correlate OM with *brahman* (TU 1.8; see my ch.9, §9.1).

While making use of diction adapted from other branches to emphasize OM's singularity and identity with *brahman*, the Kāṭhakas innovate by presenting OM as the highest form of esoteric knowledge, a magic "word" (*pada*) to fulfill every wish. The framing narrative shows that such knowledge can only be grasped by the seeker who, like Naciketas, has already rejected material wealth, ritual, and divine praise; and who has cast his gaze beyond the facile opposition of right and wrong, done and undone, past and future. The only wish of a man like this is an understanding of the final frontier, the journey to *brahman*'s world; OM is the "only *akṣara*" to shed light on such a journey.

§4.3 *The support supreme*

Another key innovation in the discursive construction of OM is the Kāṭhaka formulation of the syllable as the best and supreme "support" (*ālambana*). As the term *ālambana* receives great emphasis here (repeated three times), and since this the first appearance of such a term in Vedic discussions of

³⁰ JB 2.10: "Only this syllable *om...*" *om ity etad evākṣaram...*; 1.322: "with only that syllable...", *evaitenākṣareṇa*. Not only the diction but also the thematic contexts resonate with the KaṭhU: the first of these Jaiminīya passages also refers to OM as *idaṃ sarvam*, a likely reference to *brahman*; while the second notes that the syllable is the irreducible part, the "sap" (*rasa*) of the Vedas.

OM, it is worth asking whether it alludes to a specific contemplative practice.³¹ The *Yogasūtras* employ *āmbana* as a technical term to denote "any object upon which the *yogī* has chosen to focus or concentrate the mind" (Bryant 2009, 43); indeed, Patañjali teaches the repeated utterance (*japa*) of OM as an *āmbana* to assist concentration on the highest god, Īśvara (*Yogasūtras* 1.28; Bryant 2009, 109). This furnishes an intriguing parallel for this section of the KaṭhU: as we have just seen, Yama invokes *yoga* as a means to perceive the divinity within (KaṭhU 2.12), and shortly after refers to OM as the best *āmbana*. Note also that the final verse of the KaṭhU styles Yama's teachings as "yogic rules" (*yogavidhi*; KaṭhU 6.18). Especially in light of these yogic parallels, I am convinced that the composers of the KaṭhU are discussing OM's soteriological potency in the context of a fairly systematic contemplative practice, even if its details elude us. We will have reason to return to some of these points in our discussion of the *Bhagavad Gītā* below.

§4.4 Yama, the son of the sun

Shifting our gaze back in the direction of earlier texts, let's consider the Yama-Naciketas frame story in terms of Vedic mythology and how this shapes our understanding of OM in the KaṭhU. Yama Vaivasvata is the son of the sun, Vivasvant. According to myth, Yama is a mortal who abandoned his body at death, pioneering a path to other world along which subsequent mortals can follow; his final abode is the third, highest heaven (Macdonell 1897, 171-172). Therefore, although the KaṭhU never specifies his route, Naciketas likely *ascends* to the heavens to spend three nights in death's house and earn his three wishes (KaṭhU 1.9). In the ensuing dialogue, Naciketas impresses Yama with his sagacity and Yama divulges a number of secrets, culminating in the syllable OM. In this exchange between a seeker intent on immortality and a solar deity, I hear thematic echoes of the older Upaniṣadic

³¹ The term is only in use from the Upaniṣads forward; its literal meaning is "foundation, support" (Mayrhofer 1992-2001: 'Grundlage').

soteriologies discussed in the previous two chapters. Specifically, the JUB gives a detailed account of the sacrificer's ascent to heaven, where he must prove himself in dialogue with the sun god in order to win freedom from death. In both the KaṭhU and the older Upaniṣads, the stakes are high—immortality—and OM is a crucial part of the arcane knowledge needed to succeed.

§4.5 *Summing up: the reflections of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad*

Although attributed to the Kāṭhakas of the YV, the KaṭhU constructs OM without reference to the liturgical specialty or earlier hermeneutics of its branch. Instead, the composers of this Upaniṣad integrate old material from other branches with their own contributions to construct a hybrid soteriological scenario featuring OM. On the one hand, they borrow: statements on the syllable's preeminence and identity with *brahman* can be traced to Jaiminīya and Taittirīya sources; moreover, the trope of OM as a realization of esoteric knowledge echoes the Sāmavedic Upaniṣads. On the other hand, they innovate. First, they discuss the proper experience and qualifications for gaining knowledge of the syllable: KaṭhU 2.15 specifies prolonged study, celibacy, and austerity; while the model of Naciketas's story points to fasting, penetrating intelligence, and the renunciation of ritual. Next, they stress the syllable's wish-fulfilling potency. Third, they style it as a "support" (*ālabhana*), a turn of phrase that suggests some form of mantra-based meditation using OM.

This adds up to a soteriology that simultaneously looks backward at Vedic antecedents and forward to contemplative practices codified in later texts. The bottom line for this study is that the KaṭhU eschews Vedic ritual completely in its construction of OM. The text only invokes the Vedic corpus as an authoritative totality—in the KaṭhU, "the Vedas" connote a source from which superior knowledge springs and an austere lifestyle that qualifies a man to pursue such knowledge.

§5 *Bhagavad Gītā*

Now I turn to a work that is not strictly speaking an Upaniṣad, but which has many affinities with the KaṭhU and other works discussed in this chapter. As received in later currents of Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gītā* scarcely needs introduction. This dialogue on action and duty between the divine charioteer Kṛṣṇa and the warrior Arjuna has stood as an independent text for centuries, regarded as perhaps the most sacred of Hindu scriptures. From a historical perspective, however, the BhG is a tiny part of a gargantuan Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. The circumstances surrounding the epic's composition, compilation, and redaction remain controversial; its dating even more so. Like the massive work that frames it, the BhG is heterogeneous and internally stratified; its composers likely drew on different sources from different times to assemble the received text as we have it today (Ježič 2009). The *Gītā*'s relevance to this study lies in the fact that it shares verses and themes with a number of Upaniṣads considered in this chapter, forming Cohen's "meta-textual complex" alluded to above.³² Therefore, the testimony of the BhG provides us with another perspective on OM's discursive construction in the Upaniṣadic milieu.

³² The overall relation between the BhG and the two Upaniṣads with which it shares the most material, KaṭhU and ŚvU, is extremely complex. This is because the relationship between these oral or partly oral compositions must necessarily be one of "interdependence." One must assume cycles of performance, reception, and stratification preceding the final redaction of the texts as we have them today. As Ježič argues in a recent study of the mutual influence and relative chronology of these three works, "their interdependence must be checked throughout the text in order to find the relationships of dependence or influence not between the whole texts, but between all sections of different texts (or text variants) which we can identify as their layers or strata" (Ježič 2009, 272).

§5.1 Upaniṣadic OM in the Gītā

Reflections on OM occur across several different layers of the stratified BhG.³³ In at least one case we can identify a parallel with a known Upaniṣad, but for the most part we must content ourselves with the generalization that the *Gītā*'s treatment of OM is broadly "Upaniṣadic." To demonstrate what I mean by this, let's briefly consider an array of OM passages in the BhG. I will focus on several features which recall the Upaniṣadic construction of OM and which suggest that the composers of the BhG draw on a common stock of lore: the double meaning of *akṣara*; the correlation of OM and *brahman*; OM as the essence of the Vedas; and the preeminence of OM in hierarchies of various sorts.

The term *akṣara* is used throughout the *Gītā* in the sense of "imperishable" and "syllable," with both meanings often present in the same verse. Kṛṣṇa's teaching in BhG 3.15 exemplifies this: "...know *brahman* whose origin is *akṣara*."³⁴ On one level, this statement has a metaphysical sense; as such, it unequivocally establishes our second feature, namely, the close relation between *akṣara* and *brahman* as metaphysical entities—the "imperishable" and the "absolute." On the other hand, there is no obstacle to interpreting both words as denoting forms of utterance—"syllable" and "the Vedas."³⁵ Indeed one might argue that the double resonance suits the *Gītā*'s often polyvalent mode of reflection.

Next, the idea of OM as the essence of the Vedas is captured in the following verse (BhG 7.8):

I am the essence in waters, O son of Kuntī, the splendor in moon and sun, the
praṇava in all the Vedas, the sound in open space, the manliness in men.³⁶

³³ Ježič has identified "four main categories of text" within the heterogeneous BhG (Ježič 2009, 218): the epic episode, Arjuna's hymn in praise of Kṛṣṇa, discourses in an Upaniṣadic style, and the *bhakti* synthesis. Reflections on OM appear in only in the latter two categories; these are also the sections of the *Gītā* where the parallels with known Upaniṣads are to be found.

³⁴ ...*viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam*. The *Gītā* translations in this section are my own.

³⁵ Zaehner 1969, 167n; cf. van Buitenen 1959.

³⁶ *raso 'ham apsu kaunteya prabhāsmi śaśisūryayoḥ /
praṇavaḥ sarvavedeṣu śabdaḥ khe pauruṣaṃ nṛṣu //*

Like other passages we have considered, this verse refers to OM as *praṇava* without any hint of technical meaning. The divine Kṛṣṇa uses this series of essences—flavor, *praṇava*, brilliance, sound, force—to illustrate his own place in the cosmos, his essence diffusing the whole. A similar series demonstrates the fourth feature of discourses on OM in the *Gītā*, the idea of its preeminence (BhG 10.25):

Of the great sages, I am Bhṛgu, of all praises I am the single syllable. Of all the sacrifices, I am murmuring mantras, of immoveable things Himālaya.³⁷

This verse plays up Kṛṣṇa's preeminence in the universe by enumerating a series of outstanding things, among these the "single syllable" (*ekam akṣaram*), a formulation that certainly denotes OM (see discussion of BhG 8.13 below) as the foremost "of all praises" (*girām*).

Let one more verse with a series suffice to show the scope of OM's discursive construction in the *Gītā*. Here, Kṛṣṇa asserts his all-encompassing transcendence; the collocation of OM and the three Vedas shows that the ideas of essence and preeminence sometimes overlap (BhG 9.17):

I am the father of this living world—mother, founder, and grandfather, too. I am everything known, the *soma*-strainer, the sound *om*—verse (*ṛc*), melody (*sāman*), and formula (*yajus*), too.³⁸

§5.2 *The art of dying*

We now turn to a section of the BhG that addresses OM's crucial role in achieving liberation after death. In Angelika Malinar's apt turn of phrase, the theme of chapter eight is "dying successfully," which she defines as "liberating oneself from all karmic connections with the created world" (Malinar 2007, 136). The basic idea is that death is a "process" that must be carefully prepared for and attended

³⁷ *maharṣīṇāṃ bhṛgur ahaṃ girām asmy ekam akṣaram /
yajñānāṃ japayajño 'smi sthāvarāṇāṃ himālayaḥ //*

³⁸ *pitā'ham asya jagato mātā dhātā pitāmahaḥ /
vedyaṃ pavitram omkāra ṛc sāma yajus eva ca //*

to, since the state of one's mind at the time of death will influence the soteriological outcome. Malinar observes that the chapter has "strong ritual connotations" which emphasize death's liminality (2007, 136):

Dying is not regarded as the end, but as a "threshold" which brings about another state of being...The ritual dimension provides a chance to control and to address a situation that may be experienced as beyond one's reach. This is possible when ascetic skills are used to turn the process of dying into a final proof of yogic qualifications and devotional detachment.

Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna in a specific praxis designed to navigate this crucial threshold successfully. The basic features include restraint of senses, mind, and breath—all contributing to the "fixing of the mind in *yoga*" (*yogadhāraṇa*, BhG 8.12). Once this state of total introspection has been achieved, the final step is to utter OM, the "*brahman* of one syllable" (*ekākṣaram brahma*; BhG 8.13), while thinking of Kṛṣṇa. With that he is liberated from his body and merges with the god. He has died successfully.

This disquisition on the art of dying is extremely significant within the doctrinal context of the BhG, since it describes in precise terms how to best sever karmic attachments and fulfill the devotional soteriology that is the central theme of the work as a whole. But for the purposes of this study, its significance extends beyond the BhG to the broader Upaniṣadic milieu. The *Gītā*'s script for the art of dying is not wholly innovative: it builds on Upaniṣadic discourses—some earlier, some perhaps contemporary—which have their own versions of OM-based mental praxis for the moment of death. From this perspective, the BhG is the crystallization of a longstanding Vedic tradition of reflecting on OM's soteriological potency.

§5.3 *Realizing the highest puruṣa*

Let's now take a close look at the verses in question, BhG 8.9-13, which describe aspects of the process in detail. Where should the mind be directed? As in some Upaniṣads, the introspective gaze

should seek out the highest *puruṣa*, the divine "person" who resides within everyone. The theistic character of the BhG comes to the fore here: concentrating on the highest *puruṣa* leads ultimately to union with Kṛṣṇa. The supreme *puruṣa* is "the primeval poet, the ruler, tinier than an atom, founder of all, inconceivable in form, sun-colored, beyond the darkness..." (BhG 8.9).³⁹ Such praise has diction in common with several Upaniṣads (KaṭhU, ChU, ŚvU, MuṇḍU; cf. Malinar 2007, 140). Noting these parallels, Malinar observes that the *Gītā*'s strategy of assimilating the divine *puruṣa* to Kṛṣṇa as the "highest god" resembles that of the theistic Upaniṣads.⁴⁰

After extolling *puruṣa*, Kṛṣṇa describes the ascetic stance necessary to reach him, an introspective awareness based on meditation, devotion, and breath (BhG 8.10):

With mind not moving at the time of death, fully controlled by means of devotion (*bhakti*) and yoga-power (*yogabala*); forcing his breath between his eyebrows, he attains that *puruṣa*, supreme and divine.⁴¹

The centrality of *yoga* and *bhakti* in this account suggest a growing rapprochement between Upaniṣadic traditions and such newer forms of religiosity. The *akṣara* has a part to play in forging these connections and expanding the scope of Vedic authority (BhG 8.11):

What the Veda-knowers call the imperishable; what ascetics enter into with passions drained; what people want when they lead lives of studentship—this word I will proclaim to you in brief...⁴²

³⁹ *kaviṃ purāṇam anuśāsītāram aṅor aṅīyāṃsam anusmared yaḥ / sarvasya dhātāram acintyarūpam ādityavarṇaṃ tamasah parastāt //*

⁴⁰ "...The attributes and epithets of a divine being called *puruṣa* used in older texts are now ascribed to 'highest gods' like Viṣṇu (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*) and Rudra-Śiva (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*)" (Malinar 2007, 140). However, Cohen (2008, 212) argues that the KaṭhU is not overtly theistic. Indeed, the KaṭhU only mentions Viṣṇu once in an idiom to denote the uppermost realm ("that highest step of Viṣṇu," KaṭhU 3.10); it does not form a part of sustained discourse on the god.

⁴¹ *prayānakāle manasācalena bhaktyā yukto yogabalena caiva / bhuvor madhye prāṇam āveśya samyak sa taṃ paraṃ puruṣam upaiti divyam //*

⁴² *yad akṣaram vedavido vadanti viśanti yad yatayo vītarāgāḥ / yad icchanto brahmacaryaṃ caranti tat te padaṃ saṃgrahaṇa pravakṣye //*

Kṛṣṇa is now on the verge of disclosing to Arjuna the pinnacle of his teaching. He anticipates it with a series of relative clauses that allude to the common aim of scholars, ascetics, and students alike—they all are working toward the same goal. As the only appositive in the verse, *akṣaram* gives us the unique clue as to what this goal might be: it is both the "syllable" OM (see 8.13 below) and the "imperishable" state of union with the god.⁴³ The polyvalence of *akṣara* is carried forward in the correlative clause, where the term *pada* can denote both a "word" and a "state" of being. With this capacity to encode two levels of discourse—the performative and the metaphysical—the diction affirms the core teachings of this section of the BhG: that the realization of this "syllable" is the realization of the "imperishable"; and that utterance of the "word" leads to the "state" of union with Kṛṣṇa.

§5.4 *Echoes of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad*

The verse also interests us for its close parallels with the KaṭhU. The first half-verse of the Upaniṣad uses different language to convey a similar sense of rapprochement between Vedic authority and ascetic practices (KaṭhU 2.15ab): "The word that all the Vedas disclose; the word that all austerities proclaim..." Its second half-verse is nearly identical to BhG 8.11cd. The only difference is that the Upaniṣad substitutes *bravīmi* for *pravakṣye* and boasts the hypermetrical gloss *om ity etat* at the end. The cautious consensus seems to be that the composers of the BhG borrowed this half-verse from the KaṭhU, or via an intermediary text (Cohen 2008, 199; Ježič 2009, 247-49; Malinar 2007, 140). I will delve more deeply into the implications of this shared half-verse below.

⁴³ Malinar reminds us that the polyvalence of several terms used in these verses—*puruṣa*, *brahman*, and *akṣara*—pose difficulties for their interpretation and translation throughout chapter eight of the BhG (2007, 137-138). Beyond the familiar doubts about *akṣara*, a related difficulty concerns the interpretation of *brahman* itself, which, in addition to its metaphysical sense, may also be understood in the older sense of "truth formulation," or as a way to denote the Vedic corpus as a totality. Once again I note van Buitenen's argument that there is a tendency for Vedic terms denoting forms of utterance to do double-duty as words for transcendent reality (van Buitenen 1959). In this light, even when a verse clearly privileges one sense, the resonance of the other meaning may still be present.

§5.5 The brahman of a single syllable

Whereas the composers of the KaṭhU furnished few details as to the contemplative practices informing their OM reflections, the BhG is considerably more specific. The praxis described by Kṛṣṇa consists of various restraints: control of senses, mind, and breath. Having achieved a state of total absorption, the *yogī* is ready for the last liberating step, the utterance of OM with Kṛṣṇa in mind. All of this ensures that when he dies, he will ascend towards union with the god (BhG 8.12-13):

Shutting all the gates of his body and confining his mind in his heart; keeping his breath in his head, absorbed in concentration through *yoga*;

Saying *om*, the *brahman* of a single syllable, calling me to mind; when he sets forth, leaving his body—such a man goes along the highest path.⁴⁴

Although the terms *akṣara* and *brahman* are frequently polyvalent, in verse 8.13 their primary sphere is performance, suited to the context of speaking the mantra OM, which is the "formulation (*brahman*) consisting of a single syllable (*akṣara*)."⁴⁴ This is a new way of expressing the familiar idea that OM is the essence of the Vedas, the utterance in which the potency of the entire corpus is compressed. The one who utters the syllable with Kṛṣṇa in mind reaches him—after all, Kṛṣṇa *is* OM, as BhG 7.8 attests: "in all the Vedas, I am the *praṇava*." With his powers of mind and speech perfectly joined in contemplation of the god, the dying man leaves his body and embarks on his journey toward liberation. The diction emphasizes the conception of death as a departure for a higher realm: "he who sets forth" (*yaḥ prayāti*, 8.13) echoes "at the time of setting forth" (*prayānakale*, 8.10), which introduced the praxis. Departing from the created world, he passes beyond the realm of Brahmā or *brahman* (*brahmabhuvana*, 8.16) to the imperishable abode of Kṛṣṇa (8.21). Higher still is the "supreme person" (*purusaḥ paraḥ*, 8.22), who

⁴⁴ *sarvadvārāṇi saṃyamya mano hṛdi nirudhya ca /
mūrdhny ādhāyātmanaḥ prāṇam āsthito yogadhāraṇām //
om ity ekākṣaram brahma vyāharan mām anusmaran /
yaḥ prayāti tyajan dehaṃ sa yāti paramām gatim //*

can be reached only through pure devotion. In this way, the BhG hierarchizes alternative paths of liberation (Malinar 2007, 142).

§5.6 *Systematic contemplation of OM*

The utterance of OM therefore crowns a precise sequence of steps leading across the threshold of death. One can imagine the immense difficulty of harnessing all the body's faculties at this pivotal moment which, for most people, is defined by the failure of those same faculties. And the stakes could not be higher: success means liberation; failure means return. As BhG 8.11 suggests, *this* is what scholars, ascetics, and students prepare for all their lives: the capacity to grasp the *akṣara* when the time comes. Such a disciplined exercise of "ascetic skills"—control of senses, mind, breath, and speech—attests to the high degree of systemization of this praxis. In general terms, we may observe that the composers of the BhG base their account on a set of techniques in which meditation on OM is the central feature. More specifically, Malinar stresses the close resemblance of these verses to the codification of the "worship of god" (*īśvarapraṇidhāna*) in the *Yoga Sūtras* (1.23, 27-28), where "OM is used to evoke...the god on which the concentration of the yogin is fixed" (Malinar 2007, 141).

§5.7 *Yoking mind and body with OM: Upaniṣadic antecedents*

The contours of a similar contemplative praxis are shared by the Upaniṣads examined in this chapter. While the technical terminology is less developed, the basic trajectories are remarkably alike. The PrU teaches that the meditation (*abhiśdhyai*) on OM "until death" (*prāyaṇāntam*) leads to the world of *brahman*, where one "beholds the supreme person" (*paraṃ...puruṣam īkṣate*). For its part, the MuṇḍU advocates meditating (*śdhyai*) on the self (*ātman*), which abides deep in the heart where new births originate. Realizing that this self is OM, he crosses beyond the darkness. I have argued that these

accounts in both Atharvavedic Upaniṣads are indebted to the ChU, where casting one's thought (*manas* *√kṣip*) towards OM leads a man to the sun and the door to the farther world. Also relevant is the section of the KaṭhU already considered, which reveals that knowledge of OM is the way to the world of *brahman*. Significantly, that Upaniṣad uses a technical term of meditation, "support" (*ālambana*), to denote OM; it also refers to its teachings as "yogic rules" (*yogavidhi*). In light of the broader interdependence of the BhG and these Upaniṣads—with an array of shared diction, verses, and themes—I conclude that all these texts draw on a common soteriological strategy of contemplating OM at death. By way of the ChU, which attests its own version, we can trace the roots of this strategy back to the Jaiminīya soteriology of song in the JUB, which also refers to various forms of mentalization.⁴⁵ Therefore, as far as the textual records attest, the Jaiminīyas are the first to formulate the soteriological strategy of uttering OM to transcend death and achieve immortality. New concepts and practices—meditation, rebirth, *yoga*, *bhakti*, and so forth—may enter the conversations of later Upaniṣads and the BhG, but the established structure persists: yoke the mind and body, say OM, and reach the highest goal.

§6 Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad

Although often associated with the "Black Yajurveda" (Cohen 2008, 213; Olivelle 1998, 413), the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* cannot be conclusively tied to any known branch.⁴⁶ Indeed, the text itself credits

⁴⁵ Although the Jaiminīyas never mention meditation *per se*, they do codify forms of mentalization in their OM songs. As befitting a period when the sacrifice itself was the supreme deity, these forms involve mentally grasping liturgical elements—the *stotra*, the *ṛc*—during performance. One in particular, the *yukti*, includes control of the senses and breath in a seated position, with the eyes directed towards the sun (see ch. 8, §3.2). Given the continuities of the intervening Upaniṣads, it may be more than a coincidence that the cognate words *yukti* and *yoga* are invoked, several centuries apart, by the JUB and the BhG in broadly similar contexts.

⁴⁶ Deussen (1897, 288) and Witzel (1982-83, 183) note that a Śvetāśvatara branch is mentioned in the *Caraṇavyūha*, but this compendium of the Vedic *śākhās* is not always reliable; cf. Oberlies 1988, 36 and Cohen 2008, 213.

an individual teacher named Śvetāśvatara ("man with a white mule"; ŚvU 6.21) with authorship.⁴⁷ It seems to have been composed in an ascetic milieu, for it describes its target audience as *atyāśramin* (ŚvU 6.21), an expression that Olivelle interprets as referring to "ascetics who have moved beyond the household life" (Olivelle 1998, 628n21). The ŚvU is a patently theistic work focused on the praise of one highest god, Rudra-Śiva (Cohen 2008, 226-231); its primary strategy for approaching him is the "discipline of meditation" (*dhyānayoga*, ŚvU 1.3). The diction and themes of the ŚvU closely parallel those of the BhG; it also borrows a number of verses from the KaṭhU (Deussen 1897, 289) and older Vedic texts (Olivelle 1998, 413).

§6.1 *Sacrifice as a model for contemplation*

In this work dedicated to the worship of a supreme god through meditation, OM is referred to only twice in a pair of verses about the kindling of fire. To place these verses in context, it is necessary to say something about the *pravargya* ritual, the rite on which the ŚvU, following Yajurvedic tradition, focuses many of its speculations. Cohen argues that the preeminence of Rudra in the Upaniṣad may have grown from the well-attested correlation between that god and the *mahāvīra*, the pot that is heated until it glows in the course of this rite. She also attributes "the pervasive use of fire and sun imagery" throughout the ŚvU to its interest in the *pravargya* (Cohen 2008, 223). These arguments suggest that a core hermeneutic strategy of the ŚvU is to take models of sacrificial praxis as the basis for formulating new metaphysical, theistic, and contemplative doctrines.

⁴⁷ This claim is supported by the arguments of Oberlies 1988 in favor of the work's uniformity but contested by Deussen, who regards it as a heterogeneous text (Deussen 1897, 288ff; Cohen 2008, 213).

§6.2 *Threefold brahman*

Let's take a close look at one such doctrine, that of the threefold *brahman*, which will help us make sense of the OM verses in the ŚvU. The text formulates the triad in several ways, but the three elements correspond in general to god, self, and primal matter.⁴⁸ God rules over all, as the "impeller" (*preritr*); the self has free rein as the "enjoyer" (*bhoktr*); primal matter furnishes the "object of enjoyment" (*bhogyam*; all in ŚvU 1.12). Further, there are two *ātman*s in the ŚvU: the lower self is bound to the "perishable primal source" (*kṣaram pradhānam*, 1.10; cf. 1.8), while the great self (*mahātma*, 4.17) is identical with god, "immortal and imperishable" (*amṛtākṣaram*, 1.10). The soteriological aim of the Upaniṣad is to explain how the lower *ātman* may realize its identity with god and thereby achieve liberation from the bonds of primal matter.⁴⁹ The composer of the text declares confidently of the threefold *brahman*: "This can be known!" Everything one needs to arrive at this realization "abides always within one's body (*ātman*)"⁵⁰ (ŚvU 1.12)—it remains only to discern it.

§6.3 *The womb of the gods*

Now we are in a good position to analyze the OM verses, which compare the kindling of flame with a fire-drill to the realization of soteriological knowledge with OM. The fire of Vedic ritual must not come from just any source—the Yajurvedic officiants must "churn fire" (*agniṃ √manth-*) in the course of sacrifice using special tools. To explain the procedure, I rely on the accounts of Renou (1954, s.v. *araṇi*) and Olivelle (1998, 492n, 617n). The fire-drill consists of a lower and an upper part, both called

⁴⁸ Thus Olivelle (1998, 616n7), glossing "oneself, the foundation, and the imperishable" (*supraṭiṣṭhākṣaram*, 1.7). Other formulations of the triad include: "god, the self, and the power" (*devātmaśaktim*, ŚvU 1.3); "the perishable primal source" (*kṣaram pradhānam*), "one god" (*deva ekaḥ*), and the "self" (*ātman*; all in 1.10); and "the enjoyer, object of enjoyment, and the impeller" (*bhoktā bhogyam preritāram...*; 1.12).

⁴⁹ On the two *ātman*s in the ŚvU, see Cohen 2008, 219-221.

⁵⁰ *etaj jñeyam nityam evātmasamsthā...*

araṇi ("wood for kindling fire"). Fixed on the bottom is a plank (*adharāraṇi*) with a center depression, on top of which a thick shaft (*mantha*) with a pointed extremity (*pramantha*) is placed, supported in turn by an upper plank (*uttarāraṇi*). While one officiant holds the top part, another twirls the shaft with his hands or a cord so that it spins against the plank. The friction between the wooden surfaces leads to the kindling (*indhana*) of fire. For obvious reasons, "the entire production of fire by this method has highly sexual connotations" (Olivelle 1998, 492n): indeed, the bottom part is also known as the "womb" (*yoni*) or the "womb of the gods" (*devayoni*), since it is the source from which the fire is born.

§6.4 Kindling fire, kindling god

With this in mind, let's take up the first of the verses (ŚvU 1.13):

When a fire is contained in its womb, one cannot see its visible form and yet its essential character is not extinguished; one can grasp the fire once again from its womb by means of kindling it. In just the same way, one can grasp both god and primal matter within the body by means of the *praṇava*.⁵¹

Unkindled, the "essential character" (*liṅga*) of fire remains unmanifest in its wooden womb; the friction of churning releases the flame, giving it a material form. In the same way, god is unmanifest: the syllable OM (here called *praṇava*) causes him to materialize in the body of the seeker.⁵² The next verse puts the simile in more concrete terms, effectively offering a gloss on the preceding one (1.14):⁵³

⁵¹ *vahner yathā yonigatasya mūrtir na dṛśyate naiva ca liṅganāśaḥ /
sa bhūya evendhanayonigrhyas tadvobhayaṃ vai praṇavena dehe //13//*

⁵² One difficulty is how to interpret the crucial but cryptic diction of the last quarter: *tadvobhayaṃ vai praṇavena dehe*. I have followed Olivelle, who takes "both" (*ubhayaṃ*) as referring to god and primal matter (Olivelle 1998, 617-18n13); Cohen understands the referent to be higher and lower *ātman* (Cohen 2008, 235).

⁵³ This *śloka* breaks the *triṣṭubh-jagatī* scheme of the text, prompting Cohen to argue that 1.14 is an addition. Pointing out the way it glosses 1.13, she suggests that it "may very well be part of a teacher's explanation or commentary on the text that became incorporated into the text itself" (Cohen 2008, 235).

When one makes one's own body the bottom slab and the *praṇava* the upper drill, by twirling it constantly through meditation one would see god, just as one would the hidden thing.⁵⁴

The drill, twirling against the slab, reveals fire ("the hidden thing"; see Olivelle 1998, 618n), just as the *praṇava*, resounding in the body during meditation (*dhyāna*), reveals god. This verse explicitly compares the physical motion of churning fire to the mental motion of revolving the mantra OM for a prolonged period during meditation. The contemplation of OM leads to direct, embodied experience of the highest god.

As expressed in these verses, OM is central to the "discipline of meditation" (*dhyānayoga*) that the ŚvU expounds. The syllable serves the soteriological aim of the text, which is to reveal the threefold *brahman*, that is, to cultivate the liberating awareness of god, self, and primal matter. The opposition between higher and lower forms—of ritual, of knowledge, of *ātman*—plays an important role here. OM encompasses the three Vedas and all ritual know-how; as such, it is the apex of what Upaniṣads in this period have come to refer to as lower knowledge. In a similar way, as a spoken syllable it resounds in the "body" (*deha*), which corresponds to primal matter and the physical bondage of the lower *ātman*. But the composers of the ŚvU aim to show that OM is also the apex of the higher knowledge associated with meditation; it is the watchword of emerging practices—still obscure in this text—that enable the seeker to realize the higher *ātman* within. Therefore OM serves both the inherited purposes of Vedic ritual (the lower knowledge) and the innovative purposes of contemplation and theism (the higher knowledge). From this perspective, the simile of the fire-drill takes on a deeper resonance: it shows how an element of *śrauta* ritual can be reinterpreted to suit the evolving hermeneutic context. The very basis of sacrifice—the fire itself—stands revealed as the highest god, accessible through meditation on the syllable OM.

⁵⁴ *svadeham araṇim kṛtvā praṇavaṃ cottarāraṇim /
dhyānanirmathanābhyāsād devaṃ paśyen nigūḍhavat //14//*

§6.5 *Out-of-body experience: Upaniṣadic antecedents*

The idea of using OM to transcend the body and achieve higher knowledge has antecedents in earlier discourses we have examined. Recall that the central aim of the JUB is to explain the "bodiless" *gāyatra-sāman*, so-called because its performance helps the sacrificer to shake of his body and ascend to the highest realms by means of OM and esoteric knowledge, collecting divine body parts along the way. Once he arrives, his immortality is defined by integrating his divine body with a new *ātman* constructed through sacrifice. This seems broadly compatible with the idea in the ŚvU of moving from lower to higher realms of knowledge by means of OM. Another continuity with earlier discourses is evident from the sexual connotations of the kindling of fire. In the ŚvU, OM penetrating the body during meditation is compared to the drill penetrating the lower slab during sacrifice: in sexual terms, OM is the penis that penetrates the vagina during intercourse. As the twirling of the mantra in the body produces an awareness of the divine; and as the churning of the drill on the slab produces fire; so the friction of the penis in the vagina produces the heat of orgasm. This highly sexualized imagery is significant when examined in light of the sexual imagery associated with OM from the Brāhmaṇas forward. In the JB, OM was the sound that made it possible for the Stoma and Gāyatrī to finally have sex; in the JUB, the verse and the melody copulate in the Udgātṛ's mouth as he sings OM; in the ChU, voice and breath are two more partners who unite sexually in the syllable OM. Such passages attest to the steady current of sexual imagery in OM's construction across several centuries and textual strata.

§6.6 *Summing up: the reflections of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*

Even though the ŚvU touches on OM only briefly, the text does so in a manner that engages a number of the most important issues in OM's development during this period. The ŚvU is not affiliated directly with any one Vedic branch, and yet its emphasis on the *pravargya* and the kindling of fire

speak to its distinctively Yajurvedic sensibility. By implicating OM in the image of kindling sacrificial fire, the composers of the ŚvU pay tribute to the syllable's preeminence within *śrauta* ritual even as they degrade the path of Vedic ritual as lower knowledge. By comparing the act of kindling the fire to kindling the experience of god through meditation, they coopt the lower knowledge and reveal the higher knowledge that it conceals. Just as a fire-drill is the sacrificial implement that sparks fire, so OM is the contemplative tool that sparks insight. Suited to the milieu of Brahmanical asceticism in which it was likely composed, the ŚvU uses OM to smooth the transition from an inherited, ritual-based soteriology to an innovative, meditation-based soteriology. While this emphasis on meditation has much in common with other texts in this "meta-textual complex," the ŚvU places its own theistic stamp on contemplative practice: liberation is not conceived as a crossing to *brahman* but rather as an introspective union with the highest god. The specific continuities of OM's discursive construction—most notably the imagery of bodilessness and sexual intercourse—speak to the continuity of these soteriological transformations based on earlier models. Again, the case of OM suggests that such developments arise not from stark breaks with the past, but rather from the gradual integration of new doctrines and practices.

§7 *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*

We conclude our analysis of OM in the Upaniṣads by focusing on a short text that takes the syllable as its main theme, the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. Although the composers of the MāṇḍU claim affiliation with the AV, the text is not transmitted within the traditions of a known Atharvavedic branch. Olivelle points out that Māṇḍūkya is the name of several teachers of Ṛgvedic provenance (1998, 473). For Cohen, the MāṇḍU is a "transitional Upaniṣad," bridging the gap between the oldest Upaniṣads, wherein "*śākhā* affiliations are still meaningful and inform the texts' religious views," and

the later Upaniṣads, where such affiliations are "insignificant" (Cohen 2008, 267). While I agree that the MāṇḍU does not show any signs of having an authentic historical connection to the AV, I want to stress that its claim is not necessarily casual or lacking significance. Rather, it speaks to the composers' desire to claim the mantle of Vedic authority for their independent works. The AV, excluded from *śrauta* participation, provides a natural refuge for the cultivation of new or marginal religious perspectives.

§7.1 *The transcendent fourth*

In keeping with its ascription to the fourth Veda, the MāṇḍU discusses OM in terms of the *catuṣpāt* ("four-footed") doctrine, which divides the holism of *brahman* into the *ātman* consisting of four "feet" or "quarters" (*pāda*). The soteriological goal is to cultivate awareness of all four quarters of the self; in this scheme, the fourth quarter is the highest, providing the supreme knowledge of the *ātman* on its own terms. To realize the fourth quarter is to achieve liberation. As we will see below, the MāṇḍU approaches OM on two levels. First, the syllable is correlated with the holism of *brahman*; next, the syllable's constituent phonemes correspond to the four quarters of *ātman*. This latter part of the doctrine necessitates an important innovation in OM's discursive construction: whereas earlier texts divided the syllable into three phonemes (*a*, *u*, and *m*), the composers of the MāṇḍU reveal a fourth, silent part of the syllable where its true potency resides. In this way, OM in the MāṇḍU exemplifies what Wendy Doniger has called the "transcendent fourth," the rhetorical and theological strategy of "squaring" an established triad by adding a fourth element that transcends them all (Doniger 2014, 27, 29-31). Jan Gonda has referred to the same strategy as the "x + 1" hermeneutic, the superaddition of an entity to crown an existing triad or larger series (Gonda 1976, 8). The revelation of OM's transcendent fourth expands the soteriological range of the syllable in line with other Upaniṣads of the period, advancing OM as the way to reach liberation through contemplative practice. Outstripping the triple

Veda and its external rituals, which lead only to lower knowledge, contemplation of OM becomes the higher, fourth path.

§7.2 Whole in one

The text opens by trumpeting the syllable's holism (MāṇḍU 1):

1. *Om*—this whole world is that syllable! Here is a further explanation of it. The past, present, and the future—all that is simply the sound *om* (*sarvam oṅkāra eva*); and whatever else that is beyond the three times, that also is simply the sound *om*.⁵⁵

OM encompasses "the whole" (*sarvam*) spatially, temporally, and cosmologically. The syllable is "this whole (world)" (*idaṃ sarvam*), "the past, present and future" (*bhūtaṃ bhavad bhaviṣyad*), and, in an instance of Gonda's $x + 1$ and Doniger's transcendent fourth, even that which is *beyond* the triad of times. As the next section makes clear, the "whole" encompassed by OM is precisely that of *brahman* and the fourfold *ātman* (MāṇḍU 2):

2. for this *brahman* is the whole. *Brahman* is this self (*ātman*); that *brahman* is this self consisting of four quarters (*catuṣpāt*).⁵⁶

§7.3 The fourfold *ātman*

Framing the issues in terms of human perception, the next four sections (3-7) explain this division of *brahman* and *ātman* into four quarters: the "universal one" (*vaiśvānara*) of wakeful consciousness, "perceiving what is outside" (*bahihprajñā*); the "brilliant one" (*tajjasa*) of dreaming, "perceiving what is inside" (*antarprajñā*); the "intelligent one" (*prājñā*) of deep sleep, an undifferentiated "mass of perception" (*prajñānaghana*), "perceiving the whole" (*sarvajñā*); and finally,

⁵⁵ *om ity etad akṣaram idaṃ sarvam / tasyopavākyānam / bhūtaṃ bhavad bhaviṣyad iti sarvam oṅkāra eva / yac cānyat trikālātītaṃ tad apy oṅkāra eva //1//*

⁵⁶ *sarvaṃ hy etad brahma / ayam ātmā brahma / so 'yam ātmā catuṣpāt //2//*

the fourth state, defined principally by what it is not, the transcendent negation of the previous three, "one whose essence is the perception of itself alone" (*ekātmapratyayasāra*)—that is, the very "self" (*ātman*) that the other three states perceive. The triad of waking, dreaming, and deeply sleeping is thus crowned by a supreme state that supersedes them; again, the idea of the transcendent fourth structures the discourse.

§7.4 *The four mātrās*

The discussion now turns back to OM. While the traditional hermeneutic of the Upaniṣads is triadic, attending to divine (*adhidaiva*), ritual (*adhiyajña*), and human (*adhyātma*) levels, the MāṇḍU explicitly extends its analysis to the level of syllable (*adhyakṣara*) and phoneme (*adhimātra*) (MāṇḍU 8):

8. With respect to syllables, the sound *om* is this very self (*ātman*); whereas with respect to the constituent phonemes of a syllable, it is as follows. The constituent phonemes (*mātrā*) are the quarters, and the quarters are the constituent phonemes, namely, the sounds *a*, *u*, and *m*.⁵⁷

As an undivided syllable, OM corresponds to the *ātman*, which here refers to the transcendent fourth state (more on this below). Let's focus for a moment on the divided OM. The MāṇḍU divides the syllable into *mātrās*, which are understood here not in the older sense of duration (*morae*; see discussion in §2.4 above) but in the novel sense of phonetic quality. Explicitly enumerating the three "constituent phonemes" as "the sounds *a*, *u*, and *m*," the composers of the MāṇḍU correlate them with the three "quarters," or states of perception: *a* is *vaiśvānara* of wakefulness; *u* is *taijasa* of dream; and *m* is *prājña* of deep sleep.

These correlations are further elucidated through what Olivelle has called "phonetic etymologies" (1998, 641n; cf. 488n); indeed, it is fitting that speculations about *sounds* should be predicated precisely on the *sonality* of the terms involved. In this case, the sound of the phoneme

⁵⁷ so 'yam ātmādhyakṣaram oṅkāraḥ / adhimātraṃ pādā mātrā mātrās ca pādā akāra u kāro makāra iti //8//

matches the initial sound of the concepts with which it is correlated (9-11): the first, *a*, pertains to "obtaining" (*āpti*) or "being first" (*ādimattva*); the second, *u*, to "heightening" (*utkarṣa*) or "being intermediate" (*ubhayatva*); and the third, *m*, to "construction" (*miti*).⁵⁸ Throughout, the correlations conclude with the usual statement that the "one who knows" (*ya evaṃ veda*) comes to possess the associated concepts: he obtains all his desires, becomes first, heightens his knowledge, constructs the world, and so forth.

§7.5 Indivisible OM

Returning now to undivided OM, the MāṇḍU attributes to it all the qualities of the fourth *pāda*, the supreme self-knowledge (MāṇḍU 12):

12. The fourth, on the other hand, is without constituent phonemes (*amātra*); beyond the reach of ordinary transaction; the cessation of the visible world; auspicious; and unique. Accordingly, the very self is the sound *om*. Anyone who knows this enters the self (*ātman*) by himself (*ātman*).⁵⁹

It is possible to interpret this section and the key term *amātra* ("without constituent phonemes") in two ways. As in some later Yoga Upaniṣads (cf. Ruff 2011, 109), the idea may be that there is a fourth, silent part, unsounded, that is the highest part of OM; the syllable is *amātra* in the sense of being extra-phonetic and beyond articulation. More simply, the idea may be that the sound *om*, as the synthesis of all three phonemes, transcends them; the syllable is *amātra* in the sense of being completely whole and indivisible. The internal evidence of the MāṇḍU recommends both interpretations simultaneously—after all, the discourse acknowledges two levels of analysis, that of phoneme and of syllable (see MāṇḍU 8 and §7.4 above).

⁵⁸ The *m* sound also pertains to "destruction" (*apīti*), which of course does not match the phoneme.

⁵⁹ *amātraś caturtho 'vyavahāryaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivo 'dvaitaḥ / evaṃ oṅkāra ātmaiva samviśatyātmanātmānaṃ ya evaṃ veda //12//*

§7.6 Allusions to a contemplative soteriology

Unlike other texts we have considered in this chapter, the diction of the MāṇḍU remains fairly abstract—technical terms associated with contemplative practice (e.g., *yoga*, *dhyāna*, *āmbana*) never occur. Nevertheless, the structure of the text suggests an intentional movement through the stages of consciousness—wakefulness, dream, deep sleep—by means of contemplating the phonemes of OM one at a time. The ultimate destination of this introspective movement is the transcendent fourth state where the perceived division into constituent phonemes falls away into a realization of the whole sound. This seems grounds enough to posit a form of meditation on OM assumed by this text. If so, such a form of contemplative practice perfectly reflects the theological doctrine at the heart of the MāṇḍU: by proceeding meticulously through the differentiated quarters of OM, the seeker arrives at their undifferentiated union in the whole syllable; in the same way, by progressing through the differentiated quarters of *ātman*, he arrives at the undifferentiated realization of the *ātman* on its own terms.

The soteriological goals of this form of introspection are likewise somewhat abstract—unlike other texts, the MāṇḍU makes no mention of rebirth, immortality, or devotional union with the highest god. And yet, achieving knowledge of OM has all the hallmarks of some form of liberation: non-activity, non-perception, non-duality, wholeness. Therefore, I would argue that the MāṇḍU teaches a contemplative soteriology that aims to achieve direct realization of *ātman* and *brahman* through prolonged meditation on the syllable OM. In this respect, the MāṇḍU has definite affinities with the other Upaniṣads we have considered in this chapter, which presented us with a range of contemplative soteriologies based on OM.

§7.7 Antecedents and parallels

The diction and content of the MāṇḍU itself shows the influence of several earlier Vedic texts. Its opening statement (*om ity etad akṣaram idaṃ sarvam*) recalls the ChU (2.23.3: *oṅkāra evedaṃ sarvam*), the TU (1.8: *om itīdam sarvam*), and the JB (2.10: *etad dha vā idaṃ sarvam akṣaram*). In making OM the very first word of the text, and in styling its discourse "a further explanation of that (syllable)" (*tasyopavākhyāna*), the MāṇḍU reproduces the arrangement and diction of the ChU (1.1.1; 1.4.1; cf. Olivelle 1998, 641n). In its discourse on the whole and its relation to *brahman*, there are also echoes of the ChU (3.14.1: *sarvaṃ khalv idaṃ brahma*). The *catuṣpāt* doctrine recalls the ChU yet again, where it is a "four-footed *brahman*" (*catuṣpād brahma*; 3.18; 4.5-8). It also echoes the *subrahmaṇyā* litany of the Soma sacrifice, where Subrahmaṇyā is addressed as *brahman* and her four feet are enumerated (including, however, a *fifth* foot that transcends all others, see JŚS 1.3.15). Cohen (2008, 267) points out that Vāc has four feet in ṚV 1.164.45, a fact that may suggest that the composers of the MāṇḍU—like the Jaiminīyas before them—are seeking with this text to retroactively identify the *akṣara* in the Riddle Hymn as OM.

On the whole, therefore, the composers of the MāṇḍU have made a careful study of many of earlier discourses on OM and incorporated their insights into their "further explanation." A crucial difference is that while these earlier discourses arose from esoteric insights into the uses of OM in *śrauta* ritual, the MāṇḍU shows no such ritual grounding. Instead, it accepts OM's soteriological potency as an established fact, completely separate from sacrificial performance. In this regard, it bears comparison to the other Upaniṣads in this chapter, especially the MuṇḍU, the PrU, and the KaṭhU, which emphasize the soteriological valence of OM on its own terms, a realization of the higher knowledge accessible through contemplation. The MāṇḍU and the PrU are also quite similar in their deployment of the transcendent fourth to exalt the syllable: whether it be the triple division of the

syllable (PrU, MāṇḍU), the three modes of liturgical utterance (PrU), or the three quarters of *brahman* (MāṇḍU)—all these triads are crowned by the addition of a fourth, namely OM. However, the MāṇḍU differs from the other Upaniṣads in this chapter by virtue of its lack of technical terms associated with contemplative practices.

§7.8 *Summing up: the reflections of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*

Summing up, OM in the MāṇḍU has a decidedly philosophical bent. By this I mean that the text eschews concrete references to ritual, contemplative, and devotional practices in favor of abstract reflections on OM, its phonemes, and the doctrine of the fourfold *ātman*. Although it alludes to the outlines of a contemplative soteriology, the main thrust of the text is a systematic inquiry into the states of consciousness and their relation to OM. Stripped of all references to specific ritual, contemplative, and devotional practices, peppered with philosophical terms (e.g., *advaita*, *avyavahārya*), the reflections on OM in the MāṇḍU seem to foreshadow later developments in the realm of Vedānta.⁶⁰ As such, the reflections of the MāṇḍU are a good place to wrap up our exploration: we have followed OM across more than a thousand years of texts, from its earliest expressions in the mantras of Vedic ritual up through its crystallization as an abstraction at the font of Hindu theology.

§8 *OM in the next wave of Upaniṣads*

This concludes my analysis of OM's development in the next wave of Upaniṣads, those composed at some remove from Vedic branches and *śrauta* ritualism. Although many of these works claim affiliation with certain Vedic traditions, only one of them (the KaṭhU) has an uncontested link to a specific branch; the rest seem to be independently composed works in search of a Vedic imprimatur.

⁶⁰ Moving forward several centuries, Gauḍapāda's *Kārikā* is a commentary on the MāṇḍU. Gauḍapāda was the teacher of Govindapādācārya, who in turn taught Śaṅkara, one of Vedānta's foremost thinkers.

The texts in this group share an interest in cultivating soteriological knowledge based on OM. They distinguish two forms of knowledge: the higher, based on interiorized forms of worship; and the lower, based on sacrificial expertise. Such themes strongly suggest that many of these texts were composed in a milieu of asceticism and renunciation. Nevertheless, most carve out a place—albeit a subordinate one— for Vedic ritual in their new schemes, with only one work (the MuṇḍU) taking an openly hostile stance. These discourses on OM are all predicated on some form of contemplative practice, which is presented in different ways: some texts invoke specialized terms (*yoga, dhyāna, ālambana*); others prescribe set sequences of mentalization; one formulates a taxonomy of consciousness. Having considered all these reflections on OM as a group, I conclude that the composers of these texts are all drawing on a shared practice of contemplation centered on OM; comparison with earlier texts suggests that the roots of this OM-based contemplative soteriology can be traced back to the Sāmavedic Upaniṣads.

§8.1 *Summing up: text-by-text round up*

Before spinning out the broader ramifications of this analysis, let me briefly summarize the positions of the individual texts. The PrU teaches that the *akṣara* OM underlies the elemental power of breath (*prāṇa*), which animates creation; and that meditating (*abhi√dhyai*) on the syllable at the moment of death is the preferred soteriological path. The text structures this teaching with reference to OM's three constituent parts, asserting that only the contemplation of all three *mātrās* together ensures entry into the sun; union with the *puruṣa* on high; and liberation from the cycle of life and death. The MuṇḍU, for its part, criticizes sacrifice and recommends asceticism and meditation as the best soteriological option. The text conveys its teachings through the memorable metaphor of the bow, arrow, and target, which stresses OM's function as an instrument of thought: drawn taut by secret

knowledge, the syllable powers the *ātman's* flight to *brahman*. By meditating (*śādhya*) on OM in this way, the seeker crosses the darkness of death's passage.

The KaṭhU integrates OM into its overall message of gaining soteriological knowledge of the self through contemplative practice (*yoga*), defined as meditation with OM as the support (*ālambana*). The composers of this text depend on earlier discourses, exalting OM with well-known aphorisms on the syllable's holism and preeminence. At the same time, however, they stress the importance of non-sacrificial practices, notably asceticism, celibacy, and renunciation. All these themes come together in the revelation of a single "word" or "state" (*pada*), the knowledge of which leads to *brahman*: OM. Like the KaṭhU in many respects, the BhG similarly draws on Vedic antecedents to present OM as the culmination of a contemplative soteriology. In the voice of Kṛṣṇa, the BhG furnishes many details on the mental praxis that a *yogī* employs at the threshold of death: these include the control of mind, breath, body, and speech; and the evocation of Kṛṣṇa through meditation on OM. Leaving his body, he ascends through ever higher realms until he reaches the highest *puruṣa*. In this way, the BhG weaves OM into its characteristic tapestry of *yoga* and *bhakti*, reserving a place for the syllable at the most decisive soteriological moment. Exhibiting similar theistic tendencies, the ŚvU conceives liberation as an introspective union with the highest god, achieved through meditation on OM. Using an image borrowed from *śrauta* praxis, the composers of this text compare the kindling of a fire with a fire-drill to the realization of god with OM. The intertwining of sacrificial and contemplative elements in this text speaks to the rapprochement between external and internal ritual practices, higher and lower knowledge—all made possible by OM. We observe, once again, that holism and the synthesis of divergent practices remain crucial themes in the syllable's construction.

Finally, the MāṇḍU correlates the fourfold division of OM with the division of the *ātman* into quarters (*pāda*). This text speaks of the constituent phonemes of OM (*a*, *u*, and *m*), plus a fourth that

simultaneously encompasses and exceeds them. Individually, the phonemes lead the seeker through the corresponding states of his own consciousness; together, they grant access to a final liberated state of non-activity, non-perception, non-duality, and wholeness. While there are outlines of a contemplative soteriology here, the MāṇḍU focuses chiefly on the systematic exposition the *catuṣpāt* doctrine with reference to OM; its diction and tone speak to its participation in the distillation of Upaniṣadic wisdom under the rubric of Vedānta.

§9 *Brahmanism's changing landscape*

On the whole, therefore, the reflections on OM in this chapter have furnished strong evidence for the changing landscape of Brahmanism. With real shifts in religiosity taking place, the composers of these Upaniṣads must walk a delicate line. On the one hand, they cling to the established authority of the Vedic branches; on the other hand, they use this authority as a foundation for innovative doctrines and practices that supersede the older models. These new teachings correspond to a growing interest in currents of religiosity that had not previously been well represented within Vedism: renunciation, contemplation, and theistic devotion. OM serves as a locus for negotiating this balance between tradition and innovation. The construction of the syllable within earlier *śākhā* traditions lends it an impeccable pedigree: OM has the unique capacity to embody the Vedas as a totality, to stand as their essence. This capacity suits it perfectly to the project of the Upaniṣads considered in this chapter, which is to engage in theological, cosmological, and soteriological reflections for a pan-Vedic constituency, beyond the strictured context of *śrauta* ritual expertise and particular branches. Just as the Upaniṣads become the "common property of all Brahmins" in this period, so, too does OM become accessible to a broader Brahmanical audience. As this happens, the syllable sheds many of the characteristics that defined it within Vedic branches, notably its multiformity and its specialized

applications in ritual and recitation. Instead, the holism of OM becomes its defining feature: it is the whole (*brahman*) made audible, the totality of knowledge compressed into a single sound.

§9.1 *Tradition and innovation*

The influence of earlier discourses is still palpable, however. It can be felt in the constant recycling of language and themes from older texts; and especially in the persistent emphasis on OM as a soteriological instrument. In both these areas, the influence of the Sāmavedic branches remains paramount. Key turns of phrase in the younger Upaniṣads—that OM is the "only syllable," or "this whole world"—can be traced back to Jaiminiya sources via the ChU of the Kauthuma branch. Similarly, the use of OM as a means to realize *brahman* at the moment of death can be traced back to the ChU, and even further back to the soteriology of song in the JUB. But there is evidence that the texts considered in this chapter cast a wider net in formulating their teachings on OM: for example, the division of OM into constituent parts, first discovered by the Aitareyins of the ṚV, remains relevant. Therefore, the construction of OM in Upaniṣads beyond the Vedic branches, for all its innovation, nevertheless continues the pattern of synthesis and integration that we have observed throughout this study.

As for the innovations—these are considerable. Independence from the Vedic *śākhās*—notwithstanding dubious claims of affiliation—puts the composers of these Upaniṣads in a position to openly challenge the teachings of earlier strata. And so the critiques of *śrauta* ritual as a soteriological option—which appeared only as glimmers in isolated sections of the oldest Upaniṣads—now become more pronounced, even strident. All of the discourses considered in this chapter seem to take for granted the division of salvific knowledge into two forms: the lower knowledge of the Vedas and sacrifice, which ultimately leads to rebirth; and the higher knowledge of contemplation and devotion, which leads to liberation. OM encompasses *both* forms of knowledge: it simultaneously embodies the

three Vedas and exceeds them. This allows the syllable to remain at the center of soteriological thinking even as the scope of discourse shifts from sacrifice to other modes of religiosity. Even though seekers come to renounce external ritual in favor of its interiorized forms, and supersede sacrifice by means of theistic devotion—there is no corresponding imperative to renounce or supersede OM. The result is that the syllable does more than simply retain its preeminence in Brahmanical theology: indeed, as the esoteric concerns of *śrauta* expertise give way to a more generalized emphasis on salvific knowledge available to all Brahmins, OM's status grows and becomes widely established. The syllable assumes its place in a pan-Vedic discourse, where it is the sonic counterpart of *brahman*, an instrument of silent contemplation, a means to reveal the highest *puruṣa* within the self. From this point forward, it will be difficult to conceive a Brahmanical soteriology in which OM does not play some role.

§9.2 From Brahmanism to Classical Hinduism

The transformations sketched above speak to the significance of OM from the perspective of the history of South Asian religions. Surveying the earlier discourses on the syllable, we find a number of features associated with Vedism and Brahmanism: the authority of the Vedas and their branches; the importance of sacrifice and its esoteric meanings; the centrality of heaven-based soteriologies predicated on the winning of immortality. Moving to the discourses considered in this chapter, we notice features that anticipate the formative currents of Classical Hinduism: renunciation of external rituals, with an emphasis on interiorized practices of asceticism and contemplation (*yoga, dhyāna*); theistic tendencies, characterized by devotion (*bhakti*) to a highest god (*deva*) or "person" (*puruṣa*); the cultivation of metaphysical knowledge, with increasingly abstract disquisitions on the relation of the self (*ātman*) and the whole (*brahman*); and finally, the prominence of renunciatory soteriologies predicated on liberation from rebirth. All in all, the testimony of these younger Upaniṣads shows that

the discursive construction of OM is integral to understanding the transformation from Brahmanism to Classical Hinduism at the turn of the Common Era.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSION: ONE THOUSAND YEARS OF OM

We have now fulfilled this study's primary aim of charting OM's emergence on the basis of Vedic texts and rituals. This comprehensive history of the syllable has spanned the Vedic corpus in its entirety, from OM's roots in the earliest textual strata of specific branches to its pan-Vedic circulation as a common theological property. This amounts to one thousand years of OM. Through a millennium of ritual performance and discursive construction in the milieu of Vedism and Brahmanism, OM emerges as a sacred syllable. From this exalted position as the sonic essence of the Vedas and the audible realization of their supreme theological principle (*brahman*), OM exerts a profound influence on the formative currents of Classical Hinduism.

In this chapter I offer my conclusions about OM's one-thousand-year history in the Vedas. First I present a periodization of the major developments, which conveys the arc of the syllable's emergence across the Vedic corpus. Next, with an aim towards bringing more precision to the fuzzy moniker "sacred syllable," I enumerate the key characteristics of OM's Vedic history: sound, cosmogony, irreducibility, imperishability, inexpressibility, holism, and soteriological knowledge. Then I proceed to more detailed conclusions, approaching my findings through the filter of several categories I have employed throughout this study. I examine the impact of *performance and text* on OM's emergence, attending to the interplay between liturgy and discourse that has shaped the layers of OM's history; and to the ways in which OM has been recited, performed, textualized, and constructed. I take up *ritual sensibility* and *branch affiliation*, arguing that these categories are critical for understanding how and why *śrauta* experts reflect on OM the way they do; and that only by attending to the syllable's distinctive trajectories within individual branches can we arrive at a nuanced analysis of the bigger

picture. This leads me to emphasize the primacy of *music and song* in OM's history. I take a close look at the Sāmavedic contributions, especially those of one branch in particular, the Jaiminīya. Who were these people who fostered OM's emergence? Where did they live? When were they active? I attend to the *localization, chronologization, and humanization* of the Jaiminīya *śākhā*, concluding that these singer-theologians made their decisive contributions to OM's history in North and Central India from 800-600 BCE. Identifying themselves with ancestral culture heroes on the margins of society, their arcane reflections on the syllable still resonate today. Finally, switching from the particular to the general, I consider OM's emergence within the wider framework of South Asian religious history. I highlight three areas where OM has exerted a strong influence on the formative currents of Classical Hinduism: *sonality, authority, and soteriology*. Thanks to its capacity to distill the entire Veda into a single, salvific sound, OM remains a sacred syllable even as the older paradigms of external ritual give way to a new focus on interiorized religion.

§ 1 *Periodizing the sacred syllable*

I begin this final chapter by summarizing the basic facts of OM's history as established in the preceding chapters. Arrayed in Table 2 on the next page are the milestones in its journey from an unremarkable sound in Vedic ritual to the preeminent syllable of religions in ancient South Asia. This periodization of OM takes into account the major ritual and theological developments, assigning them to specific phases in the various strata of the Vedic corpus. While the relative chronology is quite stable, the absolute dating remains approximate, based on the most recent consensus as given by Witzel (1997a). My periodization also assigns the milestones in OM's history to specific branches, crediting the contributions of certain groups of specialists.

Table 2: *Periodization of OM in the Vedas*

ṚV Saṃhitā (1200 BCE)	-OM unattested -the sound <i>hiṃ</i> as proto-OM? -doctrines of <i>akṣara</i> and <i>vāc</i> take shape
SV Saṃhitās (1000 BCE)	-oldest OMs attested as <i>stobhas</i> in Sāmavedic lyrics
YV Saṃhitās (1000-800 BCE)	-OMs attested in mantras of Maitrāyaṇīyas and Vājasaneyins -reflections on associated recitational practices lead to tri-Vedic synthesis in prose of Taittirīyas and Vājasaneyins; <i>praṇava</i> attested
Brāhmaṇas (800-600 BCE)	-sustained construction of OM in hermeneutic discourses -Prajāpati's pressing of the Vedas as primary motif -phonological equation ($A + U + M = OM$) and OM as 'yes' attested among Aitareyins of ṚV -intense, copious reflections on OM by Jaiminīyas of SV: integration into doctrines of <i>akṣara</i> , <i>vāc</i> , and <i>brahman</i> ; OM is "only <i>akṣara</i> " and "this whole world;" simile of leaves and pin
Āraṇyakas (600-500 BCE)	-construction of OM in esoteric turn of Vedic discourse -Aitareyins promote the sound <i>a</i> over OM - Kāṭhakas-Taittirīyas affirm tri-Vedic synthesis; correlate OM with <i>brahman</i> -Jaiminīyas continue reflections on OM, integrating earlier material with innovative discourses on "unexpressed" (<i>anirukta</i>) song; Prajāpati remains prominent -Jaiminīya soteriology of song: ascension to heaven and entry into the sun with OM
Early Upaniṣads (500 BCE)	-construction of OM in continuity with specific <i>śākhā</i> traditions -Kauthumas of SV reflect on OM under Jaiminīya influence: holism, ascension to heaven, entry into the sun, sacred sound -Kauthuma contemplative soteriology: thinking of OM at the moment of death; not predicated on specific ritual context -Taittirīyas stress OM's holism -Vājasaneyins implicate OM mantra in ascension to solar person
Next Wave of Upaniṣads (last four centuries BCE to early centuries CE)	-construction of pan-Vedic discourse on OM; recourse to fourth Veda (AV) as alternative authority -reflections turn inward: contemplative, devotional, renunciatory, and other interiorized practices with OM -contemplative soteriology is systematized and widely diffused from Upaniṣads to <i>Bhagavad Gītā</i> -iconic and influential speculations: division of OM into <i>mātrās</i> ; metaphor of bow, arrow, and target; simile of fire-drill

As this chart demonstrates, OM is first textualized in Sāmavedic texts dating back to the beginning of the first millennium BCE. After the syllable enters the corpus, the pioneering developments in OM's construction also take place in a Sāmavedic milieu, most notably in the Jaiminīya branch between ca. 800 and 600 BCE. During this period, Jaiminīya singer-theologians individuate OM as the preeminent, essential, and holistic syllable of the Vedas. They develop a proprietary collection of Jaiminīya lore on OM in the Soma sacrifice, including stories, aphorisms, correlations, figurative devices, and a soteriology of song. As OM gains a pan-Vedic profile, Jaiminīya antecedents remain influential, carried forward primarily by their Sāmavedic rivals, the Kauthumas. Kauthuma reflections on OM transcend the syllable's sacrificial context through metaphysical speculations and the formulation of a new contemplative soteriology with OM. From this point onward, innovations come thick and fast, with reflections on OM addressing a whole range of contemplative, devotional, and interiorized modes of religiosity.

§1.1 *A thousand years of music and song*

The bottom line is that the first thousand years of OM constitute a Sāmavedic movement within the broader religious culture of Vedism. Amidst concurrent contributions by experts from the other Vedas, it was the singer-theologians of first the Jaiminīya, and then the Kauthuma, branches of SV who did the most to foster OM's emergence. In my view, this is the single most important finding of the present study: that the history of the sacred syllable resounds with music and song.

§2 *Pressing the sacred syllable*

In the preceding chapters I analyzed the vast majority of passages in the Veda where OM appears, a good number of which have never been discussed in print. Now at the end of this study, I

take this opportunity to pull together the most salient features of OM's history in the Vedas. Like Prajāpati, who struggled to take the sap of this unpressed syllable of the Vedas, I aim now to distill its essence. Too often, scholarly discussion of OM in the Vedic corpus has been shaped by the syllable's reception in Hinduism and other South Asian religions, not taking into account the syllable's complex liturgical profile or the periodization of its emergence. As such, there is a creeping sense in scholarship that OM has always been a sacred syllable, or at least was destined to become one. (This etic viewpoint plays into the emic notion that OM is somehow beyond history or impervious to explanation: like the Vedic *śruti* of which it is a part, OM is *apauruṣeya*—"not of human origin.") Informed by a comprehensive survey and analysis of all the relevant sources, my own take on OM in the Vedas stands as a corrective to the conventional wisdom. What exactly does it mean to say that OM is the "sacred syllable" of the Vedas? What are the key characteristics that make it so? To answer these questions, I draw on the story of Prajāpati's pressing of OM, a myth-cycle in which the syllable's most salient features are encoded.

§2.1 *Sound*

Above all, before it is called a "syllable" (*akṣara*) or any other name, OM is just a sound, appearing without exposition in mantras, recitations, and songs. Even after OM's discursive construction gets underway, the sonality of this syllable remains its most salient feature. This is evident in the way our texts refer to OM: more often than not, it is "OM" (*om iti*), with the particle *iti* stressing its relation to direct speech; or it is "the sound OM" (*omkāra*), with the suffix *-kāra* emphasizing its orality. The fact that most recitational iterations of OM are never directly textualized in the Vedic corpus, but only codified in rules that must be actively applied to mantras in performance, further

heightens the significance of sound to OM's history. In a very literal way, OM in the Veda epitomizes ritual performance: only in sacrifice does the sound become manifest.

§2.2 *Cosmogony*

When OM becomes the topic of explicit reflection, as it does from the Brāhmaṇas forward, one of the syllable's defining attributes is cosmogonic potency. Cosmogonic OM is elaborated through the familiar cycle of Prajāpati's creation of the cosmos through heating and pressing its parts. He presses the three divine elements (Sun, Wind, Fire), whose sap produces the three Vedas, three worlds, the three utterances *bhūr bhuvā svar*, the three sounds *a, u, and m*—culminating in the tri-moric *o3m*. In this mythic realm, sound is the cosmogonic medium—Prajāpati speaks his creations to bring them into being—and OM, as the sonic "sap" (*rasa*) of Prajāpati's chain of triads, represents the ultimate compression of his creativity.

§2.3 *The triple paradox: irreducible, inexpressible, imperishable*

Like modern efforts to split the atom, or Upaniṣadic efforts to locate the *ātman*, Prajāpati's heated efforts to press the cosmos reveal the boundless power of the tiny kernel at the heart of things. As he broods on OM, he discovers one paradox after another. First, he finds he cannot take OM's sap. It cannot be pressed like everything else—it is an irreducible essence. Next, it is inexpressible, that is, the sound of OM conveys all that cannot be expressed or circumscribed with language. In this regard, OM is the perfect counterpart for Prajāpati, who is known as the "unexpressed" (*anirukta*) god, the one to whom the totality of sacrifice—as opposed to offerings earmarked for specific deities—is offered. How, then, to reduce the irreducible, and give voice to the inexpressible? The goddess Voice (*vāc*), Prajāpati's consort, comes to his rescue. With this divine embodiment of sound and speech as intermediary,

Prajāpati succeeds and the sap of OM flows for him. As it flows through Voice, Prajāpati discovers a final paradox—its imperishability. Like the great Syllable (*akṣara*) with which it comes to be correlated, the "imperishable" (*a-kṣara*) never exhausts itself. And once this sound of inconceivable potency has been revealed, the god ascends heavenward in a desperate attempt to conceal his discovery. But such knowledge cannot be kept secret for long. Learning of this single syllable that can keep Death at bay, the gods, sages, and generations of *śrauta* officiants reenact Prajāpati's primeval inquiry. Prajāpati's wisdom—that OM is the essence of all knowledge—becomes the open secret of the triple Veda, and the composers of Vedic texts never tire of revealing it.

§2.4 Holism

In the correlative worldview of Vedic hermeneutics, all of Prajāpati's triads are identical by virtue of their threefoldness: three Vedas, three worlds, three gods. In this way, the three beats of *o3m* encompass not only the textual corpus as a totality, but also the entire cosmos. This is the holism of OM, expressed most succinctly in the famous aphorisms from which my study takes its title: "for this syllable is indeed this whole world," and "this whole world is only the sound *om*." As an expression conveying the most comprehensive holism—the cosmos and everything in it as an undifferentiated totality, the whole in one—"this whole world" (*idaṁ sarvam*) is also the esoteric name of the unnameable, *brahman*. The same idea is conveyed through the memorable comparison of OM's penetration of the three worlds to a pin's perforation of a sheaf of leaves. In a later version of the simile, OM penetrates not three worlds but the "whole of voice" (*sarva vāc*), which is yet another of *brahman*'s names. Thus the holism of OM is as pervasive and all-encompassing as a perfectly formulated mantra, which is no mere utterance but also the realization of *brahman*. When an officiant

sings OM, he makes audible the most perfect formulation of all perfect formulations, what the *Gītā* will later call the "*brahman* of a single syllable."

Another reflex of OM's holism can be found in the frequent claim that the diverse recitational practices of all three Vedic liturgies—the Udgātṛ's song, the Hotṛ's recitation, the Adhvaryu's formulas—are "on the same level" because they have OM in common. Although the ritual authorities codify these practices with great multiformity, even reporting several variations of OM (*o*, *o3*, *om*, *o3m*, *om̐*) for each one, for the man-in-the-know such differences are erased by OM's omnipresence. These liturgical discussions exemplify, in a concrete way, the heady reflections on OM's holism mentioned above, for OM pervades the "whole of voice" quite literally: the syllable is added to the mantras of all three Vedas alike, perfecting them and pinning them together like so many leaves.

§2.5 Soteriological knowledge

Soteriology is the realm where all of OM's most significant features come together. From the Brāhmaṇas forward, the syllable's sonic resonance, cosmogonic potency, and essential holism are employed for one overarching purpose: to further the soteriological quest of those who sing, chant, speak, and think it. Glimmers of OM's soteriological potential are evident already in its earliest attestations in Sāmavedic lyrics, where the syllable is repeated in a string of non-lexical vocables capped by the words "heaven" and "light." Stronger hints come in the earliest Brāhmaṇa reflections, where OM is correlated with the heavenly world, and subsequently integrated into the transcendent doctrines of sacred sound, *akṣara*, *vāc*, and *brahman*. But the clearest articulation of OM's soteriological significance comes in Sāmavedic discourses of the middle to late Vedic period, when the Jaiminīyas make OM an integral part of their soteriology of song. The story told by these singer-theologians is that the gods, at their father Prajāpati's instruction, succeed in hiding themselves from Death in OM after

every other element of ritual has failed them. The lesson is that ritual performance on its own terms—*ṛc, sāman, yajus*—does not shield a man from death. Instead, ritual must be informed by knowledge. One must *know* the esoteric essence of the triple Veda, the single syllable to which their sprawling complexity can be reduced: OM. Singing OM, a man may ascend to heaven; but *knowing* OM—its mythologies, cosmologies, and soteriological powers—he enters into the sun and reaches the illuminated world of *brahman*. By the early Upaniṣads, the Sāmavedic soteriology of song morphs into a contemplative soteriology with a burgeoning pan-Vedic appeal. As much as the singer who sings it, the erudite man who simply *contemplates* OM now has access to its salvific potency. In this way, even as Brahmanical soteriologies transform, from ritualistic and heaven-oriented (Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas) to contemplative and liberation-oriented (Āraṇyakas, Upaniṣads), OM remains at their center. To my mind, OM's flexibility is the single most important factor in ensuring its ascendance from Vedism and Brahmanism through Classical Hinduism and beyond. Theological fashions may change, but somehow OM never goes out of style.

§2.6 *Summing up: the essence of OM in the Vedas*

By characterizing OM in broad strokes—in terms of the syllable's sound, cosmogony, irreducibility, imperishability, inexpressibility, holism, and soteriological knowledge—I have given an account of the syllable in the Vedas which epitomizes the detailed findings of this study. Like Prajāpati, I have tried to press my arguments to distill their essence. I will be gratified if this essence can serve as foundation for future studies on OM's post-Vedic history, especially the syllable's iconography and later uses in yoga and meditation. I now turn to a more detailed consideration of my findings through the lens of several categories I have employed throughout this study.

§3 *Performance and text*

The manner in which OM is performed and textualized profoundly shapes its history. In this section I draw conclusions about the syllable in performance and text, touching on the interplay of liturgy and discourse; the centrality of recitation and performance; the concept of multiformity; and the nature of the syllable's discursive construction.

§ 3.1 *The feedback loop of ritual: liturgical OM, discursive OM*

OM's emergence is driven by the constant interplay of ritual and reflection, performance and interpretation, liturgy and discourse. In the neverending feedback loop of Vedic sacrificial culture, each category is informed by the other. A nuanced understanding of any part of the Vedas—whether it be a mantra, a story, a *sūtra*, a rite, or a doctrine—requires engagement with both. In the same way, it is necessary to understand the ritual facts about OM in order to grasp what Vedic thinkers have to say about the syllable. Accordingly, I began this study by adopting a heuristic division of the syllable's history into two complementary currents, liturgical and discursive. *Liturgical OM* encompasses the syllable as attested in mantras and as codified in the liturgies for recitation and performance; *discursive OM* encompasses the ways in which the syllable is constructed in interpretive discourses to theological and soteriological ends. Throughout this study, I relied on this division of OM as a way of entering into the feedback loop of ritual. Every passage, every excerpt, every sentence, and every mantra could be analyzed in terms of liturgical OM, discursive OM, or some combination thereof.

OM emerges as a sacred syllable through the intense and uninterrupted interplay of these liturgical and discursive currents. In the earliest strata of the Vedic corpus (SV and YV Saṃhitās), liturgical OM predominates, attested exclusively in mantras without further exposition. In the middle strata (Brāhmaṇas), discursive OM enters the record, attested in the reflections of various specialists on

the use of OM in the liturgies. Here, liturgical OM is mostly taken for granted as part the extra-textual expertise that informs these reflections about cosmological, theological, and soteriological topics. Ritual details *do* enter these discourses on OM, but only to provide grist for the interpretive mill. For instance, when the composers of the JB seek to emphasize the holism and essence of OM, they refer to its common use in diverse liturgical contexts, one from each Veda.

Next, in the late middle strata (*Āraṇyakas*), liturgical OM and discursive OM are equally well represented. The signal feature of this esoteric turn in OM's construction is a focus on only a few rites of arcane character, with attention to the detailed intertwining of performance and hermeneutics. The most significant example of this phenomenon is the JUB, where liturgical facts (OM and other syllables in the *anirukta-gāyatra-sāman*) serve to structure the theological and soteriological discourse. The singer-theologians proceed through each syllable of the lyric, explaining the hermeneutic implications of each one. This adds up to an exhaustive and voluminous account of OM through the filter of the Jaiminīya Sāmavedic sensibility.

In the next strata (early Upaniṣads), discursive OM comes to the fore as experts focus more intently on the metaphysical implications of their expertise in *śrauta* ritual. This trend is exemplified by the ChU, whose composers adapt earlier specialized reflections on OM to better suit a broad-based theological and soteriological agenda. In parallel and contemporary strata (*Śrauta Sūtras*), ritual experts exhaustively codify liturgical OM for the purposes of recitation and performance, finally archiving many centuries of extra-textual knowledge. This has the effect of filling in many of the blanks of earlier strata, furnishing a comprehensive account of OM's multiformity in the Vedic liturgies. From this point forward, liturgical OM remains in the realm of narrow ritual expertise and becomes less and less relevant to the broad-based construction of OM in the growing pan-Vedic discourse.

Finally, in the latest strata (next wave of Upaniṣads), discursive OM predominates. Ritual elements—*ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*—enter these reflections, but only as touchstones of Vedic authority. As a consequence, the construction of OM comes to embrace non-sacrificial modes of religiosity, especially contemplation, devotion, and renunciation. I have shown that these developments do not constitute a decisive break with the past: for example, the later Upaniṣadic uses of OM in contemplation have roots in the contemplative soteriology of the Kauthumas (ChU), which in turn was inspired by the Jaiminīya soteriology of song (JUB), which grew out of still earlier reflections (JB). Nevertheless, OM's trajectory as a sacred syllable beyond the ritually oriented world of Vedism is marked by the decline of specialized liturgical engagement. As the syllable takes its exalted position in pan-Vedic discourse, it has become the "common property of all Brahmins" (Olivelle 1998, 10). The totality of Vedic knowledge becomes accessible through its compression into this single syllable. Prajāpati's discovery, which he so jealously guarded from the gods—that the essence of the Vedas is OM—has now been broadcast to a wide Brahmanical audience.

§3.2 *Listening to OM: recitation and performance*

Much of the complexity of OM's history in the Vedas arises from the fact that the syllable is intimately tied to recitation and performance. More often than it occurs independently, liturgical OM is added to other mantras as a recitational substitution or interpolation. This results in what I have called OM's hidden history—the majority of its attestations in the Vedic corpus are never textualized and hence inaccessible through the usual methods: word searches, concordances, and so on. To make this hidden history audible, my solution has been to reconstruct OM's recitation and performance on the basis of codifications in the Śrauta Sūtras and ancillary ritual texts. My findings demonstrate that the actual scope of OM's diffusion across Vedic texts and rituals has been greatly underestimated: OM

seems to have virtually defined the soundscape of the Soma sacrifice. If ancient ritual performances bore any resemblance to their codifications in text—or, for that matter, any resemblance to modern performances among orthoprax populations such as the Nampūtiris of Kerala—then the ringing out of thousands of OM's formed a wall of sound emanating from the ritual enclosure. Listening to OM's history in this way, we gain a much better understanding of aspects of the syllable's discursive construction. For example, the declaration "this whole world is OM" is not simply a theological and cosmological claim, but rather an experiential one, inspired by immersion in the sacrificial soundscape.

§3.3 *Multiformity*

Closely tied to issues of recitation and performance is the fact of OM's multiformity in the liturgies. I have catalogued more than twenty distinct archetypes of liturgical OM, spanning all three Vedic liturgies. When these archetypes are realized in performance, the result is the wall of sound discussed above—OM rings out over and over, on the lips of more than half-a-dozen different officiants. OM's multiformity has several implications. First, it complicates our efforts as modern scholars to explain the syllable's history. After all, how can one explain a sound that cannot be circumscribed? This is a major problem for scholars who would approach OM as a unitary entity with a single stream of origins. Any explanation predicated on a unitary OM—whether etymological, phenomenological, or evolutionary—courts failure. There is not one OM, but many.

In my own analysis, I have taken the opposite tack: I acknowledge OM's multiformity and eschew arguments about origins. Instead, I explore OM in terms of emergence, the idea that many streams of ritual culture flow together from diverse sources to form what we now think of as the unitary sacred syllable. Another implication of multiformity is that ritualists from all three Vedas had a vested interest in OM's success. Even if, as I have stressed, the Sāmavedic Jaiminīyas did the most to

foster OM's emergence, their efforts had a natural resonance across other *śākhās* and Vedas. Thus it seems most fitting that a syllable often glossed as 'yes' also became the one syllable that the rivalrous and contentious subcultures of *śrauta* ritual could agree on. Because OM was multiform, it was not a question of privileging one priestly constituency at the expense of another. Instead, this was a sound shared across liturgies, a "bond" (*bandhu*) serving to connect the members of a ritual culture in which such esoteric connections were prized. Thus, OM is holistic and all-encompassing not only in a theological sense—as the audible realization of *brahman*—but also in the ritual sense of being realized in myriad ways in the course of performance. This gave Vedic thinkers the chance to "discover" OM's unity and to intentionally construct it as the essence of the triple Veda. Against the background of liturgical multiformity, they individuated OM as the single syllable shared by all the officiants and the sound in which all three liturgies come together.

§3.4 Construction

Crucial to my idea of OM's emergence is the human agency driving its history. Even though there are good arguments to be made that OM's phonology and sonality predispose it to the role of primordial syllable, OM does not "emerge" organically out of the mists of time because it was destined to do so. Instead, OM emerges through the intentional and constructive activities of the people who used it. (See more detailed discussion of humanizing OM in §5 below.) The construction of OM is part of the broad, centuries-long Brahmanical project of textualizing Vedic ritual and theological expertise in a variety of forms, from codified liturgies to aphorisms to stories about the gods.

I have devoted the bulk of this study to revealing OM's place in this project, examining the roots and the many offshoots of the syllable's discursive construction, arguing that such reflections are the realm where OM emerges most clearly as a sacred syllable. Insofar as there is one decisive moment

in the process, it is when the Jaiminīyas, for the first time recorded anywhere, integrate OM into the ancient doctrine of sacred sound by calling it the "only *akṣara*." When correlated with the great primordial Syllable, the liturgical utterance OM takes on all of the qualities of that exalted theological concept: its imperishable potency, its proximity to the goddess Voice (*vāc*), its elemental irreducibility. I would argue that all subsequent phases of OM's incredible rise to preeminence flow from that watershed correlation.

§3.5 *Correlating OM*

That Jaiminīya moment exemplifies the central interpretive strategy of Vedic thinkers, which is the practice of making correlations. OM's construction proceeds through the gradual accretion of correlates, steadily forming a "web of relations" that informs Vedic hermeneutic engagement. OM's rise from mere liturgical utterance to sacred syllable can be summed up by listing just a few of such correlates. Thus, OM is...

the sap of the Vedas
the three pure sounds
earth, atmosphere, and heaven,
Sun, Wind, and Fire
the triple Veda
the only *akṣara*
the sun
honey in grains
truth
voice
this whole world
a pin perforating leaves
brahman
wings of sound
the supreme
the sound of sex
the sound of the sun

...and so on.

Axel Michaels has argued that the practice of making such identifications, which he calls the "identificatory habitus" (2004, 5) and traces to Vedic hermeneutic roots, is a persistent and fundamental feature of the history of Hinduism. Adapting Michael's terminology slightly, I would suggest that a "correlative habitus" likewise drives OM's emergence in the Vedas. And insofar as this syllable, through its multifarious correlations, gradually comes to define practices and doctrines at the heart of Vedism and Brahmanism—sacrifice, sacred sound, and soteriology—I would further argue that the trajectory of OM *in particular* is integral to the formation of Classical Hinduism from Vedic roots. To put it another way, OM is not merely a passive residue of the Veda's legacy to Hindu traditions; rather, reflection on OM *actively* contributed to the formation of Classical Hinduism from Brahmanical antecedents. (I will return to OM's role in these broad religious developments in §6 below.)

§4 *Branch, specialization, sensibility*

I now draw some conclusions about the distinctive trajectories of OM within specific Vedic branches, ascribing the idiosyncrasies to clear differences in liturgical specialization and ritual sensibility. I also ponder the implications of these findings for how we talk about OM's history among the religious subcultures of Vedism during the first millennium BCE: once we move past the conception of the Vedas as a monolithic religious culture, it becomes possible to credit specific aspects of OM's construction to certain branches and groups. As we do so, the richness and diversity of Vedic subcultures become evident.

§4.1 *Śākhā*

Thanks to the pioneering work of Renou and Witzel, recent scholarship on the Veda has been able to produce ever more nuanced pictures of this massive corpus in terms of the idiosyncratic

contributions of individual branches (*śākhā*) or groups of branches. It has been recognized that the *śākhās* represent the localized lineages of extended Brahmin families with their own linguistic variations ("dialects;" Witzel 1989), their own iterations of *śrauta* ritual paradigms, and their own hermeneutic agendas. The importance of *śākhā* to OM's history should by now be quite clear: every time I have attributed doctrines and practices to specific texts, identified patterns of mutual influence, or cited the rival opinions of "some" (*eke*) authorities in contentious debates, the idiosyncracies of the branches have come into play.

§4.2 *Liturgical specialization and ritual sensibility*

Above all, I have invoked the category of *śākhā* to explore the impact of liturgical specialization on OM's discursive construction. The basic idea, formulated most recently by Signe Cohen for the Upaniṣads (2008), is that recognition of the liturgical specialty of a given work's composers—*hautram* of ṚV, *audgātram* of SV, or *ādhvaryavam* of YV—ought to inform our reading of that work and our broader understanding of text and authority in the Veda. I adapted Cohen's idea into a reading strategy of my own, encompassing not only liturgical specialty but also *śākhā*, and applied it much more widely, across all strata of the corpus. As we read within a branch and within the groups of branches that constitute a liturgical specialty, coherent sensibilities become evident. In terms of the triple Veda, I have spoken of Ṛgvedic, Sāmavedic, and Yajurvedic sensibilities, each attuned to its respective ritual expertise. When it comes to OM, the Ṛgvedic sensibility favors discourses that resonate with plainly Ṛgvedic concerns, notably metrical, phonological, and lexical analysis. By contrast, Sāmavedins stress the importance of sound, melody, and non-lexical syllables; I argued that this sensibility predisposes exponents of the SV to a fascination with OM. Among Yajurvedins, the

emphasis is on OM's capacity to structure exchanges between officiants and to signal the transfer of ritual authority.

But liturgical specialty remains a fairly wide category, with each liturgical Veda consisting of multiple branches. Applying the more circumscribed category of *śākhā*, our analysis becomes more nuanced: thus, I have characterized any number of idiosyncratic branch sensibilities, from the Aitareya to the Kauthuma. The category of branch is especially useful for contrasting the liturgical and hermeneutic traditions *within* a single Veda. Therefore, just as the Veda as a corpus is not monolithic and undifferentiated, neither are its threefold divisions: for instance, I have shown that the Sāmavedic engagement with OM differs dramatically from the Kauthuma to the Jaiminīya branches.

The filters of liturgical specialty and branch affiliation together make it possible to credit the contributions of particular groups to OM's emergence as a sacred syllable. While Yajurvedins of the Taittirīya and Vājasaneyi branches were the first to reflect on the importance of recitational practices associated with OM in their respective Saṃhitās, they seemed to have lost interest for several centuries before picking up the thread again in their Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads. Similarly, Ṛgvedins of the Aitareya branch were way out ahead in proposing an influential phonological analysis of OM already in their Brāhmaṇa; however, the logic of their phonemic hermeneutic led them to discard *om* in favor of its initial constituent phoneme (*a*). As I have stressed throughout this study, it was the Sāmavedins of the Jaiminīya branch who took the lead in fostering OM's emergence. From the earliest recorded attestations of the syllable in their Saṃhitā, to the multifarious liturgical uses for the syllable in their Śrauta Sūtra; from the influential reflections on OM in their Brāhmaṇa, to the soteriological innovations of their Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad (JUB)—all along this "path of melody," the Jaiminīyas persistently speculated on OM, giving it more airtime and amplifying its significance. The categories of branch and liturgical specialization again come into play as we trace the legacy of these monumental

Jaiminīya contributions, for it was the "other" Sāmavedic branch, the Kauthumas, who picked up where the Jaiminīyas left off. Integrating Jaiminīya discourses on OM into their famous Upaniṣad (ChU), the Kauthumas can be credited with broadcasting Jaiminīya ideas beyond the parochial boundaries of branch and liturgy to a much wider, and ultimately pan-Vedic, constituency.

Finally, I have shown that these categories act on OM's history in indirect and negative ways, as well. I have in mind the pan-Vedic phase of OM's construction in the Upaniṣads and beyond, when it is precisely the lack of affiliation with a specific *śākhā*, as well as the downgrading of ritual expertise in favor of other modes of religious authority, which shape reflections on the syllable. Lacking continuity with definite branches, and claiming affiliation with the AV, which had long been excluded from *śrauta* traditions, the independent composers of these texts were free to pursue their own agendas as they reflected on OM. Adapting the influential contemplative soteriology of the Kauthumas, they opened the doors wide to alternative religiosities. The negative impact of ritual sensibility and *śākhā* decisively shaped this final phase of OM's history in the Veda, as theologians turned away from sacrifice, constructing OM in conversation with currents of meditation, mendicancy, renunciation, devotion, and theism.

§4.3 Primacy of Sāmaveda

What more can we conclude from applying the categories of liturgical specialty and branch to OM's history in the Veda? First, my survey of liturgical OM demonstrates that it is the Sāmavedic liturgy (*audgātram*) in which the recitation and performance of OM predominate. Next, my survey of discursive OM shows that Sāmavedic reflections on OM are among the oldest and most influential; and that they exceed Ṛgvedic and Yajurvedic reflections many times over in scope, volume, and continuity. These points point to the primacy of Sāmavedic traditions in OM's emergence. The history of OM is

closely intertwined with that of Sāmaveda. I believe that this close connection has remained obscure until now only because, in the words of J.A.B. van Buitenen, Sāmaveda is "the stepchild of Vedic and ritual research" (van Buitenen 1959, 181). The more we learn about Sāmavedic performance and hermeneutics, the more OM's centrality in these traditions becomes evident. Singers were attracted to its sonality, its drawn-out resonance, its tone, and its non-lexicality. This attraction cemented the bonds between Sāmaveda and OM at an early date, and constantly renewed them even amidst dramatic transformations in Vedic ritual and theology. Melody, song, and music have decisively shaped OM as a sacred syllable.

But there is more to the story, for as we have seen, it was not just singers *generally*, but rather the singers of one branch *in particular* who led the way with OM. To the Jaiminīyas goes the credit of nearly every significant ritual and theological development in OM's history, from its integration into ancient doctrines of sacred sound to its instrumental role in a soteriology of song. By pushing the category of *śākhā* a little further, we stand to add still more depth and detail to OM's story. We can say where the singers lived and when they were active. We can even name names. I now delve a little deeper into the history of the Jaiminīya branch in an effort to localize, chronologize, and humanize the circumstances of OM's emergence. I want to get a better sense of the human agency behind one of the most influential and enduring cultural contributions in the history of South Asian religions.

§5 *In search of the Jaiminīyas*

Jaiminīya traditions seem to have grown out of the earlier (now unattested) Śāṭyāyana branch, as parallels between the JB and the surviving fragments of the lost *Śāṭyāyani Brāhmaṇa* indicate (Witzel 1997a, 307). The teachings of the eponymous founder of this branch, Śāṭyāyani, are frequently cited in Jaiminīya texts (Parpola 1973, 9; see also my ch. 8, §4.9-10). The name Jaiminīya itself refers to the sage

Jaimini, whose epithet *talavakāra* ("musician") leads to the currency of Talavakāra as an alternative name for the Jaiminīya branch and its various texts.¹ Parpola, observing that neither of these names is ever found in the ancient texts themselves, concludes that Jaiminīya and Talavakāra are later labels for this branch (1973, 9). While I continue to refer to the singers of this branch as Jaiminīyas as a matter of convenience, it is almost certain that they knew themselves by some other name.

§5.1 *Localization*

As for their localization, Witzel has shown that Jaiminīya texts have a wide "geographical horizon," encompassing most of North and Central India north of the Vindhya mountains. (For the following account, I rely on Witzel 1987, §4.4; and 1997a, 307-309.) The Jaiminīya sphere of activity "is confined in the South by the Narbada, in the East by the River Ken, in the North by the lower course of the River Chambal and the Tharr desert, and in the west by the Arabian sea" (Witzel 1987, §4.4, quoting Frenz), a massive area corresponding roughly to the modern Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and parts of Madhya Pradesh. This is a region where the eastern and western parts of the Vedic cultural complex could meet and intermingle. According to Witzel, the Jaiminīyas migrated south from the heartland of post-Ṛgvedic *śrauta* traditions, the region controlled by the Vedic Kuru and Pañcāla tribes (corresponding to modern Haryana). With the hostile Vidarbhas to their south, the wild Naimiṣa forest to their east, and the vast *samudra* ("ocean") to their west, the Jaiminīyas settled the southernmost frontier of the Indo-Aryan cultural expansion. Thus they are "southerners" from the point of view of Vedic civilization, "quasi-colonial" settlers who maintain ties with their northern homeland and even still send their young men back there for competitive socialization in expeditions of the *vrātya*-type. We might speculate that the idiosyncracies of Jaiminīya practices and doctrines arise partly from their

¹ Whether or not this Jaimini is the same teacher to whom the major works of Mīmāṃsā are attributed remains up for debate (Parpola 1981b).

far-flung settlement pattern at a considerable remove from the Kuru-Pañcāla homeland. In this wild southern expanse between forest and sea, they had a chance to develop a distinctive approach to song, ritual, and soteriology—including, of course, the promotion of the syllable OM.

§5.2 *Chronologization*

As for chronology (see Witzel 1997a, 307-308), the breadth of the Jaiminīya geographical horizon suggests a relatively late redaction for the final version of their major text, the JB: some time in the late Brāhmaṇa period, ca. 700 BCE. The JUB would have followed soon after. Given that the JB retains elements of the older *Śātyāyana Brāhmaṇa* composed among the Pañcālas before Jaiminīya expansion to the south, we might assign a time frame of 800-600 BCE for the composition of the texts now known to us under the rubrics of the JB and the JUB. In terms of cultural orientation and influence, the Jaiminīyas thus constitute a western counterpart to the eastern Vājasaneyins, with their sprawling Brāhmaṇa of "one hundred paths" (ŚB).

§5.3 *Humanization*

Beyond these broad geographical, chronological, and socio-cultural parameters, it is possible to further "humanize" the Jaiminīyas in several ways, including the naming of figures associated with the emergence of OM. We need not assume that these names always denote actual personalities in the Jaiminīya lineage (although we should not exclude the possibility); instead, it is enough to take them as the constructed personas of kings and teachers who played an instrumental role in the formulation and transmission of Jaiminīya practices and doctrines. Moreover, many of these figures are ancestral, evoking the Kuru-Pañcāla homeland where most Sāmavedic traditions—not only those of the Jaiminīyas—had their genesis. As such, these "culture heroes" of the Jaiminīyas are also represented in

Kauthuma texts, which furnish additional information. For my purposes, the significance of these names and personalities lies chiefly in how the composers of our texts have elected to represent them: their words, circumstances, and other attributes. Lacking more concrete evidence about Jaiminīya identity in the ancient period, these figures may serve as a reflection of how the singer-theologians saw themselves and constructed their own history.

§5.4 Jaiminīya culture heroes

The Jaiminīya soteriology of song is based on the esoteric knowledge of how to sing the unexpressed gāyatra melody. As we have seen, this knowledge is associated with the king of the Pañcālas, Keśin Dārbhya (JUB 3.29-31; see my ch. 8, §4.2). Mourning the loss of his uncle (Uccaiśśravas Kaupayeya, the king of the Kurus), Keśin Dārbhya encounters his bodiless ghost in the forest. The ghost speaks of a powerful *sāman* that allows a man to shake off his body and achieve immortality, crediting it to the son of Prajāpati, the sage Pataṅga Prājapatya. Keśin Dārbhya ultimately finds another Brahmin who knows the *sāman*, the cremation-ground hermit Prātṛda Bhālla. In terms of Jaiminīya identity, this story is significant for the way it attributes the discovery of esoteric knowledge to the interaction of kings and Brahmins belonging the erstwhile Jaiminīya homeland. Moreover, the alliance of Brahmins and Kṣatriyas is represented as highly productive, resulting in the formulation of a potent new soteriology.² The story also establishes a lineage extending from the primordial past (Prajāpati through his son) to more recent times, when the knowledge resides in a Brahmin on the fringes of society. In terms of contemporary Jaiminīya identity, I find this detail of the cremation-ground singer more telling than any other. This shows that the composers of the JUB regarded their teachings on the *anirukta-gāyatra* and OM to be truly arcane and dangerous, fit for transmission only in the desolate wastes.

² The cooperation of Brahmins and kings in this fashion is a trope with many Upaniṣadic parallels. See Olivelle 1996, xxiv-xxv for discussion.

While this is undoubtedly a trope suited to the *Āraṇyaka* genre, it nevertheless demonstrates the burgeoning importance of asceticism and marginal religious practices in the formulation of innovative Brahmanical teachings about OM.

Similar themes come up in the story of Pṛthu Vainya, who posed a riddle to a band of divine Vrātyas about the foundation of the cosmos (JUB 1.10.9-11; see ch. 7, §9.5): "On what do the great waters rest?" We do not learn if their answer ("truth") satisfied Pṛthu Vainya, but the Jaiminīya composers of this story have the last word. Leaving the narrative frame, they maintain that there is a deeper foundation on which even truth rests, namely OM. We may surmise that such agonistic exchanges of knowledge, where speculative one-upmanship is the name of the game, formed a part of the northern-bound Vrātya expeditions in which young Jaiminīya men took part. If this was the case, then stories like this one could have served as a pedagogical training ground: after reprising the old tale of Pṛthu Vainya and the divine Vrātyas, the teacher proposes a new twist, an answer based on the Jaiminīya correlation between OM and truth. In this way, reflection on OM enters into wider circulation—first among Jaiminīya students, and then among the opponents they are likely to encounter in their travels during theological debates.

There are other stories of the ancestral figures associated with OM's emergence. One is the learned conversation between the three sages, Gobala Vārṣṇa, Śāṭyāyani, and Ulukya Jānaśruteya about ascension to the sun (JUB 1.6.1-5; see ch. 8, §4.9). Of the three, only Śāṭyāyani has a clear biography: as we have seen, he is the eponymous founder of the Śāṭyāyana branch from which the Jaiminīya branch develops. Another example is the sage Śaibya Satyakāma, who asks Pippalāda, the eponymous founder of the Atharvavedic Paippalāda branch, a question about OM (PrU 5). Satyakāma's name recalls that of Satyakāma Jābala, a Sāmavedic sage who gathers arcane knowledge from talking animals (ChU 4; see ch. 10, §2.2); members of the Jābala lineage are also mentioned in the JUB (3.7-9). The trope of gleaning

secrets from the animals crops up again in the memorable story of the "canine udgītha," where the hero Baka Dālbhya (aka Glāva Maitreya) learns a food-procuring melody with OM from a white dog (ChU 1.12.1-5; see ch. 9, §7). In another story, the same Baka Dālbhya harnesses the power of "OM alone" to lure Indra away from his rivals, the Ājakeśins (JUB 1.9.3; ch 7, §9.2). Baka Dālbhya in particular is known for his wisdom—the Jaiminīyas call him "a well-versed man among the Kuru-Pañcālas" (JUB 4.7).³

§5.5 Pscyhedelic singers?

As it happens, Baka Dālbhya has an extremely long and complex biography, extending from the Vedas to the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas. In his study of this persona, Petteri Koskikallio observes that Baka Dālbhya in the Vedas has a double role: "a ritualist with connections to *sattra* groups among the Kurupañcālas, particularly those in the Naimiṣa forest; [and]...a Sāmavedic specialist" (1999, 307). These roles often overlap, as in another story where Baka Dālbhya serves as the Naimiṣīya Udgātṛ and proves his mastery over the *udgītha*, including its correlation with "this syllable" (*etad...akṣaram*, a coded reference to OM; ChU 1.2.13-14). Koskikallio also discusses other members of the extended Dālbhya family, notably Keśin Dālbhya, the very same king we encountered above under the dialectal variation Dārbhya. As a Pañcāla sacrificial patron, Keśin Dālbhya is frequently implicated in ritual rivalries and is often connected to Vrātya groups (Koskikallio 399, 312).⁴

Koskikallio considers the possibility that the name *keśin* ("having long hair") may have at one time referred to the wild locks of Vedic students (*brahmacārin*), who refrain from cutting their hair during the period of their studentship. Such long-haired students were thought to have great power by

³ *teṣāṃ ha kurupañcālānam bako dālbhyo [']nūcāna āsa /*

⁴ In several Jaiminīya tales, Keśin Dārbhya works closely with another Keśin, Sātyakāmi, to triumph over sacrificial opponents. This name recalls the Satyakāma who wants to know more about OM in PrU 5; see above.

virtue of their chastity, study, and marginal existence outside the boundaries of householders' lives. Indeed, "they are closer to the real situation in which ritual groups"—notably Vrātya bands—"were formed" (Koskikallio 1999, 316). Finally, Koskikallio traces these Keśins to their earliest prototype, the long-haired Keśin of the ṚV (10.136), who flies through the air carrying poison that—according to some (Doniger 1981, 137-38; 2009, 120; Deeg 1993, 96-117⁵)—is the psychoactive substance fueling his ecstatic flight. On the whole, Koskikallio helps us to discern in the story-cycles of Dālbhyas and Keśins a subculture of "psychedelic" (Koskikallio 1999, 304, 374) personas in the Vedas: learned, long-haired, marginal, powerful, and masters of ritual performance.⁶ To the extent that the Jaiminīyas construct OM with reference to such figures, they are perhaps identifying themselves with similar movements on the fringes of Vedic religious culture.⁷ Drinking the psychoactive *soma* and ascending to heaven by singing OM, they may have styled their soteriology of song on these culture heroes of the wilderness.

§5.6 *The Jaiminīya legacy*

To round out this assessment of the Jaiminīya branch, I now summarize the distinctively Jaiminīya cultural legacy in OM's history. While other branches adapted and integrated many Jaiminīya teachings on OM, this study has shown that it was these innovative singer-theologians who did the most to individuate and promote OM as a sacred syllable. From their earliest texts, the Jaiminīyas sang

⁵ Deeg argues further for a connection between the Ṛgvedic Keśin and the later Keśin Dārbhya based on what he speculates may be the intoxicating effects of *darbha* grass (1993, 99ff.)

⁶ Doniger (2009, 120) takes this countercultural idea even further, calling the Ṛgvedic Keśin a "drop-out and turn-on type" and a "protophippie."

⁷ It is worth noting that the connection between Baka Dālbhya and "Jaimini/Jaiminīya" persists at least through the epic period. In the independent mini-epic known as the *Jaiminīyāśvamedha* or *Jaiminībhārata*, Arjuna's escort encounters on a remote island "an old ascetic standing on the shore with his eyes closed..., his body...covered with creepers, birds' nests, ants, and serpents were resting on his shoulders..." The old man opens his eyes and joyfully greets Kṛṣṇa, who is among the retinue, and tells the story of his life, a "rather psychedelic journey" through many realms of heaven (Koskikallio 1999, 303-304).

om in collocation with *vāc* ("voice"), as well as *suvar* ("heaven") and *jyotis* ("light"). Next, the Jaiminīyas identified OM as the sound of the primordial Syllable of the *akṣara* doctrine, "the only *akṣara*." They also correlated OM with "this whole world" (*idaṃ sarvam*), the holistic expression of *brāhman*, and coined the influential simile of the leaves and the pin. They correlated OM with the sun for the way it begins songs, and compared it to honey and "sap" (*rasa*) for the way it perfects them. They told stories of Prajāpati's pressing of OM and the gods' escape from Death in the syllable. They called it the weapon of truth and the foundation on which the cosmos rests. Ultimately, all of these Jaiminīya ideas came together in an innovative soteriology of song: by singing the unexpressed *gāyatra* with OM, a singer could ascend to the heavenly world up to the sun, where only the password of inexpressibility—"I am Ka (=Who)"—would earn him entry to the realm of immortality. Without the continuity and intensity of Jaiminīya reflections on the syllable, OM's sonality, irreducibility, inexpressibility, holism, and soteriological urgency would never have been celebrated to the same extent. And without this Jaiminīya legacy, it seems quite likely that OM would have gone the way of other special syllables (e.g., *him*, *a*) in the Veda: briefly celebrated but ultimately forgotten, relegated to obscure corners of ritual and reflection.

§6 *OM and the history of South Asian religions*

In a study such as this one, which surveys more than a thousand years of material, there is an inherent risk of painting with too broad a brush—that is, of reifying categories such as Veda, sacrifice, sacred sound, Vedism, Brahmanism, Hinduism, and so forth—in an effort to draw conclusions about textual, ritual, and theological developments unfolding over vast expanses of time and space. Relying on the reading strategies already discussed, I have done my best to avoid this risk by localizing, chronologizing, and humanizing my conclusions about OM; and by stressing the multiformity that

characterizes its early history and shapes its emergence. OM is not simply a case study, but rather many "case studies:" every stratum, every Veda, every branch, and every passage in which the syllable appears has its own story to tell. I have done my utmost to let this multiplicity of voices be heard, highlighting technical details, arcane rites, and disagreements among specialists both ancient and modern. As my study comes to a close, however, it's time to pick up the broad brush, so to speak: drawing on these rich and varied findings, I examine what the emergence of OM can tell us about the history of South Asian religions from the first millennium BCE up through the early centuries of the Common Era. I now ponder the role played by OM in the development of certain currents of Classical Hinduism from Vedic antecedents.

§6.1 *Why OM?*

That OM played *some* role in this transformation is obvious: this sacred syllable of the Upaniṣads has remained central to Hindu doctrines and practices for the last two thousand years, and remains as significant as ever today. (Probably more so, as the global diffusion of Hindu spirituality, iconography, meditation, and yoga have raised OM's profile in South Asia and abroad.) Like many other aspects of Vedic tradition—mantra, sacrifice, renunciation, ancestor worship—OM has become enshrined as a crucial part of the legacy bequeathed by Vedism and Brahmanism to Hindu religious cultures. However, as Frits Staal has shown for mantras (1989b), Madeleine Biardeau for sacrifice (1976), Patrick Olivelle for renunciation (2006), and Matthew Sayers for ancestor worship (2013), we learn nothing by taking these continuities for granted—what matters is revealing the concrete details of how ideologies and institutions develop and transform; and finding out what is at stake in the process. And so I conclude this study by again posing a question I have asked already numerous times, but now repeat in the broader context of South Asian religious history: why OM? By which I mean:

what is it about OM's emergence in the Vedas that makes it relevant, important, and above all, "sacred" in a post-Vedic Hindu milieu? I identify three main factors: sonality, authority, and soteriology.

§6.2 Sonality

OM's primary liturgical uses are recitational, and its primary sphere in the Veda is ritual performance. Thus sonality is central to its history and to its persistent appeal. Unlike other mantras, which have been systematically textualized in the various Vedic Saṃhitās, the majority of OMs in *śrauta* ritual are extra-textual—that is, only realized when spoken aloud according to recitational codifications. And when OM is the topic of hermeneutic reflection in its own right, the medium of sound remains paramount in its construction. Thus, Prajāpati discovers OM's constituent phonemes in the course of his sonic cosmogony; the gods hide from Death in OM because its sound shields them as the grosser noises of the other ritual elements cannot; and OM is compared to the sound of the sun, sexual intercourse, and truth. The syllable's sonality is even emphasized at the level of diction, through expressions (*om iti*; *oṃkāra*) that emphasize its orality and aurality. The emphasis on OM's sound echoes the auditory orientation of the Vedas: encompassing the totality of "what has been heard" (*śrutam*, *śruti*), OM—like *akṣara* or *brahman* or *vāc*—is simultaneously an utterance and the realization of the supreme theological principle. We have seen that the most decisive moments in OM's emergence came with its integration into such doctrines of sacred sound. Reflections on OM as a sound thus help to establish the parameters for the development of subsequent "sonic theologies" of Classical Hinduism (e.g., *nāda-brahman*; Beck 1993, 81ff.), which similarly draw on the sonic realm to formulate cosmological, soteriological, and metaphysical doctrines. With the high value attached to auditory culture and sonality in general comes the veneration of OM in particular.

§6.3 Authority

We have seen throughout this study that the authority of the Veda in the time of Vedism and Brahmanism depends largely on ritual expertise, notably the mastery of the "threefold wisdom" (*trayī vidyā*) of ṚV, SV, and YV. This ideal is encoded in the cycle of myths about Prajāpati's pressing of the three Vedas; as well as in the constant recourse to *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus* as liturgical instruments of power and transformation. The ideological claim is that these are the three elemental divisions of a monolithic system of knowledge—preexistent, eternal, and divine. But the three divisions, ṚV, SV, and YV, also serve to organize the many different subcultures of localized knowledge transmitted within Brahmin lineages, known to us through their texts as the branches (*śākhā*) of the Vedic family tree. Here we find a shared culture of knowledge, to be sure, but one that is anything but a divine monolith: instead, it is eminently human—fractious, agonistic, and innovative. So while the theological imperative of the Vedas is uniformity, the textual record attests to their underlying multiformity. With this in mind, we come to appreciate that Vedic thinkers constructed OM as a mirror of the very corpus they knew so well: although acutely conscious of the syllable's multiformity in the liturgies, they sought to reveal its transcendent unity.

OM, as the syllable in which all three Vedas coalesce, admirably serves the aim of projecting a sense of uniform, pan-Vedic authority—it is the syllable that everyone can agree on as the Vedic brand. OM as the essence of the Vedas serves a similar end: to distill unity from multiformity by revealing a secret essence common to all. The appeal of a single syllable that conveys the authority and essence of an entire revelation speaks for itself. But what happens when that revelation is overtaken by newer modes of religiosity? That is, what happens to OM when the reigning sacrificial paradigm gives way to new paradigms based on salvific knowledge, contemplation, renunciation, and theistic devotion? Perhaps the clearest proof of OM's enduring appeal as a Vedic brand comes in the most recent

Upaniṣads considered in this study. The composers of these texts looked beyond the Vedic branches and *śrauta* ritual expertise, instead claiming affiliation with the marginal fourth Veda (AV) to establish their authority. This suited their innovative ritual and theological agenda, which was to promote new, interiorized practices at the expense of the old, external paradigms. In such a climate, one could have easily imagined OM's downgrade, along with the triad of *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*, to the status of "lower knowledge." And yet OM was retained on par with the "higher knowledge" of internal religiosity. With this Upaniṣadic upgrade, the syllable's preeminence continued even into the sources for burgeoning currents of Classical Hinduism, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Yoga Sūtras*, where OM emerges as the syllable giving access to Kṛṣṇa at death, or as the mantra supporting the realization of Īśvara in meditation. Enshrined in these post-Vedic classical texts, the success of OM as a Hindu sacred syllable was assured.

§6.4 Soteriology

Less immediately apparent than OM's sonality or its distillation of Vedic authority—but every bit as important—is the syllable's place in the soteriologies of Vedism and Brahmanism. By focusing on the ritual and theological traditions of the SV, I have located the roots of OM as a soteriological strategy in the little-known texts of the Jaiminīyas. It is here, in the wilds of Sāmavedic tradition, that singer-theologians formulated an innovative soteriology of song with OM which was to prove quietly enduring. By singing OM in sacrifice, they taught, a man ascends to the heavenly world and into the sun, where he gets the chance to win immortality. When the rival Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya branch adapted Jaiminīya reflections on OM, they broadened OM's soteriological appeal by severing the connection to a specific ritual context. Among other things, the Kauthumas focused on the contemplation of OM at the moment of death: simply *thinking* OM—song and even sound are

superseded here—the dying man ascends through the veins of his heart along solar rays to the world of *brahman*. This contemplative soteriology, growing from Sāmavedic roots, furnishes us with a specific and well-documented feature of OM's role in the formation of Classical Hinduism from Vedic antecedents. As I have shown, the key features of the Kauthuma contemplative soteriology—moment of death, contemplation of OM, ascension to the highest realm of *brahman*—prove highly influential on the formulation of similar soteriologies in the next wave of Upaniṣads and associated texts. I would argue that it is through such channels that the Sāmavedic construction of OM's soteriological potency comes to be broadcast beyond a narrow audience of ritual experts to a much wider Brahmanical constituency, and beyond. Indeed, a strikingly similar contemplative soteriology is attested in one of the seminal sacred texts of Classical Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, when Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna in the art of dying. The emergence of OM in the Vedas imparts to the syllable a soteriological urgency that fuels its continued success in post-Vedic Hindu traditions.

§6.5 *Summing up: from Vedic to Hindu*

In conclusion, I suggest that the most significant and enduring impacts of OM's construction in the Vedas pertain to its sonality, authority, and soteriological potency. During the many centuries of the syllable's construction, even as the ritual and theological paradigms of Vedism and Brahmanism underwent dramatic transformations, the significance of OM continued to grow. In this way, the syllable was quite literally transcendent, in the sense of *crossing beyond* the boundaries of time, geography, and a changing cultural landscape. To accomplish this feat of continuity in the midst of radical transformation, Vedic thinkers constructed OM as an eternal force abiding in the midst of multiformity: it is the one sound among thousands in the liturgies that the officiants share, the essence of the sprawling Vedic corpus, and the audible counterpart of *brahman*. The syllable's capacity to

realize sacred sound bonded older layers of the Veda, which focus on heaven, immortality, branch identity, and specialization in external rituals; to the later layers, which focus on *ātman-brahman*, liberation, pan-Vedic identity, and mastery of internal practices. The totality of Brahmanical religious culture was now packaged into a mantra of a single syllable. Meticulously constructed over nearly one thousand years of reflection, OM emerged as a sacred syllable too precious and powerful to give up. As the ritual and theological streams of Vedic religion flowed into the formative currents of Classical Hinduism, OM retained its pride of place.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	<i>Aitareya Brāhmaṇa</i>
AĀ	<i>Aitareya Āraṇyaka</i>
AG	<i>Araṇyegeyagāna</i>
ĀsvŚS	<i>Āśvalāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
ĀpŚS	<i>Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra</i>
AV	<i>Atharvaveda</i>
BĀU	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
BhG	<i>Bhagavad Gītā</i>
BŚS	<i>Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
BI	Bibliotheca Indica edition of Sāmaveda Saṃhitā = Satyavrata Sāmaśrami 1874-1878
CH	Caland & Henry 1907
ChU	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
DŚS	<i>Drāhyāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
GB	<i>Gopatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
GG	<i>Grāmegeyagāna</i>
ĪśāU	<i>Īśā Upaniṣad</i>
JUB	<i>Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa</i>
JB	<i>Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
JAG	<i>Jaiminīya Araṇyegeyagāna</i>
JGG	<i>Jaiminīya Grāmegeyagāna</i>
JŚS	<i>Jaiminīya Śrauta Sūtra</i>
JS	<i>Jaiminīya Saṃhitā</i>
KAG	<i>Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya Araṇyegeyagāna</i>
KGG	<i>Kauthuma-Rāṇāyanīya Grāmegeyagāna</i>
KaṭhS	<i>Kaṭha Saṃhitā</i>
KaṭhB	<i>Kaṭha Brāhmaṇa</i>
KaṭhĀ	<i>Kaṭha Āraṇyaka</i>
KaṭhU	<i>Kaṭha Upaniṣad</i>
KātyŚS	<i>Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
KauṣB	<i>Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa</i>
LŚS	<i>Lātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
MāṇḍU	<i>Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i>
MS	<i>Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā</i>
MuṇḍU	<i>Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad</i>
PB	<i>Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa</i>
PrU	<i>Praśna Upaniṣad</i>
ṚV	<i>Ṛgveda</i> ; =Van Nooten & Holland 1994
ŚB	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
ŚāṅkhŚS	<i>Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
ŚvU	<i>Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad</i>
SV	<i>Sāmaveda</i>
TS	<i>Taittirīya Saṃhitā</i>
TB	<i>Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
TĀ	<i>Taittirīya Āraṇyaka</i>

TU *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*
VS *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā*
YV *Yajurveda*

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