GENERAL INTRODUCTION

I.

MORE THAN THREE thousand years ago, nomads crossed the mountain ranges that separate Central Asia from Iran and the Indian subcontinent. Leaving behind the dry steppes of their ancestral home, they entered the fertile plains of the upper Indus and came in contact with scattered remnants of an earlier civilization. These nomads imported the rudiments of their social and religious system along with their Indo-European language, which developed into Vedic, and later into Sanskrit. They worshipped fire, called *agni*, and adopted the cult of *soma*—a sacred plant, probably a hallucinogen—which grew in the high mountains.

The interaction between these Central-Asian adventurers and earlier inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent gave birth to Vedic civilization, called after the four Vedas: Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda. These Vedas, oral compositions by bards and priests, have been transmitted by word of mouth to the present day. Their guardians, the brahmins of India, are each attached to one of the Vedas by birth. The Vedas depict Vedic religion, in the words of Louis Renou (1953, 29) as "first and foremost a liturgy, and only secondarily a mythological or speculative system."

The larger Vedic rituals were primarily dedicated to Agni and Soma. Agni was not only a god in his own right, but the divine messenger and intermediary. The offerings, primarily of clarified butter (ghee), were poured into sacrificial fires installed on altars, and Agni transmitted them to the gods. Special libations were made of juice extracted from the stalks of the Soma plant. Remnants of the offerings were consumed by the celebrants. The ceremonies were accompanied by recitations from the Ṛgveda and chants from the Sāmaveda. According to the Ṛgveda itself (7.26.1), pressed juices unaccompanied by sacred hymns have no effect. The celebrations required the execution of multifarious activities, distributed among priests from different Vedas, who officiated on behalf of, and for the benefit of, a ritual patron, the *yajamāna*.

One of the most elaborate of these ceremonies was called Agnicayana, the "piling of Agni," or, simply, Agni. This ritual originated around 1,000 B.C. During its performance, a large altar in the shape of a bird, dedicated to Agni and itself also called Agni, was piled from more than a thousand bricks. The Agnicayana plays an important part in the Vedic literature after the Ṛgveda, and especially in the Yajurveda. Unlike the Ṛgveda, which remains curiously alien to India (see Renou 1960), the Yajurveda occupies the center of Vedic culture. It constitutes the foundation of the ritual and of the edifice of the Vedic schools. More distant from the Indo-European back-

ground than the Ṛgveda, the Yajurveda exhibits a more Indian flavor, is closer to the beginnings of Hinduism and Buddhism, and preserves features of earlier Indian cultures. In all these respects, the Agnicayana ritual occupies a similar position. Though it incorporates the Indo-European fire cult and the Indo-Iranian cult of Soma, these begin to be overgrown by numerous features not found outside India. These features are not Indo-European or Indo-Iranian, but are recognizably Indian. The Agnicayana shows us India beginning to assert herself.

Though Vedic ritual was confined to an elite, its performances must have been relatively common for about five centuries. This period—which lasted for a shorter time than Manichaeism or Islam, but longer than Protestantism—may be called the age of karman ("ritual activity"). Around 550 B.C. Vedic culture began to decline. Further east and south, new religions and cultures rose to prominence. Though Hinduism and Buddhism are replete with Vedic elements, they belong to another age, the age of *jñāna* ("knowledge"). Hinduism continued to look upon the Vedas as its source, formally transmitted by the brahmins, regarded as eternal revelation, "of nonhuman origin" (*apauruṣeya*) and no longer understood. Buddhism rejected the Vedic heritage, the authority of brahmins, and the supremacy of ritual. In due course it evolved its own hierarchies and ceremonies. Fragments of the original Vedic ritual survive to the present day in the domestic rites of the brahmins, such as marriage ceremonies. Despite attempts to revive them, we hear less and less of the larger Vedic ritual celebrations. In the eleventh century A.D., the logician Udayana could declare that the great Vedic ceremonies were no longer performed (Renou 1960, 21, note 4).

India, however, is a land of miracles. In a distant corner of southwest India, Kerala, far away from the original home of Vedic civilization, a few families among the isolated and orthodox community of Nambudiri brahmins have maintained their Vedic tradition and continue to perform two Vedic rituals: the Agniṣṭoma, which lasts five days, and the Agnicayana or Agni, which lasts twelve days and continues through some of the nights, from which the name Atirātra ("overnight") derives. We know little of the history of these performances; their continuation was unknown to the outside world. The Nambudiri performances are not artificial or scholarly reconstructions (as have taken place in some other parts of India), nor are they the results of recent revivals. The tradition is authentic and alive. Though this will be apparent from the present work, it can be directly observed in the attitude of the performers. When the Nambudiri ritualists are told that, according to the classical texts, certain rites used to be performed differently in the past, they say, "Interesting." Not for a moment would they consider changing their own ritual practice in the light of such information. They perform the rituals as they have learned them from their preceptors. It is their tradition.

During the last hundred years, the Agnicayana has been performed

seventeen times; during the last fifty years, five times. After a gap of almost twenty years, it was celebrated again in 1975. For the first time in history, it was attended by outsiders. On this occasion, the performance was not only witnessed but filmed, photographed, recorded, and extensively documented. The only restriction was that non-Nambudiris could not enter the ritual enclosure, in which most of the ceremonies took place. This 1975 performance of the Agnicayana, which was possibly the last, is the subject matter of the present publication.

2.

The elaborate ritual performances of the Vedic period and the supreme importance attached to them in Vedic civilization demand an explanation or at least an interpretation. In the earliest Vedic literature itself, rituals, along with meters and chants, are depicted as instruments used by gods and demons to fight and conquer each other, and sometimes to create. Even when the aims are not explicit, gods and demons are frequently described as engaged in ritual. It is obvious, however, that priests who perform rites on behalf of a yajamāna cannot always be thought of as conquering or creating. Moreover, the later commentaries, especially the Brāhmaṇas attached to the various Vedic schools, provide rituals with a great variety of interpretations, sometimes inconsistent with each other. Many of these are obvious rationalizations. Some invoke events, myths, or legends that have nothing to do with the rites at hand. On the other hand, the most important episodes of Vedic mythology, those that reflect cosmogonic events, are not reflected or used in any rites (Renou 1953, 16; cf. below page 117). Renou concluded:

> We must be content with very general theories if we are to avoid arbitrary explanations such as those put forward in the old *Brāhmaṇas*, where we find fabricated accounts of the origin of various details in the liturgical ceremonial. In these stories there is much that deserves attention, but the *nidāna* or *bandhu*, the hidden connection that they try to establish, cannot be accepted; it is too visibly the product of the priestly mind. It is recognized in the texts that comprehension must cease at a certain point: they declare "*paro'kṣakāmā hi devāḥ*," "the gods love what is out of sight" (1953, 16; with a modification in the translation).

The recitations that accompany the rites often express specific desires: for health, strength, sons, victory, heaven, and immortality. The list of wishes and desires is not so different from that of modern man. It is not exclusively spiritual, as some contemporary visionaries have claimed, nor is it wholly materialistic, as some critics have asserted. As can be seen at a

glance from the recitations recorded in this book, the same desires are repeated over and over again. Does this mean that they were never fulfilled? In spite of a certain poetic variation, such repetitiveness would almost seem offensive, not least to the gods. However, it is universally believed, and by the best of minds, that repetition increases effectiveness. Today, similar repetitions are thrust upon us by politicians and the media—not to mention commercials. Bertrand Russell was criticized for his antiwar speeches by a general: "Do you not think there is some lack of a sense of humour in going on reiterating the same thing?" Russell observed that, if it would not serve any purpose to repeat himself, "I failed to see why he was so anxious to prevent me from doing so."

By the time the Vedic rituals had reached their greatest elaboration, these reiterated wishes receded into the background. Their place was taken by a codification of the two kinds of rites we have already met: the *gṛhya* or domestic rites—which are "rites de passage," life-cycle rites or sacraments, accompanying such events as birth, initiation, marriage, and death—and the *śrauta* rites, which the French call "rites solennels." There are several general and formal differences between these two kinds of ritual. For example, the śrauta rites require three fire altars and the services of several priests, whereas the domestic rites require only one fire (the domestic fire) and one priest (the domestic priest). While the function of the domestic rites appears to be fairly straightforward, the significance of the śrauta rites is not obvious. The śrauta ritual, with its myriad ramifications, exhibits the unhampered development of ritual construction and creativity. It is therefore more important for the understanding of ritual than the domestic rites. There are, moreover, śrauta rituals that last a thousand years, which shows that some of the rites were purely theoretical. Such theoretical constructs (which the grammarian Patañjali compared to the infinite uses of language) should not be brushed aside, as was done by Hillebrandt, who referred in this connection to "myth and fantasy" of the ritualists (1897, 158). On the contrary, they are as important for the theory of ritual as are concrete ceremonies. Many rites have, in fact, an intermediate status. The Agnicayana, which was performed in 1975, is a śrauta ritual that seems to have been always "real," though some of its extensions, which the texts describe, smack of theory.

The Śrauta Sūtras of the late Vedic period offer several definitions of ritual. One that is often quoted characterizes it as comprising three things: *dravya*, "the substance (used in oblations)"; *devatā*, "the deity (to which oblations are offered)"; and *tyāga*, "renunciation (of the fruits of the ritual acts)." The tyāga is a formula pronounced by the yajamāna or patron at the culmination of each act of oblation. When the officiating priest, on behalf of the yajamāna, makes the oblation into the fire for one of the gods, for example Agni, the Yajamāna says:

> This is for Agni, not for me (*agnaye idaṃ na mama*).

At this point a contradiction begins to appear, which becomes increasingly explicit in the ritualistic philosophy of the *Mīmāṃsā*. The reason for performing a specific ritual is stated to be the desire for a particular fruit or effect. The stock example of the Mīmāṃsā is:

> He who desires heaven shall sacrifice with the Agniṣṭoma ritual (*agniṣṭomena svargakāmo yajeta*).

But this fruit is renounced whenever the yajamāna utters his tyāga formula of renunciation. The effect, therefore, is not obtained.

The resulting picture is further complicated by another apparent contradiction. The rites are subdivided into two classes, "obligatory" (*nitya*) and "optional" (*kāmya*). Unlike the Agnicayana, which is kāmya, the Agniṣṭoma is a nitya rite: every brahman has the duty to perform it. So here is a ritual that appears to be optional, since it is confined to those who desire heaven (nobody's duty), but that is also not optional because it is a prescribed duty, and that does not bear any fruit because its fruits are ultimately abandoned. The texts reflect such contradictions. The Mīmāṃsā Sūtra, basic manual of the ritual philosophy of the Mīmāṃsā, lays down that the rites lead to happiness, but the subcommentary "Straight Spotless" (*Ṛjuvimalā*) observes that this does not apply to obligatory acts.

The Mīmāṃsā philosophers faced another difficulty. When a ritual performance is completed, no fruit is seen. The yajamāna, on whose behalf the rites have been performed, does not rise up and go to heaven. Rather the opposite: he returns home and is, as the texts put it, the same as he was before. In particular, he must continue to perform the morning and evening fire rites (*Agnihotra*) for the rest of his life. The Mīmāṃsā concluded, quite logically, that the fruit of ritual activity is—temporarily—unseen. It will become apparent only later, e.g., after death. An elaborate theory was devised to show that this is in accordance with the mechanism of karman, according to which every cause has an effect. A special logical theorem, called *arthāpatti*, was invented in support of this theory. The followers of the Mīmāṃsā were criticized by others (e.g., the philosophers of the *Advaita Vedānta*) for postulating such unseen effects. For whatever our contemporary fads may suggest, in India the unseen is resorted to only under duress. What the Mīmāṃsā in fact ended up teaching is that the rituals have to be performed for their own sake.

The notion of tyāga, "renunciation," has attained an important position in Hinduism through the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Here Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates, as the highest goal of life, a mode of activity in which acts are performed as usual, but the fruit (*phala*) of action (*karman*) is always renounced (*karma-phala-tyāga*).

Unlike the Brāhmaṇa literature and the Mīmāṃsā, the Śrauta Sūtras are not concerned with interpretation. They confine themselves to description and address insiders. They were in no sense teaching manuals. Their description is not enumerative, but highly structured, and uses abstract principles of organization. The Śrauta Sūtras exhibit the science of ritual as an intellectual discipline. In doing so they influenced and determined the development of scholarly and scientific methodologies in India. The ritual rules (sūtra) are formulated carefully and consistently, the use of metarules (*paribhāṣā*) enables the authors to explicate structure and avoid redundancy, and the logical organization of the system of rules is brought out explicitly. All these features developed gradually and paved the way for the work of the Sanskrit grammarians. Directly or indirectly, they contributed to many of the more technical features of Indian logic and philosophy, which are often expressed in sūtra form. It is not the complexity of the ritual itself, but the Śrauta Sūtras' explicit, systematic, and exhaustive characterization of that complexity that is the first manifestation of the Indian scientific and scholarly genius.

3.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of ritual for the civilizations and religions of India, for it is their basic feature. Accordingly, for a Hindu or Jaina, and to some extent for a Buddhist, what he does is more important than what he thinks, believes, or says. Earlier, I referred to the *orthodoxy* of the Nambudiri brahmins. It would have been more appropriate to use the term *orthopraxy* (from Greek *ὀρθός*, "right," *δόξα*, "opinion," and *πρᾶξις*, "action"). Ritual activity is physical activity and is therefore primarily related to the body, unlike thinking or believing, which are mainly connected with the mind. Ritual affiliation is therefore determined by birth, and not by choice or preference. Unlike religious sects, ritual traditions coexist more or less peacefully, they are mutually exclusive, and there is neither desire nor mechanism for conversion. This feature, too, has become a mark of Indian religions.

The study of the Vedic ritual ceremonies was taken up by European Sanskrit scholars in the nineteenth century. In 1805, Colebrooke mentioned several śrauta ceremonies, quoting from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. He did not mention the Agnicayana by name, but referred to it when mentioning that four books of the text "teach the consecration of sacrificial fire: and the tenth, entitled *Agnirahasya*" (see below page 63) "shows the benefits of these ceremonies" (Colebrooke 1873, 54). The first survey that resulted from these European studies appeared at the end of the century in Hillebrandt's *Ritual-Literatur: Vedische Opfer und Zauber* of 1897.

Around the turn of the century, Willem Caland (1859–1932) opened up

the study of Vedic ritual in its full depth and complexity. By publishing and translating some of the Śrauta Sūtras (upon which the excerpts from Baudhāyana in our second volume are based) he showed that there was a science of ritual, and explicated for the first time in a Western language the Indian systems of ritual rules. Apart from ritual, he wrote extensively on the arcane subtleties of the Sāmaveda and explained its liturgical raison d'être. He left a few questions unanswered. In due course, I obtained their answers from Itti Ravi. The paradigm of the Soma rituals was described by Caland and Henry in the two volumes of their *Agniṣṭoma* of 1906. As we have seen, this is the five-day ritual that the Nambudiris have preserved.

Since the publication of the monumental "Caland and Henry," Western, Indian, and Japanese scholars have explored the ritual texts, and especially the Śrauta Sūtras, in breadth and depth. Hillebrandt dealt with the *Darśa-pūrṇamāsa* (Full- and New-Moon ceremonies), Schwab with the *Paśubandha* (Animal Sacrifice), Dumont with the *Aśvamedha* (Horse Sacrifice) and the Agnihotra (Daily Fire Worship), and Tsuji with the Śrauta Sūtras of the Ṛgveda and Yajurveda. Renou published a monograph on the ritual schools. The Vaidika Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala of Poona contributed a series of studies, culminating in a collective work, directed by Dandekar and Kashikar, entitled *Śrautakośa*, an encyclopaedia in several volumes on the śrauta ritual. Renou provided a small dictionary of technical terms used in the ritual, as well as several specialized studies. More recently, the Śrauta Sūtras of the Sāmaveda were studied by Parpola; the *Āśvalāyana* Śrauta Sūtra of the Ṛgveda by Mylius; the Baudhāyana, *Bharadvāja*, and *Vārāha* Śrauta Sūtras of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda by Kashikar; and particular rites by a host of others, for example, the *Rājasūya* or Royal Consecration by Heesterman, the Pravargya by Van Buitenen, the *Sarvamedha* and the *Saṃsava* by Mylius, and the *Mahāvrata* by Rolland. More general and interpretative studies have been written by Lévi, Rau, Gonda, Heesterman, Thite, Biardeau, Malamoud, and many others.

Some of the Śulba Sūtras, dealing with the measurement and construction of Vedic altars by means of a cord or rope (*śulba*)—formerly explored by Thibaut, the historian of mathematics Cantor, Van Gelder, and Raghu Vira—have been studied recently by Satya Prakash, Swarup Sharma, and Seidenberg, and have been published by the Research Institute of Ancient Scientific Texts of New Delhi. Numerous links of the śrauta ritual with history, archaelogy, art, architecture, music, religion, anthropology, economics, linguistics, literature, mathematics, science, mythology, magic, and philosophy are only beginning to be explored. Gonda's study on the origins of the Indian drama in the Vedic ritual and Kashikar's study on Vedic pottery are examples of what can be done. A new area of research involving botany and pharmacology is opened up by the works of Wasson and Flattery on the hallucinogenic origins of the Soma.

Insofar as information on the ritual is concerned, all such studies are

confined to texts. Yet, as Renou observed, "one cannot grasp even the outward meaning from reading the text by itself unless one is gifted with the rare virtuosity of a Caland" (1953, 34). Direct information on living ritual in contemporary India is mostly confined to temple ritual, the domestic ritual of the higher castes, other caste rites, village rites, and tribal rituals. Traces of the Rājasūya are preserved in Southeast Asia and in Nepal, and in India in temple worship and *pūjā*, which retain elements of the consecration rite (*dīkṣā*).

Until recently it was quite unknown that the śrauta rituals, which are much more spectacular than any of these other rites, continue to be performed in India, albeit rarely and in a few inaccessible places. The fact that these almost three-thousand-year-old rituals are still alive would have astonished Hillebrandt or Caland. Once these survivals were discovered, it became obvious that many of the basic issues concerning the interpretation of the ritual, as well as numerous problems of a more technical nature, could only be brought closer to a solution if the living traditions were studied. At the same time it became clear that this study is a matter of urgency, since many of the few surviving authentic traditions are on the verge of extinction. What ensued was a new era of Vedic research, which involves close collaboration with the traditional Indian ritualists, and which might be more properly called Vedic fieldwork (an expression first used by Kashikar in his Presidential Address to the Vedic section of the 24th All-India Oriental Conference, Varanasi 1968). An unexpected feature of this work is that the informed interest of scholars from all over the world gives fresh hope and inspiration to the rare Vaidikas who try to keep the śrauta traditions alive. A chapter in our second volume (Part III, pages 193–251) will show how extensive these Vedic survivals are.

Scholars who came in contact with the living tradition directed their attention first to the recitations of the Veda, which are not only prominent features of the ritual, but which are more easily accessible because they can be heard outside the ritual context. Nonbrahmins are not allowed to hear Vedic recitation or to attend Vedic rituals. This continues to make Vedic fieldwork a delicate affair. Not surprisingly, the first barrier was overcome first. Recordings were made and studied by Bake, Gray, Howard, Parpola, Raghavan, Sreekrishna Sarma, Van Buitenen, and myself. The Government of India, through its Sanskrit Commission, urged that complete recordings of the Vedas be made. All-India Radio also took an active interest. Subsequently, films of śrauta ceremonies were made by Van Buitenen (of the *Vājapeya*) and by me (of fragments of an *Atyagniṣṭoma*). When the ritual began to be studied also in its social context, it became apparent that much work was left undone by anthropologists. Except for recent work by Mencher, basic information on the Nambudiris, one of the main communities that maintains its Vedic culture, remains available mainly in the older manuals

of ethnographers (e.g., Anantha Krishna Iyer), historians (e.g., Padmanabha Menon), and British District Collectors (e.g., Logan and Innes).

If nothing else, the present publication will show that a great deal of Vedic fieldwork remains to be done and should be done before it is too late. At this point in history, each time one of the older Vedic ritualists dies, a portion of the 3,000-year-old tradition is irretrievably lost.

4.

Vedic ritual is not only likely to be the oldest surviving ritual of mankind, it also provides the best source material for a theory of ritual. This is not because it is close to any alleged "original" ritual. Vedic ritual is not primitive and is not an *Ur*-ritual. It is sophisticated and already the product of a long development. But it is the largest, most elaborate, and (on account of the Sanskrit manuals) best documented among the rituals of man.

We now have to record one of the more striking failures of modern scholarship, especially striking since it has largely gone unnoticed. Vedic ritual, the best source material for a theory of ritual, has been ignored, with one exception to which I shall return, by precisely those scholars who have been concerned with the theory of ritual. The resulting picture is not edifying: on the one hand we have a highly developed science of ritual, laid down in Sanskrit texts and made accessible and interpreted to non-Sanskritists by several generations of Sanskrit scholars; on the other hand we have ideas on the nature of ritual by anthropologists, psychologists, and students of religion, which fail to take the former into account and are, by comparison, surprisingly simplistic and naïve.

There are several reasons for this state of affairs. First of all, the theorists of ritual have usually confined themselves to generalities. There is no large body of empirical ethnographic work on ritual that theorists can draw upon. Accordingly, theorists tend to quote ritual facts selectively in support of some theory or other. Since details are rarely described exhaustively, the real intricacies are not generally touched upon. In all the work on ritual by anthropologists, ethnographers, and students of religion I am familiar with, there is nothing that approaches the thoroughness of the Indian Śrauta Sūtras. The situation is very different from that in most of the sciences. In biology it is known how many teeth every animal has, and in philology what the numerals of every language are. Only masses of detailed knowledge of this kind can pave the way for adequate theories, which tend to spring up in an imaginative mind steeped in facts. The Indian science of ritual could develop into a rigorous intellectual discipline, on a par with mathematics, physics, or linguistics, because it was based on vast amounts of precise empirical knowledge of ritual and rituals.

The absence of a Western counterpart to the Indian science of ritual is not due to the fact that rituals are not important. A striking fact about ritual activity is that all men, and probably many other animals as well, engage in it. Perhaps the absence of a science of ritual is due to the fact that the discipline of ritual lacks the utilitarian and pragmatic value that other sciences are believed to have. A physicist can always claim that his work may have military significance, a linguist can always hope that his research is relevant to the computer industry, but a ritualist has no illusions of this kind. It is conceivable that the emphasis on relevance (which means that scholars should follow the whims of others rather than their own) has prevented people from taking ritual seriously and from paying adequate attention to its rich detail and real intricacies.

A specific reason for the neglect of the study of Vedic ritual is that the exclusiveness of its brahmin guardians has been adopted by some of the Sanskritists whose task it is to expound and clarify it. As a result, some publications on Vedic ritual are unintelligible to readers without Sanskrit. This does not apply to some of Caland's work. His translation of Āpastamba's Śrauta Sūtra, for example, appeared in three volumes, the first of which was published in the *Quellen der Religionsgeschichte*, a sourcebook accessible to all students of religion. In order to read the present book no knowledge of Sanskrit is needed, though it does not follow that its contents are simple and easily assimilated.

This is not the place to try to demonstrate fully the inadequacy of the Western approaches to the study of ritual. However, I shall provide a few examples and establish their inadequacy by showing that they fail to apply to Vedic ritual. First let us dispose of the emptiest of all these theories, if it is a theory at all: the idea that ritual effects a transition from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred. (Instead of "transition" we also meet with "communication," a weaker version of the theory.) Though this idea may correspond to some believers' sentiments, it is very unclear. Terms such as "transition" or "communication" are vague and do not pose too much of a problem, but "sacred" and "profane" certainly do. On one interpretation the theory may be saved by turning it into a tautology: the distinction between profane and sacred is the distinction between the status of a person or object before and after a relevant ritual is embarked upon. Accordingly, if sacred and profane have been defined in terms of ritual, ritual cannot be defined in terms of sacred and profane. This is circular and uninformative.

Given another interpretation, this theory would assume that the distinction between sacred and profane is already established and known from elsewhere. For example, "sacred" might have been shown to apply to the domain of the gods, and "profane" to that of men. However, a satisfactory distinction of this kind is not easily found. Moreover, if it were found, the terms would not introduce anything new. The theory would merely claim that ritual effects a transition from the realm of men to that of the gods (or

a communication between the two). As a matter of fact, the Vedic ritual offers an immediate contraction. During the *Agnipraṇayana* rite (Episode 20 of Part II), a transition is effected from the Old to the New Altar. The former is said to be the abode of men, and the latter that of the gods. Thus a transition from the domain of men to that of the gods is effected *within* the ritual. The distinction therefore cannot serve as a concept in terms of which ritual itself may be defined.

Another theory that has long been fashionable is that rites reenact myths. This idea, which originated more than a century ago, was partly inspired by the Babylonian festival of the New Year, which involves a recital of the myth of creation. But whether or not it is applicable elsewhere, it is certainly inconsistent with Vedic ritual. As we have already seen, the Vedic rites are, in general, not related to any myths. In the few cases where there is a historical connection, it has no longer a ritual function. The officiating ritualists may not be aware of it, just as speakers of a language need not know the etymology of a word, which is no longer connected with the word's meaning or function. Just as etymology is not linguistics, the notion that rites reenact myths has nothing to contribute to the science of ritual. Moreover, in the few cases where historians can trace a mythological connection, the rites lead a life of their own, full of ritual features that have nothing to do with, and are not explicable in terms of mythology. An example is the construction of the fire altar from a thousand bricks. This is probably related to a hymn in the Ṛgveda that refers to a Man with a thousand heads, eyes, and feet (see below page 113). Though the precise relationship is not clear, the mythological background seems to be safeguarded in this case. However, this background has no ritual significance. What is ritually relevant is that numerous rules are followed that determine the shape of the bricks, their arrangement, the order in which they are piled, and the various mantras with which they are consecrated. Many additional rules pertain to specific features relating to the placement of the bricks, the activities and behavior of the priests in relation to them, the recitations over the completed layers, over the completed altar, and so forth. These are the bread and butter of ritual activity, the activities determined by tradition and/or texts, the knowledge of which distinguishes a ritualist from an outsider. Moreover, none of this enormous amount of ritual has any mythological background or significance. The idea that rites reenact myths may be applicable to Vedic ritual in a few isolated cases and, in those cases, in a very general way, but it fails to explicate any specific rite. It fails, therefore, even as a component of a general theory of ritual.

The same holds for the related theory, current among anthropologists, that rituals are used to transmit cultural and social values to the younger generation. Whether or not this theory holds elsewhere, there is no evidence in support of it from the area of Vedic ritual. It is tautologically true that rituals transmit ritual values, whatever these are, but it is difficult to pinpoint other values that Vedic rites such as are described in this book transmit in

general. It is obvious that ritual performances create a bond between the participants, reinforce solidarity and territory, boost morale, and constitute a link with the ancestors. So do many other institutions and customs. Such side effects cannot be used to explain ritual. It is true that a few rites are specifically dedicated to the ancestors, but this does not explain the great majority of rites, and throws no light on the nature of ritual in general.

The idea that rites and myths are closely connected is a typically Western idea. It is connected with the notion of "orthodoxy," which stresses the importance of opinions and ideas. To the Indian ritualist it is the activity that counts. As a mode of existence it is perfect in itself and does not stand in need of something else. Unfortunately, anthropological studies have mainly developed against a Western background, and continue to be dominated by the search for a connection between rites and myths. Even Lévi-Strauss, who has many worthwhile things to say on ritual in general, offers, as a kind of definition, that ritual "consists of utterances, gestures and manipulations of objects which are independent of the interpretations which are proper to these modes of activity and which result not from the ritual itself but from implicit mythology" (1971, 600). Vedic ritual does not support the last clause. However, the distinction between ritual and proper activities is certainly applicable to it. Almost any rite could illustrate this. Consider the important ceremony, already referred to, of Agnipraṇayana, "transporting the fire." Agni is transported from the Old to the New Altar. First the adhvaryu priest of the Yajurveda addresses some of the other priests with a formula, prompting them to perform their respective ritual tasks. Then he lifts the clay pot containing the fire, and begins to move east, addressing recitations to Agni and other gods. Several priests form a procession, each executing his own rites and recitations (see Part II, Episode 20).

To the onlooker, the main result of this performance seems to be that PLATE 86 the fire is deposited on the New Altar. This result, however, can only be reached in the ritually prescribed manner and has only ritual use. If it were an ordinary activity, I could come in from the outside and assist in the proceedings by picking up the fire from the Old Altar and depositing it on the New Altar, or by making a wheelbarrow available. However, if I did such things, the ceremony would be desecrated, interrupted, and expiation rites would have to be performed. Similar disruption would result if anyone used the sacred fire for any but a ritual purpose, e.g., to heat water for tea.

The two kinds of activity, ritual and ordinary, can be juxtaposed without conflict or contradiction. After making fire in the ritually prescribed manner, by rubbing two pieces of wood together, a priest may leave the sacred enclosure and light a cigarette with a match. But the two domains should not be mixed. If a priest were to light a cigarette from the sacred fire, it would be bad; he would have confounded different realms and roles. If, on the other hand, he were to go outside the enclosure, produce fire by rubbing two

pieces of wood together, and light his cigarette from that fire, he would be considered mad or at least eccentric. This would not, incidentally, disqualify him from performing ritual tasks. The ritual and ordinary ways of making fire are neatly demarcated.

The so-called structuralist approach, often associated with the work of Lévi-Strauss, may well be applicable to the study of Vedic ritual, but it would have to be formulated more adequately. Since it is by definition a synchronistic approach, remnants of diachronistic methods of explanation (e.g., "rites derive from myths") would first of all have to be excised from it.

A more unadulterated form of structuralism occurs in the work of the earlier anthropologist Van Gennep. Van Gennep coined the expression "rites de passage," the title of his book of 1909, which is largely applicable to the Vedic domestic (gṛhya) rites but does not contribute to the understanding of the śrauta rites. After completing his book, Van Gennep noted that in many societies marriage ceremonies include an aspersion rite that he interpreted as a fecundity rite. Identical aspersion rites are employed, in the same and in different societies, when a slave is acquired, when a new ambassador arrives in town, to make rain, or to expel someone. Van Gennep gave different interpretations to each of these rites, and concluded:

> The aspersion rite does not have any personal or basic meaning in the state of isolation, but it is meaningful if seen as a component part of a particular ceremony. The meaning of the rite can, consequently, only be found by determining the relation it has with the other elements of the whole ceremony (Van Gennep 1911, in Waardenburg 1973, I, 299).

This seems a promising kind of structural approach, and though it is sketchy, there is nothing in the Vedic ritual that contradicts it. I am not familiar with any attempt to develop this approach systematically and in detail, so that the data of the present book, for example, could be used to test it. This is in general the complaint one is forced to make about these anthropological contributions, not to mention the religious ones, which are very much vaguer: if they mention Vedic ritual at all, they are no more precise, and much less enjoyable, than Foster's *Hill of Devi* (1953, 36): "As each guest finished, he sang a little song from the Vedas in praise of some god, and the Rajah was, as usual, charming."

Earlier I mentioned that there is one exception to the general neglect of Vedic ritual by theorists of ritual. This exception is contained in the work of Hubert and Mauss, who used the Vedic animal sacrifice as source material for the construction of a ritual paradigm (*un schème abstrait du sacrifice*, 1909, 22). Their study is thorough and admirable, though it stays rather close to the texts made accessible mainly by Schwab. Hubert and Mauss did not know that these rituals are still performed, so that some of the data were

inaccessible to them. When it comes to structure, the authors noted little more than that rites have a beginning, a middle, and an end. More can be done (see Part III, Chapter 00). At least their own essay was a real beginning, though nothing of similar quality seems to have followed.

In the area of psychology, the only worthwhile contribution I am familiar with is the brief article Freud devoted to the subject. Freud noted three points of similarity between rites and neurotic obsessions: "the fear of pangs of conscience after their omission," their "complete isolation from all other activities," and "the conscientiousness with which the details are carried out." He also enumerated three differences:

> the greater individual variability of neurotic ceremonial in contrast with the stereotyped character of rites (prayer, orientation, etc.); its private nature as opposed to the public and communal character of religious observances; especially, however, the distinction that the little details of religious ceremonies are full of meaning and are understood symbolically, while those of neurotics seem silly and meaningless (Freud 1907, in 1953, II, 27–28).

While the similarities discovered by Freud seem to be real, the differences are not. The first difference is overstated: Freud was more familiar with the variability of obsessive acts than of rites. The present book will easily redress the balance. The second difference does not obtain: many Hindu and Buddhist rites are performed by a single priest, an audience being optional. This holds for temple and iconic ritual, and especially for Tantric rites, which combine ritual with meditation and Yogic practice, in India, Indonesia, and the Far East (cf. Staal 1975, 191–193; Hooykaas, in Part III, pages 382–402). As for the other side of the alleged difference, I am not qualified to challenge the view that neurotic obsessive behavior is only private. I doubt Freud would have been as emphatic had he lived in California.

Regarding the third difference, the thrust of Freud's article is that obsessive acts are meaningful, and therefore similar to religious rites. His paper does not show that obsessive acts have general meaning, but illustrates how they refer to particular events, "from the most intimate, and for the most part from the sexual experiences of the patient." Here Vedic ritual could offer at least some support. For example, the birth of Agni from the kindling blocks that are rubbed together is clearly connected with the sexual act (see below page 76). Sex, however, predates Freud. Beyond throwing light on a few particular rites and, perhaps, ritualists, I do not see how Freudian theories could explain ritual activity in general.

Obsessiveness in ritual is often reported, though it does not seem to be a necessary feature. Moreover, it may merely reside in the eyes of the beholder who is unfamiliar with particular ritual procedures. Speakers of a language also adhere painstakingly to numerous rules when they utter a

sentence. This does not seem obsessive even to a person who does not know the language, though it might seem so to a being who does not know any language. Lévi-Strauss has been criticized for neglecting this obsessiveness or anxiety that may accompany or underlie ritual. Instead of replying to his critics that the anxiety is theirs, Lévi-Strauss has located it in the ritualists' fear that reality, which they cut up, cannot be put together again (1971, 603, 608). However, the ritual of the fire altar contradicts this assumption. It involves the construction of a large altar that allegedly puts together the universe, the god Prajāpati, or the yajamāna. Since the participants need not be familiar with these mythological notions, we should confine ourselves to saying that the altar is put together. If we admit mythology, as Lévi-Strauss does, it weakens his case further. However, it is irrelevant, as these notions are probably a later rationalization. (In the Soma rituals, Prajāpati is certainly an afterthought: Oldenberg 1919, 31; see below page 160). It is an undeniable fact that the altar is put together without anxiety.

To the extent that there is obsessiveness in ritual performance, its explanation does not seem to pose much of a problem. An activity that has to be performed painstakingly and in accordance with strict rules can easily become obsessive. Ritualists may be obsessed by rites, stockbrokers by the market, or mathematicians by proofs. I have been obsessed by the Agnicayana, at least to some extent, or else I would not have completed this book. There is scope for obsession wherever there is serious concern. The more complex the domain, the greater the concern that mistakes have been made. The Agnicayana performance of 1975 was followed by a long series of expiation rites for mistakes that were or might have been committed. No anxiety or discomfort was felt, however, unless it was due to the excessive heat. Like solidarity, obsessiveness may be a side effect of ritual. It is not a necessary feature.

Biologists have used the term "ritualization" with reference to certain types of animal behavior (e.g., Huxley 1966). Some anthropologists have denied that there is any connection between such ritualization and human rituals. As far as I can see the question is wide open. I hope biologists will use the detailed descriptions offered in this book to determine whether there is any resemblance to animal ritualization.

5.

In the previous section I have claimed that theorists of ritual have neglected Vedic ritual. Though true, this might merely be an oversight, easily accommodated. What we have seen, however, is worse. All the theories mentioned fail to be applicable to Vedic ritual and are therefore basically inadequate. Moreover, their inadequacies cannot be resolved by patchwork. At this point the reader may voice a suspicion. Perhaps Vedic ritual con-

stitutes an exception. Perhaps Vedic ritual is too sophisticated, highly developed, and intellectual. This may be so—I could not tell without undertaking a major comparative survey of rituals. However, I suspect that such criticism is on a par with saying that it does not matter that a certain theory of language does not apply to Sanskrit or English, because Sanskrit or English are too sophisticated, highly developed, and intellectual. If anyone were to make such a claim, the conclusion would be simple and immediate: his theory of language is itself insufficiently sophisticated, developed, and intellectual. The same verdict must apply to the theories of ritual we have reviewed. If they cannot account for Vedic ritual, they must go.

There is a general reason for this inadequacy: all these theories are of the reductionist kind. They attempt to reduce ritual to something else. Vedic ritual shows that ritual is, at least in part, a discipline engaged in for its own sake, which cannot therefore be thus reduced. Most Indian theorists of ritual have sensed this, and some have stated it in so many words. Basically, the irreducibility of ritual shows that action constitutes a category in its own right. To reduce it to ideas or anything else seems the scholar's prerogative, but in this case it appears doomed. It is likely, at this stage, that no general theory of the reductionist kind can explain the majority of Vedic rites such as are treated in this book.[1] This is especially clear in the case of such elaborate ceremonies as I referred to in connection with the piling of the bricks. These specific rites cannot be explained by a general desire for strength or heaven, a yearning for the sacred, a wish to reenact myths, sexual anxiety, or any such motivation, which—from the ritual point of view—can only be regarded as extraneous. Such rites show, on the contrary, that ritual follows its own principles and leads a life of its own. Once this is realized, it becomes increasingly obvious. When the bricks of the altar have been finally deposited and consecrated (which takes five days: one day for each layer) there is an unexpected sequel: 118 pebbles are placed on the top layer, in specific positions between the bricks. Again each pebble is consecrated with mantras. And so it goes on, rite after rite. Ritual exhibits a very detailed and specific knowledge. I estimate that the extent of specialized knowledge needed to put the altar together ritually is on a par with the extent of technical knowledge required to build an aeroplane. The bird-shaped altar is in fact a kind of aeroplane, only it takes off in a different way.

The Soma ceremonies require similarly complex constructions, though the intricacies are different in kind. Here numerous subtle relationships are maintained between recitations of the Ṛgveda and chants of the Sāmaveda. They are carefully balanced, and each is subject to numerous rules; syllables, groups of syllables and verses are repeated, partially repeated, or undergo

[1] I say "at this stage" because it is not inconceivable that a future science of ritual, which would account for all such specific rites, would itself turn out to be reducible to another science, as chemistry is to physics. But we are far from having reached such a stage of advancement in our understanding of ritual.

transpositions; certain parts are hidden; specific priests officiate in specific roles. When dealing with some of the intricacies of these chants, even Caland lost heart: *Au surplus, cette méthode de chant comporte encore une infinité de règles, qu'il est impossible de consigner ici* (Caland and Henry, 180, note). The Soma sequences exhibit mind-boggling complexities that relate almost entirely to the form of the chants and recitations, and can therefore be described in purely formal terms. In order to achieve this, the priests cooperate closely, and the results resemble the movements of a musical composition of Wagnerian proportions.

Some of these complexities, and much of the ritual tendency toward proliferation, are due to recursive features. These are features that result from rules that are applicable to their own output. A simple example is the rule:

$$B \rightarrow A\ B\ A$$

This rule expresses the fact that a structure B is joined on both sides by another structure, A. Since the rule applies to any B, it applies to the B of its output:

$$A\ B\ A \rightarrow A\ (A\ B\ A)\ A \text{ or } A\ A\ B\ A\ A$$

By reiterating this procedure, an indefinite number of structures A may be attached to B on both sides:

$$\ldots A\ A\ A\ B\ A\ A\ A \ldots$$

The recursive features of Vedic ritual include this structure, and many more complex structures (for illustrations, see pages 127–134 of Part III in the second volume). Such features will have to be taken into account in any general theory of ritual structure. They are indicated, and sometimes explicated, in the Śrauta Sūtras.

A simple application of a recursive structure is the insertion of the so-called *iṣṭi* rite (basically a vegetable oblation: see pages 46–47). Iṣṭi rites can be inserted in specific, but indefinitely many places, so that the ritual system is indefinitely expandable. Such recursive features are not confined to Vedic ritual. They occur in the elaborate rituals that characterize contemporary bureaucracies. An iṣṭi rite is in certain respects like a committee or a report. Committees create new committees and reports lead to more reports. At the University of California we have a Committee on Committees, which symbolizes and initiates such recursiveness, which then operates throughout the system. I once argued that a certain committee should be abandoned because it served no purpose. My arguments were taken seriously and time was spent on debating whether a subcommittee should be created to look into them and submit a report. As we have already learned from our cursory survey of the interpretations of Vedic ritual, invisibility of results is no bar to the proliferation of rites. Rites obey principles of their own, and humans find

rationalizations to explain them. Such rationalizations are also invoked to explain the proliferation of committees and reports: supporters claim that they safeguard justice and fairness; critics attribute them to suspicion and paranoia; the truth is that ritual forces are at work, which are greater than man.

One reason that the absence of visible or otherwise detectable results causes no concern is that large rituals are ends in themselves. A bureaucracy grows and does not mind a diminution of its effectiveness and an increase in waste provided that its rules and regulations are maintained and further developed. Vedic ritual manifests the same tendency to be absorbed in itself. The rites have no practical utility and have lost their original function, if ever they had one. The ritualists perform them not in order to obtain certain ends, but because it is their task. Lack of practical utility, incidentally, is a characteristic that ritual shares with many of the higher forms of human civilization. It may be a mark of civilization.

There is an analogy between rites which are without function, and ritual language which is without meaning. We have already observed that an important characteristic of Vedic ritual is the emphasis on recitation and chant. Under duress, ritual acts may be neglected, glossed over, or changed, but recitations must be maintained at all cost, and without modification. This has been the case in the past, and continues to be so in the present. The construction of the fire altar involves the deposition of more than a thousand bricks, of specific sizes and shapes, and in a complicated pattern. However, the physical deposition of the bricks is unimportant; what counts is their consecration by mantras. This is obvious from the simple fact that, though the order of bricks is ritually prescribed, the bricks are actually put down in any order, and not at the proper time. When they are consecrated, however, the prescribed order is adhered to and the correct time is observed. This emphasis on ritual consecration also explains the pebbles, mentioned before: they must have been introduced simply because there were more mantras than bricks. That this emphasis on mantras has been the same for at least 2500 years is demonstrated by a statement in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (9.1.2.17): "This fire altar is language, for it is constructed with language."

During the 1975 performance of the ceremony several changes were made. One of the most important was that no animals were killed during the fourteen animal sacrifices traditionally prescribed. The goats were represented by cakes made of a paste of rice flour. This modification did affect the rites, since it is not easy to kill rice cakes by strangulation and cut them open to take out particular internal organs. However, the mantras were recited in the prescribed manner and it was felt that the essence of the ritual was thereby preserved.

If it is remarkable that recitations are more important than acts, it is not less remarkable that these recitations are not generally understood. This unintelligibility is an inherent feature of mantras. It is not simply due

to the meaning having been forgotten. Whoever can remember a mantra can certainly remember its meaning. However, mantras are significant not as meaningful expressions, but as units recited on specific ritual occasions. In its purest form, this view was defended by the ancient ritualist Kautsa, according to whom the mantras are meaningless (see below, page 61). This is consistent with the fact that the formal features of the recitations and chants are ritually the most important. Hence the emphasis on syllables, meters, insertions, and transpositions, none of which make any sense in terms of meaning. An extreme example is provided by the Sixteenth Recitation (*Ṣoḍaśi-śastra*), which is also one of the most sacred and mysterious (Part II, Episode 29, pages 660–663).

In the history of the religions of India we increasingly meet with mantras that are unintelligible and mysterious, not because they have lost their original meaning, but because they had no meaning to begin with. A well-known example is the mantra OM, which originated in the Vedic recitations. Though an entire Upaniṣad is devoted to its interpretation, the interpretation is pure rationalization. Unlike language, such mantras are universal. They do not stand in need of translation. The abundance of such sacred noises in Buddhism facilitated its introduction into China, where their way was paved by the magical formulas of Taoism (cf. Staal 1979a).

In the case of the Sāmaveda chants, their meaninglessness is more obvious and admits of a simple explanation in historical terms. Basically the Sāmaveda consists of mantras, mostly taken from the Ṛgveda and set to music. The texts are adapted to the melodies, so that many words are changed and new syllables are inserted. Thus we meet in the chants with sequences such as: *hā yi* or *kā hvā hvā hvā hvā hvā*. Meaningful words may also be incorporated, e.g., *suvar jyotiḥ*. This expression has a meaning by itself ("celestial light") but not in its melodic or ritual setting. The chants of the Sāmaveda are often *Lieder ohne Worte*, "Songs without Words," as is indicated by their name, sāman, which means "melody" as well as "the hum of bees." Faddegon referred in this connection, quite appropriately, to "Ritualistic Dadaism" (1927), showing thereby—as did Wasson and Flattery—that the fashions of one period sometimes enable us to understand another.

In Vedic ritual the chants and recitations that accompany the acts are partly meaningless. This meaninglessness may be original or derived. A similar situation obtains with respect to the rites themselves. They are often devoid of function or outside reference, which again may be original or derived. A few illustrations will make this clear, and will show that this state of affairs is not confined to Vedic ritual.

Some of the earliest rituals of mankind seem to have originated in connection with the use of fire. As we shall see (Part I, page 78), carrying fire became a ritual activity as soon as it was no longer necessary, i.e., as soon as man had discovered methods for kindling fire. The two main types of ritual fire, "perpetual fire" and "new fire," represent the two main periods

in the history of fire, the early age of fire collecting and the later age of fire production. During the ceremonies that will be described in this book, there are seven occasions at which new fire was made by rubbing two pieces of wood together. At all other times the fires were kept. The making of new fire is not accompanied by mantras and is therefore less ritualized than the carrying of perpetual fire, which is generally accompanied by mantras and other rites. The historical explanation is that the transportation of fire is much older, and became superfluous much longer ago.

While many rites that pertain to fire go back to the early stages of human evolution, other Vedic rites reflect later and historical periods. Many rites are inspired by the adventures of Vedic nomads who entered the Indian subcontinent from the northwest (Part I, Chapter 5, p. 90). The sacred fire (going back to the Indo-European period) and the sacred Soma plant (going back to the Indo-Iranian period) are ritually transported from west to east, as they were carried by the Vedic nomads in the course of their eastward expansion. The priests recite battle hymns that make sense only in the context of these early adventures. The rites refer to enemies who are sometimes historical, at other times purely ritual. The modern performers are not aware of any of these historical roots, which are not reenacted or celebrated and are as unimportant to the ritual as the etymology of a word is to its meaning.

The cult of Soma, originally a hallucinogenic plant, has undergone the most massive ritualization. This is apparently connected with the fact that the original Soma was lost and replaced by substitutes at an early period (Part I, page 109). This is similar to the disappearance of features of the paleolithic hunt, which seem to survive only in ritual sacrifice. In this connection Burkert has sounded a warning: scholars are prone to assert that the original idea behind a ritual has been lost or misunderstood (1979, 38). In some cases it is likely that there never was an idea behind it. Even if there was, it is no longer functional in ritual performances, and is therefore without ritual significance.

The tendencies of rites to be without function and of ritual language to be without meaning are conspicuous in the area of Vedic ritual. This is not the place to enquire to what extent these are general characteristics of all ritual. If they are, this would offer a simple explanation for the inadequacies of the Western theories of ritual we have reviewed, for all theorists of ritual have assumed that ritual cannot merely have intrinsic value, but must be provided with meaning, function, or outside reference. If the assumption is wrong, this would indicate that theorists are in this respect not different from ordinary believers, who always assume that rites have special, if not extraordinary effects.

When Vedic ritual entered the counterculture in the United States, a center was set up in Randallstown, Maryland. It distributes a journal, pamphlets, and books that claim that ashes from the Agnihotra fire may cure fever, skin fungus, and ringworm, and alleviate cancer of the rectum. A

pharmaceutical firm in Bodensee, Switzerland is quoted as confirming these findings. Apparently, such specific cures are expected by Westerners, too sophisticated to be satisfied with health, strength, and immortality in general.[1] However, if we are able and willing to abandon our own specific expectations and desires and to immerse ourselves in the rites as they are performed, we realize that Vedic ritual is very different from a health cure, a psychoanalytic session, an anthropological meeting, or a religious service. When we begin to develop a sense for its structure and orchestration, we discern that the ritual resembles, at least structurally, a musical performance. As a matter of fact, some of the syntactic rules that ritual and language share are also found in music. The structures ABA, ABBA, ABCBA, and AABAA, for example, all occur in Bach's six sonatas for violin and harpsichord. Why men and probably some other animals use and delight in such structures and not in others, equally plausible or implausible, has not yet been explained.

6.

Words are not the most effective means for describing activities, ritual or ordinary. How simple it is to peel an apple, yet how cumbersome to describe that process in words, especially to someone who has never seen an apple or used a knife. With respect to rites, the task of their description was undertaken in the Śrauta Sūtras. It is also the principal aim of Part II of this book. In formulating the descriptions, I have experienced some of the problems with which Baudhāyana and other authors of Śrauta Sūtras were struggling more than 2,000 years ago. In the course of my work my admiration for them has grown. However, there is a difference between those manuals and the present publication. The Śrauta Sūtras, though fully explicit, address an audience of initiates and connoisseurs. The authors made judicious use of references, cross references, and abbreviations, all explained with the help of metarules (paribhāṣā). For example, in the Śrauta Sūtras of the Yajurveda, "he" always refers to the adhvaryu priest. Whenever an oblation is referred to, and is not otherwise specified, it is to be understood that it is an oblation of ghee, made by the adhvaryu into the sacrificial fire by means of the *juhū* ladle or by means of the *sruva* if the juhū is already otherwise employed. Vedic recitations, nowadays generally referred to by numbers, are quoted by the beginning words, the end being marked by the particle *iti.*

[1] Actually the Agnihotra center at Randallstown is not the first manifestation of Vedic ritual in American popular culture. The priority goes to Batman, as Michael O'Flaherty has shown. In the January, 1976, issue of the *Batman* journal, the hero is shown a slide of a mysterious rug and exclaims: "Just as I thought—the figure of *Agni*, the *Vedic god of the altar fire*! This is a *prayer rug* of an obscure sect of the *Vedas* . . . a most sacred object . . . In fact, even *photographing* it is considered *desecration*!"

The resulting prose is characterized by a highly nominalized, formulaic style, which—in some of the later texts—begins to resemble algebra.

By contrast, the present volume addresses an audience not merely of experts, be they Sanskritists, Indologists, or even Vedic ritualists. Throughout my work I have tried to keep in mind that my readers would be historians, anthropologists, psychologists, students of religion—in fact anyone interested in the great manifestations of civilization, provided he has the *Sitzfleisch* and reads from the beginning. Since the subject is explained ab ovo, the description is even longer than the relevant parts of the Śrauta Sūtras, composed for insiders, which are published and translated in the second volume. And yet, in spite of its intrinsic value, I would have hesitated to present a work so large and so exotic were it not for its audiovisual component. In fact, this component is better suited to its subject matter than the 250,000 words of the entire text. The photographs of the rites form an integral part of the book. The same holds with regard to the cassette tapes, which give an idea of the power of the oral tradition. I have found that Western traditions and sensibilities are such that most Westerners are attracted by the pictures but mystified by the recordings. It is good to plunge oneself into both before one undertakes any systematic reading. Ideally, readers should first see the film "Altar of Fire," which it has not been feasible to include in this package. This provides an immediate experience of some of the ceremonies, and after 45 minutes one has reached just that mixture of understanding and bewilderment that propels one to take on the book.

The organization of the book is straightforward. This first volume consists of two parts and a Bibliography. Part I provides the background. It deals with Vedic ritual in general, its sources and traditional interpretations, the historical and prehistorical background, and the community of the performers. As I have already indicated, much of this background, though interesting for the understanding of Indian culture and for a variety of other reasons, need not possess any ritual significance.

Part II of the first volume, its main part, offers a detailed description of the 1975 performance of the ritual. It is preceded by a description of the preparations that discusses time, space, materials, and personnel. The principles of the description, which is selective and nonbehavioristic, are explained in an Introductory Note (pages 274–276). The description is concerned with the 1975 performance, not with what is prescribed in the classical texts.

The second volume consists of three parts, numbered III-V. Part III is a collection of contributions by different scholars whose work illuminates the ritual from a variety of perspectives. Some of these authors attended the 1975 performance. Part IV contains texts and translations of the relevant ritual manuals. The first of these, Chapter 10 of the Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra, provides a detailed description of the Agnicayana ritual and should be compared with the description of Part II by anyone who wishes to study the difference between the classical tradition and the 1975 perfor-

mance. Part V gives a brief outline of the twenty hours of film and eighty hours of recordings made in 1975 under the direction of Robert Gardner, which were subsequently used in the production of the film "Altar of Fire." It also provides texts and translations of the material available on the accompanying cassettes. Finally, there are a Glossary and Indexes. There are cross references throughout, and each volume is separately introduced.