

Aksara

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*Journal of the American Oriental
Society*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (1959), 176-187.

of cases by *m^ehā* in the Targums.¹¹⁸ The distribution of 'weaver' will therefore be as follows: Akk. *išparu* (*māḥiṣu* and *kāmidu*); Ugar. *mḥṣ* and *ksd*; Phoen. (Punic) *ʿrg*; ¹¹⁹ Aram. *māḥē*; Arab. *nassāḡ*,

¹¹⁸ See Targum on Ex. 28:32; 35:35; 39:22, 27; II Sam. 21:19; II Kings 23:7; Is. 19:9; 59:5; Job 7:6. In some cases Heb. *ʾōrēg* is rendered by *gardāʾi(n)*. Cf. Targum on Jud. 16:14; I Sam. 17:7; II Sam. 21:19; Is. 38:12; Job 7:6. Note also Jud. 16:13 (*šēti*).

¹¹⁹ *Corpus Inscript. Semiticarum*, I (1881), No. 344, l. 3.

ḥāʾik.¹²⁰ We might add that the *māḥiṣu* in Alalakh was erroneously rendered 'wounded' by the editor,¹²¹ where, in all probability, the correct rendering should be 'weaver.'

¹²⁰ Cf. Saadia on Ex. 28:32; 35:35; 39:22, 27; Is. 19:9; 38:12; 59:5; Job. 7:6 (Darenbourg, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 122, 135, 140; *ibid.*, III, pp. 27, 57, 88; *ibid.*, V, p. 27).

¹²¹ D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets* (London, 1953), p. 158.

AKṢARA *

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A FEW YEARS AGO two distinguished indianists, Gonda¹ and Renou,² simultaneously expressed their dissatisfaction with the more or less accepted view on the semantic development of the term *brāhman*, from "sacred formula, hymn, etc." to "supreme principle." Both concurred in the opinion that the most ancient meaning,—most ancient in so far as it happens to be attested in the most ancient document, the R̥gveda,—is really too narrow to allow for the use of the term in *āraṇyaka* and *upaniṣad*, and must reflect the specialized usage in sacerdotal milieu of a more comprehensive significance. For Gonda the notion behind *brāhman* is that of a vast but not unspecific power of support and foundation which in the speech of the Vedic priest-poets was especially articulated as "ritual, sacred or magical utterance," the bearer of that power. For Renou the term signifies that powerful activity which by way of a putative original meaning "riddle, enigma" came to denote the very object of those riddles that sought to encompass the great cosmic coherence.

Reviewing their suggestions, a third vedicist, Thieme,³ disagreed with both. Rejecting both the

* This paper is partly based on a brief note which appeared in the *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 17 (1955-56), 204 ff., under the title "Notes on Akṣara."

¹ J. Gonda, *Notes on brahman* (Utrecht 1950).

² Louis Renou, "Sur la notion de 'brāhman,'" *JAs.* (1949), 7 ff.

³ Paul Thieme, "Brāhman," *ZDMG*, 102 (1952), 91 ff.

original meanings and etymologies proposed, he put forward a novel etymology of *brāhman* on the basis of an original meaning more construed from the meaning of supposed non-Sanskrit cognates than elicited from the unmistakable meaning of the Sanskrit texts. As Thieme himself to some extent recognizes, no one of the three attestations he quotes for this original meaning "formation, either of an embryo or of a poem" (RV. 10.61.7; 10.65.11; AitBr. 5.15.5) is really convincing. In fact, they are not very suggestive, and one may suspect that a meaning "formation" would not occur to someone who, while looking for still another etymology of *brāhman*, had not at once certain German uses of the verb "to form"⁴ and the mere possibilities of *βρέφ-ος* in mind from the outset. As this original meaning must be denied, the etymology based upon it (IE *mrég^{uh}-men-; *mre/og^{uh}- > *βρέφ-ος*, *μορφ-ή*, *brāh-man*) lacks urgency.

Committed to a methodological view-point which allows him to pronounce on the general meaning without exploring too far the actual denotations (etymology in one case, exegesis in the other, both sharply to be distinguished), Thieme is content to note for the upaniṣadic *brāhman* the meaning (*Bedeutung*) "die durch das Wort *brāhman* be-

⁴ Cf. his characteristic remark, o. c., p. 113: "Wenn *brāhman* im RV die (dichterische) Formulierung, also ein sprachliche Formung, bezeichnet, werden wir *ohne weiteres* [italics mine] vermuten, dass es ursprünglich "Formung" überhaupt bedeutete . . ."

zeichnete Kraft" and the denotation (*Sinn*) "das letzte Prinzip,"⁵ and thereby must remain fundamentally at cross-purposes with Gonda and Renou who attempted to find in this denotation a criterion to establish more precisely the meaning of *brāhman*. Yet their question is etymologically relevant: does in the functions of *brahman* as a universal principle survive a specific meaning which enabled just THIS word among several near synonyms to acquire those functions? By denying for the older texts the meanings they propose, Thieme has not really answered their question, and we must conclude that the question, and the answers suggested, still stand.

Renou raises the question: if *brāhman* as a word for sacred, etc., utterance could develop a meaning of "supreme principle," why had words with similar meanings, like *dhī*, *vāc*, *mantra*, *uktha*, *stoma* such a different fate?⁶ More meaningfully the question could be restated: is *brahman* the only word that underwent these semantic changes, and if so, why just *brahman*? We must immediately remark that of the five words enumerated, the first two may claim attention as parallels. *Vāc* as Prajāpati's consort and progenitrix of the world sometimes reaches an eminence entirely comparable to that of *brahman*. *Dhī* becomes identified with *buddhi*, the creator's self-recognition, and will, as the first product of creation, be the highest in the hierarchy of creative principles, like *brahman*. At another occasion⁷ I have tried to demonstrate that in *ahaṃkāra*, too, we have a term which, originally denoting an utterance, consequently assumed a role in world creation and the cosmology and psychology based on the creation process. Ex-

⁵ O. c., 121 f.

⁶ O. c., 7 ff. "entre la valeur de 'principe universel' (ou de quelque manière qu'on voudra l'appeler) qui est acquise dans les *brāhmaṇa* et déjà solidement fixée dans l'*Atharvaveda*, et la valeur de 'hymne' ou de 'formule' qu'atteste le *Rigveda* dans son ensemble, il y a un fossé difficile de franchir. Sans doute, l'intense spéculation qui dès l'origine a marqué tout ce qui touche à la 'parole' pouvait acheminer ce mot vers une pareille surrédiction d'emploi. Mais pourquoi ce vocable plutôt que tel autre, plutôt que des termes génériques comme *dhīh*, *vāk* ou *māntrah*, ou des termes déjà spécialisés comme *ukthām* ou *stōmam*?" Thieme agrees (o. c., 101): "Es ist schwer glaublich, dass ein Wort von der Bedeutung 'Formel, Hymnus' die Rolle übernehmen konnte, die *brāhman* später als Name des 'Absoluten' spielt. . . So weit stimme ich Renou völlig bei."

⁷ "Studies in Sāṃkhya (II), *Ahaṃkāra*," *JAOS*, 77 (1957), 15 ff.

amples, therefore, seem not to be wanting. Still it may be said that *brahman* is a principle of a different kind: but is it? Do we have in the case of *brahman* really a word of a different meaning, different from the meaning generally prevailing in the texts of the same milieu which later elevate it to its high status? After all that has been written about this word, it requires some temerity to produce another opinion and more presumption to believe oneself right. But there may be some heuristic value in approaching the question of *brahman* obliquely, not dealing with this term alone but with other terms which undoubtedly denoted an "utterance" and yet became a name for "the absolute." One of these terms, which in every phase of the ancient text occurs side by side with *brahman*, which seems to have had even less of a significant — philosophically significant — content than *brahman*, yet acquired even more rapidly than *brahman* itself this philosophical significance, appears to be especially relevant: not only because it proves that a word denoting some kind of an utterance could indeed denote God, but also because in its case, as well as in *brahman*'s, secondary connotations confirmed and continued its position when the original speculations about word and sound became obsolete. This term is *akṣara* "syllable."

Already in the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā akṣāra*⁸ claims the position of a supreme principle, without however for a moment ceasing to mean "syllable." So 1.164.41-42: *gaurīr mimāya salilāni tākṣaty; ekapādī dvipādī sā cātuspadī / aṣṭapādī nāvapādī babhūvūṣi saḥsraṅkṣarā paramē vyōman // tāsyāḥ samudrā ādhi vi kṣaranti tēna jīvanti pradīśas cātasaḥ / tātaḥ kṣaraty akṣāram tād vīsvam ūpa jīvati //* "the Buffalo-Cow has lowed, building lakes, having become one-footed, two-footed, four-footed, eight-footed, nine-footed, of a thousand syllables in the supreme heaven; on the rivers that flow out from her live the four quarters of space; therefrom flows the Syllable: on it lives all the world."

Even here a different rendering of *akṣāra* has been proposed. Geldner⁹ prefers to interpret the *akṣāra* on which all the world lives as "imperish-

⁸ I shall not enter into a discussion of *akṣāra* as against *akṣarā*, but follow here H. Oldenberg's opinion in "Vedische Untersuchungen 30, *akṣāra*, *akṣarā* im *Rigveda*," *ZDMG*, 63 (1909), 203 ff.

⁹ K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda I* (Cambridge Mass., 1951), *ad loc.*

able"—*a-kṣara*, a view against which Bergaigne had already protested.¹⁰ Geldner, however, suffers from a preconception about supreme beings:¹¹ not wishing to believe that a syllable could, as SYLLABLE, be a source of creation, he prefers a generally descriptive sense, without asking what to these thinkers was the imperishable, and why. But not only does the same term *akṣara* occur twice in the same context as syllable (39; 42 in *sahāsrākṣarā*), but the earliest commentaries on this passage leave no possible doubt that the disputed *akṣara* was firmly conceived of as "syllable," namely TaittS. 5.1.9.1 and JaimUpBr. 1.10.1, which we shall discuss presently.

The Cow of this mantra is unmistakably *Vāc*, the life-giving sacral Word, here represented as the roaring thunderstorm which announces the rainy season; just as the monsoon storms—like the cow—pour down their revivifying showers, building lakes which inundate the soil and sustain creation, so the Word manifests itself in the sacred formulae which, over the sacred fire in the sacrifice, bring about the rains. But the ultimate measure of the Word is the Syllable from which all formulae start and to which their power can be reduced. Without the knowledge of this first and ultimate, what use are the hymns? So ib. 39: *ṛcō akṣāre paramē vyōman yāsmīn devā ādhi viśve niśedūh / yās tān nā vēda kim ṛcā kariṣyati yā it tād vidūs tā imē sām āsate //* "what can he bring about with the hymn who does not know the Syllable in the supreme heaven in which the gods are seated? Only those who do know it are here sitting together in discussion."

Since the syllable is the smallest bit of speech that can be spoken and the first that must be spoken, it is conceived at once as the matrix and as the embryo of speech and all that can be effected by it. But for speech, that is the ritually powerful utterance, to be effective at all, it must be spoken in conjunction with the ritually powerful fire of the sacrifice. But this fire, too, is effective only in conjunction with the appropriate formulae. To-

¹⁰ A. Bergaigne, "Études sur le Lexique du Rigveda," *JAs* (1883), 480 ff.

¹¹ And appropriate statements about them, cf. his note ad 1, 164, 23 "hier steigt zunächst der Dichter von der Höhen des bisherigen Spekulation (i. e., the metaphors of 20-22) in die Niederungen der dichterischen Technik und rituellen Praxis hinab": but it is just through this technique and practice that most discussions about the supreme, even in the upaniṣads, become intelligible.

gether they originate, inseparable, in the womb of the true order.¹² Thus RV. 6.16.35-36: *gārbhe mātūh pitūspitā vididyutānō akṣāre / sīdann ṛtāsyā yōnim ā //* *brāhma prajāvad ā bhara jāta-vedo vicarṣane / āgne yād dīdayat divi //* "As Jātavedas, most excellent Fire, sparkling in the Syllable which is thy mother's womb, as thy father's father, seated in the womb of the true order, deliver the child-bearing *brāhman* which radiates in heaven."

The interdependence, the biunity, of Word and Fire could hardly be expressed more completely. Fire is contained in the germ of Speech, which is the Syllable; and the Syllable itself is the embryo which becomes the fully delivered *brahman*; but Fire is also wedded to Word, for without Fire the Word cannot even conceive the Syllable which is the germ of the ritually potent Formula, hence Fire is also the father of the Syllable which in its turn begets the powerful Fire of the sacrifice. The birth of Word and Fire is a cosmic event which is reproduced in the sacrificial area but happened primordially, at the beginning of creation, in heaven. But once reproduced in the sacrificial area, this area itself becomes the matrix of the cosmic order: it is the source from which the *brāhman*, the ritually powerful utterance, is born to beget offspring again,¹³ the source therefore of the everlasting continuity of the true order which, after its first initiation in heaven, is perpetuated ever since. Every single term at some time will become the epitome of this total conception: *etaj jyotir etad akṣaram etat satyam etad brahma*—it is almost a refrain in the upaniṣads.

Cosmically this event is summed up in the incomparable line, 3.55.1 ab: *uśasaḥ pūrvā ādha yād vyūśūr mahād vi jajñe akṣaram padē gōḥ* "when the ancient dawns first dawned the Great Syllable was born in the footstep of the Cow." The life-

¹² This is dramatized, for instance, at the *agniman-thana* ceremony. While the *yajamāna* drills the fire and the *sāmaveda* priests in the background chant the strengthening *sāmans*, the *hotar* holds himself ready to start reciting the appropriate mantras at the first wisp of smoke that will rise from the lower drilling block. When the drilling fails and the smoke disappears, the mantra, too, ceases; to start again when the smoke appears again. One can say that the mantra bears the fire, or that the fire begets the mantra. Cf. also RV 10.90.5 where *Puruṣa* begets *Virāj* and is himself borne by *Virāj*.

¹³ In the expression *brāhma prajāvad* we see the beginnings of *Prajāpati* and *Brahmā* the creator.

granting Voice calls the world into being by CALLING it; in the first foot—for the voice speaks poetry—arises the first syllable from which everything else will follow. The significant relation between Syllable and Sun will occupy us later.

Unless we understand the significance of the ritually effective Word for a class of priests for whom the cosmic order was predicated upon the ritual order, and the significance of the actual manifestation of that Word in the embryonic Syllable which grows into the fully potent *brāhman*, we shall misunderstand the more advanced speculations which are inspired by this central ritual event. If we render *akṣāra* as “imperishable,” why is what imperishable? The source of all continuity is Word and Fire; whatever is imperishable is imperishable just by virtue of this pair. *Akṣāra* is imperishable just BECAUSE it is the Syllable, the principle of continuity to which everything can be reduced and from which everything can be derived.

In an interesting text of the Sāmaveda tradition, the JaimUpBr. 1.1, we read an account of how the creator squeezed out the classes of creation whose juice or sap, i. e., their first principle, became a higher class. He continues to squeeze until he arrives at the very last principle of all classes of creation, the *akṣara*—*athaitasyākṣarasya rasam nāśaknod ādātum / om ity etasyaiva seyam vāg abhavat / om eva nāmaisā / tasyā u prāṇa eva rasaḥ* “he could not take the juice of this *akṣara*; of this *akṣara*, *OM*, the Word came to be, for the Word is indeed *OM*. The juice of Word is Breath, etc.” Thus, having found the ultimate, the irreducible, the creator starts creation; *akṣara*, that, through which the Word exists, can of course be nothing but “syllable.” Here the syllable is identified: it is the syllable *OM*.

Elsewhere creation is said to start from ether, which is not only the region of the sun but also the medium of sound and thus the natural substratum of the couple Fire and Word. This ether as prime principle evidently continues the *paramām vyòman*, with which the R̥gvedic *akṣāra*, *brāhman* and even the *brahmān*¹⁴ are so closely associated. Jaim

UpBr. 1.23.1 reads: *ayam evedam agra āsīt / sa u evāpy etarhi / (2)sa yas sa ākāśo vāg eva sā / tasmād ākāśād vāg vadati* “this (ether) was here at first. It is the same ether which is still here. This ether is Word, for the Word speaks from the ether.”

The term *akṣara* goes through an interesting evolution. On the one hand it exists on as a word for syllable in the grammatical sense of the word, on the other hand it retains the significance of first and last principle of the cosmic order and so its creator, a significance which it originally acquired just by meaning “syllable.” In one milieu it persists as a name for the absolute, however conceived of, is gradually, when the *Vāc* speculations become obsolescent (but rather later than we expect) reinterpreted as “imperishable” in order to rationalize its function as a supreme entity, and eventually (but later than the early metrical upaniṣads), it becomes an adjective. In another milieu, probably that of the Sāmaveda, *akṣara* was specifically identified with the syllable *OM*, which then takes over the role of being a name for the Supreme, until it becomes a symbol for Hinduism in very much the same way as the cross is a symbol for Christianity.

That *akṣara* is indeed imperishable inasmuch as it is “syllable” is clear from such passages as JaimUpBr. 1.23.3 ff. The Word that speaks from ether is squeezed out: its juice is the three-world universe, whose juice is the gods, whose juice is the triple Veda. The juice of the Veda is the three *vyāhṛtis*; of their juice it is said: *tad etad akṣaram abhavat OM iti yad etad* “that became the *akṣara*, namely *OM*.” The text continues (8) *sa etad akṣaram abhyapīlayat / tasyābhipīlitasya rasaḥ prāṇedat / (1.24.1) tad akṣarād eva / yad akṣarād eva tasmād akṣaram / (2) yad evākṣaram nākṣiyata tasmād akṣayam / akṣayam ha vai nāmaitat / tad akṣaram iti parokṣam ācakṣate* “he squeezed this *akṣara*; when it was squeezed juice trickled forth. That flowed, hence it is *akṣaya*. As the *akṣara* did not perish, therefore it is *akṣaya*. In fact, *akṣara* is really *akṣaya*; they call it *akṣara* to mystify.”¹⁵ As the syllable *OM*, *akṣara* is still

¹⁴ E. g., RV. 1.164.35. The natural medium of speech, and therefore the element where speech ‘originates,’ is ether, hence the equation of *paramām vyòman* and *brahmān* who is the medium of the sacred utterance is obvious. As Thieme rightly observes, “sein Dichten ist nur die Wiederholung der Urschöpfung der Wahrheitsformulierung *en miniature*.” (o. c., p. 112). Cf. also

RV. 10.90.12 where the Puruṣa’s mouth becomes the Brahmin.

¹⁵ The popular etymology *yad akṣarād eva tasmād akṣaram* raises the question of the etymology of the word, which was apparently a problem for these thinkers. On the one hand it does not “flow” any more, being the irreducible source (JaimUpBr. 1.1), yet it

“syllable”; yet *OM* has already usurped so much of *akṣara*'s supremacy that there are attempts to reinterpret the term as “that which flowed into the world,” and “that which does not perish.” So *akṣara* has a tendency to become an attribute to *OM*, instead of *OM* a specification of “syllable.” Generally, however, it remains one expression: *OM ity etad akṣaram*.

The relation between *akṣara* as *OM* and the three *vyāhrtis* is interesting. These utterances, *bhūh bhuvah svaḥ*, represent the three worlds, in fact there are accounts¹⁶ that the three worlds arose through their formulation. But all three are contained in *OM*3. So ChUp. 2.23.3-4 *prajāpatir lokān abhyatapat / tebhyo 'bhītaptebhya trayī vidyā samprāravat / tām abhyatapat / tasyā abhītaptyā etāny akṣarāṇi samprāravanta bhūh bhuvah svar iti / tāny abhyatapat / tebhyo 'bhītaptebhya omkārah samprāravat / tad yathā śāṅkunā*¹⁷ *sarvāṇi parṇāni samtrṇṇāny evam omkāreṇa sarvā vāk samtrṇṇā / omkāra evedam sarvam*.

The same speculation occurs in JaimUpBr. 1.10.1-2 where it forms part of an exegesis of RV 1.164.41-42: *sā prthak salīlam kāmādughā *takṣati*¹⁸ *prānasamhitam cakṣuśśrotam manasā vyāptam hrdayāgram . . . sahasrākṣaram ayutadhāram . . . amṛtam duhānā sarvān imān lokān abhi vikṣaratīti* “She, milch-cow of desires, yielding (as her milk) the elixir of immortality, build-

“flows out” into creation (RV. 1.164.42; JaimUpBr. 1.24.1). It is interesting to note that another etymology has been proposed just for *akṣara* “syllable.” *āsnoter vā saro 'kṣaram*, i. e., *as* — *sara* → *akṣara* (Mahābhāṣya ad Siddhāntaśloka-vārttikā post 1.1.8), which Bhāskara also exploits for *akṣara* “Supreme Being”: *āsnoti vyāpnoti svavikārān ity akṣaram* (Brahmasūtrabhāṣya 1.2.22, which deals with Yājñavalkya's *Akṣara*, below). The root *KṢAR-* is used for the “flowing” of speech (RV. 1.181.7; 8.46.6; 8.50.4); is in *akṣara* “non-flowing” just this irreducible ultimate of metrical speech understood from the beginning?

¹⁶ E. g., MaitrUp. 6, 3.

¹⁷ We can do away with the meaning *śāṅku* “Blatt-rippe” (pw s. v. 4), based on Hemacandra, *Anekār- . . . thasamgraha* 2.17 “*patrasirajāla*” (which was probably also deduced from the same passage); in the parallel JaimUpBr. 1.10.2 we have *sūci* for *śāṅku*: *yathā sūcyā palāśāni samtrṇṇāni syur evam etenākṣare- neme lokās samtrṇṇāh*. The idea is certainly that of herb-leaves stuck on a stake to dry.

¹⁸ Oertel's text (JAOS, 16 [1894], 49 ff.) reads *kāmādughākṣiti*, which makes no sense. Oertel renders “she that milks immortality possessing individual oceans (?),” thereby also taking medial *duhānā* in an active sense. I take *akṣiti* as a corruption of *takṣati* from the RV passage which it paraphrases.

ing (?) separate lakes, composed with breath, possessed of sight and hearing, rich in speech, pervaded by mind, culminating from the heart¹⁹ . . . with a thousand syllables, ten thousand streams,²⁰ flows out into all these worlds.” Incidentally such passages raise the question whether the popular notion of the *kāmadhuk* does not ultimately derive from the representation of *Vāc* as a cow. ChUp. 1.3.5 in an entirely comparable context has: *dugdhe 'smāi vāg doham yo vāco doho 'navān annādo bhavati ya etāny evam vidvān udgīthāksarāny upāsta ud-gī-tha iti*.

That the connection between *akṣara* “syllable” and the syllable *OM* was first laid in Sāmavedic circles cannot be proved. But we note that this explicit connection remains confined in the older texts to the Sāmaveda, notably the JaimUpBr. and the closely related ChUp.; implicitly the same connection is found also elsewhere, as we shall see. In any case, the Sāmavedic interest must reflect a sacerdotal preoccupation which was conspicuously articulated in the *agniṣṭoma* ritual itself. Noteworthy in the ChUp. is the special relation between *OM* and *udgītha*, which, as far as I can see, does not occur before. Why specially the *udgītha*? The *udgītha* may begin with *OM*, but the *prastāva* ends with it, and generally the cry *OM!* is the commonest sound heard at the sacrifice, as the present writer, who once attended every minute of one of the more elaborate derivatives of the *agniṣṭoma*, can testify. There must be a special relevance in the equation *OM = udgītha*.

There is. At the three climaxes of the *agniṣṭoma* ceremonial, the three soma pressings, the *udgītha* is chanted in a most curious way. In the *sāmans* proper to these stages, the *pavamānastotras*, the *udgītha* is chanted with *aniruktagāna*. This “chanting without actually pronouncing” is done by substituting the sound *O* for every syllable, so that for example the first *udgītha* of the *bahīṣpavamānastotra*, which reads *pavamānāyēndave abhi*

¹⁹ RV *ékapadi* explained as *prāṇa-samhitam*, where *prāṇa* must be regarded as the first manifestation, the first creation; *dvīpadi* as *cakṣuḥ* and *śrotra*; *cātuṣpadi* as *vāc*, which is of course four-footed; *aṣṭāpadi* as *manas* is beyond me; *nāvapadi* as *hrdaya*, possibly on account of the *navadvāram puram*? The translation of *hrdayāgram* is uncertain.

²⁰ *ayutadhāram* is obviously inspired by *sahasrākṣaram*, which the author apparently associated with an *akṣara* somehow understood as “flow.”

devām iya- (ṚV. 9.11.1 = SV 651; 763) is actually sounded as

OM-O²-O²-O²-O¹-O¹-O¹-O¹-O¹-O¹-O¹1212.

When one hears it chanted, it sounds like the repetition of the initial *OM* with which the *udgītha* begins. And that is what it must have been: LātṢS. 7.10.20 prescribes here: *śeṣam udgātā manasā tu svabhaktim omkāraṃ tathā svaram vācā gāyet* “the *udgātā* must chant the remaining portion (i. e., after the *prastāva*); his actual part, however, he must chant in thought, (having the words themselves in mind), and just the *Omkāra* and also (its) vowel with the voice.” Caland²¹ quotes a *prayoga* which explains: *omkāreṇākṣarāṇi cchādayan vācā gāyet* “he (the *udgātā*) must chant (the *udgītha*) aloud with his voice while concealing the actual syllables with *OM*.”

This practice itself, which can be dated with the ChUp., must have originated from esoteric speculations about the Syllable, esp. the syllable *OM*, and the actual *brahman*²² of the mantra. The function of the *sāman*, stepchild of Vedic and ritual research, in the sacrifice is really most important. Perhaps one must have heard it chanted at a sacrifice to appreciate this point. It is the fullest manifestation of the sound of the mantra, the very generator of the power of the sacral word which is drawn upon at certain stages in the ceremonial. Just at the climaxes of the ritual the actual words do not even seem enough; their very principle, the ultimate Word is enunciated, instead of the manifest words that from it derive their efficacy.

The identification of *akṣara* with a definite syllable, *OM*, marks another stage in the development of the term. *Akṣara* is no longer the syllable as such, which derives its importance from the fact that it measures ritual utterances, metres, etc.,²³

²¹ Caland-Henri, *L'Agniṣṭoma* (Paris, 1906-07), p. 180, § 134, n. 38. In the Vājapeya ritual which I attended all three pavamānastotras were executed this way. In the final *udgītha* the *O* was replaced by an *A*, which is an even subtler evocation of the ultimate, inspired, if I am right, by the *A* of *AUM* into which *OM* is eventually analyzed. This analysis is, however, comparatively late and does not seem to start before the later *upanīṣad* stratum; the triad understood in *OMṢ* is at first that of *bhūḥ bhuvah svah*, with which the syllable is so closely connected; and only when this triadic *OM* was thus established, the esoteric *AUM* speculations began.

²² The fully articulated formula.

²³ As, e. g., RV. 1.164.24.

but a certain syllable, or rather sound, which is the hypostasized *brahman* and from which the Veda and hence the world originates. That just *OM* became the *akṣara*, par excellence, allows, at least partially, of explanation. It is striking that in various passages, where this supremacy of *OM* is speculated upon, the triadic cosmological patterns that gain in importance through *brāhmaṇa* and *āraṇyaka* are elaborated. In *OM = udgītha*, *ud-gī-tha* sums up in its three syllables whatever triads the author may care to think of. Likewise, in the speculations about *OM bhūḥ bhuvah svah*, where the three *vyāhrtis* are thought to manifest the three *mātrās* of *OMṢ*. There is little doubt that the *pluta* pronunciation of *OM*, which already in the *śikṣopaniṣad* of the Taittirīyas is elaborated,²⁴ further contributed to the selection by these esoteric phoneticians of this syllable of consent as the syllable that epitomizes the universal pervasiveness of the ritual word.

As could be expected, the same development of *akṣara* is found in milieux which did not necessarily connect the Syllable with *OM*. In TaittS. 5.1.9.1, evidently inspired by ṚV. 1.164.42, it is both a metrical unit (as in ṚV. 1.164.24) and the source of creation: *ṣaḍbhir dikṣayati ṣaḍ vā ṛtava ṛtubhir evainam dikṣayati / saptabhir dikṣayati sapta chandāmsi chandobhir viśvo devasya netur ity anuṣṭubhottamayā juhōti / vāg vā anuṣṭup tasmāt prānānām vāg uttamā / ekasmjād akṣarād anāptam padaṃ tasmād yad vāco 'nāptam taṃ manusyā upa jīvanti / pūrṇayā juhōti / pūrṇa iva hi prajāpatiḥ prajāpater āptyai / nyūnayā juhōti / nyūnād dhi prajāpatiḥ prajā asṛjanta / prajānām sṛṣṭyai* “he consecrates him with six (verses): the seasons are six, so he consecrates with the seasons; he consecrates with seven (verses): the metres are seven, so he consecrates with the metres. He pours the oblation with the last *anuṣṭubh*, *viśvo*, etc.; the *anuṣṭubh* is Word, hence Word is the best of the Breaths. The *pāda* is incomplete by one syllable; therefore men live on that which is the incomplete part of the Word. He pours with the complete Word,—for *Prajāpati* is, so to say, complete,—in order to have *Prajāpati* complete. He pours with the incomplete Word,—for from the deficient

²⁴ TaittUp. 1.5-6; cf. also MaitrUp. 6.3 and 6.5, which, as I hope to show in a forthcoming study *The Maitri and Maitrāyaniya upaniṣads* are concerned with the *agnyādhāna* and *agnihotra* speculations of the *Maitrayaniyas*.

part of the Word did Prajāpati create the creatures,—in order to create the creatures.”

In this brief but very pregnant piece of exegesis several notions are blended. There is first the Syllable on which all the world lives. But this idea is combined with another, the division of the Word in a higher and a lower part, the complete and the incomplete Word; cf. RV. 1. 164.45 where the incomplete part of Vāc is spoken by men (*turīyaṃ vāco manuṣyā vadanti*). This idea is of course the same as that which underlies the division of the Puruṣa (RV. 10.90.3). All these ideas are interrelated in the conception of the uttered/unuttered Vāc — created/uncreated Prajāpati. The unuttered, uncreated and hence still incomplete Creator formulates and completes himself in self-creation out of the unuttered Word which is the Syllable.

Here, as in the JaimUpBr., as in fact already in the R̥gveda, *akṣara* “syllable” transcends uttered speech: it is the subtle, germinal principle of the Word, the unborn embryo which when born will be the Word that is creation. This is expressed in a later text, MuṇḍUp. 1.1.4-5 as follows: *dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma yad brahmavido vadanti parā cāparā ca / tatrāparā r̥gvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedaḥ śikṣā kalpaḥ vyākaraṇam niruktaṃ chando jyotiṣam iti/ atha parā yayā tad akṣaram adhigamyate* “the experts in Vedic lore say that there are two sciences to learn, a higher and a lower one; the lower one consists in the three Vedas and the Vedāngas; the higher science is that through which the *akṣara* is learnt.” Ib. 7 continues: *tathākṣarāt sambhavatīha viśvam* “from the *akṣara* all in this world originates,” and, ib. 1.2.13, *tasmai sa vidvān . . . yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tāṃ tattvato brahmavidyām* “he who possessed the science taught the other that which is truly the brahman-science, so that he would know the *akṣara*, the *puruṣa*, the *satya*.” The knowledge of the *akṣara*, or the *brahmavidyā* ‘proper’ (*tattvataḥ*), evidently concerns the esoteric connotations of the Syllable, which is the hypostasized, the higher *brahman*, in contrast to the lower *brahman* “Vedic lore.” Similarly MāṇḍUp. 1 *Om ity etad akṣaram idaṃ sarvam / tasyopavyākhyānam—bhūtaṃ bhavad bhaviṣyad iti sarvam oṃkāra eva / yac cānyat trikālātītam tad apy oṃkāra eva / sarvaṃ hy etad brahmāyam ātmā brahma so ’yam ātmā catuṣpāt* “all this is the syllable *OM*. The explanation of this: *OM* is everything, in past, present and future; *OM* is also

that which is beyond the three times. For this *brahman* is indeed all; *brahman* is this *ātman*, and this *ātman* consists of four quarters.”²⁵ Here we meet the same equation *akṣara OM = brahman = ātman*, but *akṣara/brahman* include the lower science of the lower creation.

In the last quotations we have passed the line beyond which all translators derive the word *akṣara*, not from the old “syllable” of immediately preceding texts, but from another *akṣara*, mfn. “imperishable.” But is there really any valid reason to assume that the *akṣara* of the later *upanīṣads*, Mokṣadharmā literature and the Bhagavadgītā is genetically a different concept from “syllable as the ultimate measure of ritually potent speech — source of creation — unuttered transcendent principle of speech—*OM* as the subtle germ of the *Veda*—syllable as the womb and embryo of the *brāhman*,” which we have met so far? This is not to quibble about translations (in fact, we ought to leave *akṣara* at one stage untranslated because it has become a kind of proper name), for evidently *akṣara* no longer means just “syllable.” But neither does it mean just “imperishable”; it is not synonymous with descriptive words like *akṣaya*, *nitya*, *dhruva*, and the like, for in later texts *akṣara* still carries along the connotations and associations that went with *akṣara* “syllable.”

Before we enlarge on the interesting implications of the usage of *akṣara* in the metrical *upanīṣads*, we have to deal with Yājñavalkya’s well-known discourse²⁶ on *akṣara*, which is the first occurrence of the so-called “new” *akṣara*, “Imperishable Being.” The famous *adhvaryu* is questioned by his wife Gārgī about the first principles of the cosmos: What is the frame on which are woven that which is above heaven, that which is below the earth, and that which is in between? (The formulation itself is quite interesting: there is an attempt to sum up a vaster universe than the old universe of the three worlds, but even this vaster universe can only be viewed from the triadic pattern set by those three worlds.) Yājñavalkya’s reply is: *ākāśa*: ether, region of the sun, medium of the word, is from of old a very high and therefore a very original entity. But Gārgī insists: on what is *ākāśa* woven? In another, less digested, version²⁷ Yājñavalkya tells her to hold her tongue:

²⁵ That is to say, the COMPLETE *ātman*.

²⁶ BĀUp. 3.8.

²⁷ BĀUp. 3.6.

“Don’t ask too much, Gārgī, lest your head fly apart!” But here the adhvaryu goes on: *ākāśa* is woven on *akṣara*. The statement lacks surprise after the JaimUpBr. speculations about the primacy of *akṣara* side by side with the primacy of *ākāśa* which is *vāc*, or even after the RV. passages where *akṣara* was closely associated with the *paramām vyòma*. Yājñavalkya’s important contribution here is that *akṣara* is described as a completely transcendent entity; and the tendency which we followed through the Syllable’s equivalencies with *OM* and its narrow connections with the unformulated, uncreated, still incomplete creator, has now reached its climax: *tad akṣaram Gārgi brāhmaṇā abhivadanty asthūlam ananv ahrasvam alohitam arusam acchāyam atamo vāyv anākāśam asaṅgam arusam agandham acakṣuskam aśrotram avāg amano tejaskam aprāṇam amukham amātram anantarabāhyam na tad aśnāti kiṃcana na tad aśnāti kaścana*. Still, however rarified²⁸ this *akṣara*, this completely transcendent entity has now become, the old associations of the Syllable cannot help persisting: at the behest of the *Akṣara* exists the true order of the world: sun and moon, heaven and earth, year and its divisions, eastward and westward rivers behave as they should; and this cosmic order is, as indeed we would expect from the celebrated adhvaryu whose name perpetuates his brilliance at sacrifices, firmly based in the ritual order: “at²⁹ the behest of this *Akṣara*, O Gārgī, people praise the generous (so praise) the gods the (generous) yajamāna and so do the deceased ancestors who depend on the oblation.” And again he echoes the R̥gvedic poet (“what use are the hymns if one does not know the syllable?”) in the immediate sequel:³⁰ “if one does not know this *Akṣara*, then one’s oblations, sacrifices and austerities for many thousands of years in this world will come to an end; and when one departs from this world without knowing the *Akṣara*, one is miserable.”

Though it be true that Yājñavalkya’s *Akṣara* is

²⁸ In PraśnUp. 4.9 the *viññānātman* that is the CREATED *Akṣara* is described as the positive counterpart of this negative uncreated *Akṣara*.

²⁹ *etasya vā akṣarasya praśāsane Gārgi dadato manuṣyāḥ praśamsanti yajamānaṃ devā darvīm pitaro nvāyattāḥ*.

³⁰ *yo vā etad akṣaram Gārgy aviditvāsmiṃ loka juhōti yajati tapas tapyata bahūni varṣasahasrāni antavad evā-sya tad bhavati yo vā etad akṣaram Gārgy aviditvāmāl lokāt praiti sa kṛpaṇaḥ*.

highly abstract (but this qualification is objectionable), in fact more so than in many occurrences in the chronologically later metrical upaniṣads, we have no reason to assume that this *akṣara* is genetically different from *akṣara* “syllable, etc.” The predominantly transcendental connotations are the last phase of a tendency that we see start long before, when the term still clearly reveals its original meaning. Increasingly, *akṣara* loses its more ancient functions as “syllable” but retains the connotations “first and fundamental principle of the cosmic order,” which it acquired by meaning “syllable.”

When we now turn to the later vicissitudes of the word, we must keep in mind that, however absolute some statements may sound about the primacy and supremacy of Word and Syllable—whether *vāc*, *akṣara*, *brahman*, *ahamkāra*—, in the background hovers the one who spoke it. In the older upaniṣads there is a persistent effort to do away with this dualism, which continues, or repeats in other terms, that of the male and female progenitors of the mythopoeic age. But this may be more appearance than reality; for, though in the supremes of the upaniṣads the “male” Fire as against the “female” Word are completely blended, yet the one entity thus obtained retains dual features. *Vāc*, as Prajāpati’s partner, may do entirely without him in appearance, but *Vāc*’s most significant expressions, *akṣara* and *brahman*, effortlessly take on “male” or “personal” functions. This rudimentary dualism becomes virtually indistinguishable from another dualism: the self-creating creator is represented in different phases, that of the still UNCREATED, unmanifested creator, and that of the CREATED creator. The created creator, *puruṣa*, *ātman*, etc., then assumes the functions which we describe as “male.” Yet, since this self-creation is often a self-formulation, the relation may be inverted and the second phase is then the “female.” We do well to keep these two dualistic patterns distinct, for through them we can in part account for the bewildering variety of conceptions about the Supreme which the older and later upaniṣads evidence.

It is in this complex pattern that we find terms like *akṣara* and *brahman* used in the later upaniṣads, which reflect the opinions of a greater variety of thinkers and schools than the older, more brahmanistic ones. We find that key-terms have lost many of their sacerdotal relevancies and exist on

as names of high-ranking principles, whose position in creation hierarchies was not fixed. If in one text we find *akṣara* and *brahman* described as a transcendent supreme being divorced from creation, and in another as almost female sources of creation, or even as the lower (i. e., actual) creation itself, we do not have shifts in the meaning of the terms so used, but a varying treatment of the problem of creation. A term does not 'mean' *prakṛti* here and inactive male person there, but the term is used as a name for a creative agent or agency who or which may be divided in different stages, phases or aspects, to anyone of which the name, from among a wide selection of names, may get attached. Anyone of the associations that went with the originally more comprehensive, less analytically distinguished conception, may emerge as a henceforth fixed principle and the name of a more comprehensive entity out of that more comprehensive complex may continue as the name of a more specialized principle.

Akṣara illustrates neatly all these possibilities. Take for example the special use of *akṣara* with *puruṣa* which will end with the noun becoming an adjective to *puruṣa*, paralleled by *brahman* becoming *Brahmā*. The association of Syllable and Person starts long before. We saw our term, unmistakably "syllable," figure in a creation context with Prajāpati who created the creatures from the incomplete Word, the unuttered Syllable. In JaimUpBr. 1.43 *akṣara* is identified with the *puruṣa*, for "etymologic" reasons first with the person in the eye, who is then equated with Prajāpati: (8-10) *katamat tad akṣaram iti / yat kṣaran nākṣīyateti / katamat tat kṣaran nākṣīyateti / indra iti / katamas sa indra iti / yo 'kṣan ramata iti / katamas sa yo 'kṣan ramata iti iyaṃ devateti / so 'yaṃ cakṣusi puruṣa eṣa indra eṣa prajāpatiḥ / sa samah prthivyā sama ākāsena samo divā sarveṇa bhūtena / eṣa paro divo dīpyate / eṣa evedam sarvam ity upāsītavyah.*

This equation of *akṣara* and *puruṣa* is also implicit in ChUp. 8.3.5; here *satyam* is syllabized as *sat-ti-yam* to support a triadic inventory of the cosmos entirely comparable to that of *ud-gi-tha* in ChUp. 1, which is *akṣara*. To the three syllables correspond *bhūḥ bhuvah svah*, which are not only the universe, but the "spoken" universe; in other words, the three *vyāhrtis* stand to the creator as the creation stands to *akṣara*. This SPOKEN universe or creation is equal to the CREATED creator, the *puruṣa*, whose highest phase is represented

cosmically in the sun, microcosmically in the eye. Not only are the connections between the *vyāhrtis* and *OM* very close—the complete formula has *OM* either preceding or following—, *OM* being their source and subtle container, but also are the parallel relations of *OM*—*vyāhrtis* and *puruṣa*—creation (as is already implicit in 8.3.5), really the same relation: *puruṣa*—*udgītha* (ChUp. 1.6.6-8) or *OM*—*udgītha* (ChUp. 1.1).

The same is stated in the old MaitrUp. 6.3 *dve vāva brahmaṇo rūpe mūrtaṃ cāmūrtaṃ ca / atha yan mūrtaṃ tad asatyam / yad amūrtaṃ tat satyam tad brahma taj jyotiḥ / yaj jyotiḥ sa ādityah / sa vā eṣa om iti / etad ātmābhavat / sa tredhātmanaṃ vyaguruta / om iti tisro mātrāḥ / etābhiḥ sarvam idam otaṃ protaṃ caivāsminn iti.* In Yājñavalkya's account, which the last line recalls, this same *akṣara*, at whose behest (*praśā-sana*) the cosmic order is maintained, has similar personal features in spite of its thorough-going depersonalization. The personalization of *akṣara* continues and seems to increase in popularity, just as the personalization of *brāhman* as *Brahmā*.³¹ This process was assisted by the more ancient connections between Word and Fire, which are interdependent in their cosmic significance; the ritual fire is more consciously identified with the sun (and, on the *adhyātma* level, with the digestive fire, the *prāṇa* and the eye) and this identification is enacted ritually in *agnicayana* and *agnyā-dhāna*.³² But already in RV. 3.55.1 the Great Syllable is born in the footstep of the cow at the first appearance of DAWN.

The solar *puruṣa*, the one beyond the sky, who in JaimUpBr. and ChUp. is equated with the *akṣara*, *OM*, is also the creator; and inasmuch as the creator himself is a person, *OM* is *ātman* and *puruṣa*. All these notions are present in such lines as PraśnUp. 5.5 *yaḥ punar etaṃ trimātreṇom ity etenaivākṣareṇa paraṃ puruṣam abhidhyāyīta sa tejasī sūrye saṃpannaḥ*.³³ This *akṣara*, *OM*, is equated with *brahman* (5.1) *etad vai satyakāma paraṃ cāparaṃ ca brahma yad omkāraḥ / tasmād vidvān etenaivāyatanenaikataram anveti*, and from 5.7 we learn that this syllable, *OM*, gives access to

³¹ On the relation of *Brahmā* to *brāhman* from a different viewpoint, see Gonda, o. c., 62 ff.

³² I must refer the reader to the study announced in note 24.

³³ "He who will represent the supreme person with this triadic syllable *OM* will find perfection in *tejas*, in the sun."

the highest world: *ṛgbhir etaṃ yajurbhir antarikṣaṃ sāmabhir yat tat kavayo vedayante / tam oṃkāreṇāvāyatanenānvēti vidvān yat tac chāntam ajaram amṛtam abhayaṃ paraṃ ceti*. The world to which the knowledge of the Sāmaveda gives access is certainly the heaven, from among the three worlds summed up in the person of the created creator, earth, atmosphere, heaven. The knowledge of all three Vedas together is the *aparaṃ brahma*, the lower Word as in MuṇḍUp. 1.1.4-5; whereas the transcendent Veda, the *akṣara* or higher *brahman*, leads one to the very highest point, the beginning and therefore the end. *Akṣara* and *Brahman* are two names of the same supreme: KāthUp. 2.16 *etad dhy evākṣaram brahmaitad dhy evākṣaram param / etad dhy evākṣaram jñātvā yo yad icchati tasya tat*.

In texts like the PraśnUp., where *akṣara* is a neuter noun in all other occurrences, there is no reason to treat it as an adjective in 4.9, however deceptive the context: *eṣa hi draṣṭā spaṣṭā śrotā ghrātā rasayitā mantā boddhā kartā vijñānātmā puruṣaḥ / sa pare 'kṣare ātmani sampratiṣṭhati* "this puruṣa who is . . . the *vijñānātmā*,³⁴ is based upon the supreme, the *akṣara*, the *ātman*." Cf. 4.10 *vijñānātmā saha devaiḥ ca sarvaiḥ prānā bhūtāni sampratiṣṭhanti yatra / tad akṣaram vedayate yas tu somya sa sarvajñāḥ sarvam āviveṣeti*, where *akṣaram*, n., is equated with, but not adjectival to, the omniscient, all-pervading *ātman*.

But, as we pointed out, *akṣara* may continue as some kind of "female"³⁵ principle of creation, subordinated to an aloof person. So MuṇḍUp. 2.1. 1-3 reads *tathākṣarād vividhāḥ somya bhāvāḥ prajāyante tatra cavāpiyanti / divyo hy amūrtāḥ puruṣaḥ . . . akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ / etasmāj jāyate prāṇo manāḥ sarvendriyāṇi ca*, where this person is indeed higher than *Akṣara*, and is the *para* because he is before and beyond creation. But how mobile these hierarchies still are is shown by ib. 2.2.2-3 *tad arcimad yad aṇubhyo 'ṇu ca yasmīn lokā nihitā lokinaś ca / tad etad akṣaram brahma sa prāṇas tad u vān manāḥ / tad etat satyaṃ tad amṛtam tad veddhavyaṃ somya viddhi . . . tad evākṣaram somya viddhi*.

Just as there is a higher and a lower *brahman*,

so we find a higher and a lower *akṣara*. ŚvetUp. 1.7 *udgītam etat paramaṃ tu brahma tasmims trayam supratīṣṭhākṣaram ca / atrāntaram brahmavidō viditvā linā brahmaṇi tatparā yonimuktāḥ* "this is explained to be the supreme brahman: in it are the triad and their firm basis, the *Akṣara* . . ." This *Akṣara* is the higher one, on which the triad, e. g. *bhūr bhuvāḥ svah*, or a successor triad like the *guṇas*³⁶ is based. The lower *akṣara* is the *kṣaram* which is related to the *akṣaram* as *vyaktam* is to *avyaktam* (ŚvetUp. 1.8; 1.10). This *avyakta* is not yet entirely the primordial matter of Sāṃkhya, but still rather the creator's state before creation, just as *akṣara* was the unuttered Word from which Prajāpati created the creatures. And just as *Brahman* may comprise both its higher and lower phases, so occasionally *Akṣara*: BhG. 11.18 *tvam akṣaram paramaṃ veditavyam* "thou art to be known as the *Akṣara*, the supreme," is followed in 11.37 by *tvam akṣaram sad asat tatparam yat*: "thou art the *Akṣara*: the reified, the unreified and that which lies beyond them," which recalls BĀUp. 2.3. where the lower *rūpa* of *brahman* is *sat* "reified," almost "solidified," the higher form *asat* "unreified," beyond which is yet another stage, the *satyasya satyam*,³⁷ the Puruṣa. But the author, or one of the authors, of the Gītā still remembers the Vedic and sacerdotal significance of the name. After having declared that he is supreme, as the Sāmaveda is supreme among the Vedas (10.22), Kṛṣṇa says *girām asmy ekam akṣaram* "I am supreme, as the One Syllable is supreme among words."³⁸ In 3.15 *Akṣara* is a higher principle than *Brahman*: *karma brahmodbhavaṃ viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam / tasmāt sarvagataṃ brahma nityaṃ yajñe pratiṣṭhitam* "ritual action derives from the *brahman*, and the *brahman* from the *akṣara*; therefore the all-pervading *brahman* is based eternally upon ritual worship." Edgerton³⁹ notes here that this "brahman clearly equals *prakṛti*"; but the whole passage (3.9-15) is devoted to ritual, and *brahman* in this context can scarcely be anything but the old *brahman* "Vedas and Vedāṅgas," higher than which is the "science that is brahman-science proper,"

³⁶ Cf. my remarks in "Studies in Sāṃkhya III; *Sattva*," *JAOS*, 77 (1957), 88 ff.

³⁷ I refer to my observations in "Vācārambhaṇam reconsidered," *IJJ*, 2 (1958), 4.

³⁸ And *gir* is esp. the solemn utterance.

³⁹ Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad-Gītā* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), *ad loc.*

³⁴ The *vijñānātman* is the created puruṣa, which relates to the uncreated *Akṣara* as the *vijñānamaya ātman* of TaittUp. 2 to the *ānandamaya ātman*, the *buddhi* of the old Sāṃkhya to the *puruṣa*, etc., etc.

³⁵ For *brahman*, cf. such usages as *brahmayoni*, ŚvetUp. 5.6; MuṇḍUp. 3.1.3; BhG. 14.3-4.

the *akṣara* (MuṇḍUp. 1.2.13.). But ultimately Edgerton is right again in that this *brahman* is a lower *brahman*, the actually manifested *brahman*, which indeed corresponds with the manifest creation.

Gradually we see that *Akṣara*, and so, it would seem, *Brahman*, too, are so exclusively viewed under the aspect of their creativeness, their power to bring things about, even creation as a whole, that original functions of "syllable," "ritually effective utterance," of which functions this creativeness was the most important aspect, themselves become obsolescent. Thus the 'evolution' of the functions in which the terms are used is really the evolution of the creation doctrines with which they were linked up inseparably. Several terms are levelled, *puruṣa*, *ātman*, *akṣara*, *brahman*, *avyakta*, *sattva*, etc.; as supreme creative principles, as names of the "first cause," they may be regarded either as the "uncaused cause, uncreated creator," i. e., the original being before and aloof from creation, or as the "creating and created creator." In these functions they may be opposed to any other term, but also to themselves: higher and lower *brahman*, *avyakta* and *vyakta*, *akṣara* and *kṣara*, *ātman* and *puruṣa*, *puruṣa* and *kṣetrajña*, etc.⁴⁰

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When we now survey the career of *akṣara*, perhaps the most striking fact about it is that between the meanings "syllable" and "name of the first cause" there is much less of a gap than we, with our conceptions, would be inclined to think. In "syllable *OM*" it even exists on in the meaning of "syllable" long after it has come to name the absolute. When we try hereunder to describe successive stages in the development of the uses of the term, we must keep in mind that we are not talking about a semantic development of a certain word, but are concerned with the evolution of the concept "first cause, source of creation," one of whose names was *akṣara*.

Originally *akṣara* meant "syllable." This syllable was not a grammatical artifice of analysis, but a very concrete tool for priest-poets who measured their metrical utterances by syllables. From the beginning we are concerned with *akṣara* as syllable of metrically arranged words in an utterance

which is believed to possess an inherent efficacy for these purposes to which it is applied under—the proper ritual conditions. As the measure of such an utterance, the syllable not only has its full share of the power attributed to the utterance, but inasmuch as it rules the complete metrical shape of the utterance and is therefore prior to it, and inasmuch as it is the first and smallest pronounceable unit of speech, it is the true repository of all the power of the formula. This power is tremendous. The ritually spoken Word is the foundation of the cosmic order which is represented and reproduced in the sacrificial area. Anything can be effected with it, for all that has name falls within its realm. This total ritual efficacy is contained in the syllable; hence the syllable is the prime expression of the Word on which all the world lives. Not only is the syllable the smallest pronounceable unit to which all formulae can be reduced, it is necessarily the very first imaginable one, it is the absolutely original manifestation of Word at the dawn of creation. But for the formula to be effective, it must be spoken over and with the ritual fire. This necessary concomitance is always given, and it is given from the start. Since the name is a feature of the thing it names, to name the feature is to create the thing, that is under the proper ritual conditions. So the syllable is not only the embryo, it is the WOMB of creation. The universe as a whole has been called into being by a creator; the syllable, the yet unuttered, the yet unborn Word, is the "nothing" from which the formulated was called to be. As the hypostasis of Word, and of all that can be effected by Word, this Syllable (if we still care to render it so), was itself given a name: it was identified with a particular syllable, *OM*, which, apparently meaningless—a mere affirmative interjection—manifests its extraordinary power in the recitations it introduces, nay PRODUCES. As womb of the world—the fire being its begetter, husband and offspring,—it might be supposed to create by itself, to be really identical with the creator who is the fire, the solar *puruṣa*. For not only is the creator a creator solely by virtue of his Word, he, the unuttered, unformed, incomplete, is made complete, is made HIMSELF, by the Word. When thereupon the original unuttered creator—the three feet of *Vāc*, the three quarters of the *puruṣa*—is considered the true beginning, the ultimate behind and beyond creation, then *akṣara* may either be this original state itself, or the actual manifestation of creation.

⁴⁰ And this duality is most concisely stated in the *ādeśa* of the Name *Satyam*, which is *sat*, the lower, and *tyad*, the higher.

So invariable, finally, is in certain circles the concomitance of creator/*purusa/ātman* with *akṣara* felt to be, that their continuous juxtaposition with *akṣaram*, n., (which in all cases—inevitably singular cases—except the first has the same endings), leads to its adopting masculine gender, a change materially assisted by the possible and later on increasingly exploited meaning of “imperishable,” so that it becomes descriptive of the *puruṣa* or *ātman*.

We have repeatedly rejected the translation “imperishable.” This was not because that would be wrong—in fact it is right and at a certain stage it is no longer justified to render it “syllable”—, but because that might imply that the imperishable *akṣara*, from Yājñavalkya onward, is genetically a different term. Now that it has become clear that it cannot be a different term, that it does indeed continue the ancient Syllable, we must add immediately that the possibility of deriving *akṣara* from *ḴṢAR* and privative *a-* “unflowing, constant, imperishable” probably saved the term as a name for the first cause from oblivion. When the term is taken up in philosophizing circles that were apparently no longer close to the ancient ritual and started their speculations from teachings no longer strictly confined to officiating priesthood, the connotations of syllable are not yet quite obsolete but begin to be replaced by that of “imperishable.”

Is it possible to maintain a parallel development in the functions of the term *brahman*? From the beginning *akṣara* and *brahman* have strikingly parallel careers, at every stage meeting each other in comparable functions, so that for *brahman*, too there seems reason to conclude that it really as a word for “ritually effective utterance” rose to name the first cause. In other words, whatever the original meaning of the term, its average R̥gvedic meaning on which Gonda, Renou and Thieme alike agree, was the decisive factor in its evolution. But—and here Gonda’s researches prove of very great importance—other connotations, now not of the concept, but of the word itself, must have contributed significantly to its

chances of survival. After Gonda’s massive array of material it seems certain that these connotations came from the root *BRH-* and its derivatives. For the development of the functions attributed to the term *brahman* it is not essential that *brahman* be a derivate of this root; the highly relevant point is that from early times onward its users THOUGHT it was. If *brahman* is indeed from *BRH-*, it may still be its specialized usage of “ritually powerful and effective priestly utterance” which led the way to “first cause.” If *brahman* was only mistakenly connected with *BRH-* by its users, these associations helped it on its way and kept it there. Much less than one would gather from Thieme’s review is Gonda concerned with the etymology of the word for its own sake; his important contribution is in the phenomenology of the concept, and he has shown overwhelmingly in how rich a variety of ways the power of *brahman* was believed to be active and how persistently this power draws upon the capacities conveyed by *BRH-*. Whether one believes with Gonda that the specific powers conveyed by this root and its derivatives were at the basis of the vocal power expression which *brahman* denotes in the older texts, or that *brahman* as the ritually prepared and pronounced utterance became the vehicle of powers connoted by terms not necessarily etymologically related to the word, the merit of his contribution stands unaffected: that *brahman* in its functions was so close to the meanings expressed by the root *BRH-* that even if etymological relationship is untenable (which remains to be seen), one may now safely say that these very close associations contributed significantly to just *brahman*’s rise to supremacy. We have seen that the same holds for *akṣara*: when the more ancient speculations about the power of formulation gave way to more advanced classification attempts which continued to operate with the terms that previous thought had produced for first and universal principles, the old term for syllable survives by virtue of what are evidently secondary connotations.