

The *Mahābhārata* and the Stories Some People Tell about It

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The Mahābhārata: Its Historicity, Antiquity, Evolution & Impact on Civilization

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This talk is about stories scholars tell—about the *Mahābhārata*'s text and its main story. My own story, in short, is this: the *Mahābhārata* as we have it in the Pune Critical Edition is a pretty good approximation of what it first was, and its main story was never its whole story. Although I would like to say more, and perhaps will be able to, depending on what kinds of questions arise in discussion, I now turn to some scholars who tell rather different stories. While mentioning a few others in passing, I will highlight nine who are no longer with us and three who are. The nine ancestors and three contemporaries are listed on your handout. (Although I mentioned Hermann Oldenberg or Madeleine Biardeau in my abstract of this talk, I will have to omit them for lack of time).

I begin with this observation: Whereas German scholarship through its first century entertained notions of the epic's *tribal* origins, French scholars began to understand the epic primarily in terms of *caste*. I think the tribal approach is a dead end, since I do not believe the *Mahābhārata* as we have it could have ever have started out as a tribal or even intertribal epic. I realize it may sound strange and reductive to contrast two interpretative traditions around such limiting social terms as tribe and caste. But the contrast opens up usefully on theoretical issues as they developed not only in Germany and France but in India and the US.

A. The Kuru Constant

Toward that end, I will speak of those who take tribal routes into the *Mahābhārata*, whether German, Indian, or North American, as having in common the non-French assumption of a "Kuru constant." What I have in mind by the term "Kuru constant" has three main variations. The first is:

1. that Kuru denotes not only a tribe but a *race*, as identified through the Aryan blood that flows through the Kuru tribes' royal patriline. Such a premise is central to the early views of Lassen and the two Holtzmanns, and figures prominently in the so-called "inversion theory" which, although it is usually associated primarily

with the younger Holtzmann, was actually something Lassen also gleaned from the older Holtzmann. Lassen established the convention in German *Mahābhārata* scholarship that characters named “black” and “white” made their way into the epic as symbolic “representatives” (*Vertretern*) of tribes. Noticing that Kṛṣṇa (meaning “black”) has connections with both warriors and cattle folk, he proposed that Kṛṣṇa’s herdsman life would have been the older of the two, but that he also became a “representative” of his people’s military life; he was thus glorified as a hero before he was divinized. This brings Lassen up to date, as it were, with Kṛṣṇa’s *Mahābhārata* war-allies, the Pāṇḍavas (meaning “white”), whose wife Draupadī’s name “Black” (her birth-name is Kṛṣṇā) inspires a further explanation from Lassen for the male Kṛṣṇa: {quote}“The contrast between black and white can first have developed in India after the skin color of the older Aryan tribes had become darker through their longer stay in this country.”{unquote} Inferring that Draupadī’s people, the Pañcālas, must have been Aryan since she married into the Aryan Kuru-Pāṇḍava line, her blackness would signify {quote}“that the Pañcālas, like the Yādavas who are represented by Kṛṣṇa, belonged among the early immigrant Aryan peoples (*Völkern*) who, due to the influence of climate, became darker than the most recent immigrants from the north [the Pāṇḍavas with Arjuna—all meaning “White”], and in contrast to the latter were called black.”{unquote} Incidentally, by this reasoning, the Kurus should be as dark as the Pañcālas—a well kept secret in these discussions.

Now, we have just seen Lassen suggest that the Pāṇḍavas were not only relatively more recent than Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī, but also younger than the Kurus. Indeed, he goes on to say that in order to find the {quote}“true history”{unquote} behind the epic, it would require recognizing that it had undergone a revision made in favor of the winners and to the denigration of their {quote}“defeated predecessor.”{unquote} This was galling to Holtzmann Jr., even though he found Lassen’s unattributed forty year-old idea to be “correct.” For Holtzmann Jr. could show that the Lassen’s idea had first been that of Holtzmann Sr. Holtzmann Jr. thus defended his uncle’s claim to have discovered what would come to be called the Holtzmanns’ “inversion theory,” by which they would establish the Kuru tribe, race, or lineage as the epic’s knightly Aryan constant. In my handout, I show how Holtzmann Jr. envisioned the epic’s development (he was the first scholar I know of to explain the

origins and development of the *Mahābhārata* through strata). Stage 1 went back, along with Greek and Germanic epic, to untextualized pre-bardic “saga-stuff” about a battle fought somewhere outside India. Stage 2, now in India, bypassed the Vedas in the form of oral bardic genealogies. Stage 3, momentous, transitional, and totally fanciful, was consolidated into a Buddhist epic with Duryodhana as the Aśokan hero and the Pāṇḍavas inspired to villainies by Kṛṣṇa. And stages 4 and 5, were finally “Brahmanized,” first by Vaiṣṇavas and, close upon their heels, by Śaivites.

Although the younger Holtzmann held the Buddhist ghost-poet in somewhat high esteem, it is the access this whole construction gives him to the non-textualized pre-bardic *Sagenstoffe* that has primary value for him. Here is what he promises as he begins his own reconstructions from the ghost-poem’s “old traits.”

{quote}Here, in the first place, is the thoroughly warlike worldview . . . which constitutes the genuine soul of the old portions of the epic. . . ; the raw warrior-like air of the old Germanic North blows against us here. If we were ever . . . to dissolve away almost by means of a chemical process all the influences of the Brahmanism that is already slowly developing, . . . we would find conditions before us only a little different from those described by Tacitus as unique to the ancient Germans. But even in its contemporary ruined form the *Mahābhārata* often delivers us the best commentary on *Germania*. Here we read of the passion for gambling of the Germans, of how they waged possessions and property, wife and child, [and] finally even themselves: *extreme ac novissimo iactu de liberate contendunt*.{unquote}

Holtzmann cites Tacitus only in Latin, which has been translated: “they stake their personal liberty on the decisive last throw.” The clause occurs in Tacitus’s passage on Germanic gambling:

{quote}But dicing, if you can believe it, [the Germans] pursue in all seriousness and in their sober hours, and are so recklessly keen about winning or losing that, when everything else is gone, *they stake their personal liberty on the last decisive throw*. The loser goes into slavery without complaint; younger or stronger he may be, but he suffers himself to be bound and sold. . . .{unquote}

To be fair to Holtzmann, it does read as if Tacitus could have wandered into the *Mahābhārata* dicing scene, except that it was not the loser’s *last* throw that cost Yudhiṣṭhira his liberty but his next-

to-last throw, with his slavery or liberty still in question for the interim that followed his really last throw, the wager for Draupadī. Holtzmann Jr. implies that the wagering of “wife and child” would occur *before* the gambler’s enslaving bet of himself—his interest in the epic dice match is in {quote}“a historical, non-fictional, non-literary event.”{unquote}

Although the Holtzmanns’ “inversion theory” has been repeatedly dismissed, such that many now consider it a dead curiosity of the past—as, frankly, it should be—two of our contemporaries have come back to it. One will be mentioned in each of our remaining two variations on the “Kuru constant.”

My second variation on this construct is:

2. that as a Vedic tribe central to the *Mahābhārata*, the Kurus, in their interactions with other Vedic and late Vedic tribes, would provide a thread of continuity by which to trace the epic’s early “development.” One can catch hints of this premise in the two Holtzmanns, Oldenberg, and Hopkins. More recently Michael Witzel has worked it up into a full-scale theory of the epic’s tribal prehistory. It is, however, James Fitzgerald who is now putting a spin on Witzel’s findings to work out a neo-Holtzmannian thesis about the so-called “invention of the Pāṇḍavas.”

Finally, the third and textually the most radical variation on what I mean by a “Kuru constant” is:

3. that the oldest nucleus of the *Mahābhārata* itself would be *about* the Kurus’ primacy in the text. This premise allows for scholars to use the so-called “higher criticism” to divine their different views of what they deem to be old. A bloodline version, to be exemplified in a moment, traces this old nucleus through the Kuru line itself. A grander epic-nucleus-version posits that the war books must be the epic’s core and finds the original to lie in what the Kuru bard Saṃjaya “sings” to the blind old Kuru king Dhṛtarāṣṭra. This is the recent argument of Kevin McGrath, who claims to find support for it in what he calls {quote}“the contemporary Indian view”{unquote} that the putative author Vyāsa and the narrators Vaiśampāyana and Ugrasravas were actually successive authors who contributed in that order a short *Jaya* epic on “Victory”; a longer *Bhārata*; and the eventually massive *Mahābhārata*. None of this can hold water, including the first two titles *Jaya* and *Bhārata* as stages in the epic’s

early formation. McGrath’s twist, made in the name of Parry/Lord oral theory, is to name the Kuru court bard Saṃjaya, who recounts the War Books to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as a fourth such author. With that, he forces a reading where, by mere dint of saying it again and again, Saṃjaya is the real “poet,” rather than Vyāsa, of the “Jaya” core, which McGrath also likes to call “Saṃjaya’s song.” McGrath thereby removes Vyāsa, who he likes to say is “not actually a human being” (15), from the Kuru constant in the dialogue between the Kuru “poet” and Kuru king.

Yet McGrath cannot fully extricate Saṃjaya from Vyāsa, and ultimately speaks of their rapport as a “subtle fusion.” His most revealing moment for this “fusion” comes when Duryodhana hides in a lake “called Dvaipāyaṇa” (sic)—a lake whose name, as McGrath observes, is {quote}“uniquely and solely applied to Vyāsa.”{unquote} McGrath comments: {quote}“The hero has literally returned to his source. There is an internal self-reflection here with the poem, which is enigmatic in its significance.”{unquote} So far this is rather insightful, though not entirely original. But to each of these two sentences, McGrath appends a very unsatisfying footnote. To “. . . returned to his source,” the footnote says, {quote}“Vyāsa, apart from being the originator of the song, is also Duryodhana’s paternal grandfather.”{unquote} McGrath has not thought through how Vyāsa could sire Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu if he is not a real person—something that Holtzmann Jr. had tried to solve, as we shall see in a moment. McGrath’s second footnote on enigmatic reflexivity then says, “Perhaps this is a remnant, a fragment like a small potsherd, of what was once a Duryodhana epic, a song that is long lost in time.” This confirms a suspicion one might have had all along. McGrath cites Holtzmann Jr. only in his Bibliography, and not in this footnote. It is of course fashionable to cite the Holtzmans loosely. But to speak of “what was once a Duryodhana epic, a song that is long lost in time” is obviously to have imbibed some of the Holtzmann Cool Aide. Indeed, as Vishwa Adluri confirms, McGrath’s argument that Saṃjaya, as poet of the War Books, would have authored the epic core, was anticipated by Holtzmann Jr. himself.

Yet for Holtzmann Jr., the bard’s significance lies not in his oral performativity, on which he says nothing. It is rather in his being originally, in fighting beside warriors as a charioteer, supposedly a Kṣatriya himself who would have maintained the tribal history.

Holtzmann Jr. probably derived his interest in bards from Holtzmann Sr., who thought that a bardic class would have preserved the *Nibelungenlied* from the time of Germanic migrations until it fell into the hands of Christian scribes, who, in his eyes, whose takeover in medieval Europe the akin to Brahmanization.

How were such arguments made? I turn to a *Mahābhārata* passage that was considered to support them. Back in 1853, Albrecht Weber had called the Pāṇḍavas “thieving hill-folk” (*räuberisches Bergvolk*) and described how they advanced from the north to conquer large parts of India, after which they were inserted in the text, possibly with an invented name. Holtzmann Jr. put a new twist on this:

{quote}in the Himālaya polyandry can be found till today, and among the Pāṇḍavas it was probably ancient, so that Yudhiṣṭhira could invoke the custom (*Sitte*) of his ancestors. Then, of course, the Pāṇḍavas cannot originally have been blood-relatives of the Kauravas.”{unquote}

Holtzmann thereby made the Pāṇḍavas extras to the Kuru constant. Yet he gives no citation in mentioning what Yudhiṣṭhira says about this ancestral custom. Possibly the line was already a cause célèbre. But I can find only one earlier allusion to it—by E. W. Hopkins in his 1889 *The Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste in Ancient India*, which Holtzmann had read. Hopkins cites the line along with four others in one sentence, translating it as, {quote}“I follow the custom of the ancients”{unquote}. Note that Holtzmann Jr. has Yudhiṣṭhira cite a “custom of his ancestors,” Hopkins, a “custom of the ancients.”

A few years later, Moriz Winternitz supplies the Sanskrit, as it is in your handout, and offers this fairly reasonable translation: {quote}“Let us follow the path trodden successively by men of former ages.” One can see that by the time of Winternitz, only Holtzmann Jr. had translated *pūrveṣām* with “ancestors.” Everyone else had translated it either as “ancients” (Hopkins) or “those of former ages” (Winternitz and K. M. Ganguli). *Pūrva*, as what is “former,” could mean either, but the weight of this early opinion is against “ancestors,” and so is the evidence of the line in its context. Yudhiṣṭhira is talking about a “path” (*vartman*) and not a “custom.” And he is *not* talking about *his* “ancestors” when he soon cites a case of polyandry among Brahmins: {quote}“We hear in the *purāṇa* that a Gautamī named Jaṭilā lay with the Seven Seers.”{unquote} When Yudhiṣṭhira speaks of following a path gone “one after the other” (*ānupūrvyena*), he is citing precedent for the Pāṇḍavas, who will go to Draupadī one after another just

as the Seven Ṛṣis did with Jaṭilā. He is not invoking a custom passed down “successively from men of former ages,” e.g, from ancestors, as Winternitz’s translation still leaves possible. And indeed, Winternitz, just one page later and again at the end of his article, takes the line in the same way as Holtzmann, saying that Yudhiṣṭhira is recalling a “family custom” after all.

So too, eight years after Winternitz, does C. V. Vaidya, also without citing the line and freshly obscuring it. Going beyond the archaeological metaphor of potsherds to a paleontological one, Vaidya calls the line a “fossil” that was {quote}“so strangely preserved from the old nucleus of the *Mahābhārata*.”{unquote}

Thus, after Hopkins first puts the word “custom” into Yudhiṣṭhira’s mouth, it is these three—Holtzmann Jr., Winternitz, and Vaidya—who call the Pāṇḍavas’ polyandry a “family custom.” They are also the only ones to link the “family custom” with a “tribal” argument. Yet each wants to make a different case. Winternitz is writing a critical review of Joseph Dahlmann’s 1895 book *Das Mahābhārata als Epos und Rechtsbuch*. He portrays Dahlmann as naïve for seeing legal ideas behind the *Mahābhārata*’s mythic explanations of Draupadī’s polyandry, since they are only “silliness” offered up “by a very unskilled hand” and “certainly” later than the fine old poetry that includes the “family custom” line and Draupadī’s *svayaṃvara* itself.

Vaidya’s argument, however, is closer to Holtzmann’s. He opens his *Epic India* (1907) crediting Herbert Risley, whose {quote}“anthropometric labours”{unquote} on nasal indexes for the 1901 Census of India confirmed that one needed two waves of Aryan invaders to explain the different physiognomies of what Vaidya calls the “pure Aryans” in the northwest, evidenced by the Kurus, and the “mixed Aryans” of north-central India, evidenced by the Pāṇḍavas. Vaidya saw the *Mahābhārata* war as {quote}“something like a civil war between the pure Aryans and the mixed Aryans,” won by the latter, “with a counterpart in the Civil War in America.”{unquote} Here he finds the so-called “fossil verse” “of the greatest significance”:

{quote}Yudhishtira said ‘This is our family custom and we do not feel we are transgressing Dharma in following it.’ . . . That sentence so strangely preserved from the old nucleus of the Mahabharata clearly establishes . . . that the Pandavas belonged to a [different] family, . . . which Yudhishtira knew full well.{unquote}

Vaidya puts a new “old” feelings and words into Yudhiṣṭhira’s mouth. If Yudhiṣṭhira “knew full well” that his “family custom” came from being

“born in the Himalayas of parents who were different from the inhabitants of the plain,” he would have to know nothing about the Pāṇḍavas being sons of five deities—or even of a father, Pāṇḍu, who was born on the plain. Pāṇḍu is thus a virtual fiction for Vaidya—as also for Holtzmann Jr., as we shall now see.

Holtzmann Jr. had one more way—quite definitive, as far as he was concerned—to shore up the Kuru constant. Lassen had supplied a half-measure of assistance with his point that as representatives of a “white” tribe, neither Pāṇḍu (“White”) nor the Pāṇḍavas were real. Holtzmann Jr. might agree with Lassen on the non-reality of Pāṇḍu, but he could not agree that the Pāṇḍavas were unreal, since Kṛṣṇa had been coaching them in wickedness for as long as the tale had been told in India. But what if the sons were real but the father wasn’t? This extra half-cup was supplied by Alfred Ludwig, a contemporary of Holtzmann Jr., whose reputation in *Mahābhārata* studies was being made by interpreting *Mahābhārata* characters as representatives of solar and seasonal myths. Against the background of seeing the Pāṇḍavas as the five seasons and the “pale” Pāṇḍu receding as the faded former sun, Ludwig came to an insight that Holtzmann now cites to confirm two of his major assumptions: (1.) that the Pāṇḍavas were not genuine Kurus; and (2.) that it was the tendentious Brahmanical redaction that made them so. The Pāṇḍāvas, he writes,

were first grafted (*eingereiht*) into the old dynasty at a place and time when they were the ruling royal house (*Königshaus*). That they did not belong to the old dynasty is, in my opinion, irrefutably clear from the custom predominant among them of polyandry; in reference to this Yudhiṣṭhira expressly invokes the example of his ancestors.... [But] If the five brothers and their description as Pāṇḍavas already belong to the old legend and to the old poem, it probably stands otherwise with their father Pāṇḍu. This name and the figure that bears it was first invented (*erfunden*) by the revisionists (*Uebersetzern*), [on which he now says, quoting Ludwig 1884, 9:] “we are forced to [reach] the conclusion that the Pāṇḍavas existed earlier than their father Pāṇḍu.”{unquote}

As Adluri and Bagchee point out, that Pāṇḍu is a “fiction” is Holtzmann Jr.’s master stroke:

{quote}The erasure is crucial as it simultaneously accomplishes two things: (1) it demonstrates that the later dynasty explicitly invented a “white” ancestor . . . in order to link themselves up with the Indo-Germanic tradition proper to the old epic, and (2) It implicitly undercuts the Pāṇḍava claim to being “white” in the sense of being

descended from a *pāṇḍu*. Thus, in declaring Pāṇḍu to be an invention (*Erfindung*) of the revisionists (*Uebersarbeiter*), Holtzmann cuts the Pāṇḍavas loose from their (claimed) patronymic title, so to speak—and they are thus thrown back upon their native, aboriginal origins. {unquote}

Yet the erasure of Pāṇḍu, which I have called “virtual” for Vaidya, accomplishes something still more definitive for Holtzmann Jr. It annuls from the oldest Indian *Sagenstoffe* and the Buddhist ghost-poem the double-story of the siring of Pāṇḍu and his half-brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra by their father Vyāsa. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, through whom the Kuru constant must flow to the heroic Duryodhana, can now be the son—indeed the *only* son—not of Vyāsa but of Bhīṣma. And the Brahmin Vyāsa can be assigned whole cloth—both as a non-Kṣatriya extra-lineal inseminator of Kurus and as the *Mahābhārata*’s putative author—to the discredited status of Brahmanical interpolation. Holtzmann Jr. thus clarifies why Lassen’s tribal explanations were valid: because they keep the racial stock of the knightly Kuru constant purely Indo-Germanic as long as possible, that is, until the Brahmanical takeover of the Buddhist ghost-poem.

As I bring to a close my sketch of this mainly German tribal paradigm, it is worth asking how it was received: first during its day and then afterward. The question keeps our focus on the younger Holtzmann. Before turning to French scholars, it is worth noting the response of the durably influential Hopkins and his current-day impact.

One could say Hopkins left Holtzmann Jr.’s inversion theory with a kind of half-life through the congenial way he dismissed it. Says Hopkins, {quote}“What we know is that tales which told of Kurus and Bhāratas became the depository of the Pandus, who appear to have substituted themselves for the Bhāratas and may in fact have been a branch of the tribe, which from a second-rate position raised itself to leadership. There is a theory that the epic story has been inverted, in favor of the Pandus. . . . so persuasively advanced by Professor Holtzmann, [with which] I have never been able to agree.” {unquote}

What are we to make of this? It sounds like Hopkins was never that able to disagree either? Let us look at his statement closely.

If “what we know” about the “Pandus” is that they “may in fact have been a branch of the tribe, which from a second-rate position raised itself to leadership,” but “appear” to have displaced the Bhāratas when the older first-rate tales “told of Kurus and Bhāratas became” their “depository,” then “what we know” so far is what Hopkins and Holtzmann more or less

agreed on: a “Pandu” takeover with a tribal explanation. Although Hopkins knows further of (quote)“no evidence of an epic before 400 B.C.,”{unquote} its beginnings would go back, like Holtzmann’s *Sagenstoffe*, to an {quote}“original Bhāratī Kathā” in a “circling narration” of “Bhārata (Kuru) lays” that “may lie as far back as 700 B.C. or 1700 B.C., for ought we know.”{unquote} Hopkins seems to offer his congenial last word on Holtzmann’s inversion theory as something he has put on the shelf to get on with his own reconstructions, which he advocated as an “analytic” approach and now advances in the form of two sweeping timetables on the *Mahābhārata*’s developmental stages. First, having put his “facts together,” he lists five stages. He begins with {quote}“Kuru lays” before 400 CE, “but with no evidence of an epic before” that{unquote}. He ends with a fully shaped *Mahābhārata* still growing after 400 CE. And the three interim strata introduce, in order, “Pandu heroes”; Kṛṣṇa first as “just a demigod” but transformed to an “all-god”; and “pseudo epic” growths. V. S. Sukthankar called this {quote}“pretentious table is as good as useless.”{unquote}

Hopkins’s second timetable goes on to name “four facts” that “are certain,” which we don’t have time for. Suffice it to say that the “tribal” thread unifies these discussions. Even though Hopkins is less explicitly “Aryan” where the Kurus are the tribe in question, he still gives us the Kuru constant in the form of “Bhārata (Kuru) lays” that are simply “Kuru lays” the next time they are mentioned. With these results of his analytic approach offering no rebuttal to Holtzmann’s inversion theory, the latter, with at least this one indispensable tribal element, could remain in limbo for a century until it found new takers in Fitzgerald and McGrath.

While McGrath has embellished a bardic hypothesis that Holtzmann Jr. aired but left unshaped, Fitzgerald, following Witzel, has reintroduced tribal factors into the *Mahābhārata*’s prehistory that beg the question of his views of Holtzmann. For Fitzgerald has finally admitted what was evident through all four iterations of his “invention of the Pāṇḍavas” I have read or heard—that his views have come to resemble Holtzmann’s. But let us start with Witzel.

On one point at least, which Fitzgerald follows him on, Witzel reworks one of Holtzmann Jr.’s textual strategies. Holtzmann Jr. says that in relation to the fluid bardic *Sagenstoffe* and the non-text from which it develops beginning somewhere outside of India, the Veda is a {quote}“world by itself.”{unquote} Witzel now establishes a similar latitude to imagine early bardic oral stages when he contrasts the {quote}“tape recorder”{unquote}–like preservation of the *R̥gVeda* with the supposed fluidity of a bardic oral epic originating in Vedic times. But whereas

Holtzmann Jr. finds his earliest fluid *Sagenstoffe* to have an older indo-greco-germanic non-text behind it, whose historical origins lie on a battlefield somewhere outside of India, Witzel quite ingeniously confines his evidence for an entirely “hypothetical” bardic oral *Bhārata* to what comes from the Vedic texts themselves, which were “frozen in time, as Vedic texts could not be changed any more after their initial composition.” This careful maintenance of Vedic texts, from the *ṚgVeda* through the Upaniṣads, affords Witzel with sequential check-points on the bardic oral epic’s supposed transformations. Witzel takes the precursor only so far back as the so-called *ṚgVedic* “Battle of the Ten Chieftains.” From this *ṚgVedic* event and later Vedic evidence, Witzel says, “a gradual change can be mapped closely” through the eastward movements of Vedic culture as other tribes and locations (first of all the Kurus in Kurukṣetra; then the Pañcālas; then the Salvās who oust the Kurus from Kurukṣetra) are absorbed into this ever-changing story, until at some point “the *Bhārata* chieftain Sudās and his opponent Trasadasyu” turn into Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana.

Fitzgerald agrees with Witzel that the Pāṇḍavas are a late “epic innovation,” and credits Witzel’s tape-recorder evidence of tribal origins, including where Witzel “speculates” that the ousting of the Kurus by the obscure Salvās could provide an opening for the Pāṇḍavas to be added to the story. But unlike Witzel, Fitzgerald, like the Holtzmans, envisions an “oral *Bhārata*” going back not only into *ṚgVedic* tribal times but back further into Indo-European ones. His most recent published restatement of this hypothesis boldly opens, “The *Mahābhārata* is a widespread family of South Asian literary and performance traditions that has grown from roots that reach back across all of the history of India into Vedic times, and past that into Indo-Iranian and Indo-European times.” I know of no statement in the annals of *Mahābhārata* scholarship where a knowledgeable textual scholar has done more to “deprivilege” the *Mahābhārata* as a text. Indeed, after stating even more boldly that, with his advocacy of a “putative *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*” in which, some time after about 400 BCE, the Pāṇḍavas would have been “injected” as entirely new heroes into what had until then been a virtually ever-ongoing and ever-changing “oral *Bhārata*” featuring Kuru heroes, Fitzgerald acknowledges: “This hypothesis thus agrees, in part, with A. Holtzmann Jr.’s thesis about a reversal of the polarity of the heroes and the villains.” One could identify many other ways in which Fitzgerald, unlike Witzel, has recently aired views similar to those of both Holtzmans (Holtzmann Sr. first inverted “the polarity of the heroes and the villains”), and also

Hopkins. But I leave Fitzgerald for now, to come back to after a look at four French scholars.

B. French *Mahābhāratas* and Castes

French scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* does not, as far as I can see, detach itself from imaginings of tribal origins until Lévi's short but influential article first published in 1917, six years before the 1923 publication of Mauss's famous remark in his *Essai sur le don* that the *Mahābhārata* is a "tremendous potlatch," which Mauss obviously couched in a tribal idiom. But I treat Mauss first, since he is in some respects closer to the German model, of which he seems to be at least vaguely aware. Mauss—who was both a sociologist and by this time a learned Sanskritist—constructs an altogether different kind of tribal scenario.

Mauss makes his potlatch analogy in a chapter comparing Amerindian modes of gifting with Indo-European ones that survived in written laws. Among these, he concentrates on {quote}"[t]he two . . . systems which have best conserved these traces": "the Germanic and the Hindu." {unquote} The potlatch paragraph begins: {quote}"Ancient India immediately after the Aryan invasion was in two respects a land of potlatch" {unquote}—the two respects being its substrata of Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic "tribes" whose "traditions," says Mauss, may "have persisted in a Brahminic setting." Mauss continues:

{quote} No doubt the two currents reinforced each other. Thus as soon as we leave the Vedic period . . . we find the theory strongly developed. The *Mahabharata* is the story of a tremendous potlatch—there is a game of dice between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and a military festival, while Draupadi . . . chooses husbands. Repetitions of the same cycle of legends are met with in the finest parts of the epics; for instance, the tale of Nala and Damayanyi [sic]. . . . But the whole is disfigured by its literary and theological style. (54) {unquote}

A consistent point comes across: before the epic was "degraded," Mauss wants the "cycle of legends" behind its story to have been tribal: so essentially tribal, in fact, that it would have resulted from three mutually reinforcing tribal "currents," one Aryan and the other two from the substratum. Moreover, he goes on to say that "the number of castes that were concerned" is "irrelevant." Yet one caste is important to him for its laws: Brahmins. Mauss's "tribal" implies no racial Euro-Indian primordium. Aryans have invaded, but the epic arises from within the earliest ṚgVedic tribal mixing. The early *Mahābhārata* Mauss imagines is a thoroughly tribal story. Mauss is similar to German models only in his aesthetic judgment of

the *Mahābhārata*'s later developments. What is novel here is his sophisticated attempt to link the tribal with a kind of epic story he imagines a multicaste tribe with multiethnic mixing behind it might tell.

Turning back now a few years to Lévi's article, its topic is recurrent formulas in the *Mahābhārata* that have to do with *jaya* or "victory"—(they have nothing to do with an original war "poem" by that name, as McGrath would have it). Lévi endorsed the notion that the *Mahābhārata* first belonged to Kṣatriyas and to "bards and rhapsodes" (1918-20, 17). Yet his concern was with the "*Mahābhārata* in its entirety," including the didactic: "The *Mahābhārata* undoubtedly is a didactic and moralizing epic. . ." (15); it included the whole *Bhagavad Gītā*, in which Kṛṣṇa, "the perfect master of chivalry," is questioned by Arjuna as "the perfect chevalier" (16). Such an approach parted company with German epic scholars and Hopkins, for whom interpreting the whole *Mahābhārata* by the whole *Bhagavad Gītā* and the "didactic" was the very height of stratigraphic folly. Lévi also opposed the Holtzmanns, without mentioning them, for the {quote}"laborious superstructures"{unquote} that made Duryodhana the poem's original hero (17). Rather, he says: {quote}"It is at once both simpler and more honest to take the poem just as it is" (17).

Never mentioning "tribe," Lévi repositioned caste by introducing a third societal component of sect (15): the Bhāgavatas. "Sect," offered some explanatory power for the *Gītā* in the epic taken as a "whole." Lévi's *Mahābhārata* is a post-Vedic "creation of the Hindu genius" (15) and a text that {quote}"seems with deliberate purpose to enter into competition with Buddhism"{unquote} (18). Through its originary vastness, narrative complexity, and its disciplinary code for Kṣatriyas, Lévi makes his *Mahābhārata* comparable to the vast *Mūlasarvastivādin Vinaya* (18-20).

Next, Georges Dumézil raises old issues in a new way. For Dumézil, the category of comparison of Indo-European cultures and their migrations is not the tribe but a "community" of larger-than-tribal language groups:

{quote}"The language community could certainly be conceived from the most ancient times without racial unity or political unity, but not without a minimum of common civilization—and an intellectual, spiritual (that is, essentially religious) civilization rather than a material one."{unquote}

Evidence for comparison must come principally from the earliest texts in Indo-European languages. Dumézil hypothesized that Indo-European peoples carried with them a "trifunctional ideology": in brief, and from the

top down: (1) a sovereign sacerdotal and juridical function; (2) a warrior function; and (3) an economic and fecundating function. In his early work, he considered the three functions to be inherently social, and for this he had debts to Émile Durkheim and his school, which included Mauss. He of course had no difficulty in seeing India, with its four castes or *varṇas*, as one society that from the late Veda on reflected the three functions—by the addition of Śūdras at the bottom. But Dumézil eventually sought to explain his work as an engagement with the *esprit* of texts. With that, {quote}“The prestige of Indian *varṇas* thus found itself exorcised, and more imagined problems disappeared.”{unquote} Dumézil meant that one could find traces of the tripartite ideology not only in what Indo-European texts said about social structure but in myths, rituals, laws, philosophies—and, let me emphasize these last two: in histories that were transposed from myth, and in epics.

It was in these latter two categories, but most basically as a transposition of myth, that Dumézil interpreted the *Mahābhārata*. By 1947, first Stig Wikander (1948) and then Dumézil (1948) had discovered that the five Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī could be interpreted as a transposition of a trifunctional set of Vedic deities. Yudhiṣṭhira has juridical traits, and could, both thought, have originally covered for the Vedic Mitra. The next two brothers, Arjuna and Bhīma, are fighters with different modes of action that provided evidence that they could have doubled for pre-Vedic Indo-Iranian forms of the warrior gods Vāyu and Indra. And the twins and Draupadī have associations that could explain their transpositions respectively of the twin Aśvin gods and one or more Vedic goddesses. For Wikander and Dumézil, however, this set was incomplete without a transposition of Varuṇa, as required by that god’s frequent pairing with Mitra as what Dumézil called “joint sovereigns.” To fill this niche, the most Varuṇa-like sovereign they could find was Pāṇḍu, who could not exactly be a joint sovereign with his eldest son Yudhiṣṭhira. Moreover, the *Mahābhārata* linked Yudhiṣṭhira not with Mitra but with the god Dharma. These were the points where Dumézil’s notion of transposition began to break down for me. Rather than pay attention to the *Mahābhārata* itself, which knows the five Pāṇḍavas as *sons* of the gods supposedly transposed into them, Dumézil could sidestep the whole paternity narrative by taking Pāṇḍu’s paleness and impotence as evidence of his transposition from Varuṇa, and he could dismiss the siring of Yudhiṣṭhira by Dharma as a {quote}“clumsy retouch”{unquote} of his older para-Vedic transposition of Mitra. Dumézil was lining up an argument that could lead from

historicized myth to comparative Indo-European epic. But here I anticipate some points best saved for my conclusion.

C. Eroding Tribal and Bardic *Mahābhāratas*

And yet, as we have seen, Holtzmann-like notions of the epic's tribal and bardic prehistory have recently been revived by Witzel, Fitzgerald, and McGrath. The remainder of this talk will say that their trails "back" have found nothing more substantial than the trails of their predecessors, and that the erosions these trails have undergone should be seen as irreversible.

Let me state my canons of credibility. There are only three of them:

1. There must from the beginning be a story.

This rules out Holtzmann's beginning from a Indo-Greco-Germanic non-text of *Sagenstoffe*, as it does beginning from genealogies emphasized by Witzel, or praise songs of worthy men (*dānastuti*, *naraśaṃsi*) underscored by Fitzgerald. Many scholars have considered that the *Mahābhārata* would have grown from such ingredients, which do not make an epic.

2. There must be at least the nucleus of an epic story that could become the *Mahābhārata*.

We have seen Mauss and Dumézil try to meet this criterion, and so does Fitzgerald. Based on the Homeric scholar Richard P. Martin's (2005) presentation of epic as "an expansive super-genre," Fitzgerald argues that elements, such as tales of worthy men and genealogies which {quote}"naturally grow" {unquote} out of Vedic literature, would have fed into the early oral epic along with {quote}"narratives of the exploits of chieftains that naturally grow out of that literature." {unquote} Martin has thus energized Fitzgerald's argument about "natural growths," but Fitzgerald sees that he still needs a story. So he says, {quote}"I suspect strongly that the putative oral *Bhārata* was a heroic epic set into a dualistic narrative frame, as Dumézil and Wikander have suggested—perhaps a sort of Ragnarök scenario." {unquote} Fitzgerald thus borrows a story to add into his protean mix. But from the perspective of this essay, his *omnium gatherum* reads like a menu of the very errors we have traced. Above all, it is poorly thought through for his own purposes, since both Dumézil and Wikander's Ragnarök scenarios rely on the Pāṇḍavas, whom Fitzgerald doesn't want to be part of the story yet, to represent the dualistic forces of

good. Nor does Fitzgerald take into account the complications Dumézil's attempt to keep a Ragnarök scenario raises when combined with his theory of historicized transpositions.

As I realized in writing a 1975 review of Dumézil's *Mythe et épopée*, vol. 3, *Histoires Romaines* (1973), Dumézil had for some time been working out an argument that now featured his transpositional and historicized para-Vedic *Mahābhārata* as the key to interpreting what he now saw as comparable: the Roman Republic's inaugural war with Lars Porsenna, who tried to restore the Etruscan monarchy of the Tarquins to Rome, as likewise an "epic" history transposed from myth. As I said in that review, "The lack of a distinction between *typological* parallels—governed by divine-human 'transpositions'—and *narrative* parallels—potentially recalling a common epic tradition—thus leaves us not with one hypothesis but two" (with neither helping the other). While some of the typological parallels were curious, I found it "unlikely that there is any *narrative* link between the *Mahābhārata* and the first war of the Roman Republic as related pieces of Indo-European 'epic,'" and that the two war accounts "surely" lent "no support to the 'rêve vertigineuse' of an Indo-European eschatology—along the lines a Ragnarök—transposed into 'history' in both accounts." Indeed, those were days when I began a turn away from Indo-Europeans to the study of the Tamil Draupadī cult. I could see that the game was played without any likelihood that either a Ragnarök scenario or a comparison of Indo-European historicized "epics" would ever explain the *Mahābhārata*, or reach any kind of consensus among Indo-Europeanists.

As of now, Witzel has never supplied an actual narrative to link his dichotomous tribal developments. All he says is that after a bardic epic began historically from the tribal Bhārata : Pūru opposition in the ṚgVedic Battle of Ten Chieftains, it would, probably in sequence, have been "patterned" on the fight between the Devas and Asuras, compounded by the theme of rivalry between paternal cousin-brothers (*bhrātr̥vya*), and glossed to restore "the balance of the universe, at the beginning of a new yuga" (2005, 35). He does suggest that the Salvās' ousting of the Kurus might have something to do with the "insertion" of the Pāṇḍavas. But he draws no connection between his explanation of the epic's development from dichotomous opposition between tribes with his quite widely accepted notion of the late ṚgVedic emergence of the Kuru state. Witzel does not imagine a cataclysmic epic war marking the Kuru state's end. Had he done so, it could only be as a second-tier stage in the development of an epic that began with the Battle of the Ten Chieftains. But T. P. Mahadevan has recently tried out such an idea (2011). Perhaps he or Witzel would find

some useful parallels in Dumézil’s handling of the first war of the Roman Republic as myth transposed into history. Indeed, Witzel’s hypothesized Kuru state is not a simple tribal state-formation but one for which the Kurus had to become a “super-tribe” comprised of at least thirty-three tribes. Witzel’s Kuru state could be aligned not only with Rome before its inaugural war, but with Mauss’s idea that the *Mahābhārata* emerged as the story of a “tremendous potlatch” from a late Vedic multi-tribal, multi-ethnic, and multi-caste society, and of course with Vaidya’s “civil war” involving “pure” and “mixed Aryans.” In such circumstances, Richard Martin’s conception of epic as a “super-genre” would be applicable to the *Mahābhārata* from its beginning. Indeed, we might even see some consensus on a para-Vedic or Indo-European “*Bhārata*” should Fitzgerald be willing to reconsider the lateness of the “invention of the Pāṇḍavas” and allow them to be invented as early as everyone else in the four generations from the marriage of Gaṅgā and Śaṃtanu to the death of Abhimanyu. But although I think this may well be the best argument that could be made, I am not optimistic that it could be made convincing. And here, finally, my third and last criterion tells why:

3. There must be relevant evidence of this story as a *Mahābhārata* in formation.

As Witzel admits, there are “no remnants” of the “early hypothetical ‘*Bhārata*’ epic” he attempts to reconstruct in the whole Vedic period; thus no evidence of a *Mahābhārata* in formation. It is not until the time of the grammarian Pāṇini, about 350 BCE, that one begins to find evidence by which to anticipate what Lévi calls the text “as we have it.”

To conclude: We have now come full circle back to where this tour from tribal origins through their erosion to recognition of a Brahmanical text returns us to my own story. What emerges is that the “oral bardic epic” that has eroded remains unconvincing as shaped around the post-Hotzmann fortunes of a Kuru tribe. Just as when Vaidya evokes a civil war of pure Aryan Kurus versus mixed-Aryan Pāṇḍavas, when Hopkins posits “circling Kuru lays, for ought I know”; when Witzel acknowledges the entirely hypothetical character of all the transformations he posits once Kuru dichotomies replace the Battle of the Ten Chieftains; when Fitzgerald gets from the Kurus to the Kuru/Pañcālas yet admits that he has no idea what the story would have been at that stage; and when McGrath seeks to enshrine “Saṃjaya’s song” as the original epic’s in-house Kuru martial core, it is in all these cases not just a question of lacking evidence but a matter of whistling Dixie.

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