Linguistics 051:
Proto-Indo-European Language and Society
Tripartition of Functions

Rolf Noyer

Approaches to Comparative Mythology

• One can approach the study of comparative PIE mythology from several points of view

  Linguistic
  What etymological parallels exist between deities and mythological characters?

  Universal
  How do the earliest attested PIE belief systems reflect universals of human thought and experience?

  Structuralist/Functional
  Is there an internal structure which is replicated in the various early IE societies — despite the lack of precise etymological correspondences?
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**Benveniste and Dumézil**

In the 1930s and 1940s two French scholars, Émile Benveniste, a linguist, and Georges Dumézil, a philologist, independently observed a pattern of *tripartite class division* of early IE societies.

In addition, they argued that this division was a basic conceptual one, transcending the organization of social classes. They observed reflections of the three-way division and organization in the structure of the *pantheon* and in the organization of various *rituals*. 
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**Three functions**

- Benveniste began with the following equations:

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  *brahmán-*
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  *vaiśya-*
  *śūdra-*

  **Iranian**
  
  *āthravan*
  *rahaēšta*
  *vāstrō fšuyant-

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Castes

• Indian society was traditionally organized by a system of hereditary castes which, although very numerous, can more or less be divided into four groups or varṇa: brāhmāṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdrā.

• Benveniste: the first 3 reflect a fundamental distinction in PIE society
   a priestly class: responsible for spiritual affairs
   a warrior class: responsible for ruling and fighting
   a producer class: effectively, everyone else

• The ‘lowest’ class in India, the śūdra class, was thought to be an Indian innovation. Its etymology is unknown, but does not appear IE.

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brāhman

*brāhmaṇa* etymology has been enormously disputed

– the elusive Cosmic Totality; in the Vedas it refers to many things: mysterious metaphysical ‘fluid’ or magical or mystical ‘powers’

– the derivatives noun *brahmān*, adj. *brāhmaṇa*- ‘(one) endowed with *brāhman*’ is the general term for the priestly class

– appears to correspond to Old Persian *brazman-* > Middle Persian *brahm* ‘form, (decent) appearance (in clothing or conduct)’

Thus probably, by a shift in accent that is independently observed:

* *bʰlégʰ-*men ‘(appropriate) ritual form’
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– linguistically it **cannot be** the same as L *flāmen* ‘priest’
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āθravan

- Normal word for ‘priest’ in the Avesta
- Corresponds to Vedic *atharvan* ‘endowed with magical powers’ (from the *Atharva Veda*, concerned with magic) — a rare word in the Vedas
- Attempts to link the word to Avestan ātar ‘fire’ are difficult because the Avestan *atharvan* is not specifically the fire-priest, but is responsible for religious ceremony
- ātar has no cognate in India — there fire is agni (cf. L *ignis*)
- No convincing etymology beyond Indo-Iranian; possibly a relic form
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kṣattriya and rāj

kṣattriya- derived from kṣattra- ‘power’: the Power Class

rāj- old word for ‘king’
< *₃h₃re̞g-s ‘king’ > L rēx
< *₃h₃re̞g- ‘to hold out one’s hand, to direct with the hand’

hence: the Directing Class (~ executive)

– The executive or controlling class held this position in virtue of its capability as warriors
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**raθaēštā (-ar)**

- Probably < *raθaē-štā ‘he who stands up in a chariot’

< *rotH-o-i ‘in a chariot’ + *steh₂ ‘stand’

= Ved. *ratheṣṭha* (an epithet of Indra)

- This etymology suggests that in PIE society the ruling class **drove chariots into battle** instead of riding on horseback

- Typically in the Iliad the warrior rides into battle on a chariot and then dismounts for one-on-one combat:

Homeric *ἐπ’ ἥππον βάινο*, lit. ‘to go upon horses’ always means ‘to mount a chariot’, Latin *equō vēhī* ‘to go on horseback’ must have been once literally ‘to transport in a vehicle with a horse’
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vaiśya and vāstrō fšuyant-

Ved. vaišya < derivative of viś ‘town, community’
  < *u̯i̯k- < *uoik- ‘village, clan’
  > Gk oīkos ‘house’ (economy)
  > OE wiċ > towns in -wich

The vaiśya correspond to the PIE class consisting of ‘everyone else’ — ‘the clansmen, the community’

Av. vāstrō fšuyant- a dvandva (additive) compound
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• They turned out to record the rites of a class of priests, the Atiedian Brothers. The oldest of them appears to be from the 3rd cent BCE
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Urban Lustration

- In the Iguvine tablets directions are provided for the annual lustration (ritual cleansing) of the city of Iguvium.
- The priests had to walk around the entire city’s territory in a procession.
- At each entrance to the city, they had to recite various ritual formulae.
- Benveniste notes in particular a recurring phrase which calls for divine protection for six things:

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<tr>
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<th>priests</th>
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<th>animals</th>
<th>earth</th>
<th>produce</th>
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<td>nerf</td>
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Other tripartite aspects of the lustration

• First, the auspices (bird oracles) were taken by the adfertor, the chief priest (possibly an archaic term for ‘priest’
• Pigs, oxen and sheep were to be sacrificed
• Among other actions, the priest, stopping at various gates to the city, made sacrifices to:
  — Jupiter Grabovius: received the sacrifice of three oxen
    (then three pregnant sows to Trebus Jovius)
  — Mars Grabovius: received the sacrifice of three oxen
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Tripartite Cosmos

• We have already seen that the Vedas classify the gods in various ways, but one is according to their place in three cosmic domains
  — Sky, Heaven — Celestial — solar, lunar and astral gods
  — The ‘middle air’ — Atmospheric — storms, wind, rain, lightning
  — Earth — Terrestrial/Chthonic — agriculture, underworld, fire

• This partition also corresponds to the priest/warrior/producer partition

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Ideology of the Three Functions

- Dumézil expanded greatly on the tripartition hypothesis, suggesting that it reflected a fundamental ‘ideology of the three functions’ that must have been shared in PIE times
  1. **Sovereignty** magical, juridical, maximally sacred
  2. **Physical power and bravery** victory in war: chariot ‘specialists’
  3. **Fertility and prosperity** many and various gods are placed here
- Ritual formulae frequently allude to these three ideological elements, grouped together
- Dumézil argues that in certain Roman traditions an archaic ‘god of the people’ – Quirinus — fills the third role.
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Ion Legend

• In legend, Ion originally divided Greek society into four classes.
• These classes appear connected with Ion’s four sons, and ultimately with four different deities.
• Benveniste suggested the following correspondences:

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<td>cf. Argos</td>
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