

ASKO PARPOLA

ON THE PRIMARY MEANING AND ETYMOLOGY OF THE SACRED SYLLABLE  $\bar{om}$

1. *Introduction*

1.1. *The religious importance of  $\bar{om}$*

A paramount representation of Brahma and a pivot for meditation and concentration, the syllable  $\bar{om}$  has remained sacrosanct in Hinduism for some three millennia. It is a prominent religious symbol in Tantric Buddhism and in Jainism as well.

1.2. *Previous research of  $\bar{om}$*

Rather surprisingly, a comprehensive study of the sacred syllable  $\bar{om}$  still remains a task to be undertaken. Even substantial articles dealing more extensively with this topic are few in number. Keith<sup>1</sup> has given a useful synopsis, and Boeles<sup>2</sup> has examined the written symbols of  $\bar{om}$  in India and abroad. The term *akṣara*, which means both 'imperishable' and 'syllable' and is used with particular reference to  $\bar{om}$ , has been researched by van Buitenen<sup>3</sup>. Other studies worth mentioning are referred to below, in § 2.1.

1.3. *The scope of the present paper*

The present paper reproduces the essence of a study to be published elsewhere in fuller form and documentation. It concentrates on the most central problem concerning the sacred syllable  $\bar{om}$ , namely, its primary meaning and etymology. The solution sketched here has been very briefly mentioned by the author on earlier occasions.<sup>4</sup>

2. *Earlier etymological explanations*

2.1. *A synopsis of the explanations offered so far*

- 1)  $\bar{om}$  is originally just a meaningless sound.<sup>5</sup>
- 2)  $\bar{om}$  < Sanskrit  $\bar{ap}$ - 'to attain' (Praṇava-Upaniṣad in Gopatha-Brāhmaṇa 1,1,26) or Sanskrit *av*- 'to urge, to help, etc.' ('some [teachers]' quoted *ibid.*, and Uṇādisūtra 1,141/142).

- 3)  $\bar{om}$  < Sanskrit \**āvam* 'that' (cf. § 4.1).<sup>6</sup>  
 4)  $\bar{om}$  < Sanskrit  $\bar{am}$  'yes' < Sanskrit  $\bar{a}$  'interjection of reminiscence, etc.' (cf. § 4.2-3).<sup>7</sup>  
 5)  $\bar{om}$  <  $\bar{om}$  <  $\bar{o}$  < Proto-Indo-European \**au* 'introductory particle'.

The last mentioned etymology is the one proposed by Maurice Bloomfield in 1889 in his paper "On the etymology of the particle  $\bar{om}$ "<sup>8</sup>, and the only one mentioned by Manfred Mayrhofer in his recently completed etymological dictionary of the Sanskrit language<sup>9</sup>, as well as by M.B. Emeneau in 1959<sup>10</sup>. It is clearly the currently valid etymology, and deserves a closer scrutiny.

2.2. *The primary meaning according to Bloomfield:  $\bar{om}$  = atha*

In Bloomfield's opinion, " $\bar{om}$  ... may have been originally nothing but an introductory word of somewhat the same value as *atha*." As evidence for this, he quotes two rather late references, *Gṛhyāsamgraha* 2,9 and *Vājasaneyi-Prātiśākhya* 1,16-19 correlating the use of  $\bar{om}$  at the beginning of a Vedic text with that of *atha* in works composed in prose. Warrant for such a use is found by Bloomfield also in Pāṇini's rule 8,2,87 *om abhyādāne* " $\bar{om}$  (is pronounced as prolonged, *pluta*) at the commencement (of the recitation of a sacred text)".

In fact, there are also other (recent) passages attesting to the pronunciation of  $\bar{om}$  at the beginning - and end - of a Vedic text to be recited, e.g. *Manu* 2,74-75. From this place it will however appear that  $\bar{om}$  is not so much an introductory particle as a means for mental concentration, which is accompanied by suppressions of breath.  $\bar{om}$  is evidently associated here with Yogic practices, whose purpose it is to ensure that the text taught - or recited at self-study - will be retained in the memory and not slip away.

The beginnings of Yoga seem to be connected with the worship of the rising sun, representing Brahma, the creator and the world soul. At the *sandhyā-vandana*, the worshipper pays homage to the sun with the sacred syllable  $\bar{om}$  and the *sāvitrī* verse, and identifies himself with Brahma. This daily ritual is the first to be taught to the student at the initiation, the context in which *Manu* deals with the syllable  $\bar{om}$ .

Beginning, like sunrise, represents creation. *Gṛhyāsamgraha* 2,9 expressly links  $\bar{om}$  with creation and indicates that it conveys auspiciousness (inherent in creation). *Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra* 1,13,6-7 explains that  $\bar{om}$

is the door to heaven, and therefore one who starts reciting sacred texts (conducive to heaven) should begin with  $\bar{om}$ . The same text also states that "in rites of welfare which belong to the ordinary life (outside the solemn Vedic ritual) such sentences (of benediction) as those containing the words 'auspicious day', 'good luck', and 'prosperity' should start with it (i.e.  $\bar{om}$ )" (1,13,9). As the commentator explains, these benedictions are pronounced in reply to a request made by the performer of the rite. They are thus quite parallel to the *prasavas* of the śrauta ritual mentioned as beginning with  $\bar{om}$  in the immediately preceding sūtra (1,13,8).

The *prasava* of the Brahman priest (see § 3.3.1) is the earliest context in which the sacred syllable  $\bar{om}$  is found in the Vedic texts, and the Brahman priest is the human representative of the divine Brahma, i.e. god Savitar, the rising sun as the instigator. Most of the other ritual usages of  $\bar{om}$  seem to be derivable from this one.

In any case, it is from the parallelism with  $\bar{om}$  that the introductory particle *atha* appears to have acquired its auspicious meaning, and this parallelism seems to be secondary and irrelevant to the etymology of  $\bar{om}$ . But before assessing the primary meaning of  $\bar{om}$ , let us consider Bloomfield's etymology.

2.3. Bloomfield's etymology:  $\bar{om} < \bar{om} < \bar{o} < \text{Proto-Indo-European } *au$

With reference to Pāṇini's rule on the prolongation of  $\bar{om}$  at the beginning of a recitation (cf. § 2.2), Bloomfield continues: "To this long-drawn utterance we may ascribe the nasal, which was afterwards felt an organic part of the word and treated as an independent *m*." There are, indeed, several Vedic examples of such a nasalization in prolonged syllables, e.g. in Ṛgveda 10,146,1 *vīndatī̄sm* for *vīndatī*.

Bloomfield, thus considering  $\bar{o}$  to be the original form of the sacred syllable, derives it from Proto-Indo-European *\*au* preserved in such words as Greek αὔ (αὔ-τι, αὔ-τις, αὔ-θις), Latin *au-t(em)*, Gothic *au-k*, etc., the meanings of which point to an original adversative-connective particle comparable to that of Sanskrit *atha*.

Bloomfield further points out that if Greek αὔ is the full-grade ablaut form corresponding to the reduced-grade particle  $\bar{u}$  in πᾶν- $\bar{u}$ , then  $\bar{om}$  has the same relation to the common Vedic particle *u*, and *u* is always written  $\bar{um}$  in the padapāṭhas.

Bloomfield himself does "not venture to attach any significance" to this last mentioned fact beyond its support for the hypothesis that the nasalization of  $\bar{om}$  is secondary, but Emeneau calls it a "curious fact" which is "apparently given more weight by Wackernagel"<sup>10</sup>.

Wackernagel, it is true, singles out this reference, but at the same time reserves his own judgement, holding the nasalization as possible but not certain: "Vielleicht beruht auch der Opferruf  $\bar{om}$ , falls dies und nicht  $om$  die Grundform ist, auf einer derartigen Nasalierung ..."<sup>11</sup> Wackernagel here refers to Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa 1,24,3 as rejecting the pronunciations  $\bar{om}$  and  $\bar{o}$ , and accepting only  $\bar{om}$  as correct. However, the manuscripts, and Bhavatrāta's quotation in the commentary on Jaiminīya-Śrautasūtra 1,11,9, do not read  $\bar{om}$ , but  $\bar{o}$  (with a different intonation). Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa 11,5 and 14,3 also discusses  $\bar{om}$  and  $\bar{o}$  as variant forms, used for the attainment of different wishes, stating that as a rule the syllable should be pronounced  $\bar{o}$ . In themselves, such statements by ancient authors are no proofs of the originality of a particular variant. The variation in fact seems to be based not only on temporal but also on local factors<sup>12</sup>.

Actually it is equally possible to defend the view that  $\bar{om}$  and not  $\bar{om}$  is the original form. In the Vedic (as well as later Buddhist) texts there are clear examples of the dropping of the final  $m$ , especially before a following vowel, cf. e.g. Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa 7,27 *asmākāsti vīro* for *asmākam asti vīro*, or Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā 2,12,6 *jīhvābhi* (Padapāṭha *jīhvām abhi*) for *jīhvām abhi* in Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā 28,18 and Taittirīya-Saṃhitā 4,1,8,2. There are many cases in the Ṛgveda and especially in the Atharvaveda for such an elision and contraction, though it is mostly recognizable by means of metre only. The phenomenon has been explained as resulting from a preceding change of  $-m > -m̃$ ; this is regular in Middle Indo-Aryan, where  $-m̃$  is also often dropped before vowels as well as consonants.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The primary meaning of $\bar{om}$ : 'yes'

#### 3.1. Some earlier opinions

The weak point of Bloomfield's etymology is in the meaning, and in the etymological study of particles meaning is of crucial importance. At the outset of his paper, Bloomfield declares that "the word  $\bar{om}$ , as we find it in Indian literature, has no organic connection with the language. All its uses are conscious and secondary." In particular, he turns against

the different view adopted by Böhtlingk and Roth: "The Petersburg Lexicon explains *om̄* as a word of solemn asseveration and reverent assent, comparing its meaning with that of *amen* of the Scriptures. This explanation involves the transfer of a Semitic conception, colored by Germanic religious feeling; it does not seem to represent an Indian view."

I shall try to show that Bloomfield is here quite wrong, and that there are cogent reasons for considering 'yes' as the primary meaning of *om̄*. If this is the case, Bloomfield's etymology collapses. And the view that *om̄* originally means 'yes' is held by numerous authorities in addition to Böhtlingk and Roth, such as Weber, Monier-Williams, Oldenberg, van Buitenen and Zaehner.

### 3.2. *Explicit statements in ancient texts*

Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 1,1,8 contains an explicit statement on the meaning of *om̄*: *tad vā etad anujñākṣaram; yad dhī kiṃ cānujānāty, om ity eva tad āha*. Bloomfield himself, admitting that this reference might be cited in support of the view he is opposing, translates: "This syllable is one of permission; for when one permits anything he says *om̄*." Similar statements are found in Nṛsiṃha-Tāpanīya-Upaniṣad 2,8,3 and 2,8,7.

"But", says Bloomfield, "such passages must not be employed for the elucidation of the original value of the particle." Reason: "The statement comes directly from the ritual, in which formulas of assent or permission are introduced by *om̄*. This, however, is equally true of other formulas, questions, orders (*prāiṣa*), etc., as is in fact stated in the very next verse (Chānd. Up. i.1.9)."

### 3.3. *Om̄ in the formulae and liturgy of the Vedic ritual*

It may readily be admitted that in the Vedic ritual *om̄* is also used in formulae where it does not grant permission; such are for example the very numerous mantras where it is connected with the "mystical words" *bhūr bhuvah svar*. In this case it can be shown that *om̄* has been secondarily added to this series (cf. § 3.4). But this and other secondary developments (cf. § 3.3.1-2) cannot disqualify all evidence suggesting that permission is the primary meaning, although Bloomfield is ready to dismiss it in one broad sentence. The liturgical usage of *om̄* is the oldest we have access to, and thus of the greatest importance for the determination of the primary meaning.

### 3.3.1. *The prasava of the Brahman priest*

Looking at the references in Bloomfield's *Vedic Concordance* where *ōm* introduces a mantra, one is struck by the fact that most of the oldest occurrences consist of nothing but of *ōm* followed by an imperative.

It would however be inexact to call these "orders" *praiṣa*, which in the strict sense refers to the orders given by the Maitrāvaruṇa priest to the Hotar, prompting the latter to recite the verses of invitation to a deity, and these orders (e.g. *agnaye 'nubrūhi*) are not introduced with *ōm*.

The proper term for the "orders" introduced with *ōm* is *prasava*, literally 'instigation', but in this context also translated 'permission, assent', which is the literal meaning of the synonymously used term *anujñā*. The corresponding verbs are *pra-sū-* 'to impel, instigate, order, permit, allow', and *anu-jñā-* 'permit, allow, assent'. Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra (1,13, 8) makes just the following statement about the use of *ōm* in the śrauta ritual (cf. § 2.2): *yajñeṣu caitatādādayaḥ prasavāḥ* "and in the sacrificial rites, the instigations begin with it". The commentator glosses *prasavāḥ* with *anujñāvākyaṇi brahmādīnām* "sentences of assent by the Brahman etc.", and quotes as examples such mantras as *oṃ praṇaya* or *oṃ stuta*.

It is principally the Brahman priest (sometimes also the Sacrificer, cf. e.g. Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra 1,5: 7,20 ff.) who utters the prasava. This is indeed one of his principal duties, as is described in detail in the various Śrautasūtras (Śāṅkhāyana 4,6,17; Lāṭyāyana 4,10,29; Āśvalāyana 1,12,11-15; Āpastamba 3,18,9 - 3,19,2; Baudhāyana 3,23-24: 95,21 ff.; Vaitāna 1,2,1; Kauśika 9,9). The study of these passages reveals that the prasava or anujñā is issued by the Brahman (who personifies Bṛhaspati or Savitar) in response to an address (*āmantraṇa*) directed at him by another priest, usually the Adhvaryu, where this states his intention to perform a given act (e.g. *brahmann apaḥ praneṣyāmi*, "O Brahman, I am about to carry forwards the water"). The dialogue (*saṃvāda*, cf. Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra 24,1,9-10) is closed by the Brahman's reply, which is twofold: first comes an inaudibly muttered mantra (often relating the Brahman to his divine counterpart); then the actual *prasava*, consisting of *ōm* followed by the imperative of the respective verb (e.g. *oṃ praṇaya*), is said aloud.

In Kauśikasūtra 9,9, the word *ōm* (together with the word *bṛhaspatīsūtaḥ*, which properly belongs to the reply of the Brahman only) has been secondarily transferred, on account of the parallelism, from the assent (*anu-*

*jñā*) to the request for assent (*anujñāpana* = *āmantraṇa*), which in all other texts is devoid of *ōm*.

### 3.3.2. *The āśrāvāṇa of the Adhvaryu*

A similar analogical secondary development has apparently taken place in one particularly important *saṃpraiṣa* uttered by the Adhvaryu. These orders issued by the Adhvaryu to other priests usually do not begin with *ōm*. For instance, the Adhvaryu says to the Maitrāvaruṇa priest *agnaye preṣya* immediately before he in turn issues the *praiṣa* (*agnaye 'nubrūhi*) to the Hotar. But immediately after the Hotar has finished the verses of invitation ordered here, the Adhvaryu delivers to the Agnīdh priest the exceptional *saṃpraiṣa* beginning with the sacred syllable: *o(ṃ) śrāvaya!*

The majority of the oldest texts, however, record this formula as *ā śrāvaya* (Kaṭha-Saṃhitā 31,13, etc.), and Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra 2,15,3 has four alternatives: *ā śrāvaya*; *o śrāvaya*; *śrāvaya*; and *om ā śrāvaya*. The last mentioned variant is identical with the *prasava* uttered by the Brahman just before this, in reply to the Adhvaryu's declaration worded *brahman pravaraṇyāśrāvayīṣyāmi*. It seems clear to me that we witness here a gradual assimilation of the Adhvaryu's *saṃpraiṣa* to the foregoing *prasava*.

### 3.3.3. *The recitation of the Hotar, and the Adhvaryu's pratiḡara*

In the recitation of Ṛgvedic verses, the Hotar priest substitutes the sacred syllable *ōm* - which in this context is usually called *pra-ṇava* or 'fore-shout' - for the vowel and any possible following consonant(s) of the last syllable of each verse, as well as of the foregoing *āhāva* 'invocative call' (which may be compared with the *āmantraṇa* addressed to the Brahman).

The Adhvaryu priest has to respond (*praty-ā-gar-* or *prati-grh-*) to the Hotar's *āhāva* and to each of the *praṇavas* as well as to the pauses held at each half verse. The simplest form of the response (*pratiḡara*) is *ōm*. (Cf. Āśvalāyana-Śrautasūtra 1,2,8-15 and 5,9,7-10.)

### 3.3.4. *The laud of the Chanter priests*

In the Sāmavedic chant, too, there is a somewhat similar dialogue. After the Prastotar ('fore-lauder') has informed the Brahman and Maitrāvaruṇa of the Chanters' intention to sing a laud and these have issued their *prasava* ("ōm, laud ye!"), he sings the prelude (*prastāva*), ending it with *ōm*.

The Udgātar, who chants the immediately following *udgītha*, starts his 'high chant' with *ōm*. In specific cases, *ōm* is continued over the entire

udgītha. Indeed, it occupies so prominent a position in the Sāmavedic chant that it is considered as its characteristic "form" (cf. e.g. Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 1,4,1,1). It is also significant to note that this first part of the udgītha, which always consists of *ōm*, is called *ādi* 'beginning' (cf. e.g. Jaiminīya-Śrautasūtra at Bhavatrāta, p. 214,1 ff.).

### 3.4. Early Vedic speculations on *ōm*

#### 3.4.1. *ōm* and the three Vedas

The earliest speculations on *ōm* emphasize its being shared by the liturgy of all the three Vedas, cf. e.g. Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 1,1,9, which Bloomfield cited as counterevidence to the meaning 'yes': *teneyaṃ trayī vidyā vartata; om ity āśrāvayaty* [§ 3.3.2], *om iti śaṃsaty* [§ 3.3.3], *om ity udgāyati* [§ 3.3.4]. We shall see (cf. § 3.5-6 and 4.10) that not only in the case of the prasava, but in all the cases mentioned in Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 1,1,9, *ōm* denotes assent or permission. This is implied here already by the context, the passage following immediately after Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 1,1,8 quoted in § 3.2. In Taittirīya-Āraṇyaka 7,8,1 = Taittirīya-Upaniṣad 1,8, where *ōm* is said to be *anukṛti* 'compliance', these same and other similar ritual uses are enumerated.

#### 3.4.2. Brāhmaṇa-texts on the Brahman's duties

Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 11,5,8 and Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa 1,357-358 discuss the duties of the Brahman priest and especially the three "mystical words" (*vyāhṛti*) *bhūr bhuvah svar*. They have to be pronounced all three in succession, when an error not clearly assignable to a particular Veda or an error concerning all the three Vedas is concerned, while an error related to the Ṛgveda only is to be expiated by pronouncing the word *bhūh* alone. *Bhuvah* is similarly connected with the Yajurveda, and *sva* with the Sāmaveda. The word *ōm* is not mentioned in this connection at all.

In the parallel passage of Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa 6,10-12, there is also a discussion of the *prasava* (§ 3.3.1), which is said to consist of nothing but the word *ōm*. *ōm* is, however, not linked with the "mystical words", which are correlated with the three worlds (earth, atmosphere and sky) and the three Vedas in a creation myth.

Āitareya-Brāhmaṇa 5,32-34 appears to represent the youngest textual development in the description of the Brahman's duties, for here a similar creation account ends in deriving *ōm* from the three sounds *a*, *u* and *m*, which Prajāpati finally produced from the three "mystical words" respec-



tively. This is stated to be the reason why the Brahman priest in his reply to (the representatives of) each of the three Vedas (corresponding to the three "mystical words") says *ōm*.

Once *ōm* had been explained as the essence of the three "mystical words", it also started being added to the expiatory formula *bhūr bhuvāḥ svar*, so as to make *bhūr bhuvāḥ svar om*, or being substituted for it as its equivalent. All these three alternatives are given in Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa 1,18, where the use of the youngest formula, the mere *om*, is prescribed as the correct procedure.

Through their etymological meaning the three "mystical words" are equal to "this whole (universe)", with which the formula *bhūr bhuvāḥ svar* is identified (cf. Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa 1,357). Naturally their "essence", the syllable *ōm*, is also identified with "this whole (universe)" (cf. Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 2,23,4) and with the world soul Brahma which represents everything (cf. Taittirīya-Āraṇyaka 7,8,1, etc.). From the identification of *ōm* with the three worlds, the three Vedas, and the three "mystical words", it is a short step to further equations, such as with the past, present and future in Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad 1,1.

From the point of view of the present study, it is important to observe that at the beginning of this speculative development stands the discussion of the *prasava* in Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa 6,12. And in the *prasava*, *ōm* was beyond any doubt understood to mean 'yes'. Let us quote here still the commentary on one of the earliest *prasavas*, *om pratiṣṭha* in Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā (Mādhy.) 2,13: *om ity aṅgīkārārthaḥ: tathāstu!*

### 3.5. *ōm* and *tathā*

That *ōm* means 'yes' also in the Adhvaryu's *pratiḡara* is plain from Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa 7,18 and Śāṅkhāyana-Śrautasūtra 15,27. According to these texts, when the Śunaḥṣepa legend is told, the Adhvaryu responds with *ōm* to a *ṛk* verse, and with *tathā* to a *gāthā* verse related by the Hotar (*om ity ṛcaḥ pratiḡara, evaṃ tatheti gāthāyāḥ*). The statement that "*ōm* is divine, *tathā* is human" (ibid.) can hardly mean anything else than that *ōm* is the sacred (hieratic, ritualistic) counterpart of the normal profane affirmative particle *tathā*. *Tathā*, or in fuller form *tathāstu* (e.g. in Viṣṇu-Smṛti 73,29), literally means 'so' or 'be it so!' For the meaning, cf. Latin *sic* 'so; yes' > Italian & Spanish *sì* 'yes', etc.

The parallelism of *tathā* and *ōm* is clear from several other Vedic passages, too, e.g. *Āśvalāyana-Śrautasūtra* 8,3,25, where the pratigaras to the devanītha hymn are specified to be *om ha jaritar othāmodaiva* and *tathā ha jaritar othāmodaiva*.

### 3.6. *Om* and Hebrew 'āmên

It is certainly a mistake to think (as has sometimes been done) that *ōm* and Hebrew 'āmên are etymologically related. But their respective uses may be profitably compared.

The Hebrew word, meaning 'certainly, truly', when used formulaically denotes the acceptance of what has been said before. Such a use of 'āmên is known already from the Old Testament (cf. Deut. 27:15-26; Jer. 11:5). In the liturgical praise (doxology), the congregation replies by pronouncing this word (1 Chron. 16:36; Neh. 8:6; Ps. 41:4; 72:19; 89:53; 106:48), and in this connection the word has two shades of meaning: 'it is so!' and 'be it so!'<sup>14</sup>

Such a usage appears to be very widespread among different peoples throughout the world, and for quite natural reasons. In a Namibian divination ceremony, the accompanying party claps their hands and says together *ye savuma*, 'Ye, we agree', to each and every statement made by the diviner.<sup>15</sup>

This kind of asseveration has much the same function as the refrain in the choral performance of primitive song: to assert the communal character by making the party join the leader.<sup>16</sup> For non-Vedic parallels from India, see § 4.10.

### 3.7. *Om* in profane speech

*Om* is used as an affirmative particle also in several non-liturgical discussions in the Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣad texts, as well as in later classical literature. One example may suffice.

In Brhad-Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad 6,2,1, Pravāhaṇa Jaibali asks Śvetaketu Āruṇeya: "Have you been instructed by your father?" He answers: "Om," When Jaibali thereafter asks him, "Know you how people here, on deceasing, separate in different directions?", the answer is: "No (*na*)."

The parallel passage in Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 5,3,1 ff. confirms the affirmative meaning of *om*; here the reply to the question, *kumāra, anu tvāśiṣat piteti*, "Young man, has your father instructed you?", is given in a different way, by repeating the preverb: *anu hi bhagava iti*, "He has indeed, Sir."

Cf. further Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa 1,43-44 and 3,270; Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 10,6, 1,4-9; 11,6,3,4 ≈ 14,6,9,1-2 (= BĀU 3,9,1-2); 14,8,2,1-4 (= BĀU 5,2,1-4), and in later literature, Mālatīmādhava 6; Śiśupālavadha 1,75; Sāhitya-darpaṇa 1.

### 3.8. *Om and na*

In the above-quoted discussion, *om* alternates with *na* as the affirmative and negative reply respectively. In some texts these two words are expressly contrasted, e.g. in Aitareya-Āraṇyaka 2,3,8 *yad vāca om iti yac ca neti*, translated by Keith "of speech that which is 'yes' and which is 'no'", and by Horsch "Was der Rede Ja und Nein..." Their difference is discussed *ibidem* 2,3,6, a highly instructive passage, from which it is clear that *om* is the word used when one agrees to give away something that one possesses to another person requesting it, and *na* again the word used when one selfishly denies the request. *Om* therefore represents truth, and *na* untruth.

According to Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra 2,2: 35,1 ff., when requested by the Sacrificer to give him the sacrificial ground, the Adhvaryu priest grants the request by saying *om tathā*. In Jaiminīya-Śrautasūtra 1,2,16-18, the Udgātar, when requested by the Sacrificer to give the sacrificial ground, first replies inaudibly *tathā* and then aloud *om*. According to Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa 7,20, the royal sacrificer should request the sacrificial ground from the rising sun; "in that being asked here he creeps upwards, there-with he in effect says: 'Yes, I give it'" (*sa yat tatra yācita uttarām sarpaty, om tathā dadāmīti haiva tad āha*). The word *uttara* 'higher, upper (sc. direction)' evidently suggests here the meaning 'reply'. The commentator compares the sun's creeping up to the waving of hand or head by means of which men silently give an affirmative reply.

### 4. The etymology of *om* 'yes'

#### 4.1. *Om and Sanskrit \*avam* 'that'

The Prakritic development *ava > au > o* is well attested in a number of Vedic words, and the semantic development 'that' > 'yes' can be paralleled by Latin *hoc illud* 'this here' becoming French *oui* 'yes'<sup>1</sup>. The difficulty with Windischmann's old etymology (§ 2.1.3) is the extreme rarity of the pronoun *av-* in Sanskrit - it occurs only three times in the R̥gveda (6,67, 11; 7,67,4; 10,132,5), always in the genitive-locative of the dual (*avōs*) - and the absence of the meaning 'yes' in the use of the cognate Old Iranian *ava-* 'that' and Old Church Slavonic *овъ* 'that'.

#### 4.2. *Om and Sanskrit am 'yes'*

Weber's suggestion that *om* is just a "dumpfe Aussprache" of the Sanskrit particle *am* 'yes' (§ 2.1.4) does not suffer from such difficulties.

*Am* occurs for the first time in Sanskrit in Pāṇini's grammar (8,1,55). The lexicographers record it in the meaning 'yes' (Amarakoṣa 3,5,16; Trikāṇḍaśeṣa 3,4,2; Hemacandra 1540, comm.; Hemacandra, An. 7,2; Medinīkoṣa, Avy. 50) and as an interjection of reminiscence (in the last two references). As an affirmative particle it is found in a very large number of Neo-Indo-Aryan languages, usually in the form *ā*, or with an aspiration (for which see § 4.9) *hā*.<sup>17</sup>

Phonetically the change *am* > *om* may be explained as due to the labialization of the vowel, conditioned by the following labial nasal, whose articulation position is anticipated by the speech organs. This hypothesis is supported by an independent parallel (see § 4.7).

#### 4.3. *Sanskrit am and the Sanskrit particle ā*

But if *am* is the origin of Sanskrit *om*, what is the etymology of Sanskrit *am*? Weber suggested the Sanskrit particle *ā* (§ 2.1.4), assuming that the nasal is secondary and due to the lengthened pronunciation (cf. § 2.3). This is implausible, because the lexicographers do not know Sanskrit *ā* in the meaning 'yes', though as a particle of reminiscence it may be the origin of the secondary use of *am*. The affirmative sense is equally absent from the other Indo-European words to which *ā* is compared.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.4. *The age of om and am in Sanskrit*

*Om* is first recorded in the Yajurvedic Saṃhitās (Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā M 2,13; Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā 4,9,2), *am* in Pāṇini 8,1,55. Both are thus absent from the oldest Vedic texts, although such indirect references as Ṛgveda 1,162,41-42<sup>3</sup> and Atharvaveda 13,1,15 (cf. *ibid.* 10) and 13,3,6 suggest that *om* was already current as an important religious word. The contexts, which cannot be discussed here, suggest that it stems from the religion of the pre-Vedic inhabitants of India, which was gradually and selectively adopted by the Vedic Aryans (cf. § 5).

The word could therefore be rather of Dravidian than of Indo-European etymology. Thomas Burrow, for instance, has pointed out that "the most important source of the foreign element in the Sanskrit vocabulary is to be found in the Dravidian languages" and that the large majority of the

Dravidian loans first appear in the early stage of classical Sanskrit, "being first recorded in Pāṇini, Patañjali, Mahābhārata, Śrautasūtra, etc."<sup>19</sup>

4.5. *Dravidian ām 'yes' < 'it is, it is becoming'*

The principal word for assent in all the main literary Dravidian languages is clearly related to Sanskrit *ām*: Tamil *ām* 'yes, so, expressing assent, recollection'; Malayalam *ām* 'a particle expressing ability, possibility, willingness, permission, suitability'; Kannada *ām* 'an interjection of assent or recollection'; Telugu *avunu* 'yes'.<sup>20</sup> Cognates can be found in several other Dravidian languages, too.

It is widely accepted that *ām* in these Dravidian languages is a regular contraction of *ākum*, due to the loss of the intervocalic *-k-* [*-g-/-γ-*], which is very common in spoken Tamil, and known from Malayalam and Kannada, too. (The spirantization of the voiced intervocalic guttural is assumed to have taken place already in Proto-Dravidian.) *-aku-* in such contractions results in *-ā-*.<sup>21</sup> The Telugu form *avunu* or *agun* corresponds etymologically to Tamil *ākum*, the final *-m* having in Telugu changed into *-n*, and the euphonic *-u* having been added.<sup>22</sup>

*ām/ākum* is originally the third person finite form of the non-past (i.e. present/habitual/future) tense of the native Dravidian root *ā-/āk-* 'to be, to become', attested in virtually all known Dravidian languages, and used as a basic auxiliary verb, also in the meaning 'to become, to be fitting, suitable, agreeable'.<sup>23</sup> The non-past third person suffix *-um* can also with certainty be reconstructed for Proto-Dravidian.<sup>22</sup>

The corresponding negative form of the same root is in several languages used as a negative reply, e.g. Tamil *ākātu* 'no' and Telugu *kādu* (with characteristic initial metathesis) 'no', literally 'it is not, it is not becoming, it is not agreeable'.<sup>24</sup>

4.6. *The Vedic analysis of Sanskrit ōm: a+u+m, ॐm, \*āum*

It is possible that the analysis of Sanskrit *ōm* as resulting from the putting together of *a*, *u* and *m*, first recorded in Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa 5,32 (cf. § 3.4.2), is due to speculation based upon the discovery of sandhi.<sup>25</sup>

Certain peculiarities in the sandhi of *ōm* show that it was understood to consist of the preposition *ā* followed by *um*,<sup>26</sup> and as *ōm* is said to be three morae long (cf. e.g. Maitrāyaṇī-Upaniṣad 6,3), its assumed form may

be reconstructed as *\*āum*. This is very close to the uncontracted alloforms of *ām* in the various dialects of modern Tamil [*āgum*, *āyum*, *āḥum*, *āvum*], as well as to Gujarati *āū* 'yes'. Taking into account that intervocalic hiatus resulting from the loss of intervocalic voiced stops is attested in early Prakrit (cf. Pāṇini 6,2,70 *māireya* ~ Ṛgvedic *madira*),<sup>27</sup> it does not seem impossible that the Vedic analysis of *ōm* as *\*āum* might as well be based on an early North Dravidian alloform of *ām*.

#### 4.7. *The labialization of ām 'yes' in Tamil dialects*

Vedic *ōm* might therefore also be derived from *\*āum*, with the contraction of *ā + u > ō* in accordance with the Sanskrit sandhi. The alternative hypothesis of a labialization of *ām* (cf. § 4.2), which may have taken place in an early North Dravidian dialect,<sup>28</sup> seems more likely. An independent parallel for such a labialization in this very word is offered by the Tamil dialects. In the Jaffna dialect of Sri Lanka, Tamil *ām* 'yes' has become *ōm*.<sup>29</sup> Another example of labialization is the suffix of the first person plural of the finite verb forms, Tamil *-ōm* < *-ām*.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4.8. *Intensifying reduplication of ām 'yes'*

An intensifying reduplication of the affirmative particle may naturally be expected to take place in affective speech, and *ām* 'yes' is indeed very often repeated in colloquial Tamil, as *ām-ām* or rather *ām-ā*, sometimes even *ām-ām-ā*.<sup>31</sup> This provides an explanation for the Prakrit affirmatives *āmaṃ* or *āma* 'yes, indeed, certainly' (e.g. in Hāla's *Sattasaī* 417), Pali *āma* 'id.' (in *Jātaka*, *Dīghanikāya*, *Milindapañha*, etc.).

#### 4.9. *Facultative initial aspiration of ām 'yes' in Neo-Indo-Aryan*

A Dravidian etymology for Indo-Aryan *ām* 'yes' would also explain its frequent initial aspiration, with aspirated and unaspirated variants occurring even within one and the same language<sup>17</sup>. The aspiration seems to reflect the subphonemic glottal stop, which in North Dravidian reinforces all initial vowels. In the transcription of Brahuī, this glottal stop at the beginning of the word has been marked with *h-*. I have elsewhere discussed this question on the basis of eight Indo-Aryan etyma with a probable Dravidian origin and a facultative *hV-/V-* alternation.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4.10. *ōm and hum*

One of these words with the *hV-/V-* alternation (in addition to *ām*) must be, briefly recounted here, because it is nearly synonymous with *ōm* and provides a particularly instructive parallel to its use in the Vedic liturgy.

Among Dravidian-speaking Todas of the isolated Nilagiri hills of South India, the narrator of a story exclaims at the end of every sentence *ini*, and the audience exclaims in response *ĩ, ĩ!* This exclamation is etymologically related to Telugu *ĩ*, translated 'ay! yes! what next?', similarly ejaculated in response in hearing a story, indicating that one is listening and expecting to hear the sequel. In Tamil, too, there is a related interjection *um*, also used in urging on the story-teller. Burrow and Eme-neau consider this etymon to be Dravidian in origin.<sup>33</sup>

Tamil *um* can also be more generally used as an affirmative particle. Its relation to *ām* is exemplified in the following sentence quoted and translated by Arden: *tirunālukkup pōkirāyā enrāl ām, ām! tirumpi varukirāyā enrāl um, um!* "If we ask anyone, 'Art thou going to a festival?', he says 'Yes, yes.' If we ask, 'Art thou coming back?', he grunts 'Um, um!'"<sup>34</sup> Here the speaker replying *um* appears to be angry.

The Sanskrit particles *um*, *ūm*, *hum* and *hūm* are explained by lexicographers as interjections with many different meanings, those of question, assent, and anger being most often mentioned. Sanskrit *hum/hūm* has cognates in Pali, Prakrit and many Neo-Indo-Aryan languages. The meanings of the different Neo-Indo-Aryan languages make it quite certain that this etymon is related to Tamil *um* etc., for apart from 'grunt of assent', the word is used as 'grunt to drive a camel or to urge on cattle' as well as (at least in Sindhi, Gujarati and Marathi) 'sound of attention or assent made during a narrative'.<sup>35</sup>

The exclamation *hum* appears already in the Sāmavedic chant, where it normally starts the *pratihāra* part (the term means 'reception') following the *udgītha*, the chief part chanted by the Udgātar. Moreover, when the verses of the chant are repeated, as e.g. in the ājya lauds, each turn, with the significant exception of the first one, is introduced by the exclamation *hum*, pronounced by the 'fore-lauder', Prastotar (cf. Lāṭyāyana-Śrautasūtra 1,12,8-9). It appears to function as a signal that one verse has been completed and that a new one is about to begin.

I am told that in Sri Lanka there are verbal contests during festivals for Tamils whose forbears have come from South India in the 19th century. These contests involve two performers, who try to outwit each other with improvised verses. Each of these verses is concluded with a challenging *-y-ām-ā*, which serves to the other as a signal that one has concluded. The

opponent replies  $\bar{a}m-\bar{a}$ , and goes on with his reply. The audience reacts to the performance, clapping their hands and shouting  $\bar{a}m-\bar{a}$  'yes, yes!' or  $v\bar{a}! v\bar{a}!$  'come, come!' for good turns, and - though there is seldom cause for this, since the performers are usually very skilful -  $p\bar{o}! p\bar{o}!$  'go, go!' or  $p\bar{o}tum$  'enough!' for bad turns.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the very word  $\bar{a}m$  is attested in this popular usage, which is widely documented for the word (*h*)*um*. We have already seen (cf. § 3.5) that  $\bar{a}m$  - and the synonymous *tathā* 'yes' - were used as responses to each single verse in the recitals of ancient popular narratives, during such Vedic rituals as the royal consecration and the horse/human sacrifice (which in all likelihood are of pre-Vedic Indian origin)<sup>37</sup>.

### 5. Conclusion

Unfortunately I cannot here discuss other aspects relating to the early religious uses of the sacred syllable  $\bar{a}m$ , particularly in connection with the cult of the (rising) sun. In my opinion this word of the utmost religious importance provides yet another proof that the religion of pre-Vedic India goes back to a large extent to a Dravidian substratum. I have discussed elsewhere another key term of early Vedic religion, *kīmpuruṣa*, coming to a similar conclusion. In that and other connections I have given grounds for my basic working hypothesis, according to which the Dravidian substratum is to be linked with the Harappan culture. Its traditions were transmitted to Vedic times by an earlier wave of non-Vedic Aryans, the Dāsas and Vrātyas.<sup>37</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Keith 1917.
- 2 Boeles 1947.
- 3 van Buitenen 1959.
- 4 Cf. Parpola 1978, p. 248, n. 7.
- 5 Cf. Hauer 1958, p. 24 f. and p. 451, n. 22 (Hauer compares  $\bar{a}m$  to the sound of the bull-roarer); Heiler 1961, p. 307 f. ( $\bar{a}m$  is 'numinous primordial sound'); Keith 1917, p. 490 ( $\bar{a}m$  developed from the nasalized lengthening of the final vowel in the Ṛgvedic recitation: cf. § 3.3.3, and contra, § 3.4.1).
- 6 Windischmann 1834, p. 144; Benfey 1848, p. 41; Müller 1899, p. 322.
- 7 Weber 1853, p. 187 f., n.; Böhtlingk & Roth 1855 I, col. 1122.
- 8 Bloomfield 1889. Cited below without further reference.
- 9 Mayrhofer 1976 III/26, p. 657.
- 10 Emeneau 1959.
- 11 Wackernagel 1896 I, p. 302.
- 12 Cf. Bharati 1965, p. 133, 136.



- 13 Cf. Wackernagel 1896 I, p. 333; Pischel 1900, § 348-350  
 14 Palva 1974, p. 11.  
 15 Cf. Hunter 1964, p. 337 ff.  
 16 Cf. Bowra 1963, p. 49 f.  
 17 Cf. Turner 1966, no. 1235.  
 18 Cf. Mayrhofer 1956 I, p. 69.  
 19 Burrow 1973<sup>2</sup>, pp. 380, 385 f.  
 20 TL I, p. 233; ML II, p. 3; Kittel 1968<sup>2</sup> I, p. 144; Brown 1903<sup>2</sup>, p. 97.  
 21 Cf. TL & ML (n. 20); Caldwell 1913<sup>3</sup>, p. 361; Arden 1942<sup>5</sup>, pp. 140, 204, 245; Andronov 1967, p. 212; Zvelebil 1970, pp. 120-122, 24.  
 22 Cf. Subrahmanyam 1971, pp. 317-321.  
 23 Burrow & Emeneau 1961, 1968, 1972 (DED + DEDS + DEN), no. 282.  
 24 Cf. *ibid.* and Arden 1942<sup>5</sup>, pp. 223, 245.  
 25 Cf. Scharfe 1977, p. 79, n. 14.  
 26 See especially Hoffmann 1976, p. 554, n. 5.  
 27 Cf. Emeneau 1966, p. 129.  
 28 A possible North Dravidian labialization of  $\bar{a} > \bar{o}$  due to the immediately following labial semivowel  $-v-$  (later lost) is found in Kuṛux  $\bar{o}y$  'cow' and Malto  $\bar{o}yu$  'cow, ox' < Proto-Dravidian  $*\bar{a}/\bar{a}-v-$ , cf. Pfeiffer 1972, p. 58, no. 362. On the other hand, there seems to be no parallel to  $\bar{o}m$  quotable from Sanskrit (cf. Wackernagel 1896 I, p. 40) or Prakrit (cf. Pischel 1900).  
 29 Cf. Jotimuttu 1970<sup>3</sup>, p. 27; TL I, p. 624b s.v.  $\bar{o}m-paṭu$ .  
 30 Cf. Caldwell 1913<sup>3</sup>, p. 361.  
 31 Cf. Arden 1942<sup>5</sup>, p. 285; TL I, p. 235a; Andronov 1967, p. 212.  
 32 Parpola 1978.  
 33 Burrow & Emeneau 1961 (DED), no. 552.  
 34 Arden 1942<sup>5</sup>, p. 285.  
 35 Turner 1966, no. 14132-3.  
 36 Oral information given by Mr. S. Chandrasekeram, Helsinki.  
 37 Parpola 1980; 1975.

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