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BACKGROUND AND VARIANTS OF THE HIRANYAGARBHA CONCEPTION

It is a curious fact that in discussing the cosmogony of the Rgveda some prominent authors of handbooks should have neglected to pay to the Golden Germ (*hiranyagarbha*) of RV. 10.121.1 the attention it deserves. Oldenberg¹ did not even mention the name; Keith² contented himself with writing that "Prajāpati bears the title of Hiranyagarbha"; Dasgupta³ inaccurately observed that "the Supreme Being is sometimes extolled as the supreme Lord of the world called the golden egg (Hiranyagarbha)"; Edgerton⁴ noticed that the term was used in connection with the Demiurg. It was left to the Dutch archaeologist Bosch⁵ to make some important remarks on the 'background symbolism' of this idea. In an important, though somewhat subjective and in places speculative, book which intends to be an introduction to Indian symbolism he drew attention to the undeniable fact that there exists, in the Veda, a close relation between the 'vital principle' and the complex of ideas represented by the god of fire, Agni. Part of his argument may, in a more systematical form, be repeated here by way of introduction to some remarks of my own.

Bosch' argument resolves itself into the following three points. The relationship between Agni and Hiranyagarbha is especially apparent from the fact that both of them are said to consist of gold (see e.g. RV. 2.2.4; 4.3.1; 7.3.6; 10.20.9). Like the Golden Germ Agni is believed to have been born of the Waters (see e.g. RV. 10.91.6; AV. 1.33.1). There exists a relation between Agni and Prajāpati which is similar to that existing between Hiranyagarbha and that god (see below).

¹ H. Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, Stuttgart-Berlin⁴ 1923, p. 278.

² A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, Cambridge Mass. 1925, p. 208.

³ S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, I, Cambridge 1951, p. 23. For the "golden egg" see also P. Masson-Oursel, *Histoire de la philosophie indienne*, Paris 1923, p. 177.

⁴ F. Edgerton, *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy*, London 1965, p. 348.

⁵ F. D. K. Bosch, *De gouden kiem*, Amsterdam 1948, esp. p. 56ff. (English edition: *The Golden Germ*, The Hague 1960, esp. p. 57ff.).

Now in substantiation of the first point much more can be adduced than the four R̥gvedic and two epic places collected by my late lamented compatriot. For instance, at R̥V. 4.10.6 Agni's body or self (*tanū*) is said to be "pure gold" (*śuci hīranyam*). Authors of brāhmaṇas agree with the idea that gold and fire are essentially identical. See e.g. TB. 2.2.5.2 *āgneyam vai hīranyam*: because, the commentator recalls, gold is of the form of Agni's seed. Compare also PB. 1.8.5. Side by side with this identification we find the assertion that gold is Agni's light: VS. 4.17; ŚB. 3.2.4.8, the latter text expressly identifying gold and light or splendour (*varcas*); 4.3.4.21 *jyotir hi hīranyam*; 6.7.1.2; 13.4.1.7 "gold indeed is fire, light, immortality" where Mahīdhara takes *śukram*, not in the sense of "light", but of "(Agni's) virile power (*agner vīryam*)"; TB. 1.4.4.1; 2.7.9.3; 3.8.22.3; 3.9.4.5; PB. 6.6.10f.; 18.7.8 (cf. also 12.13.25; 18.9.8f.), and compare R̥V. 8.65.11; JB. 1.205; JB. 1.62 states that "by means of a piece of gold a 'symbol' (*rūpam*) is made of the one that shines there"⁶. For gold and the sun—whose light is Agni (ŚB. 2.3.1.30f.)⁷—see R̥V. 1.46.10: "the sun is equivalent to gold" (*hīranyam prāti sūryah*); VS. 10.16; ŚB. 10.5.2.6; 7; 12.4.4.6. At AiB. 7.12.2 both gold and sun are said to be pure light (*jyotiḥ śukram*). At ŚB. 7.4.1.10 a gold plate is identified with the sun. Compare also ŚB 3.9.2.9 where gold represents that heavenly body. The author of TB. 3.11.7.3 informs us that gold is Agni's 'home'—the place where he naturally and normally belongs, fulfils his task; his right and proper place and support and firm foundation (*āyatanam pratiṣṭhā*)—as well as the god's body⁸. By means of the light of gold (*hīranyajyotiṣā*) the sacrificer goes to the heavenly world: TB. 3.8.22.3; 3.12.5.10; ŚB. 13.2.2.16. The conclusion seems legitimate that these texts point to the conviction that gold was a form of materialized sunlight⁹.

At this point it is worth recalling that the close connection between gold and the light of the sun, the identity, so to say of the lustre of this metal and the splendour of the heavenly body, did not fail to impress other peoples of antiquity also. Says the Greek poet Pindarus Ol. Od. 1.1 f. "gold, like fire flaming at night, gleams more brightly than all other lordly wealth" and Isth. Od. 5.1 ff. "O Mother of the Sun-god, Theia of many names! For thy sake men even set a stamp upon gold, as mighty beyond all beside!". That means: As

⁶ See H. W. Bodewitz, Agnihotra, Prāṇāgnihotra, Thesis Utrecht 1973, p. 201f.

⁷ For Agni and the sun see e. g. also ŚB. 7.1.1.23; 8.6.1.16; 9.2.3.28-34; 10.6.2.5f.

⁸ For ŚB. 7.4.1.15 see below.

⁹ For the conception of the identity of gold and fire or light compare R. B. Onians, The Origin of European Thought, Cambridge 1954, p. 166. For brilliance as the essence of Agni see also N. J. Shende, Mythology of the Yajurveda, in Journal of the University of Bombay, N. S. 26 (1957), II, p. 44f.

the mother of Sun; Moon and Dawn she is the principle of Light; appearing in many forms, and giving brightness to all her offspring, she is also the cause of the brightness of gold and prompts men to stamp it"¹⁰; and elsewhere (Pind., fr. 222) the same poet expresses the opinion that Gold is the son of the god of Heaven (Zeus).

As is well known gold is in the Veda often declared to be life (vital force: *prāṇa*, ŚB. 7.5.2.8) or, more often, continuance of life (a full life-time, TB. 1.8.9.1), the so-called 'immortality'. See e. g. TB. 1.3.7.7; 1.7.8.1; ŚB. 4.3.4.24 *āyur hi hiranyam* (cf. 28); 12.9.1.4; 3.8.2.27 *amṛtam āyur hiranyam*; 3.8.3.26; 4.5.2.10; 4.6.1.6; 8; 5.1.5.28; 5.3.5.15; 5.4.1.12; 6.2.1.38; 7.4.2.17 *amṛtam hiranyam*; PB. 9.9.4. At ŚB. 13.1.1.4 one places *āyur indriyaṃ vīryam* into one's own self by means of gold: one of those many instances of a ritual practice founded on an identification. It is therefore not surprising to read, at ŚB. 4.5.2.10 that by means of the formula "thou who hast a golden womb (VS. 8.29 *yasyai yonir hiranyayī*)" the womb of a definite sacrificial cow is made 'immortal'.

It has already been noticed that the commentator on TB. 2.2.5.2 explains the fiery nature of gold by a reference to the belief that it was Agni's seed¹¹. This is indeed stated at TB. 1.1.3.8: Agni has intercourse with the Waters who are Varuṇa's wives, and loses his seed, which becomes gold (*āpo varuṇasya patnaya āsan. tā agnir abhyadhyāyat. tāḥ samabhavan. tasya retaḥ parāpatat. tad dhiranyam abhavat*). For gold having sprung from or being the god's seed see also TB. 1.2.1.4 *agne retaś candraṃ hiranyam*; ŚB. 2.1.1.5 ("...his seed became gold. That is why this shines like fire"); 3.3.1.3; 3.3.2.2; 4.5.1.15 (where this metal is said to be a sacrifice to Agni); also 5.5.1.8; 12.4.3.1; 14.1.3.14; JB. 1.56 "gold is the seed of Agni and the father is identical with the son". At ŚB. 3.2.4.8 milk and gold are declared to be of the same origin, "since both have sprung from Agni's seed" (cf. 2.2.4.15; 2.3.1.15; 9.5.1.56; 12.4.1.7 "seed is milk"; cf. 12.9.1.2). So it is not surprising to see that the author of ŚB. 13.1.1.3, while commenting upon the *aśvamedha*, states that when the horse—i.e. Prajāpati in the form of the horse—was immolated its semen went from it and became gold. As already observed by Eggeling¹² gold is here also Agni's seed and Agni and Prajāpati are implicitly identified. Elsewhere (ŚB. 6.7.1.4) there is no reference to the metal, but "this fire" is simply said to be "seed poured out" (*reto vā idaṃ siktam*

¹⁰ See J. Sandys, *The Odes of Pindar*, London-Cambridge Mass. 1957, p. 473.

¹¹ For Agni's seed (without a reference to gold) see e. g. TS. 5.5.4.1. For the conception of the procreative principle as active in fire in the ancient world see also Onians, o. c., p. 156; 158.

¹² J. Eggeling, *The Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa translated*, V, Oxford 1900, p. 275, n. 1.

ayam agnih). It may be recalled that at 9.5.1.68 Agni is as the vital power *prāṇa* said “to enter the infused seed and to take possession of it”—cf. AiB. 6.3.10 “Agni places seeds in the wives for propagation”; TB. 2.1.2.11 *agnir vai retoḍhāḥ*—; interestingly enough at ŚB. 10.3.2.7 Prajāpati is “the *prāṇa* whence the seed flows”¹³.

Statements of the intimate relation between, or identity of, gold and semen are however not limited to Agni¹⁴. In connection with the narrative of Indra’s disintegration in ŚB. 12.7.1.1 ff.—“he (the god) went asunder in every direction; the full command of his physical and psychical faculties (*indriyam*), his virile and vital power or virtue (*vīryam*) flowed away from every limb,... (7) from his seed his form¹⁵ flowed and became gold (*retasa evāsya rūpam asravat tat suvarṇam hiraṇyam abhavat*)”—it may be recalled that at 12.7.2.13 gold is a means of securing *rūpam*. At TB. 1.8.9.1 a similar tradition is handed down with regard to Varuṇa’s semen: “When Varuṇa was consecrated the waters removed his *indriyam vīryam*. This became *suvarṇam hiraṇyam*”. In TB. 3.8.2.4 it is the semen of the sacrificial horse which becomes gold. A brief identification of *retas* and gold occurs at TB. 3.8.2.4. At JUB. 1.58.7 the former is compared to undefined sparkling gold. In Greek mythology it was Zeus who, while visiting Danae as a shower of gold, generated a son (cf. e. g. Pindarus, Pyth. Od. 12.17 f.). Elsewhere Prajāpati, desirous of offspring, is said to have emitted gold which he threw into the (sacrificial) fire. As it did not please the fire he threw it into himself, into his heart (TB. 3.11.8.6).

¹³ Since sand is identified with Agni’s ashes (MS. 3.2.7: 26.14) and therefore is considered a manifestation of that god (e. g. TS. 5.2.3.2) it is not surprising to read that sand is also identified with the god’s *retas* (e. g. ŚB. 7.1.1.10). See J. J. Meyer, *Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation*, Zürich-Leipzig 1937, I, p. 116; III, p. 183.

¹⁴ I cannot suppress a reference to the Iranian *hvar*, *chvar* which, related to *svar*, *sūrya* “sun” and denoting “the light of heaven, the sun”—and it may be remembered that this celestial body was considered to be the visible form of Ahura Mazdāh (see e. g. R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London 1961, p. 68; 75)—is in the *Denkart* (see BSOAS 9, p. 876ff.) said to have been formed by that creator god, now called Ohrmazd. “The seed from which it derives is the Endless Light...Subject to the command of the Creator it is the spiritual gods who are responsible for assigning it to the material seed...The proper function of the *chvar* is to save and to bring about salvation...” (see R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan*, Oxford 1955, p. 370f., who has rightly left the Iranian term *hvar* untranslated because traditional renderings such as “glory” or “fortune” will not do; in the case of a king it is something like “majesty” but in connection with God it “is simply his Being”). “The conception of ‘seed’ plays an important part in the ontological parts of the *Denkart*” (Zaehner, *Zurvan*, p. 211).

¹⁵ See A. Minard, *Trois énigmes sur les Cent Chemins*, II, Paris 1956, p. 238, § 651a.

The ancients obviously were strongly inclined to believe that seed (*retas*) is a form or manifestation of light, and that this is what it has in common with gold. This identity is clearly stated at ŚB. 2.3.1.32: "In saying, 'Agni is light (*jyotis*), light is Agni, *svāhā*', he encloses that seed, light, on both sides with the deity, viz. Agni"¹⁶ (the text is discussing the agnihotra ceremonies) and 35 "Then, in the morning, with the words, 'The light is Sūrya (the Sun), Sūrya is the light', he places that seed, light, outside by means of the deity..."; see also TB. 2.1.9.2 *agnir jyotir jyotir agnih svāheti...reta eva tad dadhāti*. In TB. 2.1.2.11 the statement *agnir vai retodhāh* "Agni is (the god) who impregnates" is preceded by *agnir jyotir ity āha*: "Agni is light". At ŚB. 7.4.2.24 we find the interesting piece of information that the testicles, here called the "seed-shedders" (*retahsicau*), "contain that light, the seed, Prajāpati" (*tāv etaj jyotir dhārayato reta eva prajāpatim eva*); in TB. 3.9.17.5 the qualification *sauryam* ("belonging to the Sun"; the commentary explains *sūryasya retahsvāmitvāt*). The author of AiĀ. 2.3.7 expounds the theory that in women, blood is the form of Agni and in men, seed is the form of Āditya (...*yad etat puruṣe reto bhavaty ādityasya tad rūpam*). At AiĀ. 3.1.2 there is question of a correspondence between fire and seed which is of the same character as that between sun and eye.

Now it is worth recalling that ŚB. 7.4.2.17, dealing, in a discussion of the agnicayana, with the *dviyajus* brick, explicitly states that the gold man is the sacrificer's divine body and "this brick (made of clay) his human body". "As to that gold man, that is his immortal (*amṛtam*) form, his divine form". The sacrificer who performs the agnicayana rite undergoes a sort of deification: "he is born in yonder world as one made of gold" (ŚB. 10.1.4.9; see also AiĀ. 2.1.3, where Sāyaṇa explains: "He appears as golden as the sun"). And the sacrificer makes himself a golden body in imitation of Prajāpati who "finally made a golden form for his body, and...this was the final form of his body; whence people speak of 'the golden Prajāpati'" (ŚB. 10.1.4.9). In the same line of thought the Puruṣa in the heart, compared to a smokeless light, is believed to consist of gold (10.6.3.2). Gold indeed is a form or manifestation (*rūpa*) of the gods: ŚB. 12.8.1.15.

The intimate relation between gold and divinity¹⁷ is also clear from the passage ŚB. 4.3.4.6 "Having tied a piece of gold in the unwoven end of a cloth...he offers (with the words): 'I hope there will be a place for me in the world of the gods' ". The man who gives gold as a dakṣiṇā will go to the

¹⁶ The text implies non-identity of Agni and seed, although both of them are light.

¹⁷ For a collection of texts see P. S. Sastri, The imagery of Ṛgveda, Anna's Bhandarkar Or. Inst. 29 (1948), p. 165 ff.

heavenly world, endowed with the splendour of gold (*hiranyajyotis*, TB. 3.12.5. 10). "Those who give gold to the brahmans will be transubstantiated into light and dwell in heaven" (AVPar. 13.5.4 *jyotir bhūtvā divi sthitāh*): we know that the quality and quantity of a dakṣiṇā are related to the purpose of the sacrifice (cf. e.g. ŚB. 13.1.5.6)¹⁸. See also JB. 2.98. See also TB. 2.2.4.5 f. relating *durvarṇam hiranyam* to the asuras, *suvarṇam hiranyam* to the devas¹⁹. In ancient Greece also the adjective for "golden" (*chruseos*) was frequently used of what belongs to the gods.

In view of the antique belief in the 'divinity' of kings and the ruling class attention may parenthetically be drawn to the interesting parallel between ŚB. 13.2.2.17 "gold is a form of (represents) nobility (*kṣatram*)" and the conviction of other peoples that the one who is the legitimate owner of gold is entitled to hold the throne by lawful hereditary right. Compare e.g. the interesting Scythic story preserved by Herodotus 4.5ff.: the youngest of three brothers, sons of the first human being, who alone could handle golden objects became their first king. A rod of gold or studded with gold is already in Homer the symbol of sovereignty and royal sway (Iliad 1.245 f.; 279; 2.100 ff.; 186; 6.159; 9.99 etc.). The symbol of king Atreus' royal power was, in Greek mythology (Alcmaeon, fr. 6), a ram of golden fleece and according to an Iranian tradition the *chvarēnah* or "kingly glory" could materialize in a similar animal²⁰.

Like the light of heavens gold expressed also for the ancient Greeks the ideas, not only of the eternally beautiful and of the imperishable²¹, but also of the truly divine. Many objects belonging to the gods are, in Homer and other Greek poets, of gold²². It is only a golden bough which, according to the Roman poet Vergilius (Aeneis 6.137), enables Aeneas to enter the Nether World without detriment to his vital power, because gold 'symbolizes' or rather represents life itself. "By gold very much is expressed which we too ascribe to deity: difference in nature, sublimity, beauty, immortality, since gold signifies

¹⁸ See also J. C. Heesterman, in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 3, p. 241 ff.

¹⁹ Cf. also VS. 21.37 etc.

²⁰ See Th. Nöldeke in *Bezenbergers Beiträge*, 4, p. 22f.; Fixson (see the next note), p. 22f.

²¹ See W. F. Otto, *Die Götter Griechenlands*, 41956, p. 211; L. Preller-C. Robert, *Griechische Mythologie*, 41894-1926, I, p. 88; K. K. Fixson, *Das goldene Geschlecht des Hesiodus*, (unpublished) thesis Königsberg 1943 (I am indebted to my colleague H. Wagenvoort for drawing my attention to this thesis).

²² According to Marjalainen, *Die Religion der Jugra Völker*, II, p. 250ff., quoted by Miss Fixson, o.c., p. 13 the sky-god of the Woguls and Ostjaks is regarded as the "Great golden Father" and as being "the golden splendour on high".

eternal life"²³. Gods, and especially gods of light and the heavens, are often represented as being closely connected with gold: the Egyptian Re²⁴, "whose skin is of pure gold", the Greek Apollo and Aphrodite, and others.

Turning now to Agni's origin in the waters a short note may suffice, because this event is often referred to and mentioned in the handbooks²⁵: see for instance R.V. 1.95.3; 2.1.1; 3.9.2; 4.1.11; 4.40.5; 7.9.3; 8.43.28; 10.45.1; 10.91.6; 10.121.7; AV. 12.1.19. That Agni was born in or from the Waters can be read also in AVŚ. 1.33.1: "Of golden colour, clean, purifying; in whom (was) born Savitar, in whom Agni; who, of beautiful colour, assumed Agni as embryo (*garbham*)...". Notice that the Waters which so to say constitute Agni's womb are expressly characterized as being of golden colour (*hiranyavarnāḥ*)²⁶. In the parallel stanza AVP. 1.25.1 Savitar and Agni in pāda b are replaced by Kaśyapa (=Savitar²⁷) and Indra, but Agni, the embryo is also mentioned in pāda c.

According to a mythical narrative preserved in ŚB. 1.2.3.1 ff. Agni formerly had a fourfold form. That Agni whom they (the gods) had chosen for the office of the hotar-priest passed away. The second and third forms of the god also suffered the same fate. The fourth form, "the one which still constitutes fire in our time", concealed himself in the waters from fear of meeting with the same misfortune. The gods discovered him and dragged him forcibly out of the water. Agni, reproaching the waters for being an unsafe place of refuge, spat upon them. The saliva served as *virya* (semen) and from that were produced the three Āptyas, viz. Trita, Dvita, and Ekata. These three births remind us of the threefold origin of the god himself which is clearly expressed at R.V. 10.45.1 ff. (cf. 1.95.3; 4.1.7). Owing to these three births he is often described as having a triple character²⁸, but after referring to his forms the poet of R.V. 10.45.2 makes mention of his highest name, which is secret, as the source from which the god has come. This does not only mean that the god phenomenally exists in three places (in the celestial world, among men, in the waters) so as

²³ G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, London 1938, p. 170.

²⁴ Fixson, o.c., p. 14; see also A. Erman, *Die Religion der Ägypter*, Berlin-Leipzig 1934, p. 27.

²⁵ Compare e.g. also A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg 1897, p. 92.

²⁶ For variants see W.D. Whitney-C.R. Lanman, *Atharva-Veda Samhitā*, Cambridge Mass. 1905, p. 33.

²⁷ Cf. M. Bloomfield, in *Amer. J. of Phil.* 17, p. 403.

²⁸ See e.g. A. Bergaigne, *La religion védique*, I, Paris 1878, ²1963, p. 21f.; Macdonell, o.c., p. 93.

to be present and manifest himself in many *dhāmāni*²⁹; there is a 'fourth form of his', his highest name or the secret aspect of his personality. See also TS. 2.6.6.1; 6.2.8.4. It would be needless to expatiate upon the well-known similar view of the Highest being in one quarter phenomenal and in three quarters immortal and inaccessible (the Puruṣa: RV. 10,90.4; Brahman: ChU. 3.12.6; cf. BĀU. 1.4.7). What is worth noticing is that the belief in the phenomenal incompleteness of the Highest was at an early date expressed in connection with the God of Fire and then (likewise in the ratio 3: 1) also with Prajāpati, because at ŚB. 4.6.1.4 it reads: "Prajāpati is the fourth over and above these three worlds".

That it was the primeval waters which bore or rather conceived the Hiraṇyagarbha is clearly stated at RV. 10.121.7 which will be discussed below. In other texts mention is made, not of an embryo but of an egg and this golden egg is explicitly said to have been produced by the Waters (ŚB. 11.1.6.1). Although in the cosmogonic myth of the golden egg from which Prajāpati came into existence—as handed down in ŚB. 11.1.6.1 f.—no mention is made of Agni, it is clear that the fiery element is, here also, of fundamental importance, because the primeval Waters³⁰ desiring to be reproduced, are described as having toiled and becoming heated with fervid austerities: they performed tapas, generated heat by ascetic practices. "And when they were becoming heated, a golden egg was produced", which floated about, bearing Prajāpati. The myth being no doubt conceived on the analogy of a bird's egg, the egg should of course not be regarded as being a solid ball of gold. The text does not speak of a father, or of Agni's seed; yet the fiery element is at the beginning of the process³¹.

²⁹ See J. Gonda, Notes on Names and the Name of God in Ancient India, Amsterdam Acad. 1970, p. 46f.

³⁰ For the primeval waters now see M. Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, London-New York 1958, p. 188ff.

³¹ Recently it was once again recalled (W. Doniger O'Flaherty, The submarine fire in the mythology of Śiva, J.R.A.S. 1971, p. 9f.) that the two natural symbols, fire—an image of energy, "all the more compelling in a land in which heat is so intense as to become a constantly obtrusive image of power"—and water—symbolizing, inter alia, immortality, fertility and the female power of creation—often occur in combination, "the image of Fire (male) in Water (female) being the ultimate resolution of oppositions": "held in suspended union, each retains its full power and nothing is lost in compromise, but there is complete balance". This 'balance of powers' is, in the Veda, represented by the conception of Agni in the waters, in which the god of fire is not destroyed, but hidden and no less capable of powerful action. This is true, but in this connection the waters are first and foremost the primeval 'material' of the universe before creation.

However, in the parallel, but more complicated, myth ŚB. 6.1.1.5 ff.³² the Person became Prajāpati who is explicitly declared to be identical with Agni (who in this context is the great fire-place which is being built) and it is Prajāpati who is said to toil and practise austerity (*tapas*), because he desired to be reproduced. In 10 it is the same Puruṣa Prajāpati (8) who, desiring to be reproduced from the Waters, entered them with the threefold Veda; “then an egg arose”, from which Brahman, the Threefold Veda came forth.

In these myths the waters “symbolize the universal sum of virtualities”³³. They are the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence. Being formless they precede every definite form and support every creation (RV. 10.129.1). Says the Bhaviṣyottara-purāṇa, 31.14 “Water, thou art the source of everything and of every existence”. Thus they are regarded as the firm foundation of the universe (ŚB. 6.8.2.2; 12.5.2.14 *āpo vā asya sarvasya pratiṣṭhā*).

The Indians were not alone in creating a myth of a cosmogonic egg. There is an Egyptian parallel³⁴ and this also is handed down in variants, showing the same absence of a hard-and-fast line between creation and a physical origin of the universe which is characteristic of the Indian mythical complex. In the beginning the Sun-god arose, in the form of a falcon, out of an egg, and this event meant the beginning of life in the universe. According to a variant the egg was produced by a bird, which is once identified with one of the great gods; or the sun-god is said to have arisen from the egg as the child of the eight primeval gods. A similar idea was entertained by the ancient Greek Orphici: the primal god of Love-and-Light (Eros-Phanes) springs from an egg laid by Chronos, i. e. Time who never grows old, in Aither and creates a world containing gods and men³⁵. Similar ideas were entertained by the Japanese who held that in the beginning Heaven and Earth were not separated but constituted Chaos resembling an egg, in the midst of which was a germ; since opposition such as male and female did not exist, this chaos represented the perfect Totality³⁶. There are Siberian and Indonesian myths in which the Highest Being, having the form of a bird, deposited the egg from which the world was to arise on the primeval waters³⁷. Mention may also be made of similar beliefs of the Chinese, the Polynesians and African peoples³⁸.

³² For a variant see ŚB. 6.1.3.1 ff.

³³ M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York 1961, p. 130.

³⁴ I refer to S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion*, Stuttgart 1960, p. 187f.

³⁵ I refer to O. Kern, *Orphicorum fragmenta*, Berlin 1922, p. 131 ff.; 143.

³⁶ Cf. M. Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris 1957, p. 240.

³⁷ M. Eliade, in *Sources orientales*, I, La naissance du monde, Paris 1959, p. 480.

³⁸ Eliade, in *Sources orientales*, l.c.

In this connection R.V. 10.121.7 is of special importance. Forming part of the Hiranyagarbhasūkta it states that when the waters received an embryo, producing Agni, the Great Unknown God, the sole vital principle of the deities (*devānām...āsur ékaḥ*) arose from that (them: *tataḥ*). As to the words *viśvam āyan gārbhaṃ dādhanā(h)* the traditional interpretation, according to which *viśvam* depends on *āyan*, may be preferred to Geldner's translation³⁹ "receiving the All as embryo", first because *viśvam* is not "the All" but "everything existing", in the second place because of the order of the words. If so, the Waters coming to everything existing, i.e. covering or comprehending everything (*Sāyana*), coinciding with everything received Agni as their germ, so as to produce the One God. Then the stanza may in a way attest to a 'transition' of Agni as the embryo of the Waters to the One immanent High God.

From a comparison of the texts it is perfectly clear that the cosmogonic myth of a High, Ultimate Principle manifesting itself in the primeval waters existed in variant forms: here the texts speak of a "germ", there of an egg. Now it is worth noticing that the stanza R.V. 8.43.9 *apsv`agne sādhiḥ tāva...gārbhe sāñ jāyase punaḥ* "In the waters, O Agni, is thy seat; being in the womb (of the plants), thou art born again"—which with the locative *gārbhe* occurs also as VS. 12.36 etc.—reads "In the waters, O Agni, is thy seat...; as an embryo thou art born again" (*gārbhaḥ sañjāyase punaḥ*) in MS. 2.7.10:88.7 (MŚS. 5.1.3.25). That means that in the traditional story of Agni's birth both meanings of *gārbha* "womb" and "embryo" could give sense. In view of the above connotations of gold it is therefore not surprising to find also references to a 'womb'—so to say the counterpart of the egg—or place of development consisting of that metal⁴⁰.

There is a curious story in KB. 6.1: Prajāpati, being desirous of propagation, undertook austerities, with the result that five deities, among whom Agni and Uṣas, were born. Uṣas, assuming the form of an apsaras, showed herself to her brothers. Their minds inclined to her and they poured out *retas*. They went to Prajāpati, giving notice of this fact. Prajāpati then made a golden bowl (*hiraṇmayam camasam*), in which he poured the seed. From this arose a divine person who received the names of Bhava and Śarva. The author obviously would not suppress the fact that the material of which the bowl consisted was gold, no doubt because this substance was essential in order to achieve the object Prajāpati had in view. Stories of seed thrown into a

³⁹ K.F. Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda übersetzt*, Cambridge Mass. 1951, III, p. 348.

⁴⁰ Mention has already been made of ŚB. 4.5.2.10.

vessel—another form of a womb—are not rare—ŚB. 7.2.1.5 “when the gods restored the relaxed Prajāpati, they cast him as seed into the fire-pan (*ukhā*), the fire-pan being indeed a womb” (cf. also 6); ṚV. 7.33.13 relates that Varuṇa and Mitra dropped their common or identical semen into a jar: the only ancient reference to the origin of the “jar-born” sage Agastya of later literature⁴¹—but in these texts there is no question of gold.

Atharvaveda-pariśiṣṭa 13 describes the ritual of a ceremony performed to secure the union of a king with the Golden Embryo (Hiraṇyagarbhavidhi). The main features of this ceremony are: the king is washed over a golden vessel with water containing the five products of the cow and the leavings of the offering, the water being poured from golden jars. He is then shut up in a golden vessel and left to meditate upon Hiraṇyagarbha, observing, in the interior, “a measure of seventeen (units) because seventeen is Prajāpati’s number”. Afterwards, he is taken out and pressed down with a golden wheel. Then the brahmins declare that he has been favoured or received by Hiraṇyagarbha (*hiraṇyagarbhānugṛhīto ’si*). There can be no doubt that in this process of ritual rebirth a stay in a golden vessel is essential. This reminds us of the ritual prescription that a man who had been missing but returns alive after his death has been presumed should undergo a birth ritual in a vessel made of gold or clay and filled with melted butter and water⁴². Another apposite reference is to be made: ŚB. 2.2.2.7 says that “even as seed is poured into the womb, so the officiants place the sacrificer in the (heavenly) world.”

On the other hand there existed the conception of a divine or mysterious being present in a golden vessel or cover. In the Atharvaveda Ś. 10.2, dealing with the wonderful structure of man, it is, at st. 32, stated that those who know Brahman know that being, called *yakṣa* and said to be possessed of an *ātman*. It may be surmised that *yakṣa* practically is another term for Brahman, the more so as at st. 29 mention is made of those who know that Brahman’s stronghold covered with amṛta (*yó vai tāṃ bráhmaṇo vedaṃṛtenāvṛtāṃ pūram*) and st. 31 describes the unconquerable stronghold of the gods in which is “the heavenly golden vessel covered with light” meant in st. 32. The closing stanza, 33, puts the matter beyond doubt: “Brahman entered into the resplendent, yellow, golden, unconquerable stronghold, which was all surrounded with glory” (compare also AVP. 16.62).

⁴¹ J. Gonda, *The Vedic God Mitra*, Leiden 1972, p. 4; 121ff.

⁴² See W. Caland, *Die altindischen Todten- und Bestattungsgebräuche*, Amsterdam Academy 1896, p. 89 and in *Der Urquell*, Neue Folge, 2, p. 193; P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, IV, Poona 1953, p. 225. As to a vessel made of clay: is it warranted to recall ŚB. 6.3.3.1ff.; 6.4.4.1 where clay is said to represent Agni ?

This presence of a divine being in a golden cover reminds us of the so-called *mahiman* libations, the two somacups drawn for Prajāpati at the *aśva-medha*. Representing royal dignity (ŚB. 13.2.11.1) and having made, when offered, Prajāpati “great and more numerous” (13.2.11.1) they are to be drawn in a golden and silver vessel respectively (13.5.2.23; 13.5.3.7), to the accompaniment of VS. 23.1=ṚV. 10.121.1 “The Golden Germ...” and VS. 23.63 “The Self-existing One (*svayambhūh*), of excellent nature, the first, laid down within the mighty flood the embryo which observes the proper time, from which Prajāpati was born”. See also KŚS. 10.5.1 f.⁴³

In this connection attention must be drawn to the interesting place VS. 40.17 “The Real’s face is hidden by a vessel formed of gold” (*hiraṇmayena pātrena satyaśyāpīhitam mukham*)⁴⁴. That means “the face or real form (*śarīram*, Uvaṭa and Mahīdhara) of the imperishable Puruṣa (the same commentators)—that is “the Puruṣa who (dwells) in the Sun”—the Sole True Being, Brahman, the indwelling ‘Spirit’ of all things existing, the Puruṣa who dwells in the orb of the sun and in the human body—is hidden etc.”. In the Kāṇva recension this closing stanza of the Mādhyandina recension is followed by the words: “... O Sun, Prajāpati’s son, remove thy rays and draw together or contract thy burning energy, so that I may behold thy most blessed form”. The last words refer to the True Spiritual Essence which is conceived of as veiled by the golden orb of material light⁴⁵. Both recensions agree in identifying, at the end of these stanzas, the human ‘Soul’ with that Puruṣa (“that Puruṣa

⁴³ The combination, and identification, of gold and a mess of rice occurring at ŚB. 13.1.1.4—“along with the priests’ mess of rice (*brahmaudana*) he presents gold (to the priests), for the mess of rice is seed (*retas*; this mess may cause pregnancy: J. Gonda, *The Savayajñas*, Amsterdam Acad. 1965, p. 55ff. and compare Kauś. 35.5; BĀU. 6.4.14ff.), and gold is seed; by means of seed he thus lays seed into that (sacrificial horse, and the sacrificer)” —leads me to make mention of the Buddhist story of Sujātā, daughter of the landowner Senāni who offered a meal of milk-rice in a golden bowl to the Buddha, who while he was sitting under the banyan, was believed to be the tree-god present in person to receive the offering. Buddha took the bowl and ate the food; it was his only meal for forty-nine days (*Jātaka* I.68ff.). For a golden cover or enclosing with gold (i.e. “immortal life”) see also ŚB. 5.4.1.14.

⁴⁴ These words recur at BĀU. 5.15.1=ĪśaU. 15 “The face of the Real is covered with a golden vessel”, Pūṣan the helpful god of light being implored to unveil it.

⁴⁵ Mention may be made also of ChU. 1.6.6 “Now, that golden Person (*hiraṇmayah puruṣah*) who is seen within the sun has a golden beard and golden hair; he is all golden (*suvarṇah*) to the tips of his nails”. The golden Person is at BĀU. 4.3.11 identified with the lonely Goose (*ekahamsah*), the ‘symbol’ of the spirit of the universe.

dwelling there, in the sun, am I")⁴⁶.

The above-mentioned existence of intimate relations between Agni and Prajāpati appears also from texts such as ŚB. 2.3.3.18; 10.4.1.12; 10.4.2.1, where they are identified (cf. 6.1.2.21); 6.1.2.26, where the latter is Agni's father as well as his son (9.2.3.50; cf. 11.1.6.14); 9.1.2.42: Agni is both offspring and the lord of offspring (*prajāś ca prajāpatiś ca*); 6.2.1.1, where he is said to have coveted Agni's forms: 10.2.4.1, where Prajāpati built for himself a body which contains Agni. Agni is identified with the year (8.2.2.8), and Prajāpati is the year. Agni is "the birthplace of the gods" (AiB. 2.3.7; 2.14.7), who are elsewhere stated to have been created from Prajāpati's vital power or breath (ŚB. 6.1.2.11; 11.1.6.7). Agni is Brahman (ŚB. 8.5.1.12; 10.4.1.5; cf. TS. 5.6.4.5 "the brahmin is connected with Agni"), and Prajāpati is Brahman⁴⁷.

In substantiation of the thesis that the relations between the Germ of Life and Prajāpati are similar to those existing between Agni and that god, it was Bosch⁴⁸ contention that in the Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa the Germ is called Prajāpati's son. However, neither the places quoted (2.4.2.1; 6.2.1.1; 11.1.6.14), nor other places state this relation; at 2.2.4.1 it is Agni, not the Germ of Life, who is generated from Prajāpati's mouth after the latter had performed *tapas*. For Agni as Prajāpati's son see also 9.2.3.50. It may be recalled that Agni is also the child of heaven and earth (of the universe): cf. ŚB. 6.4.4.2, and that the latter is identified with Prajāpati: 6.3.1.11. Bosch left, on the other hand, the interesting passage ŚB. 6.2.2.5 unmentioned: "Hiraṇyagarbha is Prajāpati, and Prajāpati is Agni".

It may—in addition to the above statements and considerations—be remembered that Agni is repeatedly said to be (identical with) all the gods: MS. 2.1.4:6.11; KS. 13.6:187.2; ŚB. 5.2,3.6 *agnir vai sarvā devatāḥ*. Notice also: Agni is indeed the existent (*bhūva*), for it is through Agni that everything exists (*bhū-*) here (ŚB. 8.1.1.4). At ŚB. 6.8.1.4 it however reads: "This Agni (represented by the great fire-place) is Prajāpati, and Prajāpati is the gods as well as men". Nay, "Prajāpati is the god above all other gods; he is the thirty-fourth god, and includes all the gods (which Agni does likewise)"⁴⁹. In the theory underlying the structure of the great fire-place, the agnicayana, both gods are identified—

⁴⁶ "This golden Person who is within the sun, who looks upon this earth from his golden place, is he who has entered into the lotus of the heart..." (MaiU. 6.1).

⁴⁷ The interesting place ŚB. 4.6.1.4 (cf. RV. 10.45.2) has already been mentioned.

⁴⁸ Bosch, l. c.

⁴⁹ J. Eggeling, The Satapatha-brāhmaṇa translated, IV, Oxford 1897, p. xx.

“an identification of cardinal importance”⁵⁰—and, what is of special interest, this theory is, in a nutshell, illustrated at ŚB. 7.4.1.15 “He then lays the gold man thereon, and this (man) is Prajāpati, he is Agni, he is the sacrificer. He is made of gold, for gold is light, and fire is light. Gold is immortality, and fire is immortality. It is a man (*puruṣa*), for Prajāpati is the Puruṣa”.

When the great fire-place, which is identical with Prajāpati, is built, a round gold plate, representing the sun (ŚB. 7.4.1.10), is laid down in the centre of the construction before the first layer is laid. This plate is identified with the sun, so that Agni-Prajāpati is built up over that celestial body: “from out of his own self he thus fashioned and generated him”, the sun and the gold plate being ‘homousian’, of the same essence (ŚB. 10.4.2.28 and commentaries). And, as we have seen, “Hiraṇyagarbha is Prajāpati, and Prajāpati is Agni” (6.2.2.5, dealing also with the agnicayana)⁵¹. It seems therefore warranted to suppose that the homologation, in the Agnicayana ritual, of the divine figures under discussion contributed much to this development of ideas, although, on the other hand, this ritual presupposed their identity⁵².

The same elements return in the symbolism of the *ukhā*, the ritual cooking-pot or fire-pan. The *ukhā* is shaped and baked side by side with the construction of the great fire-place, with the forming and baking of its bricks. During the year in which the fire-place is constructed the sacrificer has to carry about the sacred fire in this pan for a certain time each day. Now this utensil is not only identified with the tripartite universe (ŚB. 6.3.3.15; 6.5.2.6; 6.5.3.3), but also with Agni’s self or body (6.5.3.4; 5). It belongs to Prajāpati (6.2.2.23), but this exalted figure is also believed to be poured in it as seed into the womb (10.4.1.1) or to pour his own self into it (10.4.2.26)⁵³.

The preceding pages may be summarized as follows. The Vedic Indians were deeply convinced of the fundamental unity of fire, light and the sun, the source of a light and life. They regarded gold as identical with fire and light and intimately associated with divinity, calling it Agni’s seed and considering it a manifestation of (continuance of) life and a means of achieving deification. On the other hand, Agni was believed to have originated in the

⁵⁰ Eggeling, o. c., p. XIX. For the ritual see e. g. J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens*, I, Stuttgart 1960, p. 191ff.

⁵¹ See e. g. also Eggeling, *ibidem*, IV Oxford 1897, p. XVII; J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens*, I, Stuttgart 1960, p. 191ff.

⁵² See also H. R. Karnik, *Prajāpati legends in the Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, 20 *All-India Or. Conf.*, Bhubaneshwar 1959 (Poona 1961), II 1, p. 7ff.

⁵³ That the fire-pan is also considered the womb of the sacrificer (ŚB. 6.2.2.27) and his own self (6.6.1.22) can — however important in itself— be left out of consideration.

waters. So was Hiranyagarbha. Among the various ideas formed of the creation of the universe are that of the Golden Germ which, in the beginning, came into being (RV. 10.121.1); that of the Golden Egg from which Prajāpati arose (ŚB. 11.1.6.1)⁵⁴; that of the Puruṣa becoming Prajāpati (=Agni) and creating the waters with the Egg (6.1.1.5 ff.). The belief in a divine presence in a golden cover seems to have been no less current than the ritual realization of birth or rebirth in a vessel consisting of that metal. Another idea conceived with regard to Agni which appears also in connection with Prajāpati is that of his phenomenal incompleteness in the ratio 3:1. They are, moreover, identified or both of them regarded as identical with one and the same third idea.

While there can hardly be any doubt that some ancient mythical motifs and cosmogonic beliefs have been factors in the composition of the whole complex of ideas touched upon in the above pages, it seems on the other hand futile to make an attempt at reducing the variants of this cosmogonic myth to a unity, to one uniform myth or at arriving at a decision about the relative chronology of the oldest variants preserved in the Veda. The occurrence of variants is far from surprising, and the above survey is not exhaustive. In continuation of RV. 10.129.1 which is quoted in full in JB. 3.360 ff. provides us with an interesting variant of the creation myth in which the motives of light (*jyotis*), austerities (*tapas*), the waters, the golden egg combine with the motives of *asat* "chaos" (RV. 10.129.1), the One (*ekam*: RV. 1.164.6; 46; 10.129.2; 3), breath (*prāṇa*), heaven and earth as shells of the egg. An abridged translation of the passage runs as follows⁵⁵. In the *asat*— which was (a) nothing—*Ṛta*, *satya* and *tapas*, each of them provided with *jyotis*, floated upwards. Being voice, breath and 'mind' (*manas*), their food was light (*jyotis*). They became (the) One, which swelled through the food, viz. light. It let breath (the air) go downwards. Out of "the opening below", which is compared to a vulva, the waters discharged themselves. Then the world was water. When people say that in the beginning the world was unsteady⁵⁶ water they mean this water. The waves pushed (themselves)

⁵⁴ I am not convinced of the correctness of the view that the "Golden Germ" necessarily is a preliminary concept (Vorstufe) or prelude to the Golden Egg (thus e. g. Geldner, o. c., p. 347; L. Renou, Hymnes spéculatifs du Veda, Paris 1956, p. 252). Later texts not always reflect later ideas.

⁵⁵ For a complete German translation (and notes) see K. Hoffmann, in Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft, 27, München 1970, p. 59ff.

⁵⁶ *salilam*: I cannot, with Hoffmann, o. c., p. 65, follow P. Thieme, ZDMG. 111 (1961), p. 102ff. in translating by "saltish".

together. The (One) was pressed together so as to become a golden egg. After a hundred divine years the egg was about to burst open. It burst with the sound *phat*, its lower shell becoming the earth; its higher shell, heavens and that which was between the shells, the atmosphere. The word which he—masculine: probably Prajāpati is meant—spoke when he was born became the threefold Veda, Brahman. Having produced a firm foundation, viz. these ‘worlds’, he proceeded to create. For that purpose he mentally contemplated himself...”. See also Chānd. Upan. 3.19.1 ff.: “In the beginning this (world) was non-existent (*asat*: non differentiated, chaotic). It became *sat*. It turned into an egg. It lay for a year. It burst open. Then came out of its shell two parts, one of silver which is this earth, and one of gold, which is the sky...”.

In the version preserved in Manusmṛti 1.5 ff. the universe initially consisted in the shape of darkness which was dispelled by Svayambhū, “the Self-existent”, who, desiring to produce beings of many kinds from his own body, first created, by the power of his mental concentration, the waters and placed his seed (*bijam*) in them. This seed became a golden egg, in brilliancy equal to the sun. In that egg he himself was born as Brahmā, the grandfather (progenitor) of the whole world. That in 10 he is also named Narāyaṇa is no more surprising than the statement contained in the older Śvetāśvatara-Upaniṣad, 3.4: it was Rudra who generated the primeval Hiraṇyagarbha. Another variant, Viṣṇuite in presentation, is preserved in Viṣṇu-Purāṇa 1.2.46: in the beginning space, air, light, water and earth existing individually as distinguishable and therefore unable to create living beings, combined and assumed through their mutual association the character of one mass of entire unity. Directed by the Puruṣa, and with the acquiescence of Pradhāna (un-evolved nature) etc., they formed an egg. This egg, composed of the elements and resting on the waters was the abode of Viṣṇu in the form of Brahmā. Its womb was composed of the mountains and the oceans were the waters which filled its cavity...