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The Barter for Soma.
Vāc, Women’s Love of Music and Sarasvati’s Viñā*

The Brāhmaṇas and the Brāhmaṇa passages of the Yajur Veda Samhitās recount a myth wherein Soma is stolen by the gandharva Viśvāvasu, and then bought back by the gods by means of Vāc. This myth presents a number of interesting points, two of which I would like to focus on here: the appearance of Vāc in the form of a woman or a girl and the first signs of her connection with music. These two aspects, furthermore, extend their impact onto Sarasvati, with whom Vāc is identified already in the Samhitās1 and then emphatically, consistently, and repeatedly in the Brāhmaṇas and Brāhmaṇa passages of the Samhitās,2 where this myth occurs. Hence the appearance of the viñā (lute) in the ŚB version of the story could hardly have been without significance for the subsequent viñā-bearing Sarasvati. In this article I will discuss the seven Brāhmaṇa accounts3 of the Barter for Soma and conclude with the account found in the

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1 Atharva Veda (AV) 5.7.5ab (vācā sārasvatyā); Vājasaneyi Samhitā (VS) 10.30 (sārasvatyā vācā).

2 vāg vái sārasvatī. See, for example, Maitrīyaniya Samhitā (MS) 2.5.2 [49,4]; Katha Samhitā (KS) 12.13 [175,12]; Taittiriya Samhitā (TS) 2.1.2.6; Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (AB) 2.24.8; Kaushitaki Brāhmaṇa 5.2.8; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (ŚB) 4.2.5.14. [The numbers in square brackets refer to the page and then the line of the edition used. A list of the editions used appears at the end of this article].

3 MS 3.7.3 [77,14 ff.]; KS 24.1 [90,3 ff.]; Kapiṣṭhala-Katha-Samhitā (KPS) 37.2 [227,16 ff.]; TS 6.1.6.5-6; AB 1.27; ŚB 3.2.4.1-7; Vādhūla Brāhmaṇa (VādhB) in Caland (1927: 158). A critical edition of the basic texts (Brāhmaṇa or Anvākhyaṇa, Śrautasūtra, and Gṛhyasūtra) of the Vādhūla school is being prepared by Professor Ikari Yasuke 井狩弥介 of the Kyoto Daigaku Jīnbunkagaku Kenkyūjo 京都大学人文科学研究科 (Institute for Research in Humanities at Kyoto University). In collaboration with Professor Michael Witzel, he is also preparing an annotated translation of the entire VādhB. As far as the story of the Barter for Soma is concerned, Professor Ikari’s working critical edition of it (4.29), which he most kindly showed me, is largely the same as Caland’s.
Brahma Purāṇa\(^4\) (105.2-18).

As the MS recounts, gandharva Viśvāvasu stole Soma from Gāyatrī and kept it for three nights (3.7.3 [77, 14-15]). The gods then said [77, 16-17]:

\[
\text{strīkāmā vātī gandharvā vācam evā sambhṛtya yāthā yośid anapakṣeyātāmeva tāyā nīskrināmēti}
\]

The gandharvas desire women. Having prepared Speech – as a young woman of undimining youth [would be, so she was prepared] – with her let us barter him out.\(^5\)

And so it was that Vāc was exchanged for Soma. The gods, however, were not satisfied, it would seem, for they then decided to contest (ānvṛtiyāmāhā iti).\(^6\) This was the birth of untruth (tād ānṛtaṣa jānma), for, as Kūhn points out (1970: 92), the contestation of the gods to a legitimate barter was illegitimate. ‘Let us invoke (her) separately’, they said,\(^7\) and a wooing competition between the gandharvas and the gods ensued: the gods invoked her with song (gāthāṃ devā āgāyan) while the gandharvas uttered a charm (brāhma gandharvā avadān). She then turned to the gods (sā devān upāvartata).

A reading of brāhma as truth formulation\(^8\) would suggest that Vāc chose music over the Vedas – entertainment over knowledge – which is precisely the understanding of the ŚB (3.2.4.5-6).\(^9\) The gandharvas, however, are not known to have any particular connection with, or knowledge of, the Vedas.\(^10\)

\(^4\) Henceforth BrP.

\(^5\) Speech is likened to a woman already in Rg Veda (RV) 10.71.4: utā tvah pāśyan nā dadarśa vācam utā tvah śṛṇvān nā śṛṇoty enām / utō tvasmai tanvām vi sasre jāyeva pūtya uṣṭā suvāsāh // ‘Someone, though watching, has not seen Speech. Someone, though listening, does not hear her. But to some (other) one she has opened her body, as a desiring wife, beautifully attired, (would open herself) to her husband’.

\(^6\) According to Kühn (1970: 91-93), who discusses the forms ānu-ṛtiyāmahai (MS 3.7.3 [78,1]) and ānu-ārtiyanta (MS 3.7.3 [78,1]; KS 24.1 [90,9]; KpS 37.2 [228,3]) in the context of our myth, the meaning here is that after (ānu) the legitimate barter of Vāc for Soma, the gods contested it.

\(^7\) Although it would seem to be the gods who say this to the gandharvas (tē ’bruvan vihvāyāmahā iti), in the KS (24.1 [90,9-10]) and the KpS (37.2 [228,4]) it is the gandharvas who suggest this: tē gandharvā abruvān vihvāyāmahā iti.

\(^8\) See Thieme (1952: 118-19). Although Thieme does not discuss this MS passage, he does take up the parallel TS 6.1.6.6 in n. 3 of p. 119, interpreting brāhma as truth formulation, either in the sense of mystical truths or as the threefold (ṛc, sāman, yajas) knowledge, in light of ŚB 3.2.4.5 (vēdān evā prācīre). Brāhma in the sense of incantation, spell, or charm is prevalent in the AV as, for instance, in AV 4.37.11.

\(^9\) See pp. 352-53 below.

\(^10\) Kühn (1970: 92) believes the gods use a trick in choosing to sing, for song is the domain of the gandharvas. By the time of the Mahābhārata, the gandharvas are indeed musicians (see
They do not, furthermore, ‘recite’ (sāms), as would be appropriate for a hymn or a prayer, but they ‘utter’ or ‘pronounce’ (vad). On the other hand, one might argue, Vāc represents all forms of knowledge (ŚB 14.5.4.11) and embodies the Vedas in particular (ŚB 6.5.3.4), and thus the proclamation (if not recitation) of the Vedas would be a logical choice in competing for the goddess of knowledge. Her function in this myth, however, is not in the form of goddess of knowledge, but rather as a woman: the gandharvas are not said to desire knowledge, wherefore Speech as goddess of knowledge should be sent to them; they are said to desire women,\(^{11}\) and thus Vāc in the form of a ‘young woman of undiminishing youth’, much like an apsaras, the usual spouse of a gandharva,\(^{12}\) is exchanged for Soma. Consequently it is a woman whom the gods and the gandharvas vie for, and the means they resort to in order to win her over are chosen accordingly. As a man might use a line, speak some ‘magical’ or captivating words to catch a woman’s attention, recite poetry or serenade her to win her heart, the gandharvas resort to a charm and the gods to a song. The use of charms to win a woman’s love was not uncommon, as evidenced in the AV (2.30; 3.25; 6.8-9, 82, 102, 139).\(^{13}\) Hence the consequences of her choice are then explained in terms of what a woman loves (MS 3.7.3 [78,4-6]):

\[
tāsmād vivāhē gāthā āvāte tāsmād gāyant striyāh priyās
tād yā evaṃ vidvān gāthām gāyam hāstam grhṇāti sām hi
jīryatah sārvam āyur āto nārtin nītas
\]

Therefore a song is sung at a wedding. Therefore one who sings is dear to a woman. That is why one knowing thus, singing a song, marries. Then the two (the married couple) age together. They live their whole lifespan. They do not get into difficulty.

Thus for a man the road to happy matrimony is by way of song – tragic indeed the fate of the tone-deaf!

As for the Soma barter, the text concludes (MS 3.7.3 [78,6-7]):

\[
tād āhur ā vai śā pūnar agachan nāvā kim canā somakrāyaṇīti //
\]

About that [Soma barter] they say: ‘She (Vāc) did come back. There is no female with whom one barters for Soma’.

The gods were clever in invoking her with song, for in this way, she was

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\(^{11}\) Cf. AV 4.37.11d (gandharvāh sacate striyāh //).

\(^{12}\) AV 2.2.5ed (tābhyo gandharvāpatibhyo 'psarābhyo 'karaṃ nāmah //), 4.37.7b (gandharvāsya'psarāpatēḥ //).

\(^{13}\) Likewise charms were used to win a man (AV 2.36; 6.60, 89, 130-32).
only temporarily exchanged for Soma. It should be noted here that a woman's
love of music, or the conception of the author(s) that all women love music, is
not under judgement—much less under criticism—in this passage. It is par-
ticularly appropriate to Vāc as speech, for speech is meaningful sound, which
in song is set to music.

The KS (24.1 [90, 3 ff.] and KpS (37.2 [227, 16 ff.]]) accounts are almost
identical, other than a line not included in the KS and a passage of the KS corre-
correct by Raghuvira in his edition of the KpS in accordance with his reading
of the KpS. When the gods asked the gandharvas to return Soma to them, the
gandharvas refused. The gods then considered bartering him back with a cow,
but ultimately decided to send a woman, for the gandharvas desire women.
'Having made speech a woman, let us release magic [with that woman]', they
said (vācaṁ striyam kṛtvā māyāṁ upāvāsṛjāmeti).\textsuperscript{14} Having done so, they then
claimed Vāc back: 'Soma is ours. She with whom one barters for Soma is ours'
(asmākaṁ somo 'smākaṁ somakrayāṇī).\textsuperscript{15} The gandharvas suggested a woo-
ing competition, and Vāc chose the singing gods over the charm-pronouncing
gandharvas. It was then concluded:

tasmād gāyantam stri kāmavate na brahma vadantam /
adruhyad dhi sā brahmaṇe / tasmād āhur akrītaḥ somo
na somakrayany asti / devān hi sā punar upāvārataeti /

Therefore a woman desires one who sings, not one who pronounces a charm, for she
(Vāc) betrayed the charm. Therefore they say: 'Soma is not bartered for. There is no
female with whom one barters for Soma because she returned to the gods' (KpS 37.2
[228, 6-8] = KS 23.10 [90, 11-13]).

Unlike in the MS, nothing is said in the KS and KpS about weddings and
the life awaiting a man who sings. As if in abbreviated form, it is simply said
that a woman desires one who sings. On the other hand, the failure of the
charm is noted. Speech 'betrayed' the charm in that a charm is supposed to
work, and in her case it did not. She frustrated it in not allowing it to have its
intended effect on her. The final conclusion matches that of the MS: Vāc was
never really bartered away for Soma. The bartering was an illusion, a kind of
magic (māyā) released by the gods upon having made Vāc a woman (KS
24.1 [90, 7-8]; KpS 37.2 [228, 1-2]). And this magic of the gods proved to be more
powerful than the charms of the gandharvas.

In the TS (6.1.6.5-6), the gods made Vāc into 'a one-year-old female'
(stri ékahāyani). Once bartered for Soma, she took the form of a deer and ran

\textsuperscript{14} KpS 37.2 [228,1]. Schroeder's edition of the KS does not include this line. The action itself,
however, is mentioned in both texts: (te in KpS) vācaṁ striyam kṛtvā māyāṁ upāvāsrjan (KS
24.1 [90,7-8] = KpS 37.2 [228,1-2]).

\textsuperscript{15} KS 24.1 [90,9] = KpS 37.2 [228,3-4].
away from the gandharvas (sā rohid rūpām kṛtvā gandharvēḥbhyaḥ [5] aprakrāmya). She did not, however, return to the gods: she simply stood (atiṣṭat) – between the gods and the gandharvas, it would seem. This time upon the suggestion of the gods (tē devā abruvan), the two camps competed in summoning her. She chose the singing gods.

brāhma gandharvā āvadann āgāyan devāḥ sā devān gāyata
upāvartata tāṃśad gāyantam striyāḥ kāmayante kāmukā
enaṃ striyo bhavanti yā evāṃ vēda

The gandharvas uttered a charm. The gods sang. She turned to the singing gods. Therefore women desire one who sings. Women are sure to\(^\text{16}\) desire him who knows thus (6.1.6.6).

The AB (1.27.1) account is unlike any of the others in that Vāc appears as goddess of knowledge. She is the controlling hand at the centre of all activity: it is she who knows what to do when the gods and the seers consider how they might have Soma come to them, it is she who reassures them of her return when they resist bartering her away, and it is she who is then seemingly exchanged for Soma.

somo vai rājā gandharvesv āsīt taṃ devāḥ ca rṣayaḥ cābhyaḥdhyaḥ katham ayam
asmān somo rājā gacchad iti sā vāg abruvā striyā vái gandharvā mayaiva striyā
bhūtayā paṇadhvat iti neti devā abruvan katham vayam tvad ráte stheti sābrvāt
krīṇāiva yarhi váva vo mayārtho bhavītā tarhy eva vo 'ham punar āgantāṃśmī
tatheti tayā mahānagnyā bhūtayā somaṃ rājānam akrīnā //

King Soma was amidst the gandharvas. The gods and the seers set their minds on him: ‘How might this King Soma come to us?’ She, (i.e.) Vāc, said: ‘The gandharvas desire women. With me as a woman, barter [for Soma].’ ‘No’, said the gods. ‘How could we be without you?’ She said: ‘Do barter. As soon as your aim will be [attained] through me, I will come back to you’. ‘So be it’. With her as a mahānagnī, they bartered for King Soma.

The gods bartered, knowing there was no actual barter, for as Vāc had assured them, as soon as they had Soma, she would return to them. While in the MS she was given the form of a young woman of undiminishing youth (yośiḍ anapakseyatamā), in the KS and KpS a woman (strī), and in the TS a one-year-old female (strī ēkahāyani), in the AB she herself took the form of a mahānagnī.\(^\text{17}\) Keith (1920: 128) translates this term literally as ‘great naked one’, which might suggest a goddess, for she is called great, appearing in naked form like a celestial prostitute. This fits the context in that Vāc is indeed a

\(^{16}\) For the possible shades of meanings connected with the suffix -uκa-, see Delbrück (1968: 182, §123).

\(^{17}\) In the SB (3.2.4.3), as we shall see, she is given the form of a young woman (yoṣiṭ).
goddess, around whom, as noted above, all activity revolves in the AB account. She may not, however, be naked, for a nagnikā, as Thieme (1963: 178) explains, is a girl just before puberty. She is naked only in the sense that she does not yet have pubic hair. This would be more in line with the form Vāc is given in the other accounts, in most of which her youth or infancy are stressed. A mahānagnī, therefore, may be a pre-pubescent goddess.

In the ŚB (3.2.4.3), the gods sent Vāc to the gandharvas, knowing that she would return to them together with Soma:

tē hocuh /yošīkāmā vai gandharvā /vācam evābhyah prāhiṇavāma /sā nāh sahā 
sōmenāgamisyatītī /tēbhyo vācam prāhiṇvant /sūntītī sahā sōmenāgačchat //

They said: 'The gandharvas desire young women. Let us send Vāc to them. She will come [back] to us with Soma'. They sent Vāc to them. She came [back] to them with Soma.

The gandharvas, however, came after her, saying to the gods: 'Soma is yours, but Speech is ours', (3.2.4.4 sōmo yusmākam vāg evāsmākam iti) presumably understanding that Vāc had been bartered for Soma. The clever gods agreed, but added a condition: 'So be it', said the gods, 'but since she has come here, do not lead her [away] forcibly as it were. Let us invoke her separately' (tāthei devā abravann ihō cēd āgān māinām abhiṣāheva naiṣṭā vihva-
yāmahā iti). As in the other accounts, a wooing competition then ensued. In this case, however, the gods not only sang, but also played a musical instrument (3.2.4.5-6):

tāsyai gandharvāh /vēdān evā prōcira iti vai vayām vidmēti vayām vidmēti //aṁ 
devāh /viṁām evā srōtvā vādāyanto nigāyanto nisedur iti vai te vayām gāsyāma iti 
tvā prōmodeviṣyāmahā iti...

For her the gandharvas proclaimed the Vedas, (saying [everytime]) '... Thus we know!' ... 'Thus we know!' [5] Then the gods produced a viṁā and sat down playing (it) and singing (to [the sound of] it). ... 'Thus we will sing for you'. ... 'Thus we will amuse you', (they said [everytime]).

Here the charm (brāhma) is understood to be truth formulation in the form of the Vedas, and thus it is not simply a woman whom the gandharvas address, but it is the goddess of knowledge whom they seek to impress. As elsewhere the gods sing, but they are now accompanied by the viṁā. This marks the very first mention of the viṁā in connection with Vāc, for whose enjoyment it is and will continue to be played. She will choose to remain with

18 Stṛī in the KS and KpS is not necessarily a fully grown woman. It may simply denote the feminine gender, as in the TS where a 'one-year-old woman' would be a contradiction in terms.
the gods, and thus also with the viñā. This connection is particularly significant, for the viñā will become Sarasvatī’s supreme emblem, dominant amongst her attributes, and thus represented in so many of her images.

In this wooing competition, knowledge and music are vividly set against one another. Following the recitation of each hymn or passage the gandharvas repeat that they know (the Vedas), and after each song the gods assure Vāc that they will continue to sing for her and thus to amuse her. Emphasis on the contrast between knowledge and music paves the way for a rather critical assessment of Vāc’s choice. Whereas the MS, KS, KpŚ, and TS remarks appear in the form of generalizations on what women desire (and thus the challenges faced by a man!), those of the ŚB proceed to label as mógha the things to which Vāc and consequently all women are drawn (3.2.4.6):

\[
\text{sā devān upāvavarta sā vai sā tāṁ mógham upāvavarta yā stuvādbhyah sāṁsadbhya nṛttāṁ gitāṁ upāvavarta tāsmaṁ āpy etārhi móghasamhitā evā yōśā evāṁ hi vāg upāvavarta tāṁ u hy ānyā ānu yōśās tāsmaṁ yā evā nriyati yō gāyati tāśmin evātā nimiślatamā iva iva //}
\]

She turned to the gods. She who turned away from those who praised and recited to dance and song turned to something deceptive. Therefore even now women are connected with deceptive things, for Speech thus turned to [the gods], and because other women [follow] after her. Therefore it is to him who dances, him who sings, that these (women of the day) are rather closely attached.

Although nothing was said about dance prior to this, it is now added to singing. Vāc turned to these deceptive things (mógha) which lead astray (mo-hayanti). She as a woman chose the singing gods, being drawn to what is deceptive, and her choice then determined the nature of all women, for they only follow in her footsteps.

The ŚB portrays Vāc in a twofold form representing polar opposites: as goddess of knowledge she is all-knowing, and yet in the form of a woman she is connected with deceptive things, and hence with delusion and ignorance. This polar tension is particularly evident in the wooing competition. Although what the gandharvas actually seek is Vāc as a woman, with their proclamation of the Vedas they address the goddess of knowledge. Even though the real aim of the gods is Speech as goddess of knowledge, with their viñā and song they pursue a deception-drawn, music-loving woman. They each aspire for their desired object in a roundabout way. The gods, however, are more clever, for they address her in a method appropriate to her form at that given time. They made her a woman, and thus they appeal to her as a woman.

The VādhB, which belongs to the Taittiriya Śākhā, contains an account of the Barter for Soma consisting in a word-for-word repetition of TS 6.1.6.6
treated above,\textsuperscript{19} with the insertion of four stanzas (in bold below): two of the stanzas are supposed to be the \textit{brāhma} which the gandharvas pronounce, and the other two, the \textit{gāthā} of the gods.

\textit{brahma} gandharvā avadānī agāyan devā ye ha pūrve janā āsūr iti brahma gandharvā avadān yebhyāḥ pūrvavahā hitam / śrīnāṁs tebhya gandharvāḥ purā\textsuperscript{20} deyebhyaḥ ātapat // ye ha pūrve janā āsūr pūrve pūrvatārebhyaḥ / mūrdhanvāṁs tebhyaḥ saubhruvāḥ purā\textsuperscript{21} sūryād utātapad iti yā śrīnāṁ prathamā varyetīti gāthām devā agāyan yasyaṁ viśvam idam jagat / tāṁ adya gāthāṃ gāsyāmi yā śrīnāṁ uttamān yaśāḥ // sarasvati premām ava subhage vājinīvati / tāṁ tvā viśvasya bhūtasya pragyāṁasya agrata iti sā devān gāyata upāvartata ta[smād gāyantaṁ striyāḥ kāmayaṇte kāmukā enaṁ striyo]\textsuperscript{22} bhavanti ya evaṁ veda.

The gandharvas uttered a \textit{brahma}. The gods sang (a \textit{gāthā}). ‘Those people who existed previously’, the gandharvas uttered, ‘[and] those who were conveying benefit previously to them, for (all of) them the gandharva with the head heated [it] before the gods. Those people who existed previously [and] those previous to the more previous, for (all of) them the son of Subhrū with the head heated [it] also before the Sun’.

‘The \textit{gāthā} which is the first and the choice one of women’, the gods sang a \textit{gāthā}, ‘in which this whole world [exists], which is the highest glory of women, that (\textit{gāthā}) I will sing today. Further this, O Sarasvati, fortunate one, rich in prizes. As such we will sing (praise) you at the beginning, before every being’.
She turned to the singing gods. Therefore women desire one who sings. Women are sure to desire] him who knows thus.

As Caland (1929) points out, these stanzas appear in different sequence and with variants within one and the same wedding song found in the \textit{Kāthaka Grhya Śūtra} (25.23). The two stanzas uttered by the gandharvas, which are almost identical to one another, are variations on stanza 3 of the wedding song, while the \textit{gāthā} of the gods consists of stanza 2 followed by stanza 1, with minor variations. The fact that these stanzas appear in a wedding song is entirely in line with the MS account which refers quite specifically to marriage (3.7.3 [78.4-6]), and with most of the other accounts which identify the kind of man women desire (KS 24.1 [90,11]; KpS 37.2 [228,6]; TS 6.1.6.6; ŚB

\textsuperscript{19} See p. 351 above.

\textsuperscript{20} Caland has \textit{puro}, but probably it is \textit{pūrā} as in the following stanza. This is confirmed by three of the manuscripts used by Ikari, and it is, therefore, the reading he adopts for his critical edition.

\textsuperscript{21} Although both Caland and Ikari have \textit{pūrā}, this seems to be a scribal error under the influence of the \textit{pūt} of \textit{pūrva} occurring repeatedly in these two stanzas. As in the first stanza, it should read \textit{pūrā}.

\textsuperscript{22} The square brackets are mine, indicating the abbreviated part supplied by Caland from the TS. As Ikari’s edition shows, the manuscript actually reads \textit{ta=bhavati}. 
These stanzas also reveal that in the VādhB account, a brāhmaṇa is not a charm, but a Vedic passage, as in the ŠB, while a gāthā is not a song, but rather a technical term for a kind of stanza. Brāhmaṇa and gāthā thus belong to the same category here. The sense of the story, however, is partly lost if the gods and the gandharvas compete for Vāc in the same manner.

Another point of interest in the stanzas of the VādhB account is the appearance of Sarasvatī, whom the gods invoke in the second stanza of their gāthā. The epithets she is given here are commonly attributed to her in the RV: Sarasvatī is called subhagā in RV 1.89.3d, 7.95.4b, 6b, and 8.21.17b, and vājinīvatī in 1.3.10b, 2.41.18b, 6.61.3d, 4b, and 7.96.3b. Although the well-established identification of Sarasvatī and Vāc in the Brāhmaṇas renders the invocation of Sarasvatī here natural, the use of Sarasvatī’s RV epithets makes her presence overshadow that of Vāc.

The BrP (105.1-18) includes an account of this myth based on the AB version. Here, as connecting threads are tied together and further mythological links are incorporated, the name Sarasvatī is sometimes used instead of Vāc, the narrator is her father-spouse Brahmā, and the story is related as an incident which took place at Soma Tirtha (105.1):

brahmovāca
somatirtham iti khyātam pitṛṇaṁ prativardhanam /
tatra vrtaṁ mahāpuryaṁ śṛṇu yatnena nārada //

Brahmā said:

[There is a place] known as Soma Tirtha which increases the joy of the Fathers. Listen attentively to the very holy incident [which occurred] there, O Nārada.

The story, now localized, is related by the creator with added colour and detail. When the gods were distressed as to how they might regain Soma, they approached Brahmā and were answered by Vāc – his ‘better half’.23 As in the AB, her suggestion that she should be exchanged for Soma, since women are dear to the gandharvas, was met with opposition. The gods argued that they could remain neither without Soma, nor without Vāc: vinā tenāpi na sthātum śakyaṁ naiva tvayā vinā // (105.5cd). She assured them of her return (105.6b punar eṣyāmy aham tv iha //) and told them to prepare a sacrifice on the banks of the Gautamī river, where she could be exchanged for Soma (105.7-8ab).24 Invitations were issued, and gods, gandharvas, yakṣas, sages, and others assembled on a mountain, which thus came to be called Devagiri (105.9-11ab).25

23 Brahmā made Sarasvatī from half of his body. See Matsya Purāṇa 3.30-32.
24 gauntamāya daksineśa bhaved devagamo yadi / mukham tu viṣayaṁ kṛtvā āyān tu surasattamāḥ // gandharvāḥ strīpiṇīṁ nityaṃ panadhvam tam mayaṁ saha /
25 devadātait pṛthag devān yakṣān gandharvapannagān / āhvānām cakrire tatra punye deva-
While the sages were performing the sacrifice on the banks of the Gautamī, Indra, surrounded by the gods, suggested to the gandharvas to barter Soma in exchange for Sarasvatī (105.11cd-13).  

Although Soma and Sarasvatī were exchanged and thus Sarasvatī belonged to the gandharvas, she remained near the gods, coming to them in secret (105.15-16ab):

soma 'bhavac cāmarāṇāṁ gandharvānāṁ sarasvatī /
avusat tatra vāgiśā tathāpi ca surāntike //
āyāti ca raho nityam upāṁśu kriyatāṁ iti /

And Soma belonged to the immortals (gods), Sarasvatī to the gandharvas. (Although) the goddess of speech dwelt there, even so she also [dwelt] near the gods. And she always used to come secretly. ‘Let it (the barter for Soma) be done silently’.

If, despite Sarasvatī’s secret visits to the gods, it should happen to look like a barter actually took place in this version of the myth, Brahmā makes it quite clear that it was not the case (105.17cd-18ab): ‘Then Soma belonged to the gods, and Sarasvatī also (belonged to them). The gandharvas had neither Soma nor Sarasvatī’ (tato ‘bhavaḥ devatānāṁ somaḥ cāpi sarasvatī // gandharvānāṁ naiva somaḥ naivāsic ca sarasvatī //). The gods were the winners and the gandharvas were the losers. We are not told in what specific form Sarasvatī was apparently bartered away, but clearly it was as a woman. Perhaps the bard(s) of the BrP account interpreted the mahānagnī of the AB literally and considered this form entirely inappropriate for the pure Sarasvatī. Furthermore, as in the AB, the wooing competition is left out, and thus also the concluding remarks based on Vāc’s choice. Right from the outset, she had confronted the opposition of the gods by assuring them of her return. While in the AB she promised to come back as soon as they had obtained Soma, in the BrP she fulfilled her promise by coming to them secretly. Although the gods are supposed to be the outright winners, in possession of both Soma and Vāc, in the BrP their command of Sarasvatī is hardly complete given that she is openly with the gandharvas and secretly with them. The gods in the Brāhmaṇa accounts appear to have fared somewhat better.

The two points of particular interest in the myth of the Barter for Soma –

girau tadā // tato devagirir nāma parvatasāvībhavan mune / tatrāgaman suragaṇā gandharvā yakṣakīmarāḥ // devaḥ siddhāḥ ca rṣayas tathāstau devayonyaḥ /

26 र्षिभिर गाउतामीर द्रिक्यमाने महाद्विवरे // तत्र देवाः परिवर्तह सस्राक्षो [a]भ्याभसता // indra uvāca / gandharvān atha sampūjya sarasvatāḥ samipataḥ / sarasvatā paṇḍhvaṁ no yuṣ्माकम अन्तर्तामानः //

105.13ab seems to have been inserted, for it is not part of Indra’s speech. In terms of sequence, his worship of the gandharvas in the presence of Sarasvatī should have occurred prior to speaking, and yet his speech is already introduced in 105.12d (abhyabhāṣata).
the appearance of Vāc in the form of a woman or a girl and the first signs of her connection with music in general and the viṇā in particular – on which I have focused here take on a materialized form in Sarasvatī images. Having appropriated the viṇā, the goddess of knowledge is represented as a beautiful woman playing upon it. It is noteworthy that both the feminine form and the connection with music initially arise in less than optimal circumstances: the female form is imposed upon Vāc so that she may be bartered away, a song is sung for her so that she as a woman may be lured back, and in the SB, the viṇā and song to which she turns are deceptive things with which she forms a link and sets the standard for all women to follow. In order to complete the illusion of the barter, the illusory female form intended to delude the gandharvas is herself subject to delusion. The beautiful Sarasvatī with her viṇā thus finds some of her roots in the muddy environment of deception and delusion in the context of illusion, but like the lotus, she continues to grow and bloom long after the origins of her beauty and music are entirely forgotten.

TEXT EDITIONS USED

AB  

AV  
Athravaveda (Śaunaka) with the Pada-pātha and Sāyanācārya’s Commentary, ed. Vishva Bandhu et al., 5 vols. in 4 parts (Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute, Vishveshvaranand Indological Series 13-17). Hoshiarpur 1960-64.

Brp  

KpS  

KS  

MS  

RV  

SB  

TS  

VādhB  

VS  
REFERENCES


