



**McKim Marriott's Theory of "Coded Substance"
as an Explanation of Formulaic Turns of Phrase
in Certain Vedic and Hindu Prayers, and Its Relationship
to Mircea Eliade's Theory of "The Sacred"**

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Abstract. – The purpose of this article is to bring to the anthropological audience several overlooked points in South Asian literature that relate to McKim Marriott's theory of "coded substance" both with regard to *karma* and especially with regard to the interpretation of the formulaic prayers of the Yajur Veda and certain other formulaic Hindu prayers. It is suggested that Marriott's monistic interpretation of South Asian thought is consistent with what Eliade has described as "the sacred," and it is further suggested on the basis of Hindu and Buddhist architectural practices with regard to town, temple, and *stūpa* construction that we may view South Asia as "sacred space." [*South Asia, transactional analysis, "coded substance," karma, formulaic Vedic and Hindu prayers, "the sacred," sacred space*]

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**1 McKim Marriott's Theory
of "Coded Substance"**

McKim Marriott's "transactional analysis" as applied to relationships in South Asian civilization posits that there is "coded substance" that is exchanged in such relationships. Such transfers and alterations of "coded substance" are understood to be so embedded in the South Asian consciousness that it is axiomatic and is never articulated. Much like the Polynesian concept of *mana* discussed by Firth (1940) or the concept of *kwoth* discussed by Evans-Pritchard (1956: 1–33, 106–122), its explication can only be inferred from usage. The similarity, however, is a formal one: it emerges from a necessary emphasis on context for purposes of deducing and demonstrating relevant presuppositions.

Marriott (1976: 109 f.) writes:

Indian thought about transactions differs from much of Western sociological and psychological thought in not presuming the separability of actors from actions. By Indian modes of thought, what goes on *between* actors are the same connected processes of mixing and separation that go on *within* actors. Actors' particular natures are thought to be the results as well as the causes of their particular actions (*karma*). Varied codes of action or codes for conduct (*dharma*) are thought to be naturally embodied in actors and otherwise substantialized in the flow of things that pass among actors. Thus the assumption of

the easy, proper separability of action from actor, of code from substance (similar to the assumption of the separability of law from nature, norm from behavior, mind from body, spirit or energy from matter), that pervades both Western philosophy and Western common sense ... is generally absent: code and substance ... cannot have separate existences in this world of constituted things as conceived by most South Asians (Marriott and Inden 1973). Before one begins to think of Hindu transactions, one thus needs firmly to understand that those who transact as well as what and how they transact are thought to be inseparably “code-substance” or “substance-code.” The latter term will be used ... to stand, perforce awkwardly, for belief in the nonduality of all such pairs.

Marriott and Inden (1977: 228) place this observation in context:

A ... critical finding for understanding of South Asian caste – that the code for conduct of living persons is not regarded as transcendent over bodily substance, but as immanent within it – was developed by Inden and Nicholas ... [1977] from an investigation of the cognitive categories of kinship among Bengali Hindus and Muslims in both India and Bangladesh. Inden and Nicholas find that when a Bengali woman marries, her body is thought to be transformed, as is her inborn code for conduct. This striking finding mirrors the widespread and familiar but equally striking observation that a South Asian’s moral qualities are thought to be altered by the changes in his body resulting from eating certain foods, engaging in certain kinds of sexual intercourse, taking part in certain ceremonies, or falling under certain other kinds of influence. Bodily substance and code for conduct are thus thought not to be fixed but malleable, and to be not separated but mutually immanent features: the coded substance moves and changes as one thing throughout the life of each person and group. Actions enjoined by these embodied codes are thought of as transforming the substances in which they are embodied.

2 The Very Limited Support from the Volumes on *karma* Intended to Examine Marriott’s Theory of “Coded Substance”

In 1976 through 1978, and then again in 1982, there were three conferences and a section at an Association of Asian Studies meeting held in the United States and Canada devoted to exploring the South Asian concept of *karma*, “action” or “ritual action,” later “ethical action that determines the nature and place of rebirth,” as this concept relates to rebirth, with a view toward examining the applicability of Marriott’s theory. These resulted in two volumes of

essays, O’Flaherty ([ed.] 1980) and Neufeldt ([ed.] 1986), but had mixed results. O’Flaherty’s assessment of the first volume ([ed.] 1980: ix–xxv; 1980a) is upbeat. Salomon (1982), though, judges the results to be limited on account of the variability in beliefs associated with the concept of *karma*. He judges O’Flaherty’s positive appraisal of the applicability of Marriott’s theory of “coded substance” to the Vedic and Purāṇic material to be contradicted in the other papers in the volume.

3 Instances of *Karma* and Rebirth that Clearly Support Marriott’s Theory of “Coded Substance”

I might point, though, to my article (1993), which discusses the applicability of Marriott’s theory in a Purāṇic text that treats communities of polluted Brahmins. My conclusion is that in this text, the Pāṭiyagrāmanirṇaya, there is indication that polluted Brahmin status, while it may be caused by situations in this life, is also the result of *karma*. Status appears both to be contagious and to be carried by individuals from life to life. There is also an indication for a concrete conceptualization of the description *dayānidhi* “a store of compassion” applied to Paraśu-Rāma, and of the statement by the Brahmin of the last history that his children by a female slave were *snehayukta* “bound by affection.” “In short,” (Levitt 1993: 104) “these stories lend support to the hypotheses of McK. Marriott and R. Inden.”

O’Flaherty’s very interesting article (1980a), in which she traces the origin of the later concept of *karma* to the transfer of nourishment to ancestors in the Vedic *śrāddha* rite, or rite in honor of a deceased ancestor, with regard to Purāṇic material treats in the main theories of *karma* and rebirth, with a few instances of examples from mythology in her discussion of “The Transfer of Karma.”

Also well-suited to a demonstration of Marriott’s hypothesis are the Pāli Jātaka stories when read together with the framing stories, or stories of the circumstances in which the Buddha related the various stories, which are considered to have grown up around the Jātaka tales from an early date. While we can tell that some of the Jātaka stories date from at least the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. since they are depicted in reliefs at Bharhut and Sanchi, our text of the Jātaka tales, which includes the framing stories, is generally attributed to the A.D. 5th-century scholar Buddhaghosa. In our Jātaka text, in story after story one’s character and even situations in the present life are paralleled by one’s character and comparable situations in a past life – most notably

with regard to the stories about Devadatta as in the first and second Sigāla-Jātakas (Nos. 113 and 142), the Dummedha-Jātaka (No. 122), the Virocana-Jātaka (No. 143), the Vinīlaka-Jātaka (No. 160), and the Dūbhiyamakkaṭṭa-Jātaka (No. 174), and with regard to Kokālika as in the Tittira-Jātaka (No. 117), the Daddara-Jātaka (No. 172), and the Sīhakoṭṭhuka-Jātaka (No. 188), but also with regard to other characters as in, for instance, the Bāhiya-Jātaka (No. 108), the Uraga-Jātaka (No. 154), and the Sammidi-Jātaka (No. 167). The various stories, which are too long to relate here, can be found in readable English translation in Piyatissa and Levitt (2007–09).

In general, McDermott (1980), which discusses *karma* and rebirth in early Buddhism in the first volume (O'Flaherty [ed.] 1980), gives only qualified support to Marriott's theory in that he stresses the diversity of various theories of *karma* and rebirth, summing up that the variety of early Buddhist interpretations of the karmic mechanism and the rebirth process, as well as whatever is distinctive in these interpretations, can be seen to ultimately derive from the Buddha's denial of a permanent entity (McDermott 1980: 192).

It would seem that once we leave the various South Asian philosophical reflections on *karma* and rebirth, and consider instead situational examples of this reported in the literature, Marriott's theory of "coded substance" fits well.

4 Support for Marriott's Theory of "Coded Substance" from Instances of Merit Transfer in Buddhism

With regard to the transfer of merit, though O'Flaherty ([ed.] 1980: xiii) refers to "the overwhelming acceptance of merit transfer in Buddhism despite its doctrinal inappropriateness," McDermott (1980: 190) emphasizes that the Tipiṭaka is not fully consistent on this point. On the one hand, throughout much of the Pāli canon there is a strong emphasis on the personal nature of *kamma* (Skt. *karma*). One's *kamma* is said to be one's own. Meritorious action well laid up is a treasure not shared with others. On the other hand, a doctrine of transfer of merit finds expression in several places in the canon. McDermott (1980: 190f.) then goes on to give several good examples of merit transfer in the Pāli canon and in the Jātakas. I might note that aside from the Macchuddāna-Jātaka story that he cites, the "story of the past" in the Sīlānisaṃsa-Jātaka (No. 190) provides a very good example of the transfer of merit from a devout disciple of the Buddha Kassapa to a

barber who was shipwrecked with him. McDermott goes on, though, to note that a second Jātaka story, the Sādhīna-Jātaka, "seems to provide evidence that the acceptance of the practice of merit transfer within Theravāda at times came grudgingly."

Schmithausen (1986: 210–216) notes that the examples of merit transfer cited by McDermott (1980) as well as others adduced by other authors are late, in some cases late additions to an earlier text. Interestingly, he judges them to be due to popular influence, and accepts B. C. Law's earlier tracing of the doctrine of merit transfer in Buddhism back to the Vedic *śrāddha* rite, as does as well McDermott (1980: 190; see n. 86 for B. C. Law reference). He notes, though, that Bechert suggests that there may be a technical doctrinal background for the later Mahāyāna Buddhist tenet of merit transfer to *all* living beings resulting from the tension between the doctrine that one's *karma* is the fruit of one's own actions and the fact that a disciple is enabled by the teaching of the Buddha to attain liberation although he may yet not be mature in terms of his own *karma*. The tension, Bechert suggests, is resolved by the assumption that the Buddha is able to transfer some of his surplus merit to the disciple (see Schmithausen 1986: 227, n. 94 for Bechert reference).

We might note here that in his "Introduction" to his abridged translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva, L. D. Barnett (1947: 23 f.) writes:

The moral standpoint is likewise changed [in Mahāyāna Buddhism]. The ideal is no longer the calm, ascetic monk, waiting in cheerful tranquility for the end, but the Bodhisattva, the self-appointed votary seeking eagerly to procure happiness for his fellow-creatures at any cost, even if he must surrender his own right to spiritual advancement as the price. For now is affirmed the principle of *pariṇāmanā*: the karma of an individual is no longer confined to his experience, but can be made to redound to the benefit of others. The righteous can, of their own free will, sacrifice the merit of their own good deeds for the happiness of their fellow-creatures.

The emphasis in Mahāyāna Buddhism on the concept of a *bodhisattva*, or compassionate being, who defers his enlightenment for the uplift of the world, requires the concept of transfer of merit. And such, of course, fits well with Marriott's analysis.

5 Other Recent Considerations of Marriott's Theories

Marriott's concept of "coded substance" has been used profitably for purpose of elucidation of cultur-

al beliefs by O’Flaherty (1980b: 29, 36, 59 f., 117 f., 271), and is considered in Bayly (1999: 16 f., 16 n., 17 n.) in the discussion of the cultural coordinates in Hindu thought as these relate to caste, for instance.

I do not here wish to engage in a discussion of Marriott’s full blown theory of social interaction as expressed, for instance, in Marriott (1990) and as commented on in, for instance, the 1990 volume of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1990.24/2) devoted to Marriott’s work and in Gerow (2000). Marriott (1990: 1–6) contrasts his approach with those of Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and Durkheim, for instance, and places his approach to India in the context of Talcott Parson’s approach to Western society. Gerow, for instance, contrasts Marriott’s theories regarding India with those of Louis Dumont, and discusses Marriott’s theories in the context of Oswald Spengler’s theorizations regarding civilization.

Rather, my main purpose is to indicate generally overlooked points in Indian literature that Marriott’s theory of “coded substance” explains. One very important such point involves the Yajur Veda.

6 Formulative Phrases in Certain Vedic and Hindu Prayers that Suggest the “Coding of Substance”

The Yajur Veda, the ancient Vedic sacrificial prayer book for the sacrificial Adhvaryu priests, has been noted to contain numerous formula-like turns of phrase that often convey little or no meaning. While some may contain perhaps some modicum of meaning, more frequently we find endless formulas the meaning of which is doubtful. One of the chief causes for these prayers and sacrificial formulas often appearing to us to be nothing but senseless conglomerations of words is the identification and combination of things which have nothing at all to do with each other. For purposes of clarity, I provide here a few examples of such turns of phrase as given by Winternitz (1927: 180 f.), beginning with two that he interprets to convey a reasonable meaning:

Thou, Agni, art the protector of bodies; protect my body! Thou, Agni, art the giver of life; give me life! Thou, Agni, art the giver of strength; give me strength! Thou, Agni, make complete that which is incomplete in my body. – Vājasaneyi-saṃhitā 3, 17.

May life prosper through the sacrifice! May breath prosper through the sacrifice! May the eye prosper through the

sacrifice! May the ear prosper through the sacrifice! May the back prosper through the sacrifice! May the sacrifice prosper through the sacrifice! – Vājasaneyi-saṃhitā 9, 21.

Agni has gained breath with the mono-syllable; may I gain it! The Aśvins have gained the two-footed people with the two-syllabic; may I gain them! Viṣṇu has gained the three worlds with the three-syllabic; may I gain them! Soma has gained the four-footed cattle with the four-syllabic; may I gain them! Pūṣan has gained the five regions of the world with the five-syllabic; may I gain them! Savi-tar has gained the six seasons with the six-syllabic; may I gain them! The Maruts have gained the seven tamed animals with the seven-syllabic; may I gain them! Bṛhaspati has gained the Gāyatrī with the eight-syllabic; may I gain it! ... Aditi has gained the sixteen-fold Stoma with the sixteen syllabic; may I gain it! Prajāpati has gained the seventeen-fold Stoma with the seventeen syllabic; may I gain it! – Vājasaneyi-saṃhitā 9, 31–4.

A cooking pot is placed on the fire with the words:

Thou art the sky, thou art the earth, thou art the cauldron of Mātariśvan. – Vājasaneyi-saṃhitā 1, 2.

To the fire that is carried about in the pan at the building of the fire-altar, the following prayer is addressed:

Thou art the beautiful-winged bird, the song of praise Trivṛt is thy head, the Gāyatra melody thine eye, the two melodies Bṛhat and Rathantara are thy wings, the song of praise is thy soul, the metres are thy limbs, the Yajus-formulae thy name, the Vāmadevya-melody thy body, the Yajñāyājñīya-melody thy tail, the fire hearths are thy hoofs; thou art the beautiful-winged bird, go to heaven, fly to the light! – Vājasaneyi-saṃhitā 12, 4.

Winternitz (1927: 181 f.) comments:

With reference to this kind of prayer, Leopold von Schroeder says: “We may indeed often doubt whether these are the productions of intelligent people, and in this connection it is very interesting to observe that these bare and monotonous variations of one and the same idea are particularly characteristic of writings of persons in the stage of *imbecility*.” He then gives a few examples of notes written down by insane persons which have been preserved by psychiatrists, and these do indeed show a striking similarity with many of the prayers of the Yajurveda (see 182, n. 1 for von Schroeder reference).

One can similarly find such prayers recited in H. Daniel Smith’s video of, for instance, the Hindu sacraments of early childhood for a boy (1968)

as practiced in the Tengalai Śrī Vaiṣṇava Brahmin community of Tamil Nadu. When one hears such prayers recited in Smith's video, it becomes clear that what is being done is applying efficaciousness through linkage. In Marriott's terminology, it is "coding substance" by contagion. One leaf is put in a flame with the first ascription, a second leaf is put in a flame with the second ascription, a third with the third, and so on. Or one thing is linked with a second, then the second with a third, then the third with a fourth, and so on.

It would be easy to say that the coding is so as to create what Halbfass (1980) translates as "potency", *apūrva* (literally, "not having existed before," "quite new"; *apūrva-karman*, "a religious rite or sacrifice [the power of which in the future is not before seen]"; Monier-Williams 1899: 56b), in the Mimāṃsā terminology of the philosopher Kumārila (ca. A.D. 700 or 750), but this would perhaps be against Marriott's argument. As Marriott (1976: 137) states in his conclusion to his article:

Transactors and transactions are oriented ultimately neither toward "purity" nor toward "power" as usually understood in social science, but toward a unitary Indian concept of superior value – power understood as vital energy, substance-code of subtle, homogeneous quality, and high, consistent transactional status or rank. All of these are regarded as naturally coincidental or synonymous.

7 A Relationship of Marriott's Theory of "Coded Substance" with Eliade's Theory of "The Sacred"

Such prayers, and Marriott's theory of "coded substance" ought, I would suggest, be understood in the context of what Eliade (1959) has referred to as "the sacred."

Eliade suggests that "the sacred" by Rudolf Otto's analysis is beyond man's natural experiences, beyond categories, "the *ganz andere*" (1959: 9f.; see 8 for Otto reference). Such an observation is held in common with Marriott's thesis that Hindu thought is monistic.

Eliade, though, defines the sacred (1959: 10, 11) by its opposition to the profane. And, indeed, in India we do have clear evidence of, for instance, both sacred and secular scripts, and the two are treated differently by scribes. In North India, sacred letters are letters "with a head," recognizable in modern Devanāgarī script as the top line. Such are in contrast to the secular Kaithī and Mahājānī scripts, for instance, with letters without such a

head.¹ But we may have here less duality than modification.

In India, we find reality prior to the opposition of sacred and profane. Although couched in terms that are today not seen to be politically correct, Eliade (1959: 12) suggests:

The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible *in* the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitives as for the man of all pre-modern societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*.

In that the Indian universe, by this interpretation, is a *sacred* universe, this is in diametric opposition to our Western profane world. As Eliade (1959: 14) states, "*sacred* and *profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history." In India, we find a world that has been sacralized:

[I]n the view of archaic societies everything that is not "our world" [Vedic Skt., *sāt* "being, the existent, the ordered world"] is not yet a world [Vedic Skt., *ásat* "not being, the non-existent, chaos"]. A territory can be made ours only by creating it anew, that is, by consecrating it. ... [C]osmicization of unknown territories is always a consecration; to organize a space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods (Eliade 1959: 32).

Such, of course, is why non-Aryans are considered to be demons, creatures of the *ásat*, in Vedic literature.

8 India as a Realm of "The Sacred": Architectural Grids Laid Out in Town, Temple, and House Planning

In India, we can find such sacralization of an area in the grids laid down on the earth in both town planning and in temple and *stūpa* architecture in Hindu and Buddhist India. In such in North India, there is laid out on the ground one of several *vāstu-puruṣa-maṇḍalas*, or grids which represent the sacrificed body of the primeval man face downwards, the cosmos personified forced to assume an ordered existence defined by Brahmā together with the aid of the other gods, who are placed strategically through-

¹ See Levitt (1985–86: 241–243). This tradition of having both sacred and secular scripts has spread to Tibet and Cambodia, for instance, in Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med* scripts and Cambodian *mūl* and *śriēn* scripts.

out the *vāstu-puruṣa-maṇḍala*. The *vāstu-puruṣa-maṇḍala*, laid out on the ground when laying out a city or building a hermit's retreat, is the form assumed by existence, by the phenomenal world, once set in order. It creates and consecrates ordered and sacred space.

One of the most common of these in North India is the *mandūka-maṇḍala*, a square grid of 64 squares, 8 × 8. Around the central placement of Brahmā (4 squares) are the footprints of 4 "inner gods" (2 squares each) and rings of 8 "middle gods" and 32 "outer gods" (1 square each), 32 being the commonly reckoned number of Vedic deities.

In South Indian Sanskrit architectural texts, the cosmic order is visualized differently, with the so-called *sthandila-maṇḍala* usually determining the spatial arrangement of the South Indian temple. Again, there are several designs, with particular significance being attached to a *maṇḍala* consisting of 7 × 7 squares. In these, instead of visualizing the sacrificed body of the primeval man, a magic sign is drawn on the tract of ground on which a temple or new town is to be built. In the superimposed grid Brahmā, considered to be the essence of all being, is in the center. Around him in a ring is the world of the gods. At a greater distance from Brahmā, in contact with him only through the realm of the gods, and forming an outer ring around these gods, are the terrestrial phenomena, the world of human beings. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the goblins, demons, and spirits. These have no contact with the gods or with Brahmā, and inhabit the fringe of the realms arranged concentrically around Brahmā. In this way, the phenomenal world is set in order.² In South India, the presence of village deities who can cause disease and who are propitiated on a regular basis, acting as village guardians, appears to change the dynamic somewhat; but the location of the land in the realm of the sacred remains.³

2 With regard to the architectural grids of both North India and South India, see Volwahsen (1969: 43–58); see also Levitt (1991–92: 539).

3 See Whitehead (1921: 16, 17, 36) regarding the connection of the village deities of South India with the happiness and prosperity of the village. Note the frequent connection with the boundary stone of the village (32 f., 35, 100–104) and that the Tamil village deity Aiyāṇār is considered to be the watchman of the village, patrolling it every night (33). In South Asia, it is the village watchman who guards the village's boundaries. Also consider Whitehead's view that these deities were originally native agricultural deities in that many of the rites and ceremonies connected with their worship are related to the harvest (15). See also O'Malley (1935: 34 f., 139–144, 147 f.).

9 Conclusion

To sum up, there are ample points involving the South Asian beliefs in *karma* that support Marriott's theory of "coded substance," but which do not emerge clearly from the volumes on *karma* focused on examining his thesis. Such can be seen especially when we leave the philosophical reflections on *karma* and rebirth, and consider instead situational examples of this in the literature. The formulaic prayers of the Yajur Veda and certain other Hindu prayers also seem to support his thesis in that we may perhaps best interpret them as "coding substance" in such a fashion as to create efficaciousness. It is suggested here that the realm in which Marriott's transactional analysis and theory of "coded substance" operates is the realm of what Eliade describes as "the sacred." That South Asian space is conceived of as "sacred space" can be seen from Sanskrit architectural treatises, South Asian town planning, and Hindu and Buddhist temple and *stūpa* layout. It can also be seen in the specifics of the worship of village guardian deities in South India, which also clearly demonstrates that the land is consecrated sacred space. Such suggests that the conception of the sacred as beyond categories and as "the *ganz andere*" is, indeed, what Marriott is describing when he describes South Asian thought as monistic.

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