When the Goddess was a Woman

Mahābhārata Ethnographies

Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel, Volume 2

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BRILL
When the Goddess was a Woman
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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................................................... vii
Introduction ................................................................................................ xi
Chronology of Works .............................................................................. xxxv

### I. MILLENIAL DRAUPADI

| Chapter One | Draupadī’s Hair | 3 |
| Chapter Two | Draupadī’s Garments | 33 |
| Chapter Three | Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī | 53 |
| Chapter Four | Purity and Auspiciousness in the Sanskrit Epics | 83 |
| Chapter Five | The Folklore of Draupadī: Sārīs and Hair | 101 |
| Chapter Six | Orders of Diffusion in Indian Folk Religion | 125 |
| Chapter Seven | Draupadī Cult Lilās | 147 |
| Chapter Eight | Colonialist Lenses on the South Indian Draupadī Cult | 167 |
| Chapter Nine | Review of Landscapes of Urban Memory | 191 |
| Chapter Ten | Draupadī’s Question | 195 |

### II. THE SACRIFICIAL DEATH OF A CO-WIFE’S SON

| Chapter Eleven | Dying Before the Mahābhārata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravān | 207 |
| Chapter Twelve | Hair Like Snakes and Mustached Brides: Crossed Gender in an Indian Folk Cult | 243 |
| Chapter Thirteen | Kūttāntavar: The Divine Lives of a Severed Head | 275 |
| Chapter Fourteen | Kūttāntavar’s Cross: Making That Young Bride, Whoever She Is, a Widow | 315 |
### III. COMPANION STUDIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fifteen</td>
<td>The Indus Valley “Proto-Śiva”: Reexamined through Reflections on the Goddess, the Buffalo, and the Symbolism of Vāhanas</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixteen</td>
<td>Fathers of the Bride, Fathers of Satī: Myths, Rites, and Scholarly Practices</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventeen</td>
<td>Two Ways to Tell a Story: Ālhā in the Bhaviśya Purāṇa</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighteen</td>
<td>Boar and Twins: Comparing the Tulu Kōṭi-Cennaya Pāddana and the Tamil Elder Brothers Story</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nineteen</td>
<td>On the Handling of the Meat and Related Matters: Two South Indian Buffalo Sacrifices</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty</td>
<td>Transmitting Mahābhāratas: Another Look at Peter Brook</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV. APPARATUS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The second in a two-volume edition of Alf Hiltebeitel’s collected essays, *When the Goddess Was a Woman* presents twenty articles drawing mainly on his fieldwork on the cult of Draupadī as south Indian goddess and the related cult of Kūttānṭavar/Aravān. Published originally between 1978 and 2005, these articles provide a comprehensive overview of Hiltebeitel’s development from his earliest textual studies on the symbolism associated with the goddess to his most recent pieces that discuss the reception and interpretation of the Sanskrit epics in folk and other genres.

However, rather than follow strict chronological order, we have chosen to arrange the essays thematically: Part I under the heading “Millennial Draupadīs,” moves across ten chapters from treatments of Draupadī in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* to portrayals of other Draupadīs in folklores and literature; Part II, under the title “The Sacrificial Death of a Co-Wife’s Son,” contains four articles, the last newly written, about regional variations in the Tamil cult of Aravān/Kūttānṭavar; Part III, under the title “Companion Studies,” closes with six articles that compare Draupadī with goddesses and heroines from other contexts in Indian mythology, oral epic, and local ritual, and one that discusses the ethnography behind Peter Brook’s relatively recent dramatization of the *Mahābhārata*.

In contrast to *Reading the Fifth Veda*, the first of this two-volume edition of Hiltebeitel’s selected works, which focuses mainly on the Western academic reception of the Sanskrit epics, this volume mainly seeks to address the relation between the classical *Mahābhārata* text and lived *Mahābhāratas* illuminated through ethnography. The volume is organized around two complementary aspects of Hiltebeitel’s work: ethnographic and textual.

*From Indogermanisches Urepos to a Strī-Śūdra-Veda*

In his article “Draupadī’s Hair”¹ from 1980, included here as the first chapter in the volume,² one can see a preliminary culmination point

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² Chapter 1 thus sets the stage for what might be called a *bhakti* re-reading of the
of this process in the formulation of four “methodological working assumptions.” As these assumptions are formative for the remaining articles included in this volume, it is well worth considering them here. Hiltebeitel writes:

These [assumptions] are, first, that certain themes connected with a number of the heroines of the Hindu epics can be illumined by looking to materials on the Hindu Goddess that often appear only later in post-epic literature and folk traditions; second, that the epics themselves present a complex theological vision that gives pride of place not only to heroes and heroines who represent aspects of Viṣṇu, but also of Śiva and the Goddess; third, that the epics thus provide narrative reflections on (and of) the cult and mythology of the Goddess as it emerges into the literary light of day; and fourth, that the epic poets made selective use of oral traditions that probably had some affinities with oral and vernacular epic traditions still popular today.3

If one looks carefully at these four assumptions, one will see how they map the future course of Hiltebeitel’s research. While the first assumption leads Hiltebeitel to understand aspects of the epic retrospectively out of ritual traditions,4 the second assumption’s influence can be clearly seen in the two articles from 1980—“Draupadi’s Garments” (1980)5 and “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadi” (1980).5 Next, a set of articles from the period 1985 to 1995 (reprinted as chapters 4–7 of this volume) are motivated in the attempt to understand something of the reciprocal relation between the textual and the ritual traditions; and “Two Ways to Tell a Story: Ālhā in the Bhaviṣya Purāṇa” (1999)7 in particular undertakes a mapping of the classical epic onto oral and vernacular epics.

epic, whose influence is not just limited to Hiltebeitel’s ethnographic studies, but can also be seen in the article “The Two Krṣṇas on One Chariot: Upaniṣadic Imagery and Epic Mythology” from 1984; an article in which Hiltebeitel adopts as his “point of departure” the “assumption” “that the Mahābhārata in its classical form is a work of bhakti through and through.” “The Two Krṣṇas on One Chariot: Upaniṣadic Imagery and Epic Mythology,” History of Religions 24 (1984): 1; reprinted in volume 1, pp. 485–512.

3 Hiltebeitel, “Draupadi’s Hair,” 181.
5 See n. 1 for the full citation.
In 1974, after finishing his first book on the Mahābhārata, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, drawn from his doctoral dissertation, Hiltebeitel made his first trip to India with a sense that the Indo-European connections he had argued for in that book were getting less and less compelling, and with a hunch that he might find the *Mahābhārata* known better on the ground there than in Western or, for that matter, Indian halls of academe. In particular, he had begun to notice while proposing his project, on a suggestion from Madeleine Biardeau that he study the Tamil Draupadī cult, that there was total bifurcation between knowledge of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and knowledge of *Mahābhārata* vernaculars. “Colonialist Lenses on the South Indian Draupadī Cult” (1992) documents the total indifference to the Draupadī cult *Mahābhārata* during a formative period of Western Indology. If Sanskritists owned the text, vernacular *Mahābhārata*, not to mention a Tamil *Mahābhārata* of Śūdra farmers, were only to be belittled.

But what was it that Hiltebeitel hoped to learn from a Tamil *Mahābhārata* of Śūdra farmers? Since the institutionalization of modern *Epenforschung* in German universities in the late 18th/early 19th centuries, it had been an article of faith among *Mahābhārata* scholars that research into the epics was primarily concerned with textual sources.

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9 This section repeats material also found in the Introduction to volume 1.


11 This question of who owns the *Mahābhārata* crops up in a different guise in the chapters that end Parts I and III. Each is about modern literary treatments the *Mahābhārata*: one by the Bengali short story writer Mahasweta Devi, the other from the British drama director Peter Brook. Each of these essays can be said to reinforce the hunch mentioned above: that it is a mistake to overlook *Mahābhārata* known on the ground.

12 A prejudice that continues to be reflected in the comments of contemporary Sanskrit philologists. "Ehe unser Text vom philosophischen oder vom religionskundlichen Standpunkt studiert werden kann, muß er verläßlich herausgegeben werden. Daran ist nicht zu rütteln, wenngleich diese Binsenwahrheit gern und immer wieder in jenen Kreisen ignoriert wird, die sich lieber an Upaniṣad-Übersetzungen erbauen, als daß sie sich die Mühe machten, jene Texte philologisch-kritisch im Original zu lesen und zu verstehen." Wilhelm Rau, “Bemerkungen zu Śaṅkaras Bṛhadāranyakopanisadabhāṣya,” *Paideuma* VII (1959/61), 299; “It is nothing short of a scandal that still, after some 200 years of study, instead of preparing reliable texts and translations, a lot of ink keeps being spilled in work with inadequate materials.” M. Witzel, “Introduction,” in *Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts*, ed. Michael Witzel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), VI–VII. “Philology…is the fundament of our science. It is the foundation on which we must build. The texts are our best source of testimony about classical
In contrast, the reception and interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* among audiences in India could only be of secondary concern—and that too, only insofar as it could illuminate the text’s history and transmission. In other words, if there was anything to learn from the Śūdra farmers, it could only be, paradoxically, what Western scholars could tell them about where they stood in the hierarchy of the text’s transmission.

Moreover, conventional scholarly wisdom held that they stood quite low in this hierarchy. Present day Śūdra farmers of Tamilnadu, so ran the implicit reasoning, were not only geographically and historically remote from the epic’s hypothesized origins among Āryan tribes or kingdoms in north India in the early first millennium BCE. Rather, they were also cut off from the epic through distinctions of caste and religious and social perspective. The epic, it was held, was the product of a heroic Āryan lineage and reflected its ethical and social norms. Śūdra farmers could not be further removed from the concerns of the Kṣatriya kings and heroes immortalized in this supposedly original oral bardic epic. Nor could they claim, as the Brahmins could—who, it was asserted, had appropriated and refashioned the old Kṣatriya-centric poem to their own socio-political ends—to find their theolog-

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India….in many ways the only window that we have on classical Indian society…. only through the creation of edited texts….can [we] begin to place these texts in their proper context.” Richard Lariviere, *Protestants, Orientalists, and Brāhmaṇas: Reconstructing Indian Social History* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995), 16–17.

13 Cf. n. 25 of the Introduction to volume 1.

14 Cf. Hermann Oldenberg, who makes a distinction between the “Hindu” and the “Āryan” and asserts that it is “given” to “the Germans philologists” to “know… the Āryan of old India better than” the British “colleagues” who “live in his [the Hindu’s] country and breathe his air.” “Indische und klassische Philologie,” *Kleine Schriften*, Teil II, ed. Klaus L. Janert (Wiesbaden: Fritz Steiner Verlag, 1967), 1517–1518; originally published in *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte und deutsche Literatur und für Pädagogik* 17 (1906): 1–9.

15 The thesis that the epic was originally the possession of the Kṣatriya- or warrior-class and only later taken over by Brahmins is a fundament of German epic scholarship. One finds the claim throughout 19th century literature, especially in the form that there was an “older” epic (the so-called *Urepos*), to which the Brahmins later added masses of “didactic,” “theological,” and “devotional” material, ruining the simple noble lines of the former. Although the earliest references to a “Bhārata” as opposed to a “Mahā-” or “Great” “Bhārata” may be found in Lassen (1837), it is Goldstücker who gives the thesis its classic form: “The groundwork of the poem, as mentioned before, is the great war between two rival families of the same kin; it occupies the contents of about 24,000 verses. This, however, was overlaid with episodical matter of the most heterogeneous kind…. Nor was this merely matter of accident in the sense in which such a term
ical or philosophical doctrines reflected in it. If the remaining Indian castes saw anything at all of value in the text, this could only be due to the fact that they were the dupes of Brahmin ideology—and it was up to a Western scholarly elite to “enlighten” them about their misconceptions. In other words, they needed to be taught how to read their texts “critically,” i.e., to be attentive both to historical differences in the text (to the “layers,” “strata,” “rings,” “nodes,” “repetitions,” “interpolations,” and various other terms Western scholars had come up with) and to the vested interests (primarily religious, but also political and social) behind these historical changes to the text.

A record of the greatest martial event of ancient India would have emphatically been claimed as the property of the second or military caste, the Kshattriyas…. But such an exaltation of kingly splendour and of the importance of the military caste, would as naturally threaten to depress that of the first or Brahmanical caste. Brahmans, therefore, would endeavour to become the arrangers of the national epos; and as the keepers of the ancestral lore, as the spiritual teachers and guides, as priestly diplomats, too, they would easily succeed in subjecting it to their censorship…. It became thus the aim of the Brâhmanas to transform the original legend of the great war into a testimony to the superiority of their caste over that of the Kshattriyas. And this aim was effected not only by the manner in which the chief story was told, but also by adding to the narrative all such matter as would show that the position and might of a Kshattriya depends on the divine nature and favour of the Brâhmana caste…. Here and there an old legend or myth might be found in the epos, apparently not betraying such a set purpose.” Theodore Goldstücker, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Goldstücker*, vol. 2 (London: W. H. Allen, 1879), 97-99. For an analysis of the deep Lutheran ressentiment this recurring Gestalt of German epic scholarship reveals, see our forthcoming *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*.

16 The 19th century German scholar Albrecht Weber’s remark to the Prussian Minister of Culture (Kultusminister) Karl Otto von Raumer is paradigmatic: “The study of Indian antiquity has, in the last fifteen years, with the availability of the oldest holy scriptures of the Indians, the Vedas, gained unimaginably and increasingly in both practical and academic significance. The practical significance has affected England in particular and has been acknowledged both there and in India, by the Christian missions as well. The entire weight of the religious and cultural structure of contemporary India appears to rest on the Vedas. As soon as they are unveiled from the mysterious darkness surrounding them till now [sobald nun diese nicht mehr in ihr bisheriges mysteriöses Dunkel gehüllt sind], and made accessible to all, all the untruths shall be automatically revealed, and this shall, in time, put an end to the sorry plight of religious decadence [dem traurigen Zustande der religiöser Versumpfung] of India. The critical analysis and publication of Vedic texts shall assume a role among the Indians, similar to Luther’s translation of the Bible.” A. Weber, *Letter to Karl Otto von Raumer, 12.10.1855* (Humboldt University Archives, P. F. 1433); translated and cited in Indra Sengupta, “State, University, and Indology: The Politics of the Chair of Indology at German Universities in the Nineteenth Century,” in Sanskrit and ‘Orientalism’: Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany, 1750–1958, ed. Douglas T. McGetchin, Peter K. J. Park, Damodar Sardesai (Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 278–279.

17 To cite but two recent instances, Malinar, in her recent book on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, dismisses classical Indian philosophical commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā* as
Against the dominant prejudice, in an essay on the symbolism of the Pāṇḍavas’ disguises written in 1980, Hiltebeitel had already rejected the assumption that epic scholarship’s gaze had to be permanently turned backward, seeking to find traces of an Urepos beneath the detritus of what later ages had added to the Mahābhārata. Rather than distinguishing a Bhārata (original, oral, heroic, bardic, and historical) as opposed to the Mahābhārata (derivative, written, Brahmanic, and mythic), one could, he suggested, “observe” “instance[s]” of “epic themes[s]” that could “only be understood from such ‘later’ sources.” One would thus have to, he writes,

…interpret the Mahābhārata not only retrospectively but, in a sense, prospectively. Possibly the epic simply anticipates later forms. More likely, however, it evokes forms which we know of only (or largely) from later sources, but which are earlier than is commonly thought. One would thus need to recognize the pliancy and selectivity of an oral tradition in its symbolic articulation of some of the fundamental continuities of Hindu culture, for which the epic is not only the first great effort at synthesis but a means to transmit this synthesis through the centuries, in India and abroad. It is thus impossible to study the epic as a story frozen in its Sanskrit textual forms. For one thing, there are good grounds to suspect that certain features of the story descend from an Indo-Iranian and Indo-European past. But more than this, one must assume that the epic poets made selective use of oral traditions and popular cultural themes. Preposterous as it sounds, considering the immensity of the text, one

well as “modern Hindu interpretations of the text” on the grounds that “each author establishes his own hermeneutics on the basis of the religious or philosophical tradition he adheres to.” Angelika Malinar, The Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17. Are we to understand by this statement that German scholars have achieved perfect Standpunktfreiheit? Or are we to understand by it that their hermeneutics are acceptable, while “Indian” hermeneutics are not? Or that every single Indian author does so, ignoring the important differences between different schools, traditions, periods, philosophies, and standpoints? Surely, one of the contributions of the text-historical school has been its greater sensitivity to historical and textual variation, not to mention the subtle differences between different schools and traditions? Yet von Stietencron, a scholar known for his contribution to the dialogue between India and Germany, voices near-identical sentiments in his foreword to Malinar’s 1996 book: “The analytic thinking of Western interpreters who were schooled in historico-philological methods stands in contrast to the traditional Indian commentators, who not only harmonized and freely downplayed all breaks in the text [i.e. the Bhagavad Gītā], but, above all, sought to read their own philosophical-theological concepts out of individual textual passages, in order to secure Krṣṇa’s divine authority for them.” Angelika Malinar, Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1996), 1.

See n. 6 for the full citation.
can pretty safely assume that the bards knew more about the main story, both in terms of variants and underlying symbolism, than they told. It is thus worth investigating whether what they left untold but implicit, or what they alluded to through symbols, is not still echoed in the vast oral and vernacular epic and epic-related traditions that perpetuate the story to Indian culture to this day. I have come to suspect that living traditions of and about the Mahāhārata are often in close touch with traditional epic meanings that have escaped the classically based literary scholars.  

In rejecting the “old Indological prejudice” of “the older the more authentic” (Pollock), Hiltebeitel was also calling attention to the way the text had been transformed, interpreted, and disseminated within the Indian tradition: in Sanskrit dramas such as Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s Venisamhāra (discussed in “Draupadī’s Hair”) or in Villiputtūr Āḻvār’s Tamil rendition of the Mahābhārata in Vili Pāratam (discussed in both “Orders of Diffusion in Indian Folk Religion” [1997] and in “Draupadī Cult Lilās” [1995]) or the terukkūttu tradition of street-theatre (discussed in “The Folklore of Draupadi: Sārīs and Hair,” [1991] and in “Transmitting Mahābhāratas: Another Look at Peter Brook” [1992]). In addition, Hiltebeitel proposed examining the breadth of the South Asian epic tradition as it had been transmitted in regional martial oral epics—the Pābūjī epic from Rajasthan, the Tamil Elder Brothers Story, the Telugu Epic of Palnādu, and the Ālhā of the Hindi-speaking heartland of north India—for what it could tell us about the classical Sanskrit epics.

But Hiltebeitel was not just drawing attention to oral and literary re-creations or re-interpretations of the epic, but also to its place in the ritual and sacrificial traditions of south India. In three ethnographic studies written between 1995 and 1999, Hiltebeitel discusses a cult

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19 Hiltebeitel, “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas,” 151–152.
21 See n. 1 for the full citation.
that exercises a remarkable fascination on him for its wealth of clues to the interpretation of the *Mahābhārata*’s sacrificial, votive, and tragic meanings: that of Kūttāṇtavar/Aravān, the son of one of Draupadi’s co-wives, the snake-princess Ulūpī. Aravān is celebrated both at Draupadi festivals and in a Tamil cult of his own for offering his body in sacrifice to the goddess Kālī and thus enabling Draupadi’s five husbands to win the *Mahābhārata* war. In particular, the resonance that the cult enjoys among the lower status Vaṇṇiyār (a Śūdra community whose members regard themselves as Kṣatriyas, “as it were in a disguise forced upon them by history”)26 and the Alis (Tamil transsexuals or “eunuchs” who show up for the main festivities at Kūvākkam, “in large numbers—perhaps up to a thousand not only from throughout Tamilnadu but from Tamil Ali communities in cities all over India, and also from Singapore”)27 puts paid to the notion of the *Mahābhārata* as a Brahmin imposition upon an unwitting lower-caste audience. The Alis are enthusiastic participants in Kūttāṇtavar’s main procession, whom they marry in a ritual ceremony prior to his sacrificial death and mourn, as Hiltebeitel notes, in scenes reminiscent of the *Strīparvan*’s heart-rending depictions of the grieving Kaurava widows. More than their unfolding of these hypotheses, however, Hiltebeitel’s ethnographic studies are remarkable for illuminating an aspect of the *Mahābhārata* that has been all too rarely taken into consideration in Western scholars’ thematization of the epic: its analysis of war and sacrifice as “genera of becoming” with the intent of providing a soteriological response to the problem of becoming.28 Here Hiltebeitel’s description of the climax of the Kūvākkam festivities is worth citing for its expressive qualities, which succeed in communicating something of the ecstatic rapture the audience experiences through participating in this ritualized cycle of loss and renewal:

The climax of the festival begins around 5:30 a.m. Awaiting the return of the *ketāyam* procession, a vast crowd fills the open area among the village temples. On top of the Kūttāṇṭavar temple, cocks are offered: since

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26 Hiltebeitel, “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas,” 169.
28 For a discussion of the four “genera of becoming” (sacrifice, cosmology, genealogy, and war or *agōn*) and on what is meant by “becoming,” see Vishwa Adluri, *Sacrificial Ontology and Human Destiny in the Mahābhārata* (unpublished manuscript). The four genera are crucial to understanding the *Mahābhārata* as the entire epic is articulated in terms of these four genera.
the recent prohibition on animal sacrifice, no longer cut but thrown up to the temple roof. Finally, the post or kampam on Kūttānṭavar’s tēr stands ready for the building of the god’s body. Already in place are the horses, forearms, feet, bells, and two flags (koṭiccīlai) from Nāttan hamlet, and straw to fill out the frame. The tiruvācci and umbrella (kuṭai), removed from the ketāyam, are danced toward the tēr and raised to a support atop the kampam, followed in similar fashion by the umbrella, from Cevaliyankulam village, and the winged half-tubular epaulets, raised to shoulder position. While the head is danced around the tēr, the god’s shoulders, beneath the epaulets, are filled with flowers: strings of jasmine thrown up to the devotees assembling the deity on the body-scaffold. Penultimately, the mār paṭakkam is raised to the chest. Last, the head is raised and set on the pole’s top. A great boom of firecrackers goes off; 200 kilograms of smoky camphor is lit in front (east) of the deity; the entire concourse flings strings of jasmine, spectacularly filling the air before the flowers land on the god’s body as “two lakhs” worth of garlands (200,000 rupees). The Alis fling garlands removed from their hair (Nārullā 1990: 40). Devotees on the god’s frame gather the flowers onto and into his body.

Aravān thus goes forth in heroic pose, ready to fight, his frame-and-straw body complete, decorated, draped and filled with flowers. The giant image is drawn forth as a viran to repeat the march around the village streets. Now, however, he is said to begin looking sad: happy as a head, he is sad as embodied. Exhibiting tears and sweat, he is “like Nala,” as one informant put it. As he prepares for the rites that recall his kalappali and eighth-day fight, his embodied state registers his readiness for sacrificial suffering and death. While his tēr goes around the village, he takes on an increasingly “dead look,” and when he reaches the southern street where the Alis rent, the Alis have a married man with them who provides them with a white saree for their collective widowhood. Here they begin to ritualize Aravān’s death, undeterred by the additional deaths to follow. 29

Certainly, the scholars who had posited Indo-European epic as the primary framework for understanding the Mahābhārata were barely, if at all, aware of the existence of this parallel tradition of transmission and ongoing interpretation. But even making room for some awareness of early reports, how was one to decide in favor of one tradition or the other? Aside from circular argumentation, where everything that was thought not to belong to the original Indo-European or Āryan epic was excised as “late,” what evidence was there for an original “Bhārata”? In particular, could one account for the Mahābhārata in terms of an

epic “core” plus “accretions,” or were such attempts hopelessly reductive? And, more immediately, what was the evidence for considering the south Indian folk and vernacular traditions as non-epic and as deriving, at least in part, from an alternative source than the Vedic and Āryan sources posited for the Mahābhārata? In the third of his three ethnographic studies of the Kūttāntavar cult, Hiltebeitel offers some conclusions that not only demonstrate how problematic this hypothesis is, but also how limited scholars’ interpretive frameworks were in attempting to account for the Mahabharata tradition in all its plurality:

Kūttāntavar’s recurrent lives, deaths, and reanimations, in fact, seem to spill into and out of all conventional boundaries, including those Hindu ones that normatively define death, reanimation (the law of karman), and the rites of ‘establishment’ (pratiṣṭhā) and ‘dismissal’ (visarjana) whereby deities are invited to enter into icons, enliven them with their breath (prāṇa) or Self (ātman), and depart from them. But there is little if anything in the Kūttāntavar cult that one can ascribe to tribal or other ‘un-Hinduized’ influences, and much—beginning with the Vedic conundrum of the severed head and the dismemberment of Puruṣa—that taps deep Hindu sources.  

Hiltebeitel’s ethnographic studies of the Draupadi and Aravan cults were also to lead to a broadening of the definition of the “epic tradition.” V. S. Sukthankar, the editor and initiator of the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata, had already remarked in 1933 that “the Mahābhārata is the whole of the epic tradition: the entire Critical Apparatus.” Hiltebeitel, however, was now proposing to broaden the definition of “epic tradition” to include ritual and performance in addition to the manuscript tradition. One would thus, he suggested, have to posit an “underground Mahābhārata” in addition

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32 Cf. Hiltebeitel, “The Folklore of Draupadi: Sāris and Hair,” 395: “In this chapter I would like to address some folkloric material bearing on the same twin subjects [folklore of sarees and hair] and discuss it toward some additional ends, taking up the wider issue of pan-Indian Mahābhārata folklores, and raising the question of the relation between the distinctly Tamil folklore about Draupadi that is found in her cult and wider pan-Indian themes. Are Tamil and other south Indian Mahābhārata folklores (some of which are almost certainly older than the Draupadi cult) a source of diffusion for similar themes found elsewhere in India? Or does the classical epic just suggest common folk responses? Is there a sort of ‘underground’ Mahābhārata, one
to and alongside the text recovered in the Critical Edition, and this underground tradition was of no less significance in determining the epic’s meaning than scholarly theories on the literary Mahābhārata. Indeed, one could not, ultimately, separate the two, for, as Hiltebeitel remarks in the conclusion to the article where he first introduced the idea of an “underground Mahābhārata,”

…there may well be an underground folk Mahābhārata. But it cannot be monolithic. It has no prototype outside the Sanskrit text (which can never be assumed to have fallen out of the “folk epic” frame of reference). If such a folk Mahābhārata exists, however, it would seem to be centered on images of the goddess and the control of the land. Its lines of transmission and adaptation are too vast to ever trace fully. But those lines that do emerge suggest the crossing of many geographical and linguistic boundaries, and symbols and motifs that recur in a wide spectrum of “reflexive” and interpenetrating genres: from Mahābhārata vernaculars to folk dramas, from folk dramas to ritual idioms, from ritual idioms to temple tales, from temple tales to sisters’ tales, from sisters’ tales to regional folk epics, from regional folk epics to Mahābhārata vernacularizations.

In the present volume itself, one can see how the cross-fertilization of ethnographic and textual approaches leads to complementary outcomes.

Indeed, not all of Hiltebeitel’s essays in the volume are, as the subtitle might lead one to expect, examples of ethnography, strictly speaking. Only those at the center of the book, in the section titled “The Sacrificial Death of a Co-wife’s Son,” are fully ethnographies in the everyday anthropological sense of “writing about culture,” based immediately on the author’s fieldwork. Yet, all the other essays in this

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33 “Literary” here being meant in the limited sense of the narrative and not, as Hiltebeitel has been arguing since the early 90s, in the broader sense that the Mahābhārata is a work of conscious literary and artistic design.
35 Section 2 includes three previously published articles and one new one on Kūttāntavar. These four articles together form a little book within this larger one and
book are ethnographic in wider senses. Minimally, they draw on Hiltebeitel’s fieldwork on the Draupadi cult, with which the Kūttāntavar cult, as he demonstrates, shares a history and terrain. In that regard, those in Parts I and III are essays that “surround” his strictly ethnographic work, and open paths to and from Hiltebeitel’s Draupadi cult and Kūttāntavar cult ethnographies into mainly (but not exclusively) wider South Asian terrains with which they can be profitably compared. In *The Cult of Draupadi*, vol. 1, which first established his fieldwork project, Hiltebeitel wrote of “convergences” that “further widen the scope of our inquiry into other topics with which the Draupadi cult intertwines,” including “the mythologies of local ‘village’ goddesses, the Hindu mythology of the goddess in its greatest extent, and the *Mahābhārata*.” There he went on to mention a hypothesis that he had begun to investigate in the essays that now provide chapters 1 to 4 of this book: “despite the fact that the classical *Mahābhārata* makes little direct reference to the goddess, the epic narrative would seem to be informed by the goddess’s mythology. If this is so, it means that a folk interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* that places the goddess at its center has every chance of revealing much to us about the classical epic itself. And that is what the South Indian Draupadi cult is: an adroit and compelling multileveled interpretation of a living *Mahābhārata*.”

We may now say, with regard to the subtitle of this book, that Hiltebeitel was beginning to envision the project of writing an ethnography not only of the Draupadi cult, but of the classical epic itself and the culture (or cultures) that can be hypothesized to have produced and disseminated it. We see some of the outcomes of such intentions in this volume and in volume 1. In this volume, moreover, we can also see inklings of ethnographies of more modern communities of interpretation: from those of British colonial administrators to schools of interpretation found in Western and Indian academia, from those who stage *Mahābhārata* pageants in downtown Bangalore to those who put the epic on the international stage.

round off Hiltebeitel’s longstanding wish to produce a balanced interregional study of the cult of the god Kūttāntavar.

Like volume 1, volume 2 opens with chapters—the first five—that formulated and set the stage for a program of research: in this case, one that carries through (not without some reconsiderations and reservations) through all the chapters that make up this book. The first three chapters explore working assumptions\(^{37}\) that opened up new positions for Hiltebeitel’s research in the late 1970s to early 80s.

Unlike the “literary turn” that shaped a new direction for his work on the *Mahābhārata* in circa 1992\(^ {38}\) and provides the backbone for volume 1, the essays in volume 2 developed these working assumptions around two main topics. One was the study of “The Goddess in India and Beyond” (the title of a course Hiltebeitel created, and often gives at George Washington University).\(^ {39}\) The other topic was the study of symbolism, particularly that of women’s hair, sārīs, and jewels, along with the theme of disguises, as seen in chapters 1–5. Through these studies and convergences, Hiltebeitel was attempting to work out the relationship between ethnographic findings, principally in Tamil culture (and more extensively, south Indian cultures with Dravidian languages), and the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* text. That relationship began to be well formulated in the three studies of chapters 1–3. These formulations sought to focus on the goddess through the epic, and the question of what light *Mahābhārata* ethnography and the Sanskrit epic can mutually shed on each other: a matter in which the goddess turned out to be pivotal. In effect, it could be suggested that it was the study of the goddess that would force open the literary turn that followed, by calling attention to the literary artistry through which Draupadi and other heroines of the Sanskrit epics were

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\(^{37}\) See pp. vii–viii above.

\(^{38}\) See now the Introduction to volume 1 of *Collected Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*; cf. especially pp. vii–xxxii.

\(^{39}\) Hiltebeitel’s “The Indus Valley ‘Proto-Śiva’: Reexamined through Reflections on the Goddess, the Buffalo, and the Symbolism of *vāhanas*” (chapter 15) looks to the cult of the goddess Durgā and her combat with the Buffalo Demon Mahīśasura to see if it might shed some light on a well-known figure on an Indus Valley seal. Other goddesses, including especially Satī (chapter 16) and Kālī (chapter 11–14, 17), also figure prominently in this book, as does a close look at two south Indian buffalo sacrifices in chapter 19.
portrayed.\textsuperscript{40} Whereas chapters 1 (1981)\textsuperscript{41} and 2 (1980)\textsuperscript{42} are pieces that began a search to look at Draupādi in the epic more or less on her own, chapter 3 (1980)\textsuperscript{43} is an investigation into the Virāṭaparvan and takes up the idea that not only her disguise shows her relation to the goddess, but likewise her husbands’ disguises show how each one of them is capable of reminding us of Śiva. All three of these articles had behind them the beginning years of Hiltebeitel’s ethnographic research on the south Indian Draupādi cult. Chapter 4, “Purity and Auspiciousness in the Sanskrit Epics” (1985),\textsuperscript{44} begins to register that the same questions and formulations can be productive in studying the Rāmāyaṇa. Chapter 5 (1991)\textsuperscript{45} then marks a rounding off of these working assumptions by arriving at some tentative conclusions formed by the late 1980s. The conclusion of chapter 5 then points further toward Hiltebeitel’s literary turn\textsuperscript{46} where it says, “there may well be an underground folk Mahābhārata…. [But] It has no prototype outside the Sanskrit text.”\textsuperscript{47}

Chapters in this book from the early 90s on begin to reflect Hiltebeitel’s growing involvement in the George Washington University Human Sciences Program, which he was to direct from 1997 to 2002. Many subsequent chapters reflect the widening of interdisciplinary questions that interested Hiltebeitel in that period, including post-colonial studies (chapter 8; 1992),\textsuperscript{48} gender studies (chapter

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} For a demonstration of the validity of this suggestion now in his most recent work, see Alf Hiltebeitel, \textit{Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Literature} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 8.
\item \textsuperscript{41} See n. 1 for the full citation.
\item \textsuperscript{43} See n. 6 for the full citation.
\item \textsuperscript{45} See n. 24 for the full citation.
\item \textsuperscript{46} “Although my own work on the Mahābhārata has taken various turns and grounded itself in changing scholarly approaches—Indo-European studies, history of religions, anthropology, history—I believe that the largest inadequacy in Mahābhārata scholarship, including my own up to 1991, is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature.” Alf Hiltebeitel, “Reconsidering Bṛghuization,” in \textit{Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships}, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and the Arts, 1999), 156.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Chapter 5, 124. These concerns were further and more extensively explored in Hiltebeitel’s \textit{Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), of which chapters 17 and 18 can be called spin-offs, and in the essays that make up chapters 11–14, all focused on the Kūttāṇṭavar cult.
\item \textsuperscript{48} See n. 10 above for the full citation.
\end{itemize}
10; 2000), and psychoanalysis (chapters 12 [1998] and 16 [1999]).

Running through several chapters is also a basic determination to contextualize both ethnographic and textual scholarship historically, and to resist ahistorical formulations about either the goddess or the *Mahābhārata*, whether in local, regional, or pan-Indian forms. “Orders of Diffusion in Indian Folk Religion” (chapter 6; 1997) raises wider questions about the problem of diffusion in thinking about the goddess, both as played out on the local level with different aspects of the Draupadi cult and investigating likewise the problem of thinking about wider questions of diffusion from sources outside India (ancient Near East, etc.). “Draupadi Cult Līlās” (chapter 7; 1995) is a comparison of drama performances at Draupadi festivals and at Rām- and Ras Līlās in north India, which are focused on Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. “Colonialist Lenses on the South Indian Draupadi Cult” (chapter 8) is an examination of how early reports on the Draupadi cult and other south Indian goddesses set an early agenda that later scholars have had to consider in looking at the cult. “Review of Landscapes of Urban Memory” (chapter 9; 2003) is a discussion of how a modern interpreter of a very different kind of Draupadi festival found in Bangalore, but still part of the same tradition, has raised questions that still call for further discussion of some of the deeper traditions of Draupadi worship. Finally, “Draupadi’s Question” (chapter 10), which is addressed on a textual level in Hiltebeitel’s *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*,

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52 Chapters 11 and 14 on eastern and western wings of the Kuttanṭavar cult, and chapter 16 on *sati*, in particular, are consistent on formulating historical hypotheses on the background of cults and myths.

53 See n. 22 for the full citation.

54 See n. 23 above for the full citation.


56 See n. 49 above for the full citation.

takes up not only a brief discussion of Draupadi’s humiliation in the Kuru court, but a modern fictional relocation of that story into tribal and Marxist confrontations with the government in Bihar.

These four articles form a kind of subset within this first section and give support to Hiltebeitel’s sense that Draupadi is actually central to the Sanskrit epic; in his words, one of the epic’s primary foci is “the question of who Draupadi is as a figure—a rebel, a figure who is independent, vigorous, challenging, a principled woman, a very different kind of woman, intellectually shrewd, on top of things to the extent it is possible to be on top of such things.”

The Sacrificial Death of a Co-Wife’s Son and Companion Studies: Parts II and III

At the center of this book are four chapters on a cult that cross-sections with the Draupadi cult: that of Kūttānṭavar/Aravān. These are ethnographic pieces, so the literary turn is not as major an influence here as studying the distinctive and much less accessible cult and temples of Kūttānṭavar, which Hiltebeitel sought to map in the mid to late 1990s. Although it is doubtful that he found them all, he was able to find 44 through mainly oral sources. Hiltebeitel’s main interest in these pieces is in figuring out how Aravān/Kūttānṭavar becomes central to a cult of his own outside the Draupadi cult, and why this cult is so very different in its stories and rituals in different parts of northern Tamilnadu. In this section, one of the questions that is important is the relation between these two cults—Draupadi’s and Kūttānṭavar’s. The first three essays, written in the 1990s, were all concerned mainly with different facets of the most publicized and exuberant festival for Kūttānṭavar—found in the village of Kūvakkam. There and at some other nearby villages, it is a cult which features very prominently the role of transvestites, and this raises major gender-related questions across the cult in other areas as well, especially around the question of who it is that marries Aravān, since in Kūvakkam it is none other than Kṛṣṇa who

58 Personal communication.
59 Hiltebeitel, “Dying before the Mahābhārata War”; “Hair Like Snakes and Moustached Brides”; “The Divine Lives of a Severed Head.”
takes the form of Mohinī. Chapters 11 to 13 have undergone the most revision of any chapters for this book so as to avoid overlap and build up three separate arguments centered on the spectacular worship of Kuttānṭavar at Kūvākkam village, located at the eastern end of the belt of Kuttānṭavar cult diffusion.

The last chapter of this section, “Kuttānṭavar’s Cross: Making That Young Bride, Whoever She Is, a Widow,” is an entirely new article, written just for this book, which filled an obligation to round this research out. It focuses on the festival at a temple and stories of Aravān at the other end of the map as far as Kuttānṭavar worship goes: in Coimbatore in southwestern Tamilnadu, where Kuttānṭavar’s body is made of a cross. Here, what we learn about Kuttānṭavar from other temples, including Kūvākkam, is very germane as is the case in reverse. There seems to be history here and a way in which we can identify this history around the different brides who marry him. In Coimbatore, he marries a totally different woman from Mohini. This essay begins with the question of what it means for Draupadi herself to be relying upon the death of a co-wife’s son to bring about the death she seeks, and concludes with a consideration of the possibilities of familiarity with Jesuit missions in the 16th century. The Kuttānṭavar cult findings offer a virtual laboratory on the relation between Mahābhārata cults, and on the goddess and the epic in local and regional variations.

Finally, Part III of this book features six essays on broader themes relating to the epic under the title “Companion Studies.” These are essays which were all written in conjunction with larger questions raised by Hiltebeitel’s research on the Draupadi cult and the goddess. The Draupadi cult is in the background of these essays, but it is not at the center of what they are about. The section begins with a 1970s article that focused on the as-yet-unresolved question of the figure on the Indus Valley seal, that many have called the Indus Valley Proto-Śiva (chapter 15; 1978).60 This is a landmine area for anyone, but this article does state a position that still has attractions for scholars interested in this discussion.61 “Fathers of the Bride, Fathers of Satī: Myths, Rites,

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61 An interesting and provocative has been published by A. Hiltebeitel, who drew heavily on the work of B. Volcho, one of the Russian scholars who worked on their
and Scholarly Practices” (chapter 16; 1999)\textsuperscript{62} brings Draupadi’s incarnation as Belā in the Hindi Ālhā epic into a discussion of women who become Satīs and what their relations are with their fathers—one of the problematic tensions in Satī mythology, if not also in practice. “Two Ways to Tell a Story: Ālhā in the Bhavisya Purāṇa” (chapter 17; 1999)\textsuperscript{63} is in the best tradition of the way that an oral epic is, as it were, literally Sanskritized by being retold in a Purānic setting. Draupadi figures in this story, reborn as Belā. “Boar and Twins: Comparing the Tulu Kōṭi-Cennaya Pāḍdana and the Tamil Elder Brothers Story” (chapter 18; 2005)\textsuperscript{64} takes up the question of whether south Indian Mahābhārata folklores enter into a Tulu (South Kanara) version of a story also found in Tamilnadu, about twin brothers’ combat with a giant boar. “On the Handling of the Meat, and Related Matters: Two South Indian Buffalo Sacrifices” (chapter 19; 1985)\textsuperscript{65} compares a buffalo sacrifice in the fort at the south Indian capital where Draupadi has her original temple with vivid archival documentation of a 19th century buffalo sacrifice from Karnataka. Finally, in chapter 20 (1992),\textsuperscript{66} Peter Brook is the subject of a discussion of the way Indian theatrical representations of Mahābhārata were looked at by Brook, what he got from them, and what he missed—in particular, by snubbing the performances of the terukkūttu in Tamilnadu, which Hiltebeitel arranged for him to see.

The title of this book is meant to guide the reader through these three parts: first through two millennia of varied representations of Draupadi; then into a companion cult of the Tamil Draupadi cult, on which Hiltebeitel has centered much of his Mahābhārata ethnography; and then on to companion pieces that follow up trails opened up by this ethnography from the Indus Valley civilization to the 20th century international

\textsuperscript{62} See n. 51 above for the full citation.
\textsuperscript{63} See n. 7 above for the citation.
\textsuperscript{66} See n. 25 above for the full citation.
stage of Peter Brook. The title points to an especially salient feature of Draupadi: that she is an incarnation of a goddess named Śrī. It would be a bit incautious to say that “When the Goddess Was a Woman” is a title that could only apply to Draupadi. The Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki gives some hints that it could also apply to that epic’s heroine Sītā, and in some later versions of the Rāmāyaṇa it certainly does. But in the Mahābhārata, the goddess having become a woman is a more salient and complex matter than it ever is for Sītā. And as Hiltebeitel found, it is also one that is more open to theoretical, historical, ethnographic, and literary questions. Together with the unfolding implications of the title, the three-part structure is one through which theoretical, historical, ethnographic, and literary threads can be traced through the book, tying together themes from the three different sections.

**Exegesis: Mythic and Ritual**

As we have laid out the two volumes in this series, we have made a distinction between the more theoretical studies of the Sanskrit epics in volume 1 and the ethnographic and topical treatments of the goddess and her related cults in volume 2. In spite of their differing thematic foci, however, we see the two volumes as complementary. One cannot fully grasp Alf Hiltebeitel’s contribution to the study of the epic without also reading volume 2. Nor can one hope to understand the significance of Hiltebeitel’s turn to the reception of the Mahābhārata among Śūdra communities in south India in the late 70s and early 80s without first having some understanding of the prejudices of epic scholarship against such a move until that point in time. Hiltebeitel can rightly be called the first scholar to have taken the Mahābhārata’s claim to being a Veda for all classes and beings—a stri-śūdra-veda—seriously. As Hiltebeitel shows in his studies of the cult of Aravān,

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67 On the epic’s popular title as a stri-śūdra-veda or a “Veda for women and śūdras,” Black’s discussion in a forthcoming article is especially useful. Black notes that “Although the Critical Edition does not contain the well known description of the epic as a text ‘for women and śūdras’, the Mahābhārata does seem to regard itself as delivering a universal message. In addition to the numerous phalaśrutis throughout the text that address audiences beyond those who are male and of the twiceborn classes, Vyāsa himself, in the Śāntiparvan, instructs his disciples to teach his story to members of all four varnas (12.314.45). In light of the author’s own instruction to his students, what better way to reach a diverse and inclusive audience than to have Brahmanical knowledge communicated by someone of lower birth. Indeed, without making any claims about the ‘real’ history of the text, this scenario seems to be
it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain the fiction of the epic as “religious rhetoric” or as an “ideological vehicle” in light of the concrete evidence of the reception of the text among non-Brahmanical communities in India.\(^6^8\)

Such an approach need not imply a refusal to take the epic seriously as a work of history. Rather, it requires a willingness to suspend totalizing constructions of history such as the Āryan hypothesis (Holtzmann, Oldenberg, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer)\(^6^9\) or the racial hypothesis of “white Aryans [die weissen Arier]” versus “black natives [schwarzen

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68 See especially Raf Gelders and Willem Derde, “Mantras of Anti-Brahmanism: Colonial Experience of Indian Intellectuals,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 38, no. 43 (Oct. 25–31, 2003): 4611–4617. As the authors, both social scientists, demonstrate, there is little to suggest the kind of hierarchical top-down imposition of Brahmanic “ideology” that has been a central trope of German scholarship on the epic until now. As Hiltebeitel’s field studies of the Aravān cult demonstrate, the epics’ textual porosity has allowed a number of communities either to find themselves reflected in some aspect of it or to positively appropriate and retell the narrative in a way more germane to their specific context.

69 Jakob Wilhelm Hauer was a founder of the “Aryan Seminar” (das Arische Seminar) at the University of Tübingen and a member of the SS and SA. Interned after the war and found guilty of collaboration with the Nazis, Hauer was banned from teaching until 1950. On Hauer’s life and work, see Ša’ül Bauman, *Die Deutsche Glaubensbewegung und ihr Gründer Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881–1962)*, trans. Alma Lessing (Marburg: Diagonal Verlag, 2005). The classic Hauer biography is Margarete Dierks’ * Jakob Wilhelm Hauer: 1881–1962. Leben, Werk, Wirkung, mit einer Personalbibliographie* (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1986), but it is almost entirely inaccurate; Dierks herself was a member and sympathizer of the NSDAP and her Hauer biography a patent attempt at rehabilitating him; see her dissertation *Die preußischen Altkonservativen und die Judenfrage 1810/1847* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Rostock, 1939). On the Aryan Seminar, see Horst Junginger, “Das ‘Arische Seminar’ der Universität Tübingen 1940–1945,” in *Indienforschung im Zeitenwandel: Analysen und Dokumente zur Indologie und Religionswissenschaft in Tübingen*, ed. Heidrun Brückner and Angelika Malinar (Tübingen: Attempto Verlag, 2003), 177–207.
Urbewohner]”\(^{70}\) (Lassen) or the theory of a Brahmanic “Counter-Reformation”\(^{71}\) (Holtzmann) against the reformatory impulse of Indian Buddhism. As a passage from Hiltebeitel’s 1980 article on the disguises of the Pāṇḍavas demonstrates, the question of the “place of the Mahābhārata in the history of Hinduism” is a crucial one, but one that can only be answered through a sensitive and nuanced appreciation of how this text evolves in concert with this history. Such an inquiry requires us to take seriously all the available evidence: historical, textual, ritual, social, and mythic.

First, I regard the Mahābhārata as a text which attempts a great synthesis of Indian civilization in the name of Hinduism. By synthesis, however, something different is meant from the confluence of “Epos” and “Rechtsbuch” stressed in the last century by Joseph Dahlmann. The recent work leading to an understanding of this synthesis has been carried out by scholars who have stressed the “transpositions” or “connections” worked out by the epic poets in relating the story to para-Vedic (in some cases Indo-European), Vedic, Brāhmanical, and Upaniṣadic symbols, myths, and rituals, and also to the mythic material fully developed for the first time in the “background myths” told in the course of the narrative itself. But it becomes increasingly clear that a full understanding of this synthesis—and thus of the place of the Mahābhārata in the history of Hinduism—requires a recognition that the epic also evokes, through its symbolism, certain cultural themes, myths, ritual practices,

\(^{70}\) “Since the Pānkāla assuredly belonged to the Aryan races, we may not interpret the relationship between them and the Pāndava as though these ought to be described as belonging to the black aborigines [Urbewohnern] of India on the basis of the black color that is attributed to Krishnā, these [others] as the white Aryans [weisse Arier]. Nonetheless, the distinction according to color must have a significance and this can only be that the Pānkāla, like the Jādava, who are represented by Krishna, both belonged to the Aryan races who entered [India] earlier, [and] became darker through the influence of the climate as the youngest entrants from the north, and in contrast to these are called the black.” C. Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde* (Leipzig: Verlag von L. A. Kittler, 1867), 791; editors’ translation.

\(^{71}\) Adolf Holtzmann, *Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata* (Kiel: C. F. Haeßler, 1892), 98. The entire passage is of interest for its evocation of the horrors of this supposed conservative reaction: “Around the time of the beginning of our calendar, the hard and bloody battle [hart und blutige Kampf] seems to have gotten underway, in whose course the resurrected Brahmanism finally became master over its dangerous foe…. Incidentally, the course of the gigantic battle [Riesenkampfes] can be a matter of indifference to us here, its result at any rate remains firm. Buddhism was violently exterminated in those areas where it had blossomed for centuries. The causes are clear…. a violent effort, an energetic Counter-Reformation [Gegenreformation] of the Brahmins, which, through its adoption of the people’s gods especially the beloved Vishnu-Krśna, and of the entire folk-superstition [Volksaberglauben], had won over the masses for itself....” (editors’ translation).
and social norms that are not fully attested historically until “post-epic”
times, sometimes in later texts, sometimes even in contemporary folk
cults and practices.72

In other words, one cannot simply examine “texts” as though they were
mere marks upon paper. A text grows out of and reciprocally influ-
ences a culture: hence, if our aim is to truly appreciate that text, we
must evolve an analysis along both vectors: textual and ethnographic,
or, as Hiltebeitel terms it in his earliest reflections upon the subject,
mythic and ritual. Yet, as Hiltebeitel argues in a critique of Dumézil
in his 1976 book, to do so requires the ability to suspend our massive
historicist prejudice against other levels of meaning, such as meton-
ymy, myth, religious practice, and philosophical and cosmological
understanding.73 As Hiltebeitel demonstrates, a reductive system of
“transpositions,” however “ingenious,” fails to account for the com-
plexity, not just of the Mahābhārata, but any narrative and any cul-
tural phenomenon.74 Hence, “transpositions cannot be regarded as the

72 Hiltebeitel, “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas,” 151.
73 Goldstücker’s 1879 review of the Mahābhārata provides us what is perhaps the
locus classicus for this historicizing view and, in particular, provides an understanding
of the interpretive framework of much early Orientalist writing on the Indian epics.
“When, by priestcraft and ignorance, a nation has lost itself so far as to look upon
writings like these as divinely inspired, there is but one conclusion to be drawn: it
has arrived at the turning-point of its destinies. Hinduism stands at this point, and
we anxiously pause to see which way it will direct its steps…. All barriers to religious
imposition having been broken down since the Purāṇas were received by the masses as
the source of their faith, sects have sprung up which not merely endanger religion, but
society itself; tenets have been propounded, which are an insult to the human mind;
practices have been introduced, which must fill every true Hindu with confusion and
shame. There is no necessity for examining them in detail… nor need we be at pains
of convincing the intelligent portion of the Hindu community; for, the excellent works
which it sent forth from Calcutta, Benares, and Bombay, and the enlightened views
which it propagates through its periodical press, fully prove that, equal in mental
accomplishments to the European mind, it requires no evidence of the gulf which
separates the present state of the nation from its remote past…. The cause of the
gradual degeneracy of Hinduism, are, indeed, not different from those to which other
religions are subject, when allowed to grow in the dark. In Europe, religious depravity
received its check when the art of printing allowed the light of publicity to enter into
the book whence her nations derive their faith; and no other means will check it in
India than the admission of the masses to that original book which is always on their
lips, but which now is the monopoly of the infinitesimal fraction of the Brahminical
caste able to understand its sense; and admission, also, to that other and important
literature which has at all periods of Hinduism striven to prove to the people that
their real faith is neither founded on the Brâhmana portion of the Vedas, nor on the
Purāṇas, but on the Rigveda hymns.” Theodore Goldstücker, Literary Remains of the
74 “Yet there is a point where I would disagree with Dumézil over the nature of
only key to the ‘mythical exegesis.’” “More fundamental is what I call a method of correlation or correspondence…” These correspondences, as Hiltebeitel demonstrates, cannot be limited to those between the bare historical event and its mythic encrustation, nor can the scholarly task be restricted to mapping equivalences between historical “facts” and mythic retellings. Rather, we must look at these correspondences as occurring “between two levels of continually changing and growing tradition: myth and epic.” In that case…

The epic poets…emerge not so much as programmers, transposing one set of information into another form, but as rṣis, in this case the rṣis of the “Fifth Veda” whose “school” is covered by the name of the elusive but ever-available rṣi Vyāsa. By calling attention to this term for visionaries and poets, I refer in particular to the rṣis’ faculty of “seeing connections,” “equivalences,” “homologies,” and “correspondences” discussed by Jan Gonda. This faculty of “seeing connections” would have involved the epic poets not only with correlations between myth and epic, but also between epic and ritual—especially that of the Brāhmanic sacrifice. Thus the “mythic exegesis” must coexist with a “ritual exegesis.” Moreover, if this was the procedure and orientation of the poets, it helps to explain why they have told certain myths at key points in the epic narrative. In some cases, they seem to have perceived correlations between myths and adjacent portions of the epic plot, correlations which were meant to deepen one’s awareness of the meanings of the both the myth and the epic planes, and ultimately, perhaps, to afford a glimpse of broader unities.75

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75 Ibid., 359–360.
CHRONOLOGY OF WORKS*

1. Books


2. Edited books


* Except for a few articles that were newly written, the articles in these two volumes represent material previously published elsewhere. The editors would like to take the opportunity here to thank the many publishers & journals for granting us permission to reuse this material. Below we also explicitly acknowledge the original source of each of these contributions.
xxxvi  CHRONOLOGY OF WORKS


3. Translations (from French)


4. Selected Articles, Including Long Review Articles

[Articles included in this volume are denoted either with an asterisk (if in volume 1) or a double asterisk (if in volume 2)]


5. *Interviews and Profiles*


6. *In Press*


7. Book Reviews


8. Encyclopedia and Dictionary Articles and Editing


9. Work in Progress


Explicitly acknowledging its status as a strī-sūdra-veda (a Veda for women and the downtrodden), the Mahābhārata articulates a promise to bring knowledge of right conduct, fundamental ethical, philosophical, and soteriological teachings, and its own grand narrative to all classes of people and all beings. Hiltebeitel shows how the Mahābhārata has more than lived up to this promise at least on the ground in Indian folk traditions. In this three-part volume, he journeys over the overlapping terrains of the south Indian cults of Draupadi (part I) and Kūttanṭavar (part II), to explore how the Mahābhārata continues to be such a vital source of meaning, and, in part III, then connects this vital tradition to wider reflections on prehistory, sacrifice, myth, oral epic, and modern theatre.

This two-volume edition collects nearly three decades of Alf Hiltebeitel’s researches into the Indian epic and religious tradition. The two volumes document Hiltebeitel’s longstanding fascination with the Sanskrit epics: volume 1 presents a series of appreciative readings of the Mahābhārata (and to a lesser extent, the Rāmāyaṇa), while volume 2 focuses on what Hiltebeitel has called “the underground Mahābhārata,” i.e., the Mahābhārata as it is still alive in folk and vernacular traditions. Recently re-edited and with a new set of articles completing a trajectory Hiltebeitel established over 30 years ago, this work constitutes a definitive statement from this major scholar. Comprehensive indices, cross-referencing, and an exhaustive bibliography make it an essential reference work.

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