The Jain Prakrit Origin of the Vetāla

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The etymology, and hence the basic meaning, of the word Vetāla is unknown. The demon's representation in art is particularly gruesome. On the basis of its most explicit literary application, the Sanskrit *Vetāla-pañcaviṃśatikā* stories, it was described in the Böhtlingk-Roth dictionary (1871), and was still so glossed in Mayrhofer's etymological dictionary (*KEWA*, II, 1976), as a demon that takes possession of dead bodies. In Wikipedia it is being defined even more specifically as 'ghost-like ... spirits inhabiting cadavers and charnel grounds. These corpses may be used as vehicles for movement (as they no longer decay while so inhabited); but a vetala may also leave the body at will'. This Vetala was necessarily depicted as an emaciated corpse, leaving to the imagination the disembodied spirit within.

This is in spite of Monier-Williams's more guarded 'a kind of demon ... (esp. one occupying a dead body)'. He and Mayrhofer gave due prominence to the still more non-committal nature of the earliest attestations. The *mātṛ* Vetālajananī (MBh. 9.45.13) is one of a large number of supernatural beings summoned to combat Asuras, and described collectively as ranging from tree- and spring-dwellers to the inhabitants of crossroads and cemeteries. The Vetālas are variously listed among such supernatural beings in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (2.10.39 ... *vetālān yātudhānān grahān api*; 7.8.38 *yakṣāḥ kiṃpuruṣās, tāta, vetālāḥ siddhakiṃnarāḥ*); Vetalī is an epithet of Durgā in the *Harivaṃśa*. On the other hand, a comparable name, Vaitāla (or Vetāla) in the *Bhāgavata* and Vaitālika (or Vaitālaki) in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, appears in the list of transmitters of the Ṛgveda; Vetālabhaṭṭa is named as Nītiśāstrin and jewel of Vikramāditya's court; and the Pali Vetālika, Epic Vaitālika, and Classical Vaitālīya attend upon royalty. The rite called *vetāla-* or *vaitālīya-karman* was understood by M. R. Bhat in his edition and translation of *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* as 'the 'raising of goblins' (*vetālotthāpana* in *Rājataraṅgiṇī*): a simpler and perhaps more original version of the notion, 'raising of the dead' (*matasarīruṭṭhāpanaṃ*) appears in the Pali commentary on *vetālam* in DN 1.6, where it in fact features amongst a list of innocent but proscribed entertainments. In Jātaka VI, 277, the *vaitālika* similarly accompanies *māyākārā* and *sobhikā*, illusionists and showmen.

Can it be that a single etymology links these disparate phenomena? That the solution is to be found in Jain Prakrit should have been clear from the start. The *Nijjutti* on *Sūyagaḍaṅga* I, 2, explains the name of the chapter, *Veyāliyaṃ*, as signifying both a composition in Vaitālīya metre and *vaidārika* 'destruction (of Karma)'. Sanskrit *dal-* is a dialect form of *dṛ-* (Mayrhofer, *KEWA*, II, 24), presumably Magadhi Prakrit. In reporting this, it did not occur to Jacobi to infer that, if *vaidārika* could appear as *veyāl-*, it would readily appear also by a Sanskritization as the demonic and prosodic *vetāl-*.

The etymology of the demonic epithet *vetāla* is still deemed to be in doubt. The Sanskrit tradition offered 'abiding in the dead': *aveta* (casuistically identified with *preta* 'dead') + *ālaya* 'domain'. Via the literary association of the demon with decomposition, H. Petersson in 1922 sought a connection with Anglo-Saxon *wīdl* 'filth', English *widdle*. J. Charpentier suggested a **vaitāḍa* 'dashing to pieces', but in possible consonance with PTSD ('of dialectical origin') he was willing to allow it to be non-Aryan. Association with Jain Prakrit *veyāliya* obviates such suggestions. Sanskrit *vidalanam* 'bursting (intrans. and trans.)' and *vidāraka, vaidārika* 'destructive' give the basis. The use of *-īya* in chapter names, especially in *Uttarajjhāyā*, and the pervasive *ta-śruti* of Jain linguistic tradition explain Sanskritized *vaitālīya*. The commentaries explain *Veyāliya*, the name of the second chapter of *Sūyagaḍaṅga*, as treating of *vidālanīyaṃ karma* 'the karma that is to be destroyed' and *karma-vidalanam* 'the destruction of karma', and the text sums itself up in the final verse of the first lesson as a definition of *veyāliya-magga* 'the path of such destruction'. It can then be that the appellation and name Vetāla has been inferred from the adjective, Sanskritized as *vaitālika*, and employed either as an epithet for a class of demons or as a synonym of Vaitālika as a designation for Vedic and Shastric teachers in the sense of destroyers of error. Ad *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 87.12, M. R. Bhat reported a gloss on *vaitālika* as 'naked preceptor' (though the context implies rather percussionists); and Vaitālīya-karma and Vetāla-karma as the art of conjuring can represent a contamination of Jain *kamma-veyāliya* and *veyālaṇīyaṃ kammaṃ* due to the proliferation of Vetāla mythology.

That *vaitālīya*, the name of the originally rare metre in which the Veyāliyajjhayaṇa is composed, is really a different word, as Jacobi thought, is open to doubt. The chapter could have given its name to its metre, rather than have punningly adopted the metre so named, for it is hardly likely that a complete coalescence of **vaidālika* with *vaitālīya* could have occurred as early as the composition of *Sūyagaḍaṅga*. There seems to be no reason to suppose that the watchman and panegyrist, the *vetālika* of Dīghanikāya and the *vaitālika* of Epic, are in any way associated with that particular metre. Perhaps he takes his name rather from the inclusion of Vetāla among the supernatural attendants on the gods, coupled with the tendency (in Dīghanikāya and elsewhere) to connect the word with percussion, despite the derogatory implication 'breaking the rhythm' of the word *vitāla*.

Since Alsdorf has shown that Āryā verses are always intrusive in the older canon, the inclusion of Vaitālīya metre in the canonical text *Sūyagaḍaṅga* is further confirmation that Vaitālīya is the older invention of the two. After all, Vaitālīya with its two $\smile\,\bar{}\,\smile\,\bar{}$ cadences largely resembles a fairly common Ṛgvedic Anuṣṭubh combination, whereas Āryā, with twice $\smile\,\bar{}\,\bar{}\,\bar{}$ as its prevalent cadences, unheard of in conjunction in the Anuṣṭubh, implies deliberate innovation. Since metres

grow, rather than shrink, the Anuṣṭubh seems the likely model for both. By completing a fourth gaṇa, and resolution of long syllables, the Vaitālīya evolved a 7½ gaṇa structure with Jagatī rhythm for the most part, and retaining amphibrachs (˘ ¯ ˘) in the third and seventh gaṇas: it tended towards:

atha tasya vivāhakautukaṃ   lalitaṃ bibhrata eva pārthivaḥ   (*Raghuvaṃśa* 8.1)
˘ ˘ ¯ / ˘ ˘ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ (˘ ˘) / ¯ ¯ / ˘ ˘ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯

Apart from the resolutions, and completion of a fourth gaṇa, it remains a Ṛgvedic Anuṣṭubh.

The Āryā produced in the end a contrasting result, 7½ gaṇas with the probability of amphibrachs in all the *even* gaṇas, and no consistent tendency to complete a fourth gaṇa; finally a shift of the caesura obscured its pseudo-Anuṣṭubh origin:

ālāṇakhambhabaddho   ciṭṭhai kaṭṭheṇa giṇhae bhoge (*Maṇivaicariya* 286 ab)
¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ¯ (˘ ˘) / ¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ¯
āgamma so nisanno   khaṭṭāe, tīĕ bhāsio: sāmi (*ibid*. 655 ab)
¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ¯ (¯) / ¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ˘
eyassa vāhaṇeṇaṃ   jeṇa avassaṃ bhaveyavvaṃ (*ibid*. 291 cd)
¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ¯ ˘ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ¯ ˘ / ¯
āṇesu tena tatto   purīĕ ghosāviyaṃ etthaṃ (*ibid*. 1068 cd)
¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ˘ ¯ ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ˘ / ¯ ¯ / ¯

Survival of an Anuṣṭubh cadence in both cases means that there is really no call to distinguish between Āryā as *gaṇacchandas* and Vaitālīya as *mātrāchandas*.

In the absence of any other plausible etymology, there is thus reason to believe that the Vaitālīya metre takes its name from the subject-matter of its most important attestation in Jain literature, i.e., the destruction (*vidāraṇa*) of Karma. It is precisely in Jain Prakrit that we find, coupled with vestiges of Magadhi -*l*- for -*r*-, an orthographic -*t*- replacing -*d*- and the other lost intervocalic stop consonants. Appropriately, the early canonical text *Uttarajjhāyā* 20, v. 44, presents the *veyāla* as a purely destructive demon, murderous if not exorcised (*avipanna*). The word *vetāla* would be basically a conventional epithet that, like so many essential epithets of gods and demons, has taken on a measure of individuality, in this case a corpse-haunting spirit, beneficent when propitiated. Durgā's epithet Vetālī in *Harivaṃśa* would survive more authentically in the demoness Vidāri-nāmā of *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 53.83 (-*ri* is for the sake of an amphibrach gaṇa in Āryā metre), Vidārakī in Gṛhyasūtra, Vidārikā in *Agnipurāṇa*.

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Loliem Vetal
Goa
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