Khannās and Kaca: threefold death and the elements

Nick Allen

Oxford

Abstract: *To explain how evil came to be implanted within humanity a twelfth-century Sufi hagiographer tells a story about Adam and Eve, the 'Satanic' Iblīs, and the latter's son Khannās, who undergoes three deaths and two resuscitations. As was argued in a previous paper, the story is cognate with that of Kaca in* Mahābhārata *Book 1: in connection with the war of the gods and demons, Kaca undergoes three deaths and three resuscitations. The present paper compares the three modes of death in the two stories, with special reference to how the well-established 'Indo-European triple death motif' relates to the elements. Elsewhere in the Sanskrit epic the triadic frame is transcended in that there are five deaths (or equivalent events). In one such story each of the five deaths is related to one of the five elements, which themselves can be analysed in terms of the pentadic theory of Indo-European ideology.*

Keywords: *threefold death motif; Islamic Adam and Eve; Sufism;* Mahābhārata*; Indo-Iranian comparatism; five elements; pentadic theory.*

Résumé: *Afin d'expliquer comment le mal a été implanté dans l'humanité, un hagiographe soufi du* XII^e^ *siècle a raconté une histoire au sujet d'Adam et Ève, du « satanique » Iblīs et du fils de ce dernier, Khannās, qui a subi trois morts et deux réanimations. Comme nous l'avons dit dans un article précédent, cette histoire est comparable à celle de Kaca (*Mahābhārata, 1*): en lien avec la guerre entre les dieux et les démons, Kaca subit trois morts et trois réanimations. Le présent article compare les trois modes de mort dans les deux histoires, en insistant particulièrement sur la manière dont le motif indo-européen bien connu de la « triple mort » est lié aux éléments. Ailleurs dans l'épopée sanscrite, le cadre triadique est transcendé par le fait qu'il y a cinq décès (ou événements équivalents). Dans l'une de ces histoires, chacun des cinq décès est lié à l'un des cinq éléments, qui peuvent être analysés selon les termes de la théorie pentadique de l'idéologie indo-européenne.*

Mots clés: *motif de la triple mort, Adam et Ève dans l'Islam, Soufisme,* Mahābhārata, *comparatisme indo-iranien, cinq éléments, théorie pentadique.*

Khannās is the son of Islamic Iblīs, who corresponds roughly to Christian Lucifer or Satan. His story is attributed to the ninth-century Sufi saint al-Tirmi̲dī of Nishapur (in north-east Iran) – an attribution made, for instance, in the telling of the story by the popular late twelfth-century mystic and hagiographer, Farīd al Din ʿAṭṭār (of the same city). According to ʿAṭṭār 2005, the purpose of the original teller was to explain how Iblīs came to be implanted within humanity.

The story came to my attention when Harry Neale translated and discussed ʿAṭṭār's text in JIES 2007, presenting it as an instance of the Indo-European threefold death motif. I was struck by the similarities it showed with the story of Kaca in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh*) – a story that I had met in Dumézil (1971:

160-66). Dumézil does allude to the threefold death of Kaca, but so fleetingly that the allusion could easily be missed. Although the Critical Edition (CE) of the epic only gives Kaca two deaths, other versions (which we shall follow) describe as many as three killings of Kaca, '*ce qui est conforme à un moule bien connu de ce genre de narrations*.' However, Dumézil's aim was to compare the Indian Kāvya Uśanas and the Iranian Kavi Usan (seen as sorcerer-like figures positioned between gods and demons), and he does not take account of Khannās (whose story is indeed not very widely known within Islam).

This gap led me to draft an article (Allen 2018), which copied out Neale's translation and referred to those of other orientalists (some of whom are cited below). The original draft also discussed the relationship between the threefold death story and the elements, but that section was omitted from the article for reasons of length, and forms the basis of the present paper. However, in order to contextualise the issues, a little repetition will be needed of what I said before.

The motif of the threefold death is reasonably well known in the Indo-European comparativist literature – it is perhaps enough to cite Ward (1970) and Miller (1997). The motif consists in the grouping of three different modes of death, taken from a list that may include hanging, burning, use of a weapon (for instance in decapitation), drowning, burial alive, or serpent bite. Sometimes the different modes apply to different victims, but not always: in both our two cases they are inflicted on a single individual, who is resuscitated between one death and the next. The motif is probably best known from Celtic materials (see e.g. Almagro-Gorbea 2012, who cites Neale's PhD dissertation), but instances have been recognised from many other IE-speaking groups. Though India has usually been ignored, the instances include, as Neale notes, one from the Bakhtiārī in south-west Iran. Like the triple death of Ḥallāj (also recounted by ʿAṭṭār in his hagiographic collection), the Bakhtiārī story is typologically close to the instances found in western Europe, and very different from the stories we shall be examining.

Kaca is a youth whose story is told in *Mbh* (CE) (1,71.5-73.1, trans. van Buitenen 1973, or Schaufelberger and Vincent 2005).[1] Kaca is the son of Bṛhaspati, priest of the gods, and is sent from heaven by the gods to study in the household of a priest/magician called Kāvya Uśanas or Śukra, who serves the demons. The lad's mission is to learn a spell that the magician uses to resuscitate demons killed by the gods; without it the gods are at a disadvantage in their ever-renewed battles against their rivals. Kaca settles down in the household of Śukra, whose daughter falls in love with him. Understanding the youth's purpose, the demons repeatedly kill him, but on all three occasions he is resuscitated by the magician's use of his spell. However, on the last occasion the demons induce Śukra to consume the

1. Material omitted from the constituted CE text is, however, provided in its footnotes, which are referred to with an asterisk. Such material is often translated by Ganguli (1993).

lad, and in the course of the resuscitation he learns the spell he seeks. Finally he returns to heaven, his mission achieved.

The Sufi story is set in the household of Adam and Eve. Adam is not at home when Iblīs arrives. Claiming to have business elsewhere, Iblīs persuades Eve to look after his child Khannās for a while; but when Adam returns, he is angry with his wife and kills the child. When Iblīs returns and learns what has happened, his call resuscitates his son. Very much the same happens on the second occasion. However, on the last occasion the ancestors of humanity cook and consume Khannās. In this way the representative of Iblīs becomes implanted in the human race – as Iblīs had intended from the start.

Even on a quick reading one can recognise not only the triple death motif but also, at the climax of the story, forms of cannibalism – Śukra consumes his pupil, Adam and Eve consume the child Khannās. But, as I argued in my previous paper, one can also recognise a similar set of seven roles: the Winners; the Victim of the triple killings; the Victim's father; his Killer(s); the Resuscitator; the Consumer of the Victim; and one Female (respectively Śukra's daughter and Adam's wife). The comparison between the two stories is complicated by the fact that the roles are differently distributed among the participants (six of them in the Sanskrit, four in the Persian). However, both stories take place in a domestic setting, and both are about evil, whether it is embodied collectively in the demons (who fail) or individually in Iblīs and son (the Winners).[2]

Thus, despite differences of many types, the similarities suffice to suggest a historical connection between the two stories, and of the various possibilities the most plausible connection seems to be common origin in early Indo-Iranian tradition. If one hypothesises that the Sanskrit story is closer to the common origin, the divergences could be explicable by the religious history of Persia – first the rise of Zoroastrianism, then Islamisation.

Neale's approach to the history of the Khannās story runs roughly as follows (2007: 278). 'Aṭṭār started from the basic premise of al-Tirmiḏī's idea of the Devil's physical presence in man, and elaborated it 'by drawing on oral folklore, which he then adapted to the story he wanted to tell in order to elucidate *sūra* 85 in the Qur'ān. Thus, 'Aṭṭār was responding to an IE element, to wit, a variant of the threefold death motif, that had survived in the local culture of Khurasan.' Neale assembles instances of the IE motif, firstly from Germanic and Celtic pre-Christian ritual (linking them to Dumézil's trifunctionalism), and secondly (citing Brednich 1964: 138-145) from various other traditions. No doubt the recognition of a triple death story in the Sanskrit tradition adds a new element to the picture and could lead to a revision of Neale's account; but that is not my purpose here. My aim is simply to look closely at the three forms of death in each

2. Triple death stories are sometimes associated with ritual, but this does not apply to our Indo-Iranian material.

of our stories and consider their relationship to the five elements. We must start by assembling the data.

First death. Kaca is cut into pieces the size of sesamum seeds (which are particularly small), and fed to jackals (and wolves, in Ganguli's translation). Khannās is cut into pieces, each of which is hung from the bough of a tree.[3] The common factor is fragmentation of the body.

Second death. Kaca is pounded into a paste (*piś-* 'crush, bruise, grind') and mixed with the water of the ocean. Khannās is cremated and the ashes are dispersed half into water and half into the wind.[4] Common factor: reduced to paste or ash, the body is submerged in water.

Third death. Kaca is cremated, but the ashes (which would still contain remnants of charred bone) are reduced to powder, which is mixed with the wine that the demons give to Śukra. Khannās is cooked into a stew (implying use of fire and water), and consumed half by Adam, half by Eve.[5] Common factors: use of fire, and consumption.

This one-by-one comparison, resulting in the recognition of the common factors, has to be complemented by comparison of each triad viewed as a whole. A distinction is now needed between two stages in the disposal of the corpse, its initial reduction (A) and its subsequent distribution (B).

SANSKRIT		PERSIAN	
A	B	A	B
1. reduce to tiny pieces	feed to beasts	dismember	hang on branches
2. pound	into sea	cremate	scatter in water/ wind
3. cremate, mix in wine	Śukra drinks	make into stew	primal humans consume

In both traditions the B column moves from the natural world in rows 1 and 2 to the human world in 3, but otherwise none of the triads shows a particularly clear internal structure. What is striking is the variability within each tradition and between them. Persian entries 1B and 2B vary even between works of a single author, as well as between authors. The second subepisode, including the second death, is completely missing from many of the Sanskrit manuscripts – which explains its relegation to the notes of the Critical Edition. In the A columns cremation is present in both traditions but in different positions. Altogether the

3. Variants: the pieces are scattered in desert (Boyle 1976: 283-5), or scattered 'willy-nilly in a field' (Neale 2007 fn. 4; cf. also Ritter 2003: 553-4); or the body is cut into four pieces and cast on mountain tops (Lawrence 1992: 164-5).

4. Variants: ashes flung into the wind or scattered in a river (Lawrence).

5. Variants: Adam prepared a meal [of the child] (Boyle); since Khannās was in the form of a sheep, Adam killed, cooked, and ate him – no reference is made to Eve sharing the meal (Lawrence).

variability implies that this part of the story is notably unstable and so should be approached with caution. Nevertheless, unless our whole comparison is misconceived, even if the earliest written version in India only contained two subepisodes (as the CE implies), the oral prototype surely contained three.[6]

So far we have recognised in both traditions three subepisodes, three modes of reducing the corpse, and three destinations for it. In addition there are three accounts by the resuscitated Kaca of what happened to him: 700* (nine lines), 701* (line 4), 1,71.42-3. In the Persian Khannās hardly ever speaks (he may be too young)[7], but accounts of the three deaths are given by Eve to Iblīs. In both traditions these accounts repeat what the reader already knows from the narrator, and in both the second account is only mentioned, rather than being presented in direct speech. These clearly attested triads encourage us to look for others that may be less obvious.

After his first death Kaca reappears 'tearing open the bodies of the wolves', and after his third he tears open the belly of Śukra. One wonders if bodies were ever torn open after the second, and indeed one manuscript has just this: Kaca tore open the bodies of 'fish and the like' (presumably other aquatic beings). In each case the verbal root involved is *bhid-* 'split, rend asunder'.[8] Conceivably the scribe himself or one of his predecessors simply invented the fish, guided by the same feeling for the triadic patterning that prompts us to raise the question. But it seems more likely that a triad of Consumers (wolves, fish, anthropomorphs) was present from at least as far back as the story contained the motif of victim as herdsman (the cattle would attract wolves).

In other cases one can only express suspicions. Consider the process of reduction of Kaca's corpse. At the first death he was 'made like sesamum seeds' (*tilaśaḥ kṛtam*) and at the third the demons make him 'like powder' (*kṛtvā cūrṇaśaḥ*). Possibly an adverb in *-śas* has dropped out in the second subepisode. Or consider Kaca's motive for going to the woods. It is unlikely that for centuries Indian narrators were satisfied with Devayānī *twice* sending Kaca for flowers: more likely, versions existed having three distinct motives for Kaca's trips. Similarly as regards the

6. It is interesting that Dumézil's interest in modes of death as forming a structure goes back to an essay, *Le noyé et le pendu*, which focuses primarily on two rather than three modes. Originally published in 1953, the latest version appears in Dumézil 2000: 91-120. The connection with triads is made via the often-mentioned commentaries to Lucan's data on Celtic sacrifices (ibid. p. 117).

7. The exception is in Lawrence 1992. After the consumption Khannās answers from the heart of Adam: 'At your service, at your service.' 'Stay there!' commanded Iblīs. 'That was my design from the beginning.'

8. The wordings show other minor similarities. First death: *bhittvā bhittvā śarīrāṇi vṛkāṇāṃ* (699*). Second: *bhedayitvā śarīrāṇi matsyādīnāṃ* (702*, ms K4 only). Third: Kaca can only appear by *kukṣer bhedana*, and he does indeed emerge *bhittvā kukṣiṃ* (1,71.44, 49). The verb root is *bhid-* (causative *bhedayati*), and *bhedana* is the corresponding verbal noun.

repetition of the 'half-and-half' motif in Persian deaths 2 and 3: were the remains of the corpse originally given two separate destinations in death 1?

The Persian material on death 2 suggests a further line of thought. This subepisode involves the three elements, fire for the initial cremation, then the destinations water and wind. These are the three mobile elements (as distinct from the essentially immobile earth and ether), and at least two of them – fire and water (implying cremation and drowning) – are very common in Indo-European threefold death contexts. A common third member of such lists is hanging, which can reasonably be related to air/wind since it takes place in air and involves blocking the passage of air into the lungs. But this mode of death (combined with dismemberment) occurs in the first subepisode of the Persian; so perhaps some versions of the story associated each death with a different element, e.g. in the sequence air, water, fire.[9]

This idea finds a measure of support in the fact that Kaca too mentions a tree, in connection with his first death: he was attacked by the demons when, burdened with firewood and ritual *kuśa* grass, he was resting under a banyan (*vaṭa*) tree, which also gave shade for the cattle (700*). The present Sanskrit texts contain no hint of hanging, but if earlier versions did so, this could explain the reference to a tree that otherwise seems pointless. However, this is not the only possible linkage between deaths and elements. In some Persian versions of the first death the dismembered corpse is laid on a field, desert or mountain, i.e. on earth; three other elements are linked with the second death; and the third death might be regarded as transcendent, somewhat as is ether among the elements. I do not pursue this speculation, but raise it for its relevance to the notion of Indo-European functions. The literature on IE triple deaths has connected them with trifunctionalism ever since Dumézil's 1953 essay, where hanging was linked with the first function and drowning with the third. But there are many reasons for recognising a split fourth function in IE ideology – hence an englobing pentadic schema, and I have argued that, in a culture ancestral to those of classical Greece and Sanskritic India, the five elements were closely linked to the pentadic ideology (Allen 2005). So perhaps the 'threefold death motif' ultimately represents a compression of a longer series of deaths.[10] The compression could be ascribed to the mechanics of oral narrative (which at least in Indo-Europaea tends to favour triads) or to the shrinkage of the pentadic ideology (which arguably tends to fall

9. In place of hanging many lists have falling (sometimes being thrown), but this too involves air. The element is most naturally associated with birds, and one can toy with the idea of versions containing birds, whose bodies would burst open in the course of the resuscitation. The relevance of the vertical dimension is noted by Dumézil (2000: 108-9): hanging is a form of elevation, drowning a form of descent.

10. As is mentioned by both Neale and Almagro-Gorbea, Juan Ruiz (the fourteenth-century Archpriest of Hita) tells a story involving five modes of death for a single prince: stoning, burning, falling, hanging, drowning.

back on its triadic core), or to both processes. In any case, some such trend might help to explain the variability of the Indo-European as well as of our Indo-Iranian material (the variability affects even the standard list order of the elements, which differs in India and Greece).

Two other Sanskrit stories

Since the relevance of the elements is not particularly obvious in our stories, it is worth supporting the idea by considering two other passages from the *Mahābhārata*.

After the Great War, Yudhiṣṭhira grieves at the slaughter he has caused, and Kr̥ṣṇa tries to console him. Yudhiṣṭhira, he says, does not understand that an enemy is present within his own body (*śatruṃ…śarīrastham* 14,11.5). To back up his point, Kr̥ṣṇa tells a story about Indra, a 'religious mystery' (*dharma-rahasyam*), which (as we are told at the end, 14,11.20) he learned from the sages to whom Indra related it. It narrates in unfamiliar form the ancient battle between Indra and Vr̥tra – the duel that, in a sense, from the Ṛgveda onwards, epitomizes the conflict of gods and demons. Vr̥tra pervades the earth, and Indra uses his thunderbolt against him, killing or striking him (*vadhyamāna* can have either meaning). Vr̥tra now enters the waters and Indra reacts as before. The same happens when Vr̥tra successively enters light, wind and ether. The different milieux here certainly represent the elements: they appear in the normal Sanskrit list order and, on being entered by Vr̥tra, each element loses its characteristic property ‑ smell, taste, colour/form, touch, sound); and these are the properties correlated with the elements in Sāṃkhya philosophy (e.g. Larson 1979: 236). When Vr̥tra is driven from the ether, he enters Indra himself, taking away the god's sense of reality – inducing *moha*. The priestly sage Vasiṣṭha awakens him from this condition by a chant (14,11.18), and Indra reacts by hurling his 'invisible' bolt at the demon who is within his body (*śarīrastham* again).

In this relatively straightforward episode several familiar themes will be recognised. Kr̥ṣṇa is explaining the presence of something undesirable within a particular human, much as 'Aṭṭār is explaining something undesirable within humanity: Adam has been penetrated by Khannās, Yudhiṣṭhira by a nameless entity. As in the story of Kaca, the context is gods under Indra opposing demons, even if each party to the conflict is represented only by a single champion. We can probably recognise the roles of Winner = Killer and demonic Victim. The Victim dies and resuscitates himself (or is wounded and recovers) several times, each death (or 'death') being associated unambiguously with an element. The series of subepisodes culminates when the story moves from nature to the quasi-human sphere, i.e. when the Victim enters the body of the more or less anthropomorphic deity. Indra is not exactly a Consumer, even unconsciously, but he undergoes a bodily penetration, which at first seems disastrous – the *moha* recalls Śukra's

initial bewilderment on finding that he has been penetrated by Kaca. The situation is only restored when Vasiṣṭha sings the god a *sāman*, using the *rathaṃtara* chant ('the brahmin chant', Smith 1994: 300-301) – compare Śukra's use of his spell. Perhaps one can compare the intervention of the brahmins (especially Bṛhaspati and Kaca, but also perhaps Śukra) in the military conflict between gods and demons. However, the main reason for including Kṛṣṇa's story here is the emphatic connection it makes between the multiple deaths and the five elements.
My second comparison is with a different episode in the career of the same sage (1,166.1-168.13), as recounted to the Pāṇḍavas by a Gandharva. Vasiṣṭha is involved in a feud with a rival sage Viśvāmitra, and in the course of it he loses his eldest son Sakti and Sakti's one hundred brothers – they are all eaten by a king who is possessed by a *rākṣasa* demon and has thus become a cannibal. In his distress Vasiṣṭha decides to commit suicide, and he makes five separate attempts. He jumps from a mountain peak; he enters a fire; he throws himself into the sea with a heavy stone tied to his neck; he binds himself with a rope and jumps into a great river, and finally into a stream infested by crocodiles. In each case his suicide is thwarted by miracles, and he realises that he cannot die. But then he hears the sound of Vedic recitation coming from the womb of Sakti's widow. Knowing that he will have a descendant, he now recovers from his despair, and all ends happily.
In this case the familiar motifs include the following. (i) The rivalry of the two sages (cf. Bṛhaspati versus Śukra). (ii) Sons who are consumed in an act of cannibalism, whether the consumption is deliberate (Sakti consumed by the *rākṣasa* king) or inadvertent (Kaca consumed by Śukra). (iii) Towards the end of the story, a voice that is heard issuing from within the body of an older adult. (iv) A single individual associated with a sequence of different modes of death. Vasiṣṭha's 'modes of death' are his failed attempts at suicide, while Kaca's are those of an involuntary victim targeted by demons. But the most relevant point here is where Vasiṣṭha makes each attempt. (v) Implicitly, each attempt relates to one element. The sequence is air, fire, water – first salty water, then two forms of fresh water.
The 'modes of death' we have been discussing are really modes of killing, including killing oneself; but the topic lies close to that of corpse disposal. Apart from being cremated (fire) or buried (earth), corpses can be simply cast into rivers (water), and when a corpse is exposed for vultures to consume, the action can be thought of as disposal into air. Finally, it might be worth comparing modes of death with modes of birth and marriage – the latter very plausibly reflect pentadic theory (Allen 1996), as do the elements. The Khannās-Kaca comparison has many potential ramifications.

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