5 Mimesis, Habitus, and Embodiment: Becoming a *Vedamūrti*

... it is not that the ācārya "knows" tradition but that he is tradition.
–Guy Richard Welbon[308]

Entire volumes[309] have been written about the relationship of teacher and student in the Indian context. It has been considered one of the backbones of Indian culture[310] and it is evidently the base of the system of knowledge transmission in the context of Vedic education.

> The guru must have gained importance initially from the fact that the knowledge — philosophical, religious, speculative, mystic, and cosmological — that was available had not been written down, it had to be acquired personally from someone. (Raina 2002: 173)

The paradigmatic role of the master is embedded in the terms used for the teacher. One of the most common Sanskrit terms is *guru*,[311] literally the "weighty one".[312] A widespread traditional etymological interpretation of the word "*guru*", as given to me by one of the teachers, is "someone who destroys your darkness; this is [the] syllabe *gu*; and brings light to your life... [the] *ru* syllable is light. Light is *jñāna* [knowledge]."[313] This depiction matches the following definition by Mlecko:

> Gu means 'ignorance' and ru, 'dispeller.' The guru is a dispeller of ignorance [...] The term "guru" also means "heavy" or "weighty" and might well illustrate the belief that accomplished or holy persons are characterized by an uncommon weight. (Mlecko 1982: 34)

The primarily role of the teacher is therefore to impart the knowledge (*veda*) to the student, thereby removing his ignorance. This knowledge in the context of the Brāhmaṇical tradition refers primarily to the knowledge of *bráhman* in the sense of

---

308 Welbon 1986: 376.

309 Some of the notable works have been summarized by: Rigopoulos 2007: 173.

310 "[...] insofern das Guru-Institut die religionsosziologische und religionspädagogische Hauptstruktur der traditionellen Gesellschaftsordnung darstellt und in dieser Funktion als älteste und möglicherweise bestbezugte Institutionsform religiöser Erziehung anzusehen ist." (Steinmann 1986: 8) And also: "[...] far from being an independent mode of transmission which transcends the social structure and the culture, the guru-disciple relationship operates as the very lifeline of the culture and the social structure." (Milton 1963: 207)

311 Other common terms are: *ācārya*, *upādhyāya*, *paṇḍita*, *śāstrī*. For more on the etymology of these terms, see: Steinmann 1986: 73-6.

312 White 1984.

313 Interview, Goḍboḷe, 03.03.2006, Satara.

the "sacred utterance or rite" that is the knowledge of the "revelation" (*śruti*). The Veda is regarded by the tradition of *pūrva-mīmāṃsā* and other orthodox (*āstika*) traditions as *apauruṣeya* (not created by human agency), and is primarily known in this world through the mouth of a *brāhmaṇa* as it has "come down in a chain of tradition" (*pāramparyagato vedaḥ*, VāsDhŚ VI 43).[314]

The Veda is to be learned through oral instruction, by which the student obtains his second birth and becomes a twice-born man (*dvija*). This second birth is enacted by the initiatory rite (*saṃskāra*) called *upanayana*,[315] in which the student hears the Vedic *mantra* from the mouth of his teacher or father for the first time and officially becomes a *brāhmaṇa*.[316] This initiation, in which the student obtains the Veda in the condensed form of the *gāyatrī-mantra*, is a crucial prerequisite for the formal instruction of the Veda. It is noteworthy that, without the first symbolic oral instruction that takes place during the *upanayana* ceremony, any attempts to handle the Veda with authority are futile. Therefore, the *guru* as the spiritual father is, in a ritual and social sense, more important than the biological father.[317] It is the *guru* who enables the student to obtain his social and ritual status within the Brāhmaṇical society. Without the *guru*, the student is excluded from the sacred knowledge he is entitled to by birth. Traditionally, he would also be rejected by Brāhmaṇical society for not attending to his scholarly obligation and would become "like a *śūdra*."[318] It is no surprise, then, that the figure of the *guru* took such a central role in the oral transmission of knowledge. Even if one could (theoretically speaking) learn all the Veda from a manuscript or a book, it would be invalid by the very fact that it was not received in the "proper way" (i.e. through the mouth of an accomplished teacher).[319]

It has been argued that the group more than the individual, and in particular the family, is relevant for the construction of identity in India.[320] This process of enculturation is heightened during childhood, when a person learns to position himself in the different configurations of his social environment. "[…] (C)hildhood

314 As cited by: Scharfe 2002: 13f30.

315 Cf. Zotter 2010; Swain 2009; Prasad 1997.

316 According to the authoritative scriptures, also members of the kṣatriya and the vaiśya class were worthy of undergoing the upanayana ceremony considered 'twice-born' and entitled, therefore, also to study the Veda. In practice, nonetheless, it was generally *brāhmaṇa*s who studied the Veda, so that in the later literature the term *dvija* (twice-born) became a synonym for *brāhmaṇa*. Cf. Lubin 2005.

317 Cf. Michaels 2004a: 108-110.

318 MānDhŚ II.168: "When a Brahmin expends great effort in other matters without studying the Veda, while still alive he is quickly reduced to the status of a Śūdra, together with his children."

319 "Sāyaṇa wrote in the introduction to his Ṛgveda commentary that 'the text of the Veda is to be learned by the method of learning it from the lips of the teacher and not from a manuscript.'" (Scharfe 2002: 8) On the topic, see also: Rocher 1994: 8-10.

320 "How a man lives and what he does are rarely seen as a product of individual effort, aspiration or conflict, but are interpreted in the light of his family's circumstances and reputation in the wider society. Individual initiative and decisions make sense only in a family context." (Kakar 1978: 121)

in India is an extensive deindividualization and therefore a complete and "perfect" (*saṃskṛta*) socialization." (Michaels 2004a: 108) From a theoretical perspective, and as we have seen in subchapter 3.4, the model of Vedic education is clearly more than just a "school" where information and knowledge are transmitted formally in the class and where one has a "private" life outside of school. The *gurukula* is, in fact, the very family (*kula*) of the *guru*, and the roles of both *guru* and *śiṣya* are much more than just "teacher" and "student". The *guru* plays the role of father, teacher, role model, and spiritual guide to his students. This works the other way around, as well; the students become the sons of the *guru* and are treated alike. Moreover, they not only become family members of one sort, but they also enter into a complicated and integral relationship, where every aspect of life is guided by the *guru* and followed by the *śiṣya*. Through this close familiar contact, the conditions for the mimetic process of knowledge transmission in the broad sense are established. Vedic education is then not "just" about the reproduction of the Veda from the *guru*'s mouth, like a "tape-recorder" (Witzel 2003: 24) or the ability to accurately perform rituals (although these two elements are certainly indispensable components of a student's education); during his study, the student learns to speak in a particular register,[321] interact with people, to dress, to discipline the body and, in sum, as one of the students in a Vedic school in Satara told me, "to lead a Vedic life." The goal of a student is to "become like his *guru*" in all respects.

The very nature of the system in which the training of the Vedic recitation takes place (*gurukula*) implies that the student strongly mimics the figure of the *guru* and thus shapes his identity and his social network. The *guru* aims to demonstrate to his students the ontological and epistemological benefits of subscribing to and applying the knowledge he embodies, represents, and transmits. The success of this transmission of knowledge, of course, depends on factors that are beyond the *guru*, and rather depend upon the willingness and the ability of the disciple to become like his teacher.

As described by Bourdieu (2010: 72-87), *habitus* is an internalized, embodied disposition toward the world. It comes into being through inculcation in early childhood, which is not a process of deliberate, formal teaching and learning but, rather, one associated with immersion in a particular socio-cultural milieu — the family and household. In societies with formal education and class stratification, the primary habitus inculcated through the family (which will differ according to the social position of the family) comes into contact with a system outside of the family: the school. This institution inculcates a secondary habitus, the "cultivated habitus," which privileges the cultural capital (this including world views, linguistic codes,

321 According to some of my intelocutors, Maharashtrian *brāhmaṇa*s "should speak 'pure' Marathi, and not the slang that they speak nowadays in Pune." Language codes as markers of social identities such as caste and class are well-studied in Sociolinguistics; see, for example: Pandharipande 2003. For more on the socio-politics of language, cf. Brass 1974.

certain types of knowledge, and material objects) of a particular social class. In the case of the traditional *brāhmaṇa*, the school is either embedded in the family structure or it replaces the same during the period of study. While many *brāhmaṇa* children up to the age of 8-12 receive a first socialization from their biological families, after they leave their home to study in the *vedapāṭhaśālā,* the members of the *guru*'s school become their new family. In a Bourdieuan language, one could say that these *fields* (family vs. school) merge into one another. Since the students live with their teachers, and the relationship with the teacher is more than just that built with someone who transmits formal knowledge, the *guru* and the older members of the school also play a central role in what Bourdieu calls 'primary habitus'. The *guru* becomes the father, and the other students his brothers. Notable is also the very limited role of women in the socialization of the *brāhmaṇa* in the contemporary *vedapāṭhaśālā*s. Sometimes, if the school is a homeschool (*gurukula*), the wife of the *guru* takes the role of the mother, but often the only female contact they have during their studies is with the women in charge of cleaning or cooking in the schools. Celibacy (*brahmacarya*) is considered essential for the study period and, therefore, contact with women is avoided as much as possible in order to ward off any temptations. Additionally, women are considered a potential danger to the state of ritual purity, since any contact with a menstruating woman would cause a state of impurity. The study period is, therefore, ideally restricted to the company of *brāhmaṇa* males. This particular form of socialization contributes to strengthening the group's self-awareness of the *brāhmaṇa* male as someone privileged with the specific duty of preserving the Vedas in their aural form.

But even if what has been sketched above refers mainly to the figure of the immediate *guru* as the teacher and the main authority for a Vedic student, there are other *guru*s who function on a different social level as figures of authority, particularly as religious or spiritual guides. Patron *guru*s and other holy men, family *guru*s as well as ancestors and elder *vaidika*s, are also figures of authority and inspiration to both students and teachers in the Vedic schools. The student will then get instructions directly or indirectly from his *guru* for practically anything he does during the day. The students themselves, also, are role models and teachers for the younger ones in the *gurukula* when the *guru* is not present. In this way, the students also get to practice how to be a teacher and exercise authority, whether they will become teachers one day or not.

Explaining Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', Alam gives us a hint of how the institution of the *guru* is ultimately embodied by the Vedic student:

> Pierre Bourdieu, talking of pedagogy, argues that the success of any pedagogical action depends on the degree to which pedagogical authority has become part of the common sense of the individual receiver even in the absence of any pedagogical transmission. Relevant to our discussion here, Bourdieu also talks of the habitus which lies at the interface between the individual self and the larger social organism. It is the means by which structures of the social order are inscribed, encoded or written onto the individual body in the most corporeal forms of gestures, accents, patterns of dress, etc. Through the habitus, political mythology of the social order is 'made flesh'. (Alam 2011: 175)

Most of the 25 schools I visited have a link to one or several sects (*paramparā*) of modern Hinduism with a charismatic *guru* at its head.[322] As mentioned in the previous section, most of the schools have a link to the Śaṅkarācāryas of the southern *maṭha*s and are considered not only authorities in Vedic *dharma*, but 'universal teachers' (*jagadguru*s) worthy of the highest respect. Devotional attitudes towards them, and other living or deceased religious figures — often ascetics who carry an array of titles such as *jagadguru*s (universal teachers), *sadguru*s (true teachers), *sant*s (saints), and *svāmī*s (lords) — have, as we have seen in subchapter 2.3, a strong influence on the way the religious and moral identity of the *vaidika*s of Maharashtra are constructed. Nonetheless, the configurations between these authority figures and the ways in which the hierarchies are temporarily or permanently established for the students are mediated through the *guru* who the student spends the most amount of time with. While the immediate *guru* may himself acknowledge the authority, wisdom, and spiritual power of another individual or lineage, he will still dictate to his disciples to what degree the students establish relationships with these other *guru*s, whether they are ascetics or learned *vaidika*s. The *guru*, in his role as a spiritual father, will even mediate the relationship of the student with his biological family (at least during the period of studentship). He will regulate his visits to his original home and also make most of the decisions regarding the student's welfare and life. Notwithstanding this, the teacher, while being a *guru* in his own right, remains a student of his own *guru* and is imbedded in his own network of authority, in which he continually repositions himself. The dynamics of these and other power relations are not linear or fixed (as the critics of Dumont have clearly shown),[323] but are in constant negotiation with each other.

In any case, during the study period (and very often after, as well) the *guru*, from whom a student gets his socialization, is the main point of reference for the student.

> He [the *guru*] is an entity, which in Western culture has no exact counterpart. For the *guru* is a teacher, a counselor, father-image, mature ideal, hero, source of strength, even divinity integrated into one personality. (Mlecko 1982: 34)

Within the Brāhmaṇical ethos, to be an ideal *brāhmaṇa* is to be a teacher for others and to carry the moral and spiritual authority of the Veda in one's very being. By having completely internalized the sounds of the Veda, and constantly enacting them through recitation, he becomes learned (*śiṣṭa*), and his words and behavior become

322 As is noted in subchapter 2.3 and the examples of Chapter 6, the *bhakti* traditions, and particularly the *sant*s of Maharashtra, continue to have a strong influence on the construction of a Maharashtrian identity, including the *vaidika*s of these schools.

323 For a summary of three of Dumont's critics (Daniel, Khare, Nandy), see: Appadurai 1986 and also the contributions in Khare 2006.

authoritative. By becoming knowledge (*veda*), he makes space for innovation on a social and metaphysical level, for his behavior (*ācāra*) is a source of *dharma*.[324]

As mentioned above, one of the titles widely used in Maharashtra for someone who has memorized his Veda recession (*svaśākhā*) is *vedamūrti*. The Sanskrit word *mūrti* (f.) translates as any solid body or material form — an embodiment, manifestation, incarnation, personification; anything which has definite shape or limits; a person, form, figure, or appearance; an image, idol, or statue. The manifestation of knowledge is, therefore, embodied by the *brāhmaṇa* who has, at least in theory, completely memorized the Veda of his *śākhā* (i.e. primarily the Saṃhitā text, but also in some cases the Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka, and Upaniṣads, as described in subchapter 3.5). This 'graduation title' is significant because, as Bourdieu (1991: 121) advises us, the imposition of a name, particularly a title, is one of the central "acts of institution" which inaugurates the actor's identity and informs the individual "in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be." Within the Brāhmaṇical tradition, the word *mūrti* also has strong ritual connotations. *Mūrti* is the generic name given to statues or icons installed in temples and other sacred places that are meant to be worshipped. The knowledge, then, is not only present in the persona of the *brāhmaṇa*, but it also sanctifies him, elevating the individual to the status of a deity who is to be venerated. Of course, the fact that *brāhmaṇa*s have insisted that they are and were worthy of deific reverence does not necessarily mean that others accept this claim, but, at least from the perspective of the authoritative texts of the tradition, the *brāhmaṇa* was elevated to the highest status possible for his identification with the Veda. One reads, for example, in the Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra:

> We are with those who do the following: (study of) the three Vedas, vedic studentship, procreation, faith, austerity, sacrifice, and giving gifts. He who praises anything else becomes dust and perishes. (BaudhDhS 2.11.34 as cited in Olivelle 1993: 90)

In the process of becoming such an "embodiment of the Veda", the pupil internalizes a large amount of knowledge — which is not formally imparted to the student in a classroom or during formal instruction — by spending the majority of his time in the company of his master and fellow students. The knowledge the student receives during his formal education will enable him to lead a life that mirrors the life of his own *guru* once he has finished his studies. The study period, then, has also the practical effect of sharpening the social and symbolic boundaries between the *brāhmaṇa* and those around him, and strengthening their ties with one another. This occurs by osmosis or intentional mimesis. The student learns to perform his role and to know his place in the power structure as a carrier of the Veda by being subservient

324 Cf. "This knowledge was the Veda. The priests identified themselves with the knowledge. They not only had the knowledge, they were the knowledge, they embodied it." (Michaels 2004a: 109)

to his teacher. Ideally, the *brāhmaṇa* ought to behave according to the *dharma*, and in the same way as the great elders did in the past. This static interpretation means there is not much room for changes and innovations, due to the theoretical vision created by the ideological lens of the orthodox traditions. Nonetheless, even the normative concept of *dharma* has been quite flexible. It has been reinterpreted and reconstructed again and again, and across generations. Yet, innovation and change has clearly existed in India. This has been the case in the Brāhmaṇical tradition for millennia, but it was successfully masqueraded under the ideology of continuity and the eternal principles of the Vedas. The concept of *dharma*, as Olivelle (2005c) has shown, was not originally intrinsic to the Vedic tradition; it was rather incorporated as a reaction to social and cultural changes between the third and fifth centuries CE. It is the ideology of a static perfection developed in the Vedāntic traditions that covered innovations of any sort, as coming from the only valid and unchanging source: the Vedas.[325] What is remarkable is that all of these innovations have happened within the framework of the Brāhmaṇical communities who carried the knowledge from generation to generation precisely because the Vedic tradition is not just about reproducing the Veda, but rather embodying the Veda and enacting it inside and outside of the Vedic ritual.

To be an ideal *brāhmaṇa* is to become a *vedamūrti* who has the moral and spiritual authority to *be* the Veda. By having completely internalized the sounds of the Veda, he becomes learned (*śiṣṭa*), and his words and behavior become authoritative — leaving more room for innovation, for he is the Veda himself and his behavior *is dharma*.

> Since Plato we have known that it is not just ideas, attitudes, and values, but also social forms of living and acting which are learned by way of mimetic processes. Because of the different preconditions young people start out with, however, what emerges is not simply a copy of a model; the mimetic process leads to a difference, which ensures the autonomy and creativity of its results. The model appropriated in the mimetic act is, therefore, not simply a reproduction of external similarities; it is a construction on the part of the person who behaves mimetically – a construction which leaves room for difference, particularity and creativity. (Wulf 2011: 90)

The student, from a very young age onwards, is encouraged to mimic the behavior of his elders, and in particular of his *guru* until he has himself become a graduate. Even once a student has completed his studies and left the *gurukula* to become a householder himself, he will remain loyal to his *guru*. In the same permanent relationship as exists with his biological parents, who will remain his parents worthy of respect for all of his life, the teacher of the Veda — by providing him with his "second birth" — will remain his source of soteriological authority for the rest of his life. In turn, as with his biological parents, the student may also become a *guru* one day and transmit to his own sons/students the Veda and, in this way, ensure his

325 Cf. Pollock 1985: 499-519.

own immortality. In the following quote, Michaels refers to the Brāhmaṇical role of father not only in the role of progenitor, but more imporantly as the transmitter of knowledge:

> Thus, when the father died, he did not pass on the knowledge to his son, but rather put him in his place, and thus, deindividualized, he lived on in him. [...] What is crucial is that the knowledge of deliverance is passed on from generation to generation, from father to son, by replacing the biological father-son sequence with a ritual father-son identification. (Michaels 2004a: 109)

While the transcendental symbolism may be clear ideologically speaking, in the *vedapāṭhaśālā*s I visited in Maharashtra, students and teachers have different degrees of intimacy, and the bond of their relationship varies strongly. This bond depends on how much time they spend together, how many students are under the teacher's tutelage, how many teachers share the responsibility of teaching the students, whether the teacher favors some students above others, etc. According to one of the *guru*'s of a smaller *vedapāṭhaśālā*, Vedamūrti Amol Jośī spends time: "with the students and the attention they get from their *guru* is crucial for the character building and the quality of the student. The larger the schools and the classrooms, the less is the quality of the students". According to Jośī and other teachers I visited during my fieldwork, the "true *gurukula*" system "is dying out" now. In larger schools, students and teachers spend less time together and are not living under the same roof. They consider the teaching of only the formal curriculum (the recitation of Vedic texts) as the main cause for the downfall of the "authentic" *gurukula* system.

Some teachers deliberately choose to take only a few students into their care in order to maintain what they perceive as the "*gurukula* tradition". Śrī Vivekśāstrī Goḍboḷe from Satara, for example, has decided to accept students every other year, depending on the amount of pupils that leave his school. He says it is crucial that the classrooms "do not get too big." He says that more qualified teachers would need to be hired (besides the two teachers who already teach, besides himself, in his school), and that the facilities of the school would also need to be adapted. "The bigger the school the harder it is to keep students under control," he told me in a conversation. There is also the economic burden that teachers carry with having more mouths to feed and more expenses to maintain an increasing number of students.[326]

The intensity of this bond, as mentioned above, can be correlated to different factors which can affect it. The most obvious factor is the amount of time spent in the company of each other and in the quality of this time. The intimacy of these moments depends on the 'philosophy' and disposition of the *guru*, as well as on the financial capabilities of the school.

326 Sponsorship as discussed in 3.1.1 is a crucial element of the life and durability of these *vedapāṭhaśālā*s.

In subchapter 3.4, I proposed a typology of three models as a tool for analysis of these schools. While all three models refer to the *gurukula* system as their ideological orientation, I have argued that the first model fosters a stronger intimate relation precisely because the limited space in the house of the master, the interdependency on an economical level, and the longer periods of time spent together between teacher and student are determinants for the mimetic process of knowledge transmission.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that a topic which is so readily dismissed as an Orientalist construction of the "Hindu elite" can — with the help of ethnography and historiography — illumine several processes of the identity construction and knowledge transmission of these texts. This work has tried to show that the traditional *brāhmaṇa*, as an idealized trope, has found its way into concrete practices and worldviews that are not only in the Orientalist imagination of the Indologist. I have proposed that the preservation of the Veda, as embodied sound (and not as scripture), continues to be at the center of (pre)occupations of the *brāhmaṇa* reciters I present here.

The transmission of the Veda and the "Vedic way of life" are dependent on an intimate education system in which face-to-face interaction within and beyond the classroom is essential. In this book, I have emphasized the mimetic processes in which the student ideally "becomes like the *guru*", and not only by memorizing the Veda and mastering some of the rituals, but also by learning to embody a specific 'habitus' in which he becomes the personification of this knowledge.