

Magical kitchens or hunting? How to survive in the epic jungle

Danielle Feller
University of Lausanne

Introduction

What can we gather from ancient literature as to the reality of the epoch to which it belongs? This question poses itself with acuity in the case of many ancient Indian texts – which often present the prescribed as factual – and even more so in the case of a composition like the *Mahābhārata* (MBh), where the supernatural and mythical freely mingle with the mundane. The Epics often give us an ideal picture of the ascetics who live in the hostile environment of the Indian jungle, subsisting on meagre forest fare. Is it actually possible to live on such a diet – provided one is bent on surviving and not on releasing one's body?

In this paper, I propose to examine what kind of food the Pāṇḍavas ate during their exile in the forest,¹ which is described in Book 3 of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Āraṇyakaparvan*. Those who are familiar with the literature of ancient India know to what extent all the aspects of food-intake are fraught with ideology, forming, for instance, one of the main topics of law-books. What to eat – or not to eat, when, with whom, offered by whom, was a topic of paramount importance for the Indian society. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that one of the first questions king Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana, when he questions him about the Pāṇḍavas' exile at the beginning of the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, is 'What did they eat?': *kim āhārāḥ* (MBh 3.1.4c). As we shall presently see, the answer is not a simple one and different passages present a different picture of the Pāṇḍavas' diet.

1. During their exile, the Pāṇḍavas divide most of their time between two forests, the Dvaitavana and the Kāmyakavana.

Sūrya's boon

The problem of food is compounded by the fact that the Pāṇḍavas are not alone in the forest: they are accompanied by Brahmins who insist on following them – they are needed, they say, to perform rituals and to entertain the Pāṇḍavas with stories – even though Yudhiṣṭhira explains the dangers of the forest to them and mentions the problem of food. Yudhiṣṭhira points out that they will merely live on ‘fruit, roots, and meat’ (*phalamūlāmiṣāhārā*, 3.2.2) or ‘fruit, roots, and deer’ (*phalamūlamrgān*, 3.2.8). But the Brahmins are undaunted and reply that they will look after themselves and fetch their own forest food (*svayam āhṛtya vanyāni*, 3.2.10). Yudhiṣṭhira finally allows them to come, but continues to worry about them. His chaplain (*purohita*) Dhaumya² comes to his rescue and provides a solution to his problems. The Sun, he says, is the foremost provider of food, thanks to him, plants grow. Let Yudhiṣṭhira pray to Sūrya and recite his 108 names.³ The Sun-god is satisfied, appears before Yudhiṣṭhira and tells him the following:⁴

‘You shall attain to all that you aspire, king! I shall provide you with food for twelve years. The four kinds of food – fruit, roots, viands, and greens that are prepared in your kitchen – will be inexhaustible for you’. (...) He [Yudhiṣṭhira] joined Draupadī; and while she watched, the Lord Pāṇḍava went and prepared the food in the kitchen. The four kinds of forest fare, once cooked, multiplied: the food grew to be inexhaustible, and with it he fed the Brahmins. While the Brahmins were eating, Yudhiṣṭhira fed his younger brothers, too, and afterward ate the remains, which are known as the leftover. Pṛṣata’s granddaughter [Draupadī] then first fed Yudhiṣṭhira and ate the remnant herself.⁵

yat te 'bhilaṣitaṃ rājan sarvaṃ etad avāpsyasi /
aham annaṃ pradāsyāmi sapta pañca ca te samāh //
phalamūlāmiṣaṃ śākaṃ saṃskṛtaṃ yan mahānase /
caturvidhaṃ tad annādyam akṣayyaṃ te bhaviṣyati // MBh 3.4.2-3 //
 (...)

2. A certain Dhaumya (Āyoda Dhaumya) also figures in MBh 1.3.19-82, in stories which involve food. It is not clear whether he is the same Dhaumya as the Pāṇḍavas’ chaplain. (Cf. Feller 2004, 229, esp. n. 44).

3. Biardeau 2002, tome 1, 428-429 notes in her commentary to the MBh that this passage reveals the spread of the *bhakti* cult to other deities than Viṣṇu.

4. The text transmitted by the critical edition seems somewhat problematic: Dhaumya recites the Sun’s 108 names and explains the good that comes of it (end of 3.3). Yudhiṣṭhira himself is never said to recite the names. However the Sun-god is pleased with him and grants him a boon (3.4.1-3). Then Yudhiṣṭhira is said to rise out of the water (3.4.4), into which he is never said to have gone. After 3.3.14, some manuscripts insert Yudhiṣṭhira’s *stuti* to the Sun. (Cf. Appendix 1 of the crit. ed.).

5. Unless mentioned otherwise, all the translations are van Buitenen’s.

*draupadyā saha saṃgamyā paśyamāno ’bhyayāt prabhuh /
mahānase tadānnaṃ tu sādhayāmāsa pāṇḍavaḥ //
saṃskṛtaṃ prasavaṃ yāti vanyam annaṃ caturvidham /
akṣayaṃ vardhate cānnaṃ tena bhojayate dvijān //
bhuktavatsu ca vipreṣu bhojayitvānujān api /
śeṣaṃ vighasasaṃjñāṃ tu pāścād bhūṅkte yudhiṣṭhiraḥ /
yudhiṣṭhiraṃ bhojayitvā śeṣam aśnāti pārṣatī // MBh 3.4.5-7 //*

This kitchen (*mahānasa*) is not further described, nor is its mode of functioning clearly explained. It is also not clear whether the kitchen was gifted by Sūrya or whether it was already in the Pāṇḍavas’ possession. The text only specifies that Yudhiṣṭhira first prepares ‘four types of forest food’ (*vanyam annaṃ caturvidham*, MBh 3.4.6) which then multiply magically. But we do not know if the initial small amount of food is first gathered by the Pāṇḍavas or provided by the kitchen itself.

We can see that this passage reveals a certain number of differences as compared to the previous lists of food mentioned by Yudhiṣṭhira:

- The addition of a fourth category of food, namely greens or vegetables (*śāka*), which was lacking before. With these four types of food, the forest-residents are thus provided with something akin to a ‘balanced diet’.
- This food here is properly prepared (*saṃskṛtaṃ, sādhayāmāsa*) in a kitchen by Yudhiṣṭhira himself. Yudhiṣṭhira first feeds the Brahmins and his brothers, then eats their left-overs, while his wife Draupadī eats his own left-overs. Thanks to the boon, he is now in the position of a house-holder (*grhastha*) – though one without a *grha*! – while the Brahmins are his honoured guests whom he receives hospitably and feeds, instead of them all being on the same footing and having to forage in the forest to get their own food, as the Brahmins had previously suggested. Thus the king maintains his standing and is not dishonoured by his lack of hospitality.
- Perhaps most importantly, the boon solves the problem of the quantity of food, since a lot of food is necessary to feed the Pāṇḍavas’ numerous entourage.

Hunting for food

The question of food is subsequently taken up again in MBh 3.47.3-12. Once more, Janamejaya asks about his forefather’s diet – evidently an object of sustained interest, not only on the part of the king, but also on the part of the redactors and the audience of the Epic. But this time, Vaiśampāyana provides quite a different answer:

Janamejaya said:

(...) Now tell me, what kind of food did the Pāṇḍavas eat in the forest? Was it forest fare or husbanded? Tell me that, sir.

Vaiśampāyana said:

It was forest fare and game killed with purified weapons that those bulls among men ate, after first providing the Brahmins. When those champions, mighty bowmen, dwelled in the forest, Brahmins with fire and without fire followed them there. There were another ten thousand *snātaka* Brahmins of great spirit and wise in the means of release whom Yudhiṣṭhira also supported. With his arrows he laid low *ruru* deer and black gazelles and other sacrificial forest game and provided for the Brahmins in ritual fashion. Among them not a man was found ill-colored or diseased, thin or weakened, unhappy or afraid. Like favorite sons or kinsmen or blood brothers he fed them, Yudhiṣṭhira the King Dharma, best of the Kauravas. And like a mother the glorious Draupadī served her husbands and all the twice-born first, before she herself ate what remained.

The King hunted the east, Bhīmasena the south,
And the twins both hunted the west and the north
For the meat of deer, all wielding their bows,
And there they killed them, day after day.
Thus they lived in the Kāmyaka Forest
Without Arjuna, missing him sorely,⁶
And all of five years did pass them by,
As they studied and prayed and sacrificed.

janamejaya uvāca /

(...)

*kim āsit pāṇḍuputrānām vane bhojanam ucyatām /
vāneyam atha vā kṛṣṭam etad ākhyātu me bhavān //
vaiśampāyana uvāca /
vāneyam ca mṛgāṃś caiva śuddhair bāṇair nipātītān /
brāhmaṇānām nivedyāgram abhuñjan puruṣarṣabhāḥ //
tāṃś tu sūrān maheṣvāsāṃś tadā nivasato vane /
anvayur brāhmaṇā rājan sāgnayo 'nagnayas tathā //
brāhmaṇānām sahasrāṇi snātakānām mahātmanām /
daśa mokṣavidām tadvad yān bibharti yudhiṣṭhirah //
rurūn kṛṣṇamṛgāṃś caiva medhyāṃś cānyān vanecarān /
bāṇair unmathya vidhivad brāhmaṇebhyo nyavedayat //
na tatra kaścid durvarṇo vyādhitō vāpy adṛśyata /
kṛśo vā durbalo vāpi dīno bhīto 'pi vā narah //
putrān iva priyān jñātīn bhrātṛn iva sahodarān /
pupośa kauravaśreṣṭho dharmarājo yudhiṣṭhirah //
patūṃś ca draupadī sarvān dvijāṃś caiva yaśasvini /
māteva bhojayitvāgre śiṣṭam āhārayat tadā //
prācīm rājā dakṣiṇām bhīmaseno*

6. Arjuna is absent because he is sojourning in his father Indra's heaven.

*yamau prācīṁ atha vāpy udīcīṁ /
dhanurdharā māṁsahetor mṛgānām
kṣayaṁ cakrur nityam evopagāmya //
tathā teṣāṁ vasatām kāmyake vai
vihīnānām arjunenotsukānām /
pañcaiva varṣāṇi tadā vyatīyur
adhīyatām japatām juhvatām ca // MBh 3.47.3-12 //*

Janamejaya makes a distinction between forest food (*vāneyam*) and cultivated food (*kr̥ṣṭam*). The narrator immediately makes it clear that the Pāṇḍavas and the accompanying Brahmins only live on forest-food (as forest-ascetics are wont to do), but, it would seem that this is essentially meat.⁷ Whereas this passage gives an elaborate description of their hunting, no roots, fruit, or vegetables are mentioned here and the Sun's boon seems entirely forgotten. From the above passage, it becomes clear that all manners of Brahmins follow our heroes:⁸ 'Brahmins with fire and without fire'. Those 'with fire' are clearly Brahmins who follow the sacrificial life-style, and those 'without fire' are presumably bent on liberation. As we see, all of them without distinction eat the game provided by the Pāṇḍavas.

We cannot fail to notice this passage's insistence on the healthiness of all the Brahmins who eat meat: 'Among them not a man was found ill-colored or diseased, thin or weakened, unhappy or afraid'.⁹ The advantages of a carnivorous diet are also expressed elsewhere in the great Epic, for instance in MBh 13.117.6-8,¹⁰ where meat is specially recommended for the wounded or sick, and for those who undertake strenuous physical efforts:¹¹

There is no other food here on earth superior to meat for its *rasa* [nourishing juice, sap]. For those who are tormented by wounds or weakness,¹² and those who delight in a villager's duty,¹³ and for those who are emaciated by travelling, there is nothing better than meat. At once it increases the breaths [or

7. See Prakash 1961, 105-11 on meat-eating in the Epics and the *Manusmṛti*.

8. We also notice that from being previously 'a few' (*kecīṭ*, 3.1.41), the Brahmins have now multiplied to tens of thousands (*sahasrāṇi (...)* *daśā*)!

9. Contrast this with MBh 3.245.11, where Vyāsa cannot restrain his tears, 'when he saw his grandsons so gaunt from living on forest fare.'

10. This passage is commented upon by Zimmermann 1982, 203.

11. We must however note that these verses are immediately followed by others which condemn meat-eating in no uncertain terms! This wavering between the pros and cons of meat-eating versus vegetarianism, and of sacrificing versus *ahimsā* is typical of the Epic. See also Prakash 1961, 109.

12. Zimmermann 1982, 203 translates: '(...) spécialement en case de cachexie ou de surmenage'.

13. *grāmyadharmā* (lit. a villager's duty) also means 'sexual intercourse'. This is most likely what is meant here.

life-span] and gives an excellent plumpness. There is no food superior to meat, tormenter of your foes. [Author's translation].

*na māmśāt param atrānyad rasato vidyate bhūvi //
kṣatakṣīṇābhitaptānām grāmyadharmaratās ca ye //
adhvanā karṣītānām ca na māmśād vidyate param //
sadyo vardhayati prāṇān puṣṭim agryām dadāti ca //
na bhakṣo 'bhyadhikāḥ kaścīn māmśād asti paramtapa // MBh 13.117.6c-8 //*

In his study entitled *La jungle et le fumet des viandes* (1982), Francis Zimmermann notes that the ancient Indian medical texts likewise insist on the healthiness of meat-eating and remarks that meat is systematically associated with strength and virility (1982, 204 ff.). Furthermore, meat (especially the rare rhinoceros!) is recommended for *śrāddha* ceremonies as the most nourishing and satisfying type of food for the ancestors (1982, 202).

The Pāṇḍavas' essentially carnivorous diet is subsequently corroborated in other passages of the *Āraṇyakaparvan*. Thus, in MBh 3.244.2-14, the deer of the Kāmyaka Forest visit Yudhiṣṭhira in a dream. They complain that their herds have practically been decimated, and beg Yudhiṣṭhira and his entourage to move on to another forest, so that their numbers can grow again.¹⁴ In another passage at the end of the Forest-book (MBh 3.251), Draupadī is left alone in her hermitage in the Kāmyaka forest while her husbands are out hunting. King Jayadratha and his numerous entourage happen to travel that way. The king is smitten by her beauty. Unaware as yet of his evil intentions (he subsequently kidnaps her), Draupadī receives him hospitably and tells him:

Accept this water to wash your feet and this seat, son of a king. Let me give you a breakfast of fifty deer! Kuntī's son Yudhiṣṭhira himself will give you black antelope, spotted antelope, venison, fawn, *śarabha*, rabbit, white footed antelope, *ruru*, *śambara*, gayal, many deer, boar, buffalo, and other kinds of game.

*pādyaṃ pratigṛhāṇedam āsanaṃ ca nṛpātmaja /
mṛgān pañcāśataṃ caiva prātarāśaṃ dadāni te //
aiṇeyān pṛṣatān nyanūkūn hariṇāñ śarabhāñ śāsān /
ṛśyān rurūñ śambarāṃś ca gavayāṃś ca mṛgān bahūn //
varāhān mahiṣāṃś caiva yās cānyā mṛgajātayaḥ /
pradāsyati svayaṃ tubhyaṃ kuntīputro yudhiṣṭhiraḥ // MBh 3.251.11-13 //*

As we see, Draupadī enumerates an impressive number of animals killed by her husbands. One suspects that she is boasting to impress and intimidate Jaya-

14. For this passage, see Feller 2013.

dratha while hinting at her husbands' prowess. But what concerns us here is that she offers him only meat – no roots, fruit or vegetables!

Hunting as sacrifice

To return to the above-quoted MBh 3.47.3-12: a close reading of this passage reveals that here the hunting is assimilated to a sacrifice. Note the expressions: 'sacrificial¹⁵ forest game' (*medhyāṃś (...)* *vanecarān*), 'killed with purified weapons' (*śuddhair bāṇair nipātītān*), served to the Brahmins 'in ritual fashion' (*vidhivāc*). As in a sacrifice, the aim of the hunt is primarily to feed the Brahmins: 'Those bulls among men ate, after first providing the Brahmins' (*brāhmaṇānām nivedyāgram abhuñjan puruṣarṣabhāḥ*). The summary of the heroes' activities in the last verse of the passage is: 'they studied, prayed and sacrificed' (*adhiyatām japatām juhvatām ca*). Since no 'ordinary' sacrifices are mentioned here, we have to assume that hunting is summed up as sacrificing.

Moreover, as the last two verses make clear, the Pāṇḍavas are said to hunt east, south, west and north, covering the four directions, which is also reminiscent of certain sacrificial rites. Thus, in the Sabhāparvan, before performing Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*, Arjuna conquers the north, Bhīma the east, Sahadeva the south and Nakula the west, while king Yudhiṣṭhira remains in the centre, in his capital (MBh 2.23-29). Similarly, before performing the horse-sacrifice in Book 14, Arjuna follows the sacrificial horse which tours India *pradakṣiṇa*-wise. Noteworthy in MBh 3.47.3-12 is the fact that the centre is left empty – but this is only seemingly so. For indeed, the Pāṇḍavas' thoughts are all centred around Arjuna, who occupies thus the central position as well as the zenith, since he is presently residing in heaven with his father Indra.

The motif of hunting in the four directions also appears quite prominently in the passage which describes Draupadī's meeting with Jayadratha. Verse 3.248.4 states that 'all the Pāṇḍavas went hunting in the four directions for the sake of the Brahmins' (*yayuh sarve caturdiśam / mrgayām (...)* *brāhmaṇārthe*). And in 3.250.6-7, Draupadī explains to Jayadratha where her husbands have gone:

The Pārthas have settled me here while they
Spread out to the four directions to hunt.
The king went east, Bhīmasena south,

15. 'Sacrificial' translates the Sanskrit *medhya*. According to the Monier-Williams dictionary, *medhya* means: 'full of sap, vigorous, fresh (AV); fit for a sacrifice or oblation, free from blemish (as a victim), clean, pure, not defiling (by contact or by being eaten)'. The first meaning would of course also be possible here, but the second seems more likely. The *medha* (sap, pith) is something like the 'sacrificial quality', that which makes an animal fit to be sacrificed. See Smith 1991, 536.

Westward went Jaya [=Arjuna], the twins to the north;¹⁶

*te māṃ niveśyeha diśas catasro
vibhaja pārthā mṛgayāṃ prayātāḥ //
prācīm rājā dakṣinām bhīmaseno
jayaḥ pratīcīm yama jāv udīcīm / MBh 3.250.6c-7b /*

Thus, through the vocabulary which is employed and through the motif of the hunt in the four directions, the Pāṇḍavas' hunting is made equivalent to a sacrificial performance. This 'sacrifice', it is true, is not described in detail anywhere. Does it merely consist in killing the animal, or are certain ceremonies performed? The text remains silent on this point.¹⁷ Usually, only domestic animals were considered to be appropriate sacrificial victims in ancient India. The reason behind this is that the victim was thought to be a substitute for the sacrificer himself. Hence the sacrificer could only offer something that belonged to him, whereas something extraneous could not represent a valid substitute.¹⁸ But as Zimmermann (1982, 203) remarks, hunting, like war, can be assimilated to a sacrifice wherein the hunter (or the warrior) would be simultaneously both the sacrificer (he is the one who kills) and the potential victim, if he gets killed by his intended prey. In the latter case, he would offer himself as a victim, instead of offering a substitute.

However that may be, in my opinion, the equivalence between hunting and sacrificing is mainly established here for the sake of an apology: an apology for hunting and an apology for meat-eating – especially in the case of the Brahmins. In short, thanks to the equivalence 'hunting = sacrificing' the Brahmins are allowed to eat meat. If we read the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (or *Manusmṛti*) for instance, a text which is roughly contemporary with the MBh, we see that the orthodox stance was that killing could be condoned only if it were carried out in a sacrificial context.¹⁹ The same holds for meat-eating – Brahmins were only allowed to eat meat if the animal had been slaughtered in a sacrifice or in a

16. van Buitenen's translation, with modifications. In this passage, Draupadī is left alone to occupy the centre, which perhaps brings about a situation of weakness in which the Pāṇḍavas are exposed to attack.

17. This, by the way, is not unusual for the MBh. The Epic evokes many sacrifices, but the details of the performances are hardly ever dwelt on.

18. Bronkhorst forthcoming, while accepting the general validity of this argument, proposes the interesting counter-argument that 'In certain sacrifices the victim does not represent the sacrificer, but his enemy'. This seems however unlikely here.

19. See well-known quotes such as *Mānavadharmasāstra* 5.39: *yajñārthaṃ paśavaḥ sṛṣṭāḥ svayam eva svayaṃbhuvā / yajño 'sya bhūtyai sarvasya tasmād yajñe vadho 'vadaḥ* : 'The Self-existent one himself created sacrificial animals for sacrifice; sacrifice is for the good of this whole (universe); and therefore killing in a sacrifice is not killing'. MDhŚ 5.44: *yā vedavilūtā hīṃsā (...)* *ahīṃsām eva tāṃ vidyād* : 'The violence (...) which is sanctioned by the Veda (...) that is known as non-violence'.

situation of distress.²⁰ The latter was evidently increasingly found to be an insufficient excuse – even though surviving for over a decade in the wilderness should reasonably count as a situation of distress! Hence the necessity for ‘sacrificial hunts’.²¹ From the point of view of their diet, there is thus no clear-cut difference between the *kṣatriyas* and the Brahmins in these passages. However, there is one between the Brahmins who accompany the Pāṇḍavas for a limited period of time and the permanently renunciant Brahmins who live in the wilderness as a way of life, and whose diet consists of the usual vegetarian fare gathered in the forest. The Pāṇḍavas similarly subsist on roots and fruit when they visit a holy forest hermitage.²²

Conclusions

Since killing animals and eating their meat was evidently becoming problematic, one may reasonably wonder why the Pāṇḍavas are not shown to adopt a wholly vegetarian diet, like the ascetics who permanently live in the wilderness. In truth, there seem to be two problems with a vegetarian diet: the first is that meat, as seen above, is considered to give strength, and obviously our heroes need to keep their stamina up, since a terrible war expects them at the end of their long exile. The other problem with this kind of diet is that in the great nutritional chain of beings, the rulers are traditionally the ‘top-dogs’, who feed on all the others. As Wendy Doniger puts it: ‘The rank order of eaters and food in the natural world is straightforward: the physically more powerful eat the physically less powerful. And the principle supposedly holds when it comes to the social world.’ (Doniger–Smith 1991, xxvii). Thus the *kṣatriyas*, and especial-

20. MDhŚ 5.27: *prokṣitaṃ bhakṣayen māmśaṃ brāhmaṇānām ca kāmyayā / yathāvidhi nīyuktas tu prāṇānām eva cātyaye*: ‘You may eat meat that has been consecrated by the sprinkling of water, or when priests want to have it, or when you are properly engaged in a ritual, or when your breath of life is in danger’; MDhŚ 5.36ab: *asaṃskṛtān paśūn mantrair nādyād viprah kathañcana / mantrais tu saṃskṛtān adyāc chāśvataṃ vidhim āsthitaḥ*: ‘A priest should never eat sacrificial animals that have not been transformed by Vedic verses; but with the support of the obligatory rule, he may eat them when they have been transformed by Vedic verses’ (transl. Doniger–Smith 1991).

21. We may contrast this situation with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā kill deer and eat their meat quite unabashedly, without any sacrificial apologetic stance. (See for instance R 3.6 and 3.12, which reveal that the sages consider the deer as an ornament to their hermitages, whereas for Rāma they are food!). They temporarily adopt a diet of roots, fruit, and bulbs only when they visit hermits in their *āśramas* (see e.g. R 3.10.68 & R 3.11.28). But of course, unlike the Pāṇḍavas, the heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* go to the forest alone, unaccompanied by Brahmins. This contrast is quite significant in itself. For the redactors of the MBh, it was apparently unthinkable that the king and his family could go to the forest alone, without brahmanical protection/supervision.

22. For instance, when they visit the sage Mārkaṇḍeya’s hermitage in the Kāmyakavana, they live on roots and fruit (MBh 3.295.4).

ly the kings, are super-predators who feed on the lower orders. Hence, becoming a vegetarian would amount to being the eaten, or the loser – a fate which the heroes of the *Mahābhārata* are not ready to embrace.

If depicting the hunt as a sacrifice is a first concession to the superiority of non-violence over killing (since killing is acceptable only in a sacrificial context), the episode of Sūrya's boon at the beginning of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* could be seen as a further step towards the ideal of non-violence and vegetarianism, where even the sacrificial context was no longer a sufficient excuse for killing other living beings and eating their flesh. The boon of the magically multiplying food provides the Pāṇḍavas with a neat means to feed themselves and their entourage in a healthy fashion, without them having to resort to violence at all, or only minimally so.²³ At the very least, this is nothing like exterminating whole populations of deer! Viewed from a diachronical perspective, the episode of Sūrya's boon certainly appears to be a later innovation in the text,²⁴ for the following reasons: as far as I know, it is never mentioned again in the whole of the MBh, but the subsequent passages concerning food systematically mention the heroes' hunts; in 3.47.3, Janamejaya asks about his ancestors' forest-diet again, almost as if he had never asked before: it may well be that at a certain stage of development of the text he was indeed asking this question for the first time; the text of the CE reveals obvious text-critical problems, as we noted above (note 4); the passage betrays *bhakti*, moreover *bhakti* for the Sun-god, which is probably later than *bhakti* for Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa.

However, viewed synchronically, these various episodes also unexpectedly provide us with a fragment of realistic information concerning the question we asked at the beginning of this paper, namely, whether one can really subsist only on the food found in the forest. The *Mahābhārata*, it seems, gives us the following answer: if you hunt and eat meat, you can easily survive in the forest. But if a group of people want to stay in good health and remain for a long period of time in the wilderness without killing animals, they had better arrange for supernatural help, such as a *deus ex machina* providing gifts of multiplying food – because no realistically valid solution could be proposed.²⁵

23. We remember that the four types of food include meat as well, but that its provenance (from the heroes' hunting or magically provided by the Sun-god?) is not made clear.

24. Though obviously one that found its way into a majority of manuscripts, since the CE contains this episode. This shows not only that it was found to be a good story, but also that it may have solved a moral dilemma – 'how could the heroes have slaughtered and eaten so many deer?' – that many scribes and redactors were increasingly finding problematic.

25. The same remark could be made about an episode found in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In R 1.52.22-23, the forest-dwelling sage Vasiṣṭha admits that he entirely depends on his wish-fulfilling cow Śabalā to perform his sacrifices. Here too, a 'magical' solution is proposed for a concrete problem, namely, how could ascetics living in the forest follow the sacrificial life-style?

References

Primary sources

- Mahābhārata* = *The Mahābhārata*, ed. by S. Sukthankar *et alii*, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona 1933–1966, 19 vols.
- Manusmṛti* = *Manusmṛtiḥ, with Nine Commentaries*, ed. by J. H. Dave, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1972–1984, 6 vols.
- Rāmāyaṇa* = *The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, ed. by Govindlal Hargovind Bhatt *et alii*, Oriental Institute, Baroda 1960–1975, 7 vols.

Secondary sources and translations

- Biardeau 2002 = Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata. Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 2002, 2 vols.
- Bronkhorst forthcoming = Johannes Bronkhorst, *Agniṣṭoma and the Nature of Sacrifice*, forthcoming.
- Doniger–Smith 1991 = Wendy Doniger, Brian K. Smith (transl.), *The Laws of Manu*, With an introduction and notes, Penguin Books, London–New York etc. 1991.
- Feller 2004 = Danielle Feller, *The Sanskrit Epics' Representation of Vedic Myths*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 2004.
- Feller 2013 = Danielle Feller, *Ecology in the Mahābhārata?*, «Pandanus» 7, 1 (2013), 21–34.
- Monier-Williams = Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European languages, New Edition, greatly enlarged and improved (1899), Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003.
- Prakash 1961 = Om Prakash, *Food and Drinks in Ancient India*, Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, Delhi 1961.
- Smith 1991 = Brian K. Smith, *Classifying Animals and Humans in Ancient India*, «MAN» 26 (1991), 527–48.
- van Buitenen = J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, 3 vols. Vol. 1: *The Book of the Beginning*; Vol. 2: *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Book of the Forest*; Vol. 3: *The Book of Virāṭa, The Book of the Effort*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1973–1978.

Zimmermann 1982 = Francis Zimmermann, *La jungle et le fumet des viandes. Un thème écologique dans la médecine hindoue*, Hautes Études, Gallimard Le Seuil, Paris 1982.