

## Chapter 6. THE NAMBU DIRI TRADITION

A TIME SPAN of about two millenia separates the Vedic Indians from the Nambudiris, the Malayalam-speaking brahmins of Kerala. The difference in life-style, practices and beliefs between Vedic nomads and Nambudiri brahmins is almost total. Over the millenia, nothing has been left of the social structure of Vedic society and the ancient subdivision into classes (*varṇa*) of brahmins, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas, and śūdras. We know very little about the relations between the Vedic brahmins and the Nambudiri brahmins. In the mean time, the system of caste (*jāti*) based upon birth, with its multifarious subdivisions; its distinction between ritual purity and impurity; its emphasis on pollution, untouchability, and unapproachability has established itself all over India. In Kerala it assumed especially extreme forms. Ritual and caste remained such preponderant features of daily life, that Kerala has been called *karmabhūmi*, “land of ritual (activity),” or—in Vivekananda’s words—“a madhouse of caste.” At the same time, Hinduism has become the religion of the people, including the Nambudiris. As elsewhere in India, temple worship, pilgrimages, festivals, religious discourses, philosophical discussions, and all kinds of rituals are its main manifestations. While sectarianism—e.g., the development of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism—has never been strong in Kerala, temples dedicated to various forms and manifestations of Śiva, Viṣṇu, or the goddess (especially Bhagavatī) mark the countryside. The favorite form is probably Nārāyaṇa. In many of these temples, Nambudiri priests officiate.

In terms of caste and religious observances, the Nambudiri brahmins have remained orthodox until recently. Devoted to their rituals, Tantric as well as Vedic, from which outsiders are excluded, they were relatively unaffected by modern “English” education. Most Nambudiris have been settled and peaceful villagers, country aristocrats, small landowners, connoisseurs of literature and the traditional arts (especially Kathakaḷi), scholars, and gentlemen. If there is anything left of a nomadic nature, it is that the Nambudiris, especially the men, are constantly on the move visiting other Nambudiri houses, temples where a special occasion is being celebrated, or Kathakaḷis in which their favorite actors or musicians take part.

According to Anantha Krishna Iyer (1912, 170), the most conspicuous characteristics of the Nambudiris are simplicity and exclusiveness. Obviously, the former predicate does not extend to their rituals. As regards their life-style, the following description by a Tamil brahmin from Kerala, though not untainted by romanticism and nostalgia, still rings true:

Among the various peoples of the land the Nambūtiris . . .  
occupy a privileged position. They have exerted a powerful influence

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over the life and culture of the Malayālis. These refined and aristocratic Brahmins exist and move in a different world and are in certain respects a distinct group from the Brahmins of the rest of India. Their chief interest is in guarding a way of life that has all but disappeared except in isolated instances elsewhere, and the cultivation of a great body of traditional knowledge. The Nambūtiris have remained a landed aristocracy from ancient times and consequently a leisured class. Rarely has this privileged position of assured affluence been abused by the community in the past. As a class they have lived a dedicated and disciplined life; but that was never at the expense of the refined enjoyments of the arts of life. Devotion to religious practices and rites, so pronounced a feature of their daily life, has not bred in them a dry asceticism spoiling the sense of relish and enjoyment. Behind an apparent outward simplicity, almost ascetic in severity, they remain aristocrats with fine tastes. Their love of poetry and the arts and sciences are well known; but they have fine epicurean tastes too. For the delights of the table they show an undisguised weakness; their feasts held on the slightest pretext are justly famous for many exquisite delicacies. No less famed are they for their evident love for amorous pleasures, a predilection that has found ample utterance in a branch of Malayalam literature. . . bearing the stamp of Nambūtiri genius. Again, as a class, they are distinguished for their sense of humour and wit; these features are found highly developed in the Kerala theatre. . . . The Nambūtiris when they converse use picturesque and emphatic hand gestures and facial expressions. This habit is too evident a characteristic to be missed. As a body they stood aloof from the sweeping current of modernity that has all but completely de-cultured the modern Indian. Had the Nambūtiris too chosen early to exchange their great traditional culture for modern "miseducation" many noble institutions of the land and Kathakali too would have degenerated beyond redemption (Bharat Iyer 1955, 5-6).

The Nambudiris have had close social relationships with the other high castes of Kerala. Until 1933, only the eldest son was entitled to marry within the Nambudiri caste. The other sons married Nayar girls, and the children from such marriage alliances (*sambandham*) belonged to the matrilineal (*marumakattāyam*) lineages of their mothers, and were hence themselves Nayars. This led to quite extraordinary caste restrictions. For example, a Nayar son could never eat or bathe with his Nambudiri father, who himself could not eat food prepared by his wife. This system kept the ancestral property of the Nambudiri family undivided, since the younger brothers did not inherit, while spinsters remained abundant.

One of the principal aims of the Nambudiri Yogakṣema Mahāsabhā, a

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society founded in 1908, was agitation for marriage of all Nambudiris within the community. This aim was embodied in the Madras Nambudiri Act of 1933 (cf. Rao 1957, 107, 137). In the same year, the Madras Marumakkattayam Act was passed, by which sambandham alliances were considered regular marriages, conferring on the children the same rights of inheritance and property as held by children whose parents were both Nambudiris. Following these acts, Nambudiri land was increasingly partitioned and Nambudiri property dispersed.

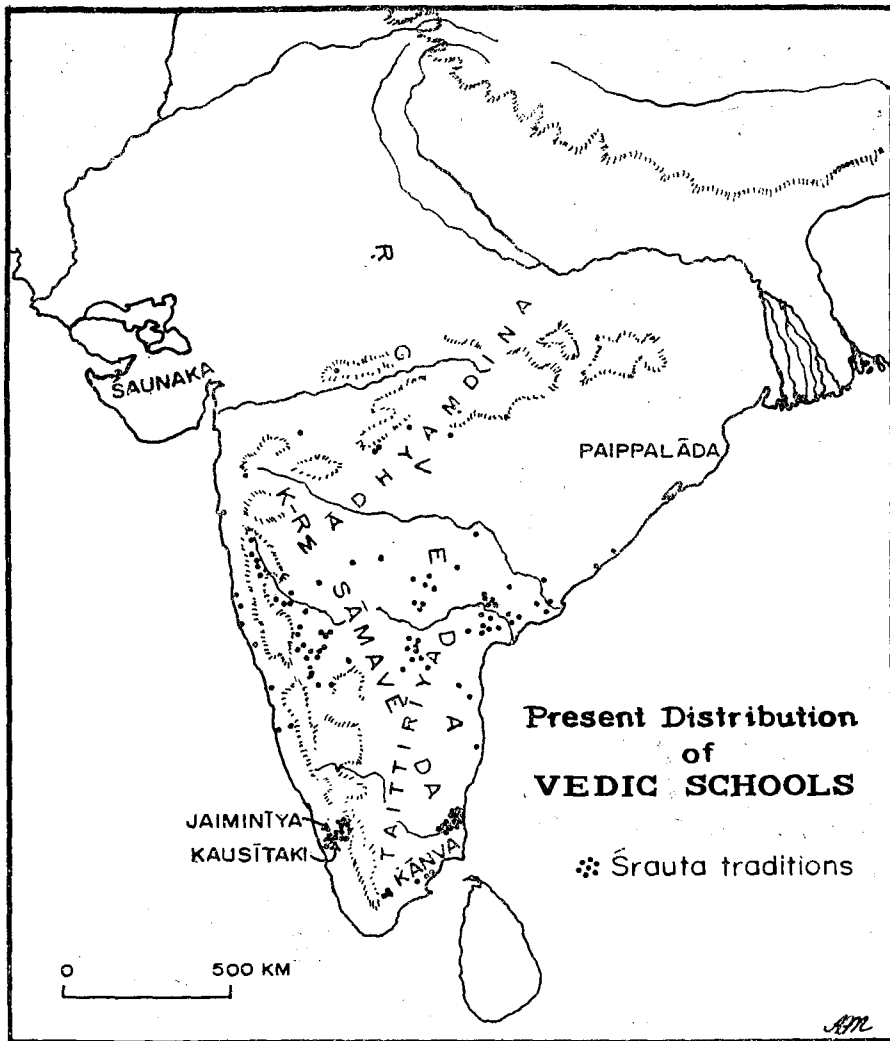
While the Nambudiris had close social (but not ritual) relationships with members of other high castes in Kerala, their ties with other brahmins in different parts of India were loose or nonexistent. They still occupy a fairly isolated position among the brahmins of India. They differ from other brahmins in "64 *anācārams*" or "64 aberrant customs," which include their marriage customs and many others (see, e.g., Innes 1951, 156; for a complete list: Anantha Krishna Iyer 1912, II, 262–266; also see Mencher and Goldberg 1967). Though all brahmins are sensitive to purity and pollution, the Nambudiris go to extreme lengths (on the purity of Nambudiri women, see Yalman 1963). Yalman (1963, 50) quotes Aiyar: "A Nambudiri only wants an excuse for bathing. . . . The fastidious sense of bath purity occasionally takes the form of a regular mania, and receives the not inept description of . . . possession by a water devil". The Nambudiri pattern of settlement is also different from that of many other brahmins. Elsewhere in South India, brahmins generally live in the center of villages, where the temples are also situated. In Kerala, the Nambudiris, like the Nayars, live mostly outside the village in the countryside, where most of the temples are built. When Nambudiris themselves use the term "brahmin," they generally refer to Tamil brahmins.

Though the Nambudiris were not the original inhabitants of Kerala, it would be hazardous to assume that they are direct descendants from the Vedic Aryans. A long history has intervened, about which little is known, so that speculation is our only resort. In more recent times, we reach firmer ground. The Nambudiri settlement in Kerala is described by M. G. S. Narayanan and K. Veluthat in Part III of this book. The rest of the present chapter will be mainly devoted to the Vedic traditions of the Nambudiris. This may be supplemented by the information provided by Kunjunni Raja, Raghava Varier, and others in Volume II.

Before discussing the Vedic affiliation of the Nambudiris, it will be useful to survey briefly the present distribution of Vedic schools and of śrauta traditions in India (see Map B; for further information on recent śrauta traditions, see Kashikar and Parpola in Part III).

In present-day India, Vedic traditions survive in two main areas: one in western India with extensions to the north (Maharashtra, Saurashtra, and Uttar Pradesh), and the other in south India (Tamil Nad, Andhra Pradesh, and Mysore). The southern tradition is stronger. In simple terms, it would seem

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Map B

justified to say that the numerous events that determined the course of history in northern and central India through the centuries, at the same time caused the Vedic traditions to move to the extremities of the country, and especially to the south.

The western Vedic tradition is characterized by the preponderance of the White Yajurveda of the Mādhyamdina school. It is supported by Ṛgveda of the *Āśvalāyana* recension, and Sāmaveda of the *Kaushuma-Rāṇāyaniya* school. There is very little left of the Atharvaveda: a pocket of the *Śaunaka* school survives in Saurashtra, and a community of *Paippalāda* Atharvavedins has been recently discovered in Orissa. There are a few isolated Vedic traditions in Nepal, exiled from other areas of North India when Islam swept over the north. There is hardly anything left in the original homeland of the Vedas, the northwest, and equally little in Bengal, in the far northeast.

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The southern tradition is characterized by the preponderance of the Taittirīya school of the Black Yajurveda (with Āpastamba as the prevailing sūtra), along with Ṛgveda and Sāmaveda from the same schools as prevail in the western tradition. The Atharvaveda never seems to have existed in the south. Though the Ṛgveda is the same in the western and southern traditions, its style of recitation is very different. Since in each case it resembles the regional style of the preponderant Yajurveda, it seems likely that Yajurveda recitation has influenced the Ṛgveda. In the south, the Taittirīya tradition has been especially powerful. It occupies the center of the Vedic tradition, which is in accordance with its importance for the ritual. That the Black Yajurveda is preponderant in the south, whereas the White Yajurveda prevails in the north and the west, can be explained against the historical background: the White Yajurveda originated later than the Black Yajurveda, and when it began to spread and exert its influence, the Black Yajurveda receded further to the south.

Other historical considerations help to explain the present distribution of the Vedic schools. Even in ancient times, the Taittirīya recension was considered prevalent in the south, though "south" did not mean anything as far south as what is nowadays called south India. The White Yajurveda was generally associated with the east, which is confirmed by the role played in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa by King Janaka of Videha (i.e., Bihar). Further geographical information on the Vedic schools in ancient times is provided by inscriptions. Both textual and epigraphical data are reviewed by Renou 1947: §47 (for Ṛgveda); § 73 (Atharvaveda); §§ 116–117 (Sāmaveda); §§ 194–199 (Yajurveda). The epigraphical data are also available in Renou 1950. We find in inscriptions the information, for example, that White Yajurveda of the Kāṇva school existed as far south as Andhra Pradesh. This is in accordance with the present situation, which shows the existence of a few Kāṇva villages still further south, in Tamil Nad.

Kerala is separated from the rest of India by the Western Ghats, a mountain range with an average elevation of 5,000 feet and a few peaks upwards of 8,000 feet. This range runs roughly parallel to the coast, in the north at a distance of some twenty miles, further south at a distance of about fifty miles from the ocean. Near the middle there is one main gap, the Palghat gap, through which most east-west communication takes place. At the northern extremity, the mountains come practically to the coast, whereas near the southern tip of India, some distance is kept. This geographical isolation, which helps to explain the Nambudiri "aberrant customs," is also reflected in the distribution of Vedic schools. In Kerala we find a tradition that is relatively small, but quite different from the rest of India, and entirely self-contained. If it had not been self-contained, it could not have supported a homogenous śrauta tradition, i.e., a tradition that does not require the importation of officiating priests from elsewhere. The Nambudiri Ṛgveda belongs in part to the *Kauṣītaki* recension, which is no longer found anywhere else. The

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Nambudiri Yajurveda is of the Taittiriya school but follows the sūtras of Baudhāyana (more than 90 percent) and of Vādhūla, less common and nonexistent, respectively, in the rest of south India. The extremely rare Sāmaveda belongs in its entirety to the Jaiminīya school, which has not been found anywhere else, with the exception of two or three isolated villages in Tamil Nad.

There is no Atharvaveda among the Nambudiris. This is in accordance with what we know about the past, including the recent past. The Jesuit Gonçalves, who lived 1561–1640, mentions only three Vedas as current among the Malabar brahmins (Gonçalves 1955, 35), and Rogerius, who visited South India in the seventeenth century, states that the Atharvaveda had long been lost (Rogerius 1915, 21).

The Nambudiri Vedic tradition makes an archaic impression when compared to other Vedic traditions in present-day India. In the realm of the Yajurveda, the sūtras of Baudhāyana and Vādhūla, closely related to each other and similar in style to the Brāhmaṇas, are older than the group Bharadvāja-Āpastamba-Hiraṇyakeśin-Vaikhānasa. In the Sāmaveda, the Jaiminīya school seems earlier than the Kauthuma-Rāṇāyaniya (cf. Renou 1947, 98, note 1; Staal 1961, 71–72; Parpola 1968, I, 1, 91, 95). In the domain of recitation, there is a unique survival of a very ancient feature: in a special form of Ṛgveda recitation, called *jaṭāpāṭha*, the originally raised *udatta* accent, which has elsewhere disappeared, is still recited at the highest pitch (Staal 1961, 46–47; cf. Levy-Staal 1968). This type of recitation constitutes the only direct verification of the raised accent postulated by comparative Indo-European philology. The Jaiminīya Sāmaveda chant, lastly, is also archaic (Staal 1961, 85). It is called “primeval” by Howard in Part III (page 312), and has in fact a narrow compass that contrasts with the “musical” qualities of Sāmaveda chant as heard elsewhere in India (cf. also Howard 1977, 200 and following).

The first to deal with the numerical distribution of the Vedic schools was Burnell. According to his estimate of 1870, “in Malabar, of 100 Brahmans (i.e., Nambudiris), 80 will be followers of the Ṛgveda, 19 of the Black Yajurveda and 1 of the Sāmaveda.” In order to interpret this it should be remembered that Kerala consisted of three states, Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. Malabar was part of British India, whereas Cochin and Travancore were princely states. Logan collected information, again for Malabar, concerning the distribution of the Vedas from 1,017 *manas* (Nambudiri joint families) in or about 1885. His data are as follows:

<u>Ṛgveda</u>	<u>Yajurveda</u>	<u>Sāmaveda</u>	Excluded from the Vedas or uncertain	<u>Total</u>
466	406	6	139	1017

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A special feature of the Jaiminīya tradition is the “Dravidian” sound *la* (see page 278), which does not occur anywhere else in Vedic or in Sanskrit. All these features are illustrated on the accompanying tapes.

The Nambudiris are probably unique in having a subcaste of brahmins who are excluded from the Vedas. They are called *ōtillāta*. These include the Cāttira Nambudiris, who engaged in military exercise (see Kunjunni Raja 1964 and Volume II, pages 302–304). The *aṣṭavaidyans*, eight families of hereditary physicians, though not studying the Vedas, are not *ōtillāta*. Most of the Nambudiris are entitled to recite the Vedas, and are called *ōttan*. A more recent estimate (reported along with the above estimates in Staal 1961, 35–36) gives 35 percent Ṛgvedins, 50 percent Yajurvedins, 1/8 percent Sāmavedins, and the rest excluded from the Veda. Since this last estimate includes Cochin and Travancore, and Cochin has important Yajurveda centers, this estimate is not inconsistent with Burnell’s estimate and Logan’s table.

According to the traditional histories of Kerala, Paraśurāma, sixth avatāra of Viṣṇu, brought the Nambudiri brahmins to Kerala and gave them sixty-four villages (*grāma*) to live in. Though they may have settled in different villages, the Nambudiris are still affiliated to certain traditional *grāmas*, among which Śukapuram (Chovaram), Perumānam, and Iriñjālakudā are the most important. In Śukapuram, there were originally only Ṛgvedins of the Kauṣītaki school, and Sāmavedins. Āśvalāyana Ṛgveda was added later when another *grāma*, Panniyūr, joined Śukapuram. In Iriñjālakudā there is no Ṛgveda; the Yajurvedic sūtras are Baudhāyana and the rare Vādhūla. In Perumānam, the Ṛgveda is Āśvalāyana, and the Yajurveda, Baudhāyana.

Nambudiris who are entitled to recite the Vedas have evolved a rich and diversified culture of Veda recitation (see Staal 1961). Their recitation is quite different from traditional Veda recitations in other parts of India. This is due to a variety of features, some characteristic of the Kerala pronunciation of Sanskrit (see Kunjunni Raja 1961). An important feature is nasalization, a feature of Malayalam in general, which seems to be relatively ancient (in Sanskrit it was called *anunāsikādhiprasara*). Another distinguishing mark is a certain swinging or trembling pronunciation of many final vowels, nasals, *visarga* (Sanskrit “-ḥ”) and, occasionally, “*l*.” Yet another peculiarity is the pronunciation of Sanskrit dentals *t/d* and retroflexes *ṭ/ḍ*, in certain syllable final positions, as dental *l* and retroflex *ḷ*, respectively. There is a tendency, characteristic of Malayalam, to voice voiceless unaspirated stops in medial position. Thus *śānti*, “peace,” sounds like *śāndi*, and *pañca*, “five,” like *pañja*. Actually, these sounds may only appear voiced. According to Kunjunni Raja (1961, 466), “they tend to become softer, though they are not voiced.”

These features of pronunciation show that Vedic recitation has been assimilated to Malayalam to a much larger extent than, for example, in Tamil Nad, where Vedic recitation, and Sanskrit pronunciation generally, has been influenced by Tamil to a limited extent. This may be related to the fact that a much larger percentage of the Malayalam vocabulary is of Sanskrit origin

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than is the case with Tamil. It may also be connected with the isolated development of the Nambudiri tradition, which was not exposed to contact with other traditions. And lastly, though there have been many Nambudiri scholars of Sanskrit, there has not been a tendency to bring existing practices in line with the norms established in the past. Rather, the living tradition has been left to prevail and develop freely.

The last point may be clarified with the help of an example. There are many people in Kerala who know that the pronunciation of *adbhuta*, "wonderful," as *albhuta* is not in accordance with classical Sanskrit as described in Pāṇini's grammar. Yet nobody would suggest to go back to the form that is accepted as correct; everybody adopts what has become common practice. The same attitude is adopted by the Nambudiris with respect to their Vedic tradition. In this sense, the Nambudiri tradition is typically "living," and not "revivalistic."

The first four to six years of traditional education among the Nambudiris is spent on the memorization of the Veda. Each boy memorizes, of his own Veda, most or all of the Saṃhitā. This may be followed by more advanced recitations, in particular of the padapāṭha and of some of its vikṛti modifications (see above, page 30). There are particular vikṛti modifications of the Nambudiri Ṛgveda and special forms of Yajurvedic recitation that are not known in other parts of India (cf. Staal 1961, 47–49, 59–61). In both Ṛgveda and Yajurveda recitation, the three Vedic accents, *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita*, are taught in a special manner: the teacher keeps the pupil's head straight for the *udātta*, bends it down for the *anudātta*, and bends it to the right for the *svarita*. When the accents have been properly learned and internalized, the head should no longer be moved. There are also special hand gestures (*mudrā*) that accompany special features of Veda recitation. In the case of the Ṛgveda, a set of photographs was made by A. A. Bake, several decades ago. One of these is published in De Zoete 1953, Plate 4(a). At the time of the 1975 Agnicayana performance, some of these gestures accompanying Ṛgveda recitation were filmed. The Nambudiri Sāmavedins use different movements, also recently filmed, which are discussed and illustrated in Howard 1977, 220–248. These *mudrās* are the subject of a section of Part III (Volume II, pages 359–381).

While all Vedic recitations are taught in the home, there are two special schools for the teaching of Ṛgveda, one at Tirunāvāyi (near Koṭṭakal) and the other at Trīśśivaperūr (Trichur). The Trichur school, called *vaḍakku maṭham*, "northern school," continues to teach many pupils, though it deserves a great deal more of public and private support. It used to be richly endowed by the Raja of Cochin and the Zamorin of Calicut (Anantha Krishna Iyer 1912, II, 253). In this school, several films and many photographs were made during 1975.

There are differences in the style of recitation of the two Ṛgvedic schools. In the Yajurveda, which is not taught in institutions similar to the two Ṛgveda maṭhams, there are also two traditions that differ slightly in style of



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recitation, one following the grāmam of Perumanām, the other that of Iriñjālakudā. Some of these differences are mentioned in Staal (1961, 47, 55). The style of Nambudiri Ṛgveda recitation is analysed by Gray (1959 b). The Sāmaveda, analysed by Howard in Volume II and also in Howard 1977, (200–248, 422–451), is transmitted in its entirety in the homes. Actually, there are only twenty Sāmaveda houses (see Staal 1961, 86). The Sāmaveda tradition is the most feeble and will be the first to disappear (cf. above, page 39).

As has been explained in the second chapter (page 32), the recitations and chants required by the ritual presuppose the “ordinary” recitations and chants, but go beyond these, and require a great deal more study. They are also much more inaccessible and rare. While nonbrahmins are generally excluded from listening to Veda recitation, the ritual recitations had probably not been heard by non-Nambudiris until 1957, when I recorded the sāmīdhenī stanzas (Staal 1961, 49–52, 92). Among the Sāmavedins, the study of ritual chanting is a more or less gradual extension of the study of the non-ritual parts of the Sāmaveda. But in the case of the Ṛgveda and Yajurveda, the situation is different. Here, the ritual tradition is transmitted by special families of Nambudiris, called Vaidikan. There are six such families: Ceṛumukkū (spelled throughout this book in its customary Romanized form as Cherumukku), Taikkāṭ, Perumpaṭappū, Kapliṅgāṭ, Kaimukkū, and Pantal. Of these, Ceṛumukkū is located in Malabar (and accordingly mentioned in the *Malabar District Gazetteer* of 1908: see Innes 1951, 109); the others in the former Cochin state. The six Vaidikans are affiliated to the three traditional grāmams in the following manner:

VAIDIKAN	GRĀMAM
Ceṛumukkū } Taikkāṭ }	Śukapuram
Perumpaṭappū } Kapliṅgāṭ }	Perumānam
Kaimukkū } Pantal }	Iriñjālakudā

The Vaidikans are in charge of the śrauta tradition, excluding only what pertains to the Sāmaveda. Thus the Vaidikans, whether they themselves are Ṛgvedins or Yajurvedins, transmit the recitations of Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda required by the śrauta ritual: *hautram*, *ādhvaryavam*, and *brahmatvam*. This implies that there are differences in the style of recitation adopted by different Vaidikans. A Vaidikan who is himself a Ṛgvedin will recite Yajurveda in a manner that Yajurvedins regard as slightly Ṛgvedic, and vice versa. The twelve priests and the sadasya priest, but not the Sāmaveda priests, are provided—or at least selected—by the Vaidikan who is responsible for a śrauta performance. The Sāmavedins provide for the udgātā and his three Sāmaveda assistants, i.e., the *audgātram*.

Śrauta rituals consist largely, but not exclusively, of recitation and

PLATE 13

Ṛgveda Teacher and Pupils

The largest school for the teaching of Ṛgveda to Nambudiri boys is the vaḍakkū maṭham, “northern school,” at Trichur (Tṛṣṣivaperūr). It used to be richly endowed. This photograph, which may have been taken around the turn of the century, comes from L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*, Volume II. Madras, London. 1912.



PLATE 14A-C

Teachers and Pupils in the Trichur Ṛgveda School

The teaching of Ṛgveda continues at the Trichur “northern school.” It is mostly confined to the basic text, which is learnt by heart. Some of the more advanced students learn the recitation of the padapāṭha, “word-for-word recitation,” and some of its modifications (vikṛti). Special forms of the Ṛgveda, such as are used in the ritual, are transmitted within the families of the Vaidikans, and are not taught in schools.



A



B



C

## PLATE I 5A-B

### Teaching the Accents of the Ṛgveda

The Ṛgveda has three accents: udāṭṭa, “raised,” anudāṭṭa, “not raised,” and svarita, “sounded.” The Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini describes the latter accent as a combination of the former two. These simple terms give no indication of the complexities that characterize the rendering of the accents by the Nambudiri brahmins. The movements, however, which accompany the teaching of the accents, are simple: the pupil’s head is kept straight for the udāṭṭa, is bent down for the anudāṭṭa (15 A), and lifted and bent to the pupil’s right for the svarita (15B). These movements are intended for teaching purposes only. An adept reciter should not move his head. There are also hand movements (mudra) which accompany recitation. They are described in the second volume.



A



B

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chant. The ritual acts have also to be performed. This is mainly the responsibility of the *adhvaryu* and the *pratiprasthātā*, and to a lesser extent that of the other priests. Again, the *Sāmavedins* are apart. Their ritual activity is limited, and is mostly confined to the Soma ritual. The *adhvaryu* is the chief performer on behalf of the *Vaidikans*. Himself a *Vaidikan*, he may be a *Ṛgvedin* or a *Yajurvedin*. The 1975 *Agnicayana* performance followed the tradition of the *Cherumukku Vaidikans* who are *Ṛgvedins*. Not all the priests were *Cherumukku Vaidikans*, but all were *Kauṣītakins*, except one. The *Sāmavedins* were on their own and acted on their own authority.

Apart from style of recitation, there are purely ritual differences between the *Vaidikan* traditions. Each has its own manuscripts, called, e.g., *Yāgam-bhāṣa*. They also differ with regard to the *Agnicayana*. There are three types of *Agnicayana*, distinguished after the basic shape of the large altar of the *uttaravedi*: (1) *pīṭhan*, which is made up of squares; (2) *pañcapatrikā*, “five-tipped,” in which the wings of the bird have five tips (*patrikā* or *patirikā*); and (3) *ṣaṭpatrikā*, “six-tipped.” The first is said to be like the *śyena* bird when it has just come out of its egg; the second, when it is young; the third, when it is fully grown. The five-tipped *Agnicayana* and the square *Agnicayana* will be dealt with in Part III (Volume II, pages 343–358). The six-tipped form was adopted in 1975 by *Cherumukku Vaidikan*, and is therefore described in the rest of this volume.

The *Vaidikan* families have their own manuscripts that describe the shapes of the altars in detail. It is on account of these that the traditions differ. The six-tipped *Agnicayana* can be performed by any of the six *Vaidikans*. The square *Agnicayana* can only be performed by *Cerumukkū*, *Perumpaṭappū*, and *Kaimukkū*. The five-tipped *Agnicayana* can only be performed by the remaining three. The six-tipped *Agnicayana* is the most common. *Erkkara Raman Nambudiri*, in his eighties at the time of writing (1978), has seen it five times. The five-tipped variety had become almost extinct, but *Erkkara* reconstructed it from the available manuscripts, and gave the information to *Kuttuḷli Akkitiripad* of the *Taikkāṭ Vaidikans*, after which it was performed once. The square bird has not been constructed for approximately 150 years. In recent years, the *Agnicayana* has only been performed by the *Cerumukkū* and *Taikkāṭ Vaidikans*. The other four *Vaidikans* have not performed it for a long time, and their last *Agniṣṭoma* took place in the fifties or earlier.

In recent centuries, the *Nambudiris* seem to have performed only two Soma rituals: *Agniṣṭoma* and *Atirātra-Agnicayana*. The first is also simply called *Somayāga*, “Soma ritual,” and the second: *Agni*. These rituals can only be performed after the sacred fires have been set up. A person who has done this, i.e., who has performed *Agnyādheya* (above, page 41), is called *Aṭitiri* or *Aṭīri*. A *Nambudiri* who has performed *Agniṣṭoma* obtains the title *Somayāji* or *Somayājipad*. A *Somayāji* who has performed *Atirātra-Agnicayana* is called *Akkitiri* or *Akkitiripad*. Only a *Somayāji* can perform



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the Atirātra-Agnicayana. Moreover, only certain families are eligible to perform these Soma rituals. They include Ṛgvedins, Yajurvedins, and Sāma-vedins. Nobody can perform such a ritual unless he is married, unless his father (if he is alive) has performed somayāga, unless he is the eldest son, or, in case he is a younger son, unless his older brother has performed somayāga.

Vaidikans affiliated to the same grāmam belong to a *Sabhā Maṭham* or College of Assembly, an institution primarily devoted to the maintenance of the śrauta traditions. Each *Sabhā Maṭham* is made up of members who have performed śrauta rituals. In Śukapuram, which has three maṭhams, each member has to be a Somayāji or Akkitiri. In Iriñjālakuḍā and Perumānam, an Aṭitiri can also be a member. Of the three maṭhams of Śukapuram, the one now located in Shoranur (Ṣoraṇūr) used to be the richest. It maintained three temples with landed property, and before 1970 its annual income exceeded 30,000 *para*'s of rice (in 1977, the price of one *para*—about 12 liters or 40 cups—was fixed at Rs.25/- or about \$3.65; it had been twice as much in 1975). This income was used to maintain three temples; the remainder was distributed among the members. A Somayāji or Akkitiri would therefore receive a yearly stipend, the amount depending chiefly on the number of other members, the nature of the crop, and the price of rice. Eight families received 20 percent more than the others, but there was no difference in income between a Somayāji and an Akkitiri. The average annual income around the twenties of this century was of the order of Rs.50/-; in the sixties it sometimes climbed to Rs.2,000/-.

There seems to have been only one economic difference between a Somayāji and an Akkitiri. In the temple of Karimpuḷa (Palghat District), Akkitiris used to be invited once a year, and were given a good feast and nine rupees each. The funds were provided by the Vice-Rājā (Zamorin) of Calicut. The expenditure involved could never have been very large. At the time of writing, for example, there are in the Śukapuram grāmam three Akkitiris, as compared to nineteen Somayājis.

All of this changed in 1970 when the Kerala Land Reform Act of 1963 was amended. Under the original act, cultivating tenants were made eligible to purchase the right, title, and interest of the landlord. They could exercise this right by applying to a Land Tribunal. In 1970, an amendment clarified that this procedure was applicable if the owner of the land was a religious, charitable, or educational institution. The legal details of the act and its amendments are complex (see, for example, Sugathan 1976), but the result was that most temples lost their income, and so did the members of a *Sabhā Maṭham*.

Nambudiris like Erkkara Raman Nambudiri do not feel that these economic changes have contributed much to the decrease of ritual performances. Their number was already on the decrease, mainly because many Nambudiris, especially the younger generation, lost interest, and also because qualified Sāmavedins have become increasingly rare (cf. above, page 39). This trend

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could only be arrested to some extent by strengthening the Sāmavedic tradition. To this end, a Sāmaveda school has been added as a branch to a school where temple ritual is being taught, the Tantravidyālaya at Covvannūr (near Kunnamkulam, which is due west from Vadakkancheri). However, the ritual chants of the Sāmaveda are enormously extended and complex, and there are only two or three people who could teach them competently. Compared to their level of expertise, the teaching at the school seems elementary. The situation could only be saved by improving the level of instruction considerably, appointing at least one of the experts, and making attractive scholarships available to the students, together with some guarantee of future employment.

We have not yet tried to explain the curious fact that the Nambudiris perform only the Agniṣṭoma and the Atirātra-Agnicayana out of all śrauta rituals. At first sight it would seem likely that in a more distant past the Nambudiris performed more Soma rituals than only these two. After all, the Atirātra is the fourth in the hierarchy of one-day Soma rituals, in which Agniṣṭoma is the first. So why should they not have performed the intervening varieties? Moreover, it seems likely that there were past performances of another śrauta ritual, viz., the Aśvamedha. Lastly, it is certain that the Nambudiris, as scholars, were familiar with the entire range of śrauta rituals.

In other parts of India the situation is different: what survives is generally the lower portion of the hierarchy. For example, there are places where the Agniṣṭoma is still performed (see Kashikar and Parpola in Volume II: Part III); elsewhere, the seven Soma rituals are performed (e.g., in Andhra and Tamil Nad). There is no other area where only Agniṣṭoma and Atirātra (whether by itself or in combination with Agnicayana) are performed. Yet this is the Nambudiri situation.

There is of course another possibility, which is at least logically conceivable, viz., that the Nambudiris never performed the other varieties of Soma ritual. In that case there must be a reason for such a particularly selective tradition. Barring arbitrariness, which is not much of a cause, the reason could be that the Agniṣṭoma and the Agnicayana represent in fact the two original and earliest types among the larger śrauta rituals. In that case, the Nambudiri tradition would reflect a very early stage of development, when only these two kinds of śruata ritual existed, and the systematization that includes the seven varieties of ekāha ("one-day") Soma rituals had not yet been evolved. However, this seems less credible, for it would take us back to a time before the sūtra period. Let us see whether it is at all likely.

First of all, it is quite possible that the Agniṣṭoma represents the original Indo-Iranian Soma ritual, or Somayāga. This would have been a product of the Indo-Iranian fire cult, which developed into a celebration of Soma when the Vedic nomads had entered the Indian plains and had left the real Soma behind. One would expect that such a Soma ritual would be reflected at least in the Ṛgveda. This is in accordance with the facts, for—though re-

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ferences to ritual in the Ṛgveda are fragmentary and often unclear—its most specific information relates to Soma rites, and it is in the domain of Soma rites that the Ṛgveda comes closest to the ritual descriptions of classical times (Hillebrandt 1897, 15). The chief priest of this original Soma ritual was the hotā. Assisted by some helpers, he was responsible for the pouring of oblations, and later for the Ṛgvedic invocations (see above page 93).

The construction of the Agnicayana fire altar “in the fashion of Aṅgiras” reflected the indigenous fire cult. It is the chief ritual of the Yajurveda, and its main priest was the adhvaryu. When the Agnicayana was combined with a Soma ritual, the Soma ceremonies were extended so as to last through the night (atirātra). Hence, an Atirātra-Agnicayana would have developed as the first composite ritual of an Agnicayana and Somayāga. The “Atirātra” of this original Atirātra-Agnicayana need not have been the same as the Atirātra defined in the classical manuals, i.e., a Soma ritual characterized by 29 Soma sequences. The name merely indicated that the Soma ceremonies that accompanied the Agnicayana lasted through the night.

In due course, a sequence of Soma rituals was developed and a hierarchy was evolved. Thus arose the seven varieties mentioned in the śrauta sūtras: Agniṣṭoma, Ukthya, Ṣoḍaśin, Atirātra, Aptoryāma, Atyagniṣṭoma, and Vājapeya. These are primarily defined by the increasing number of Soma sequences, but they have also specific features with various backgrounds. The establishment of this hierarchy, however, smacks of scholastic ritualism. Its origin may have been largely theoretical, which does not imply that these seven varieties were not, in due course, performed. The Nambudiris did not engage in these exercises and retained, along with many other archaic practices, only the two original rituals, a Soma ritual and an Agnicayana, combined with an overnight Soma ritual. This overnight Soma ritual was duly incorporated into the hierarchy and became the Atirātra of the classical manuals.

A remarkable fact accords with this hypothesis. We have seen that the Nambudiri Sāmavedins belong to the archaic Jaiminīya schools. The subdivisions of the Jaiminīya Saṃhitā mention none of the seven varieties of Soma ritual, but only the Agniṣṭoma (after 3.5) and Atirātra (after 3.9).

Much of this reconstruction is speculative, but there are other facts that clearly support it. The Ṛgveda does not mention Agniṣṭoma, Atyagniṣṭoma, Ṣoḍaśin, Vājapeya, or Aptoryāma as names of Soma rituals. In fact, only two of these terms occur: Ṣoḍaśin, which merely means “sixteenth”; and Ukthya, which means “accompanied by *uktha*,” where *uktha* denotes a ritual recitation of Ṛgveda similar to the later śastra. However, the term Atirātra occurs once in the Ṛgveda, and clearly refers to a Soma ritual: Ṛgveda 7. 103.7 compares frogs during the rainy season to brahmins at an Atirātra Soma celebration round a lake. Here is an obvious reference to an extended Soma celebration, lasting through the night—the kind of Soma ritual that was later defined in more scholastic terms by a succession of 29 Soma sequences,

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and sometimes combined with an Agnicayana. The intermediate stage is clearly represented by the Aitareya and Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇas of the R̥gveda, which describe the Agniṣṭoma, the Ukthya, the Ṣoḍaśin, and the Atirātra as consisting of twelve, fifteen, sixteen, and twenty-nine Soma sequences respectively, but mention the other varieties only in passing or not at all (Keith 1920, 53–54). Whether the Atirātra should include the Ṣoḍaśin has long been a matter of discussion. The option is quoted as an illustration by the famous philosopher Śaṅkara, a Nambudiri brahmin of the seventh or eighth century A.D. (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.1.2). All these facts support the view that the Nambudiri tradition is not a fragment surviving from an originally broader śrauta tradition, but rather preserves an earlier stage of development.

In view of the other archaic features of the Nambudiri Vedic tradition, it would not be surprising if they had indeed preserved a very early stage of ritual development. Such a view might be supported and further developed if we knew more about the history of the brahmanical system of exogamous clans or gotra. It is a fact, for example, that many Nambudiris belong to the gotra Āṅgīrasa (see pages 137, 267). Brough and Kosambi rightly deplored that we have no precise data about the numerical distribution of gotras in later and recent times. Only such information would enable us to evaluate the occurrence of the gotra Āṅgīrasa among the Nambudiri brahmins.

The Nambudiris have evolved an arrangement that provides them with a substitute for Soma. This substitute, probably *Sarcostemma brevistigma*, an Asclepiad related to the American milkweeds (Wasson 1968, 104; Flattery, forthcoming, Appendix), is also used in other parts of India. Since it grows only in tropical areas, it could not always have been the substitute, as Flattery (§ 130) observes. In South India, *Sarcostemma* grows south of the Palghat gap in the Anaimalai Hills of the Western Ghats, in the territory of the former Raja of Kollengode.<sup>1</sup> When the Nambudiris decide to perform a Soma ritual, they officially inform the Raja of Kollengode, who then provides them with Soma, with the skin of a black antelope (*kṛṣṇājina*) and with several kinds of wood needed for making ritual implements. Detailed information about the history of this arrangement is found in the Kollengode archives and is discussed by Raghava Varier in Volume II, pages 279–299. This custom, however, is also gradually breaking down. In 1975, there were some anomalies, which will be described in the sequel.

According to Erkkara Raman Nambudiri, more than 120 Agniṣṭoma performances and five Atirātra-Agnicayana performances have taken place between 1911 and 1970 (cf. Volume II, pages 252–255). This is in accordance

<sup>1</sup> Earlier I accepted a botanists' identification of the Soma plant that grows in the Anaimalai Hills as *Ephedra vulgaris* (Staal 1964). However, this identification appears to have been erroneous, and I was wrong again when I criticized Brough (1971, 361) for maintaining that *Ephedra* had never been used in India as a substitute for Soma (Staal 1975, 203, note).

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with the data provided by Cherumukku Vaidikan, according to whom the Agnicayana was performed 17 times during the last hundred years and five times during the last fifty years. The last performance before 1975 took place in 1956.

PLATE 16

Nambudiri ritualists who are engaged in a śrauta performance, and the Vaidikans in general, seem to pay scant attention to the hoary interpretations of the past, and do not offer many interpretations of their own. There are, however, traditions attached to certain features of the ritual. For example, the Sāmavedins believe that an error committed in the chant of the *ṣoḍaśi-stotra* will cause the chanter's madness.

In the sixteenth century, Melputtūr Nārāyaṇan Bhaṭṭatiripad, a famous Nambudiri scholar and the author of the *Nārāyaṇiya*—a poem in 1036 verses (*śloka*), which relates the story of Kṛṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa as told in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa—wrote a poem called *Rājasūyam* or *Rājasūyaprabandha*. This poem (see Kunjunni Raja in Volume II, page 309) contains an allegorical interpretation of the Agnicayana. In this composition, the bricks are related to the story of Kṛṣṇa. Some bricks are called *yaśodā*, which is also the name of Kṛṣṇa's stepmother. The svayamātrṇṇā pebbles are interpreted in terms of *naipāyasam*, a sweet made of ghee, jaggery sugar and rice. There is a double meaning (*śleṣa*) for the term śarkara, which means both "pebble" and "jaggery". The literary works of Melputtūr Nārāyaṇan Bhaṭṭatiri, like those of other Nambudiri authors, are not kept within the Nambudiri caste; they are known all over Kerala. The people of Kerala must have had more than an inkling of what the Nambudiris were doing, otherwise the seventeenth century author Rāmacandramakhin could not have described Kerala as follows (*Keralābharāṇa*, verse 204):

Here there is no altar construction,  
no oblation or recitation,  
no consecration or Vedic injunction,  
no exclamation of Vauṣaṭ.

In their hearts, the people of Kerala  
cling to desires  
aroused by embracing  
the breasts of courtesans.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *nevāsti vediracānā na ca homamantram  
dikṣāvidhir na ca vaṣaṭkṛtayo na vāpi |  
vārāṅganakucataṭiparirambhadatta-  
samrambhalagnahṛdayāḥ khalu keralīyāḥ ||*

## PLATE 16

### Altar of 1956 Agnicayana

The Atirātra-Agnicayana ritual described in this book was performed in 1975. During the past one hundred years it has been performed seventeen times; during the last fifty years, five times. The most recent performances before 1975 took place in 1955 and 1956. The bird-shaped altar of earlier performances has generally disappeared into the soil, which is quick to take over in the jungle of a humid and tropical climate. Sometimes bricks from earlier altars have been put to new uses, and so they are occasionally met with in Nambudiri compounds, for example, in a courtyard or garden path. The plate shows the altar of the 1956 performance, which was kept intact in the compound of Nellikat Nilakanṭhan Akkitiripad, on whose behalf the ceremony was performed. The right wing, which points to the south, is in front; the head, facing east, to the right; and the tail and left wing are visible on the left and in the background, respectively. Later, bricks from the higher layers of this altar were used for the 1975 performance.

