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## **The Turning-Point in a Living Tradition** ***somayāgam* 2003**

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# The Turning-Point in a Living Tradition

*somayāgam* 2003

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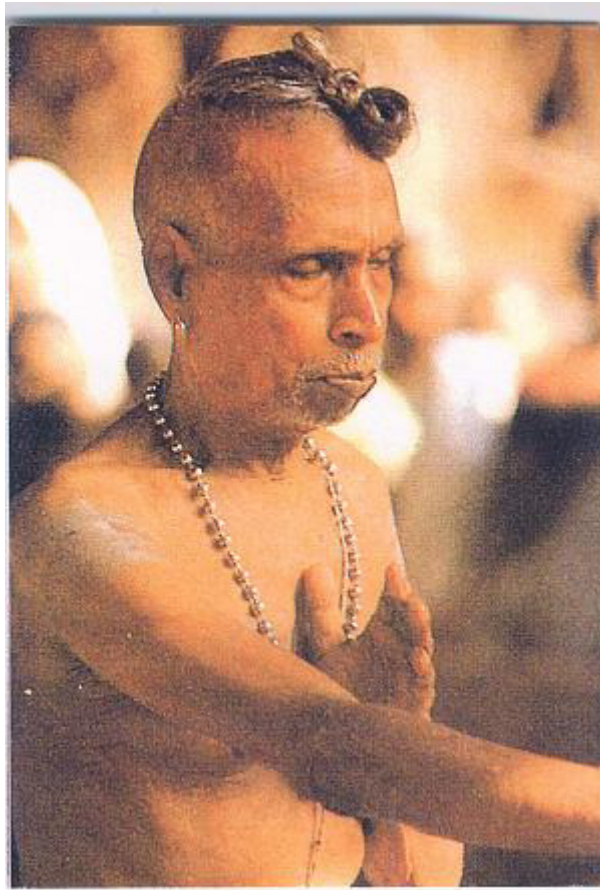


Fig. 1. *Potā* sprinkling the Soma with mantras at *āpyayanam*.

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## 1. Introduction

During April 7-12, 2003, a “*somayāgam*,” i.e., *agniṣṭoma-somayāga*, was performed by Nambudiri Brahmans in Trichur in central Kerala, formerly the Cochin State. It was preceded by *ādhānam*, i.e., *agnyādhāna* or *punarādhya*, on April 6. The location of the ceremonies was the “Vadakke Madham Brahaswam,” the Northern (*vadakkē*) of two Vedic institutions within Trichur town where the *Ṛgveda* has been taught to young pupils for four centuries or more. (The Southern Madham is for *saṃnyāsins* of whom there is at present one.)

The last performance of *somayāgam* was in 1984. It is one of two large Vedic rituals that are preserved in the Nambudiri community, the other being the 12-day *atirātra-agnicayana*. One of the many characteristic differences between the two rituals is that there are twelve “Soma-sequences” in the *somayāgam* and twenty-nine in the *agnicayana*. A soma sequence consists of a *Sāmaveda* chant (*stotra* or *stuti*, as the Nambudiris call it), *Ṛgveda* recitation (*śastra*), soma offerings to the deities and soma drinking by the *yajamāna* and his priests. The first twelve soma sequences of the *agnicayana* are similar to the twelve sequences of the *somayāgam*, but all of them are not the same. And only a ritualist who has performed the *somayāga*, and thus become a *somayājī*, is eligible for an *agnicayana* and to become thus an *akkitiri*.

The authors of the present article were both able to attend the 2003 ceremonies at Trichur but Mahadevan (TP) could spend more time than Staal (FS) in Kerala both prior to and after the performance. We decided to work together because it seemed to us that our experiences and qualifications could usefully complement each other. TP was born in a community of Tamil Brahmans in the Palghat valley, a gap in the Western Ghats that separates Tamilnad and Kerala from each other. These Brahmans wear the top-knot on the front of the head (*pūrvaśikhā*), like the Nambudiris. TP has shown that the two communities are closely related (Mahadevan et al. forthcoming and see below). Though their mother tongue is Tamil, their first language and the language of their education is Malayalam. TP had never witnessed a large *śrauta* ritual. FS does not know Tamil or Malayalam but has witnessed two such rituals, both *atirātra-agnicayana*, the first one in 1975 (see Staal et al. 1983) and the second in 1990 (see Staal 1992). FS did not witness the 1984 *agniṣṭoma-somayāga*. The two authors are jointly responsible for the

following observations, speculations and questions and use, if necessary, the abbreviations TP or FS.



Fig. 2 Erkkara Raman Nambudiri with *pūrvaśikhā* performing *apyāyanam* in 1975.

## 2. Background: The Oral Tradition of *śrauta*

Like its three immediate predecessors—the 1975 *agnicayana* of Panjal, the 1984 *agniṣṭoma* of Trivandrum, and the 1990 *agnicayana* of Kundoor—the 2003 *agniṣṭoma* of Trichur was a manifestly living tradition and entirely oral. That is, the recitations from the *Ṛgveda*, the chants from the *Sāmaveda* and the mutterings from the *Yajurveda*, are transmitted outside literacy, as are the ritual manuals that prescribe at which point in the ritual performance they have to be inserted. It is not that the priests were illiterate in the ordinary sense of the word; they were literate, living as they do in the most literate state of the Indian Union. Most of the adult priests earn their normal livelihoods through regular jobs of the world at large—teaching, engineering, one in IT profession—and several younger ones were still high school and junior college students. But as the different recitatory episodes unfolded during the course of the ritual, not the least sign of literacy, a piece of paper or a notebook with written prompts and directions, was in evidence. It is known that during the six-month period of the training, preparation and rehearsals leading up to the actual event, use is made of notebooks, prepared by the senior *ācāryas* who have already taken part in previous rituals,

containing *paddhatis* written out in Malayalam on the different episodes of the ritual, the *ādhāna* or the *pravargya*. The *paddhati* notebooks of Erkkara Raman Nambudiri, the doyen of Nambudiri śrautism of yesteryears, are legendary. But in the actual event in Trichur, all these aids, that presumably began to come into use millennia ago with the rise and spread of literacy, were held as strict taboos, as must have been the case for the traditional Nambudiri *śrauta* performance. FS recalls this to be the case for both the 1975 and 1990 performances. The situation resembles the taboo regarding the source of fire in the ritual. That is, fire is ubiquitous in and outside the *yāgaśālā* before the actual start of the ritual: the great brass lamps of Kerala ablaze with burning wicks, men smoking cigarettes and beedies are a common sight. But fire for the ritual proper comes only from the stone age technology of making fire, the laborious ceremony of rubbing two pieces of wood together. Thus, the ritual marks a warp in time and space that transports the participants to a Vedic realm of pure orality and virtual absence of modern technology.

It does not follow from the above that the individual priests, one as young as all of ten years, do not need help in discharging their individual oral performances. The ritualists are less perfect than the tape recorders to which they have been likened. They use a system of hand signs, say an outstretched thumb and forefinger, that the reciter can only understand if he already knows the mantras. Besides, the older priests were in constant huddle over the performing ritualists, and when the latter made mistakes, not an uncommon occurrence, the *ācāryas* took care that a completely error-free version of the relevant text or mantra found utterance, for the gods should hear only the complete and correct mantras.

A few feet from the reciting Nambudiris the situation was different. Three *śrauta* ritualists, visiting from Maharashtra, were following some of the recitations from a printed page. They might as well be in a different time and place, more modern and innovative. The two together presented a synchronic picture of the *śrauta* traditions in India today: the strictly oral, even atavistic but living tradition of Nambudiri Vedism and the innovative and literate traditions represented by the *śrautins* from Maharashtra and other places.

Such a synchronic juxtaposition of *śrauta* traditions at two different phases is visible within South India itself. As TP shows in a work in progress (Mahadevan, forthcoming), we know now that there were in the main two different waves of Vedism arriving in South India at two different periods of

history: the first is represented by the *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans with their fronted top-knots and the second by the *aparaśikhā* Brahmans, their top-knots toward the back of their heads, making a pony tail. The *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans who include the Nambudiris are seen to be well established in the Tamil country by the Sangam period, thus plausibly departing from the core areas of Vedic culture by ca. 100 BCE. They brought with them a phase of Vedism centering around an earlier canon, when literacy was still nascent and the early taboo of its use for the Vedas still very much in effect. The arrival of the second group of Brahmans, the *aparaśikhās*, is a later event dating from the Pallava age of Tamil history, from the 5th century CE, and this migration is historically well attested in the Pallava land grant deeds, by now well into literate times. The role of literacy is well attested in the *śrauta* ritual of the *aparaśikhā* Brahmans, living along the Godavari river in Andhra and the Kaveri in the Kumbakonam-Tanjavoor area.

### 3. Breathing New Life into a Tradition

But for the 1975 performance of *agnicayana*, there would not have been an *agniṣṭoma* in 1984; but for 1984, there would not have been the 1990 *agni*; but for 1990, there would not have been 2003. That is how an oral tradition is being transmitted and kept alive. It means, for example, that the 1975 *hotā* and *pratiprasthātā* officiants were *ācāryas* for *Ṛgveda* and *Yajurveda* in 2003. Similarly, the father of the 2003 *yajamāna*, who was *yajamāna* in 1990, was *ācārya* in 2003. But why should one start at 1975 and not before? Because the 1975 performance was the first that was widely publicized, attracted media and foreign attention, and touched the minds and hearts of many Nambudiri youngsters. The 2003 performance shows these youngsters, now in middle age, often with jobs in towns and cities, taking the helm and stepping forward with a strong desire to train a new generation of young *vaidikas* or seeing to it that they were being trained. The third generation had now arrived and many of its members were eager to receive instruction, unlike a few decades before. They accepted the value of the old tradition, realized that it was getting weaker, the expertise being thinner and distributed among fewer people, but also saw a chance of earning a livelihood from *śrauta*.

In the past, almost all Nambudiri houses were in the countryside as distinct, for example, from the Tamil Brahman *agrahārams* which are situated at the center of villages. Ritual performances took place there, as in

Panjal and Kundoor. The 1984 performance of the *somayāga* was the first to take place in a large city, Trivandrum, and the 2003 performance followed suit in that it was also an urban event. It was decided to organize it at the only Vedic school that is situated in a town, viz., the Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam at Trichur. A township of 50,000 people, Trichur, with its celebrated Nambudiri-run Vatakkunnātha temple and its popular “round” around the temple grounds, once a chic promenade, now hazardous with its traffic pollutants and pot holes, is the traditional Nambudiri town, as much a concession to an urban setting as the fiercely rural community has allowed itself. It was also decided to give wide publicity to the proceedings, preparations as well as performance, make it a media event and try to raise money by appealing to the public at large. An important role was played by the Nambudiri website nambudiri.com run by P. Vinod Bhattatiripad, which started to spread information about the ritual all over the world.

This development was not without its critics. There were those who did not like what they regarded as commercialization. These included inside critics like the Taikkat Vaidikan himself; and outside critics such as Dr. T.I. Radhakrishnan who played a crucial role in 1990. The organizers felt, on the other hand, that without publicity the tradition would be further endangered. In the past, many performances had depended on a few great Nambudiri families. What today’s Nambudiri elite wanted presently was for the performance to be easily accessible to a large number of people who would also contribute money at the site of the *yāga*. The Brahmaswam Madham obviously met those requirements. And the hoped-for remuneration did not fail to materialize: *vecchu namaskāram*, “deposit and prostrate,” (for the *yajamāna*) came to approximately Indian Rupees 165,000 = \$1500; sales of gold lockets with the *agnicayana* emblem: Rs. 1.5 million = \$30,000; gate collections and other donations: Rs.2.6 million = \$ 50,000. The collections and donations include offerings at a *dakṣiṇāmūrti* shrine, an important feature of the Trichur *yāga* to which we shall return.

The geographical position of Trichur itself is of ritual interest. A Nambudiri Vedic ritual is organized by two groups of Brahmans: the small group of *Sāmavedins* who are concerned with everything that pertains to their Veda; and the larger group of Vaidikans who are in charge of both *Ṛgveda* recitations and *Yajurveda* mantras and *kriyās*, whatever their Veda of birth. All recent performances have been organized by Vaidikans who belonged to the *Kauṣītaki* school of the *Ṛgveda*. Major *Yajurveda* officiants such as the



*adhvaryu* were also *Kauṣītakins* though a few *Baudhāyana Yajurvedins* officiated in minor priestly roles. The particular virtue of Trichur is that it is located at the southern limit of the geographical distribution of the *Kauṣītaki* school of *Ṛgveda*, and, at the same time, at the northern limit of the *Baudhāyana Yajurvedins* whose center is Irinjalakuda, some thirty miles to the south. A significant feature of the 2003 Trichur *yāga* was that the adherents by birth of *Baudhāyana Yajurveda* played a more important role than before. We consider this new cooperation between *Baudhāyana* and *Kauṣītaki* in some detail in the next section.

The rarity of qualified performers and the feeling that the tradition was in danger engendered a new spirit of cooperation between the *Sāmavedins* and *Kauṣītakins* as well. The *Sāmavedins* who, despite or because of their small numbers had split into two factions, started to seek closer contact with priests of the other Vedas. Vaidikans and *Sāmavedins* began to work more closely together than perhaps ever before. One *Kauṣītaki* Vaidikan offered his son to be trained for the office of the *subrahmanya* — the one *Sāmaveda* priest whose task is limited to merely reciting the *subrahmanyāhvānam*. There was at the same time an increasing demand for tape recordings made in the past and especially at the time of the 1975 performance. Taikkat Vaidikan approached FS about ways and means of obtaining copies of all recordings he had made since 1957.

The most important manifestation of the new spirit is that youngsters realized that Vedic ritual has a place in modern Kerala society and that a Vedic ritualist, with his extensive and specialized knowledge, may have a future.

#### 4. Three *potās*, Four *adhvaryus* and Seven *hotās*

Nothing illustrates the keen awareness of the weakening of tradition more clearly than the exceptional care that was taken to prevent mistakes in chants and recitations. The case of the *Sāmaveda* is special because the transmission of the chants is entirely in the hands of the few qualified *Sāmavedins*. The always larger tradition of *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* recitation continues to be strong, but the ritual does not follow the *saṃhitā* order of *ṛks* within a given hymn and requires extraordinary transformations to which the *ṛks* themselves are subjected. In the *Yajurveda*, the ritual sequence is often the same as in the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, but the sequences that have to be recited may be long and

the Vaidikans are not *Yajurvedins* but *Ṛgvedins* by birth. In 2003, all the required recitations and their modifications were known only to a handful of people—basically the *ācāryas* and a few others. Moreover, the concern for fidelity took on an extra dimension in view of the tender age of some of the priests. The ten year old *potā*, a minor officiant, was one of the priests whose task it is to recite the *āpyāyana* mantras that make the Soma swell. Barely tall enough to touch the bundle of Soma stalks on its high stool immediately to his south, he looked across at his two preceptors who were standing on the other side, fixing their gaze on him and indicating the mantras with their gestures. And so, it looked on this occasion as if three priests were jointly executing the office of the *potā*.

One technique that may assist in safeguarding the tradition is prompting (see, e.g., Staal et al. I:287). It is a variation on an ancient custom. The *yajamāna*, who may be a king or any person of importance and/or wealth, not necessarily a Brahman, need not be familiar with Vedic or Sanskrit. He repeated the required mantras after the *purohita* has recited them first. In a modern “Vedic” marriage the bridegroom does the same. Haltingly in Nambudiri *gr̥hya* and more fully in *śrauta*, prompting works as follows. If the designated priest, who had been elected at *ṛtvigvaraṇam*, has to recite a set of mantras, the recitation is prompted by a student who stands next to him and recites each verse before him, after which he repeats it “officially.” During the 2003 performance, the *adhvaryu* was often assisted by such a student-prompter, standing himself in front of his teacher or teachers, one of them a *Baudhāyana Yajurvedin*. Here there are four *adhvaryus*: two assisters of the prompter, the prompter himself and finally the officially elected *adhvaryu*.

The use of prompting is not allowed in the case of the *śāstras*, which consist of *ṛks* culled from different hymns of the *Ṛgveda*. They are often long and the sequence of the *ṛks* that make up a given *śāstra* have undergone unusual transformations. The recitations are not only an intellectual challenge but also place extraordinary demands on the lungs of the reciter, since a prescribed sequence of *ṛks* should be recited within a single breath. In the *agniṣṭoma*, the *hotā* has to recite six *śāstras*; and *maitrāvaruṇa*, *brāhmaṇācchaṃsin* and *acchāvāka* two each. There was a general feeling that the *maitrāvaruṇa* had problems with control of breath, but the *hotā*’s *śāstra* recitations were exemplary. However, the latter also has to recite the *prātarānuvāka* litany in the early morning of the Pressing Day. It consists of

360 Ṛgvedic verses, picked, as in a *śāstra*, from different hymns of different books, and arranged in an order different from that in the *Ṛgveda*. The *hotā*'s delivery of the *prātaranuvāka* did not match the excellence of his *śāstra* performances. Seated facing east along the *pr̥ṣṭhyā* line, he began the Morning Litany a little after 2 AM, on the fifth day, assisted by two helpers: one, eighteen years old, the most promising current *Ṛgveda* student at the Brahmasvam Madham, squatting in front of the *hotā* to his right, and the other, one of the current core members of the Nambudiri *śrauta* community, squatting likewise in front of the *hotā* but to his left. There was a constant mime of hand signals from these two to the *hotā* as he began his recitation: thus, we have three *hotās*, forming a triangle.

But the story of the multiplying *hotās* does not end there. The small triangle was at one angle of a larger triangle. At another angle of the larger triangle, a group of at least three senior Vaidikans sat behind the performing *hotā*, a few feet to his left, edging forward inch by inch, constantly and in some alarm, as the *hotā* began to falter. At the third angle of this larger triangle, the two Madham *Ṛgveda* teachers sat in front of the *hotā* but a few feet to his left, in constant communication by hand signals with the young helper who was their student. Thus our total of seven *hotās*.

Some of the *hotā*'s trouble spots in the *prātaranuvāka* may be mentioned here. The first is RV 1.34.6 which begins: *trir no aśvinā...* and this beginning is the same as that of 1.34.7, two verses ahead. The *hotā* jumped over one verse, a simple mistake in the order of *ṛks* in the *saṃhitā* which has nothing to do with the difficulties of the *prātaranuvāka*. All it shows is that he was nervous.

The second example is RV 5.79.1 which begins: *mahe no adya bodhaya* as it occurs in the *prātaranuvāka*. The next verse begins with the same three words: RV 7.75.2: *mahe no adya* but then continues: *suvitāya bodhi*. It is very confusing not only because *bodh-* occurs in both verses, but also because RV 7.75 does not occur in the *prātaranuvāka* at all, though each of the hymns 7.73, 74, 77, 78, 79, 80 and 81 are recited there almost as if a trap was planned. The *hotā* fell into it, but the young helper did not.

## 5. Preparation and Training

The undoubted stable of *Ṛgveda* recitation of the Nambudiri community is the Vadakke Madham Brahmasvam. It probably owes its origin to the former

custom of some Nambudiri youngsters after *samāvartanam* to spend a year at the Vatakkunnatha temple in Trichur where they would partake in the *naivēdya* offerings and receive some training in *R̥gveda* recitation. Subsequently they were accommodated in a separate building, the Vadakke Madham Brahmasvam or Brahmasvam Madham, where they received a more advanced education in *ṛk sam̐hitā* with *padapāṭha* and *vikṛti* recitations such as *krama*, *jaṭā*, etc. No doubt, most children had begun their *sam̐hitā* mastery at home where they were taught by their father, another relative or teacher. That practice continues. At present, 430 Nambudiri families are affiliated to the Madham and the bulk of its students come from these families, although other poor Nambudiri children are also accepted. The Madham has now 25 students and provides them with full room and board. The children also receive a modern education, as mandated by state laws, and must appear for public examinations of the State Board of Education.

All recitational studies available at the Madham are prerequisites for a *ṛtvik* taking part in a *śrauta* ritual, but no special training for *śrauta* rituals is available at the Madham now. Specially selected students receive it in the *vaidikapīṭham* in Perungottu, a town not far from Trichur, under the leadership of Cerumukku Vaidikan Vallabhan Nambudiri. At the time of the Trichur ritual there were four students in this institution and Cerumukku Vallabhan's wish is to amalgamate it with the Madham facility, leading to a central institute of *śrautasam̐skāra*. The *Sāmaveda* tradition remains largely within families. Out of the 21 *Sāmaveda* families in the Nambudiri community, nine are entitled to perform *śrauta* rituals. Although the situation with respect to trained *Sāmavedins* seemed dire a while ago, the Trichur *yāga* revealed the availability of a fully trained *Sāmavedin* corps. Throughout the training period, Tottam Krishnan Nambudiri, the *udgāta*, worked closely together with Cerumukku Vallabhan.

The training for the *yāga* itself lasted five months, posing a measure of hardship on the priests some of whom possessed secular employment. The Trichur *hotā* was a school teacher, luckily not far from Trichur, but there were priests from as far away as Bombay. In the weeks leading up to the Trichur *yagam*, there were three full rehearsals. The training began under the auspices of the senior Vaidikans, men we have identified as *ācāryas*. A *hotā* of a previous ritual trains the *hotā* for the coming ritual. For instance, the 1975 *hotā*, Naras Mangalath Narayanan Nambudiri, trained the 2003 *hotā*, Bhavatratan Nambudiri, who had been the 1990 *maitrāvaruṇa*, the priest with

the second greatest *Ṛgveda* load. A spare *hotā* was also in training in case the designated *hotā* would be disabled by poor health or death/birth pollution. Such substitute trainees existed for all the major priests, and they became the second and third priests in the *yāga* itself as illustrated in section 4. A conspicuous feature in the training and preparation of the 2003 *yāga* was the active role played by the Pantal Vaidikan, a *Baudhāyana Yajurvedin*.

Soma arrived at Trichur on Friday April 4, having been brought on foot from its traditional habitat, the Kollengode mountains in the Palghat Ghats. Its local journey through the Trichur downtown streets to the site of the ritual started on elephant back from the main entrance of the Vatakkunnatha temple. Traditional *pajñavādhyam* music accompanied the procession with much pomp and circumstance. Soma was transferred to the Madham and later lay stored under wet rags in one of its backrooms.

## 6. The *yajamāna* and his Priests

*yajamāna*: Bhaṭṭi Putillat Rāmānujan Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *vaiśvāmītra*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 48.

*yajamānapatnī*: Dhanya Pattinādi Antharjanaṃ. Age: 39.

*adhvaryu*: Kāvapra Mārath Śankaranārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *āṅgīrasa*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 34.

*pratipaṣṭātā*: Puthillaṃ Jayarāman Naṃbūdiri

Gotra: *kāśyapa*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 49.

*nēṣṭā*: Nārās Vāsudēvan Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *kāśyapa*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 20.

*unnētā*: Kāpra Nārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *āṅgīrasa*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 50.

<i>hotā</i>	Keṭṭum Bhavadrātan Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>kāśyapa</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Kauṣītaki</i> . Age: 52.
<i>maitrāvaruṇa</i> :	Erkkara Nārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri.
Gotra: <i>vaiśvāmitra</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Kauṣītaki</i> . Age: 34.
<i>acchāvāka</i> :	Kāpra Nārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>āṅgīrasa</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Kauṣītaki</i> . Age: 50.
<i>grāvastut</i> :	Kīḷmudayūr Paramēśvaran Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>kāśyapa</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Kauṣītaki</i> . Age: 57.
<i>udgātā</i> :	Tōṭṭam Kṛṣṇan Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>vāsiṣṭha</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Jaiminīya</i> . Age: 45.
<i>prastotā</i> :	Tōṭṭam Śivakaran Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>vāsiṣṭha</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Jaiminīya</i> . Age: 38.
<i>pratīhartā</i> :	Maṅgalathēri Nārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>vāsiṣṭha</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Jaiminīya</i> . Age: 58.
<i>subrahmaṇya</i> :	Maṅgalathēri Nārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>vāsiṣṭha</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Jaiminīya</i> . Age: 58.
<i>brahṃan</i>	Kariyaṇṇūr Divākaran Naṃbūtiri
Gotra: <i>āṅgīrasa</i> .	Sūtra: <i>Kauṣītaki</i> . Age: 42
<i>brāhṃaṇācchaṃsin</i>	Kuḷiyāṃkunnam Nārāyaṇan Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *vaiśvāmitra*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 27.

*agnidhra*: Nārās Agniśarman Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *kāśyapa*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 53.

*potā*: Pāṅṭaṃ Subrahmanyān Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *kāśyapa*. Sūtra: *Kauṣītaki*. Age: 10.

*sadasya*: Pantal Dāmōdaran Naṃbūtiri

Gotra: *bhārgava*. Sūtra: *Baudhāyana*. Age: 35.

*kautsan* C. P. Ramaswamy

(*soma* merchant)

Gotra: *vaiśvāmitra*. Sūtra: *Āpastamba*. Age: 63.

## 7. The Performance

Since the *yajamāna* had not kept his fires burning, the ritual performance had to start with *punarādheya/agnyādhāna* or *ādhānam*. It took place on April 6 outside the *prācīnavamśa* in the area where the *sadas* was to be constructed later. The three altars were temporarily constructed there and the fourth, the *aupāsanaṅni* altar, was located to the north of the *āhavanīya*. FS asked the *Baudhāyana sadasya*, who is also a *śulbasāstrin*, what its exact location was and his prompt answer was: anywhere. The making of the main fire began in the evening with many Nambudiris taking part in the churning of the wooden upper *araṇi* stick, drilling it into a hole in the lower *araṇi*. Although smoke was sighted soon, around 8.10 PM, a self-sustaining fire itself did not catch till midnight. The Maharashtrian ritualists declared that they possessed a more efficient and predictable method.

To do justice to the *agniṣṭoma somayāga* performance would require a tome of at least a third the size of the first volume of the 1983 AGNI (Staal et al.). We can do no more than mention a few haphazard episodes here, many of them of a non-ritual nature, and beginning with the always spectacular

*pravargya* ceremonies on the 2nd through 4th day, when each time the flame shot up about 3 feet high. It did not satisfy the Maharasthrians who are used to a 6 feet flame. The explanation lies in the traditional shape of the Nambudiri *mahāvīra* vessel which has a wider neck than the one that is used in Maharashtra. Sparse at first, crowds increased with the second and third day. Under a roof of coconut thatch that surrounded the entire area of the *yāgaśālā*, chairs and benches had been placed for visitors to a depth of four. The numbers increased exponentially as the ritual unfolded, roughly equal for men and women, mostly middle-aged and almost all Hindu although several Christians could be counted. TVs had been placed in the periphery for visitors to watch the live proceedings on the familiar screen. There was a steady stream of people worshipping *dakṣiṇāmūrti*, installed within a shrine erected to the south of the *yāgaśālā*. It is of special interest, illustrating as it does not only a most generous flow of donations but also, and related to it, the interface between Vedic ritual and the Hindu religion. The number of *dakṣiṇāmūrti* devotees increased throughout the performance, and we shall revert to it at the end of the present section.

There was a storm with thunder and lightning on the third day accompanied by widespread whisperings among spectators that Indra had arrived. More heavy downpours followed on subsequent days, a relief not to humidity but to temperatures that had soared into the nineties. The climax of the entire *yāga* began in the early hours of the 5th day, with the *prātaranuvāka* at 2.40 AM and the *saptahotr*, discussed in section 4. With the *bahiṣpavamāna* in the early morning hours came another surprise: only the first of the nine *stotriyās* was chanted. The puzzlement of FS, expressed sotto voce to TP, was immediately sensed by the *Sāmavedins* who came to the periphery of the enclosure as soon as the chant and the important rites that follow it were over in order to explain, that it is only in the *agnicayana* that all nine couplets are sung. Since the mystery of these melodies and their dangerous powers (with undercurrents of witchcraft) have always been keenly felt, was their number at an *agniṣṭoma* performance in a distant past perhaps reduced to one? Is it another testimony to the freedom of a living tradition? The *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* refers to nine *stotriyās*, the *śrauta sūtra* is silent about their number, and so we hope that *Jaiminīya* specialists will throw light on the matter.





Fig.3 On the left, the *akkitiri* from 1990 holding hands with another priest in the embrace of the *sarpaṇa* cortege which consists, from left to right, of *adhvaryu*, the two bearded *Sāmavedins* looking to their right, the *yajamāna* smiling and his *brahman*. A helper with a basket looks on, baffled.

The *bahiṣpavamāna* was followed by another unexpected scene. The priests did not only resume their *sarpaṇa* movement, “as hunters approach their prey,” but others surrounded them in a circle of tight embrace that introduced a merry moment into the solemn ritual. Is it to celebrate the inclusion of the chanters in the *yajamāna*’s cortège that already includes his *brahman*, *adhvaryu* (in front) and *pratiprasthātā* (at the end), thereby paving the way for the union of chanters and reciters in the *sadas* once the *bahiṣpavamāna* is over? Whatever it is, it unleashed the unceasing whirl of activities that characterizes the Soma pressing day and includes the remaining eleven *sāma stutis* and twelve *ṛk śāstras* that continued on well into the next morning and early noon. The *avabhṛ̥tha* bath occurred only late afternoon on April 12 and it was almost nightfall when the *śālā* was torched with the urban protection of fire brigades on hand.

Throughout all these procedures the *dakṣiṇāmūrti* shrine attracted its own kind of attention that included that of the media. *dakṣiṇāmūrti* is the presiding deity of the temple at Sukhapuram village, the *grāmam* to which both the *taikkāṭ* and *cerumukku* Vaidikan families are affiliated (Staal et al. I:175). It faces south as its name indicates. In the *taikkāṭ* mana there is also a

*dakṣiṇāmūrti* image, but it faces west since all shrines within Nambudiri houses face west. Whenever the *taikkāṭ* Vaidikan used to perform a *yāga*, he did so in his own home under the auspices of the Sukhapuram *dakṣiṇāmūrti* mediated by his own idol. The present image, which is made of wood, belongs to Taikkat Nilakantan's younger brother, Taikkat Kesavan, who brought it with him and installed it in the shrine immediately south of the *yāgaśālā* where it continued to face west and attracted an unceasing chain of visitors and devotees.

## 8. Twelve Pillars of *śrauta*

Continuing the living tradition is not a simple matter. It does not depend on bookish knowledge, books or manuscripts. The knowledge resides in the hearts, heads, voices, lungs and bellies of the people and has to be transmitted directly from teacher to pupil. In 2003, it was clear that the operation was carried out through three levels: A. the *ācāryas*; B. the present core of the living tradition; and C. future generations. The first group consists of people who are in their seventies (and in one case no more); the present core, those who are in their thirties and forties; and the future generations, those from whom the 2003 officiants were mostly taken. We shall briefly describe these three categories, each member of which was indispensable to the success of the *yāga*. If we may be presumptuous we might add that FS is coeval with the first group, TP with the second and the majority of our readers with the third.

### A. The *ācāryas*.

These are the preceptors who know the ritual tradition thoroughly and were the predominant teachers during the period of preparation and training. During the 2003 performance itself, they rarely opened their mouths, but were always present and often right in front of the officiant or his prompter. This holds especially for A4 and 5 who were on the spot whenever a complex *kriyā* had to be performed.

#### A1. Erkkara Raman Nambudiri. (See Fig.2, page 3.)

“Erkkara,” without further qualification, was the most prominent Nambudiri scholar of *śrauta* of recent time. Beginning his *śrauta* career as an *adhvaryu* at age 16, he took part in almost a hundred *yāgas*, playing a leadership role in

some sixty of them. His writings will be reviewed below in section 9 on “Literature.” He passed away in 1983, but in 2003 his large painted portraits were everywhere visibly displayed. No one has taken his place as yet though we venture to predict that B10 and perhaps C11 may aspire to it. Whatever it is, the stature and veneration shown to Erkkara are such that, one thinks, this is how a new *śākhā* named after a teacher may have had its beginnings.

### **A2. Vaidikan Thaikkat Nilakanthan Nambudiri.**

The reader should recall that the organization of a Vedic ritual in Kerala is in the hands of a Vaidikan who is also in charge of everything that pertains to the *Ṛg-* and *Yajurvedas*. Six families of Vaidikans are eligible to do it; but in recent history, the performances have been in the hands of only two whose members are *Ṛgvedins* by birth: the families of Cerumukku and Taikkat. The 1975 performance was organized by Cerumukku Vaidikan Somayajipad (co-author of Agni 1983); the 1990 performance was in the hands of the Taikkat Vaidikan, Nilakanthan Nambudiri, and it is he who was also in charge of the 2003 Somayagam. Taikkat Vaidikan was the person who on the first occasion they met again since 1990 went up to FS and asked for copies of the latter’s recordings of the 1975 *agnicayana* (see above section 3).

### **A3. Naras (or: Narana) Mangalath Narayanan Nambudiri.**

Naras Narayanan (we are now using the names by which Nambudiris refer to each other), *hotā* of the 1975 *agnicayan*, was radiating confidence and knowledge throughout the 2003 event. He was always present at the *śāstra* recitations, ready to step in but there was no need because no mistakes were made by the 2003 *hotā* to whom we return in a moment (B7).

### **A4. Kavapra Marath Sankaranarayanan Somayajipad.**

Kavapra Sankaranarayanan was *prathiprasthātā* in 1975 and acquired the title of Somayajipad in 1965 after being *yajamāna* of the *somayāgam* that was performed at his family residence. Though like most of the other ritualists, a *Kauṣītaki Ṛgvedin* by birth, he is a master of *Yajurveda* and especially of *kriyā*. He was always on the spot when the 2003 *adhvaryu* had to perform a ritual act, directing his movements by hand whenever necessary which was rarely.

### **A5. Bhatti Puttillatt Ravi ākkitiripad.**

“Akkitiri” as he is now called acquired that appellation after being *yajamāna* at the *agnicayana* in 1990 at Kundoor. He is the only *akkitiripad* alive and was always standing close his son, Bhatti Puttillatt Ramanujan Nambudiri, *yajamāna* of the 2003 *somayāgam*.

### **B. The Core of the Present Tradition.**

These are the people on whom the future entirely depends. They are experts still at the peak of their lives. In 2003, some of them were officiating priests, performing tasks (especially in the domain of *Sāmaveda*) that no one else seems to be able to presently fulfil.

### **B6. Cerumukku Vallabhan Nambudiri.**

Cerumukku Vallabhan stood at the center of the 2003 proceedings. *hotā* of the 1990 *agnicayana* and presently the most ritually knowledgeable and active member of the large Cerumukku family, forty-eight years of age, he could be found from early morning till late night inside the *śālā*, always where the action was and right on top of every *Ṛgveda* or *Yajurveda* event. He hopes to be *yajamāna* of another *somayāgam*, planned at present for the spring of 2004.

### **B7. Neddhum Bhavatratan Nambudiri.**

Neddhum Bhavatratan was *maitrāvaruṇa* in 1990 and performed the office of *hotā* in 2003. He is the undisputed master of *śastra* recitation but felt, at 52 years of age, that 2003 might be his last chance to undertake this difficult as well as exhausting assignment. As far as we are aware, he did not make a single mistake in the twelve *śastra* recitations of the *agniṣṭoma* though he faltered during the *prātaranuvāka* as we have seen.

### **B8 and 9. Tottam Krishnan Nambudiri and Tottam Sivakaran Nambudiri.**

We take the two 2003 *Sāmavedins* together because they are brothers and their close cooperation as *udgātā* and *prastotā* throughout the twelve *stotra* or *stuti* chants may be regarded as the axis around which Vedic ritual revolves. Two members of the Tottam family officiated in 1975, and one of them again in 1990. Even so and ever since 1975, FS has been concerned about the future of the Nambudiri *Sāmaveda* tradition. But here they were, at their

respective ages of 45 and 38, a formidable twosome, fully in command of their substantial and extraordinarily complex tasks — apparently, we hasten to add, for what outsider would dare pass judgment on the degree of expertise of *Jaiminīya* praxis which without doubt is unique on our planet? They must have worked hard and almost constantly despite the fact that Sivakaran is also an āyurvedic physician, running and directing a clinic at Kottayam.

#### **B10. Pantal Vaidikan Damodaran Nambudiri.**

Damodaran, the Pantal Vaidikan, final member of our core group, is not the least. He is not by birth a *Kauṣītaki Ṛgvedin* or *Jaiminīya Sāmavedin* like all of the others, but a *Baudhāyana Yajurvedin*. In 1990, at age 23, he already made an exceptional contribution: he recited the *praiṣārtham* addressed to the *yajamāna* after his *dīksa*, a most honorable duty that was exercised in 1975 by Erkkara himself. Officiating in 2003 as *sadasya* at age 35, he is now an allround *Yajurveda* expert who also knows the *Baudhāyana Śulbasūtra*; and in addition, as the reader will have noted from his name, a Vaidikan: for he is a member of one of the six Vaidikan families that are eligible to organize a Vedic ritual performance. The Pantal family, which hails from the famous *Yajurveda* center of Irinjalakuda, has not exercised its birth right of *yāga* for at least half a century. Pantal Damodaran's expertise was recognized and respected by everyone within the *sadas* and it marks a promising direction in the future.

#### **C. Future Generations**

We shall attempt to illustrate the future with two examples of young men whom we regard as possible pillars of *śrauta* in due time.

#### **C11. Kavapra M. Sankaranarayanan**

Kavapra Sankaranarayanan, the *prātaranuvāka* expert, and the eighteen year-old son of Kavapra Marath Sankaranarayanan Somayajippad (A4), is a very bright student of Sanskrit and fluent in English. He has the entire *ṛk* Samhita behind him and is on the threshold of *vikṛti* mastery. The 2003 *hotā* was all deference to him although Sankaranarayanan was his prompter and more than thirty years his junior.



Fig.4. Members of the younger generation, including bespectacled Sankaranarayanan.

### C12. Pandam Subrahmanyan Nambudiri.

Pandam Subrahmanyan could not have officiated on any earlier occasion but assumed the office of *potā* in 2003 at age ten. In his performance of *apyāyanam*, he looks over the *soma* bundle, his thumb in bandage from a recent mishap, at his preceptors, Cerumukku Vallabhan straight in front of him and Kapra Sankaranarayanan Somayajippad to the right of Cerumukku. South of the Soma bundle is the 1990 *akkitiri* facing the viewer. At the bottom right hand corner is seen the face of his son, the 2003 *yajamāna*. Other dramatis personae also sitting on the ground are the Brahman, visible with his black beard between the legs of the Soma stool, Taikkat Vaidikan, leaning forward to his right, and partly visible, the face of the hota between Kapra and Cerumukku. Pandam Subrahmanyan's sprinkling of Soma with mantras, to which we have referred already, graces our title page (see fig. 2).

## 9. Literature

As we have already noted, the Trichur *agniṣṭoma* was an urban event. A public announcement system gave what was occasionally learned

commentary on the proceedings of the ritual. There were press photographers everywhere in addition to the Asianet TV crew; and the organizers had arranged for the entire ritual to be video-taped. Thus by the second day or so, surrounding the *yāgaśālā*, a small town had risen up, selling *yāga*-related items such as shawls with *śrauta* logos. Two book stalls showed up as well. The books, almost all in Malayalam, were on a variety of subjects, and mostly related to Hinduism. There were also books on purely *śrauta*-related matters. Ranging from expositions on *śrauta* by experts such as Erkkara to fictional treatments by popular novelists, the *śrauta* literature on exhibition displayed the wide interest the act of *yāga* has for the contemporary imagination in Kerala.

By far the most important books on *śrauta* rituals were those by Erkkara Raman Nambudiri. Erkkara (as he is commonly known) was easily the most penetrating mind on *śrauta* traditions among the Nambudiris in modern times till his death in 1983. Along with Cerumukku Vaidikan and Itti Ravi, he was intimately connected to the 1975 Agni and authoritatively so. Like a number of conservative traditionalists, he opposed at first the filming of the event. When he changed his mind, all followed his lead, resulting in the film *Altar of Fire*. Likewise, when at the eve of the 1975 *agnicayana*, there were morally, religiously and politically motivated protests by Gandhians, Jainas, and Communists against the sacrifice of real animals, it was he who came up with the solution of *piṣṭapaśu*-a solution that has found wide appreciation among the current ritualists, all of whom continue to be vegetarians in their daily lives. This is another instance of how a live tradition is able to innovate itself when faced with a difficult impasse about a crucial part of the ritual.

Erkkara published three volumes: *Ānmāyamadhanaṃ*, “The Churning of Tradition” (1976); *Ekāhīnasathraggaḷ* “Ekāha and Sattrā Rituals” (1978); and *śrautakarmavivēkaṃ*, “The Investigation of Śrauta Rituals” (1983). The first one, now rare and out of print, is a collection of 18 essays, some from the *śrauta* magazine *Anādi*, “Beginningless,” he started in 1973. The first eight essays contain a survey of *śruti* literature and the following ten are concerned with the karma and Mīmāṃsā aspects of *śrauta* rituals. Many of these essays could function (and probably did) as *paddhatis* for the rituals they describe; for example, the essay 15, *Atirātrahinte kriyā saṃgrahaṃ* “Summary of the Ritual Acts of the Atiratra”, originally published in *anādi* [1975. 3:8-12], which gives a step by step account of the entire ritual on the eve of the actual event. Essay 16 *yajñapaśu* is a detailed account of the concept of *piṣṭapaśu*.

Erkkara seems to have been inspired by Vaishnava tradition for the idea. One other essay (14: *atirātram*) worth mentioning is the text of a radio-broadcast describing the dire circumstances of the *śrauta* tradition in the early 1970's and acknowledging gratefully the two *mahāśayanmār* "Men of Great Ideas," (Asko Parpola and FS) for their help with the 1975 *agnicayana*.

Erkkara's two other titles seem to have found inspiration from the success of *ānmāyamaḍhanam* which won the Kerala Sahitya Academy prize for the year 1978. *Ekāhīnasatragñal*, "Ekāha and Sattra Rituals," is made up of 85 paragraph-length vignettes on all matters *śrauta*: the three kinds of *śrauta* rituals, (*ekāha*, *ahīna* and *sattra*); the concepts of *prakṛti* and *vikṛti*; the 17 priests and their duties and functions; *śrāddha* and how to create it in our times; *yūpa*; the various *stutis* and *śāstras*; the three *savanas*. Some of these are brief Brāhmaṇa-like expositions (no wonder: let us remember that Erkkara dictated the entire *Kauṣṭiki Brāhmaṇa* from memory to E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma for his 1968 edition). This slim volume was much used by the commentators of the 2003 *yāga* through the public address system. Erkkara's third book, *Śrautakarmavivēkaṃ* "The Investigation of *śrauta* Ritual," contains eight substantial essays on different *śrauta* rituals, the essays on *atirātra* and *cāturmāsya* running into almost 70 pages each. One essay in this collection deals with various prescriptive details of the *rājasūya*.

Two other books of *śrauta* interest were *śrauta śāstra pāraṃparyam kēraḷathil*, "The Science of Śrauta Tradition in Kerala," of 1990 by the famous Malayalam poet *mahākavi Ākkitham Āchyutan Nambudiri* and Rajan Chungath's *śrautam* of 2002. Polemical in tone and nature, *Ākkitham*'s 12 essays are devoted to plead the spiritual (*adhyātmika*) and material (*bhautika*) benefits of *śrauta* rituals against skeptical scientism. Refuting the thesis that the entire tradition is retrogressive, *Ākkitham*, himself a Nambudiri, argues for a liberalization of *śrauta* rituals; specifically he calls for the training of non-Nambudiris in the Vedas, thereby making the tradition more inclusive. Rajan Chungath seems to answer to *Ākkitham*'s spirit of greater inclusion. A Christian by birth and veterinarian by training, Chungath shows a profound interest in, if not commitment to, the *śrauta* tradition. He displays an excellent command of the subject through wide reading and interviews of the principal figures of Nambudiri śrautism, and his profusely illustrated book easily fills the need for a handbook on the subject for an inquisitive layman. Of special interest is Chungath's chapter on the scientific experiments of the 1990 *agnicayana* at Kundoor - the Kirlean photography of the *sadas* and



surroundings; the EEG readings of the brain waves of the priests; measurements of body temperatures, breathing rate, pulse rate of some 50 cows herded within 50 meters of the *yāgaśālā*. Although a scientist himself, Chungath is content to report without comment the various “scientific claims” such as one Dr. Ramachandran Nair’s that there was “a measurable decrease in fungus, bacteria and other pathogens in the immediate vicinity of the *yāgaśālā*.”

The fictional literature on show in these book stalls was another testimony to the impact of the recent *śrauta* performances on the Kerala mind. Indeed, it is said that passenger buses passing by Panjal pause there and the conductors regularly announce that the bus is passing by “a famous *yāga* site,” referring to the 1975 *agnicayana*. The focus of the fictional works is by and large the *śrauta* saga of the remarkable figure of Mēžathōḷ agnihotrī, by all accounts the father of the Nambudiri *śrauta* tradition. After oral transmission in a folk tradition, the legends and myths about him appeared in print early in the 20th century in what is generally accepted as a classic about Kerala folk lore, namely Sankunni Menon’s *Aitihyamālā*, “Garland of Legends.”

Agnihotri’s story has received much literary expression, but by far the most imaginative treatment of the legend is Sridevi’s novel of the same name. Sridevi, herself a *nambūdiri* woman and a hostess at the Trichur *yāga*, follows the main outline of the hero of the story: he is one of twelve children of Vararuci, a Brahman with legendary links to the Gupta empire, and a *paraya* (“Pariah”) woman. Abandoned at birth by a river bank, the infant is rescued and raised as a Nambudiri by a Nambudiri woman. The Brahman-*paraya* couple abandon their eleven other children likewise; these foundlings are also raised by people of different castes, thus representing along with the Brahman Agnihotri a microcosm of the caste society of Kerala. All the children follow their caste functions: Agnihotri, raised from infancy as a Nambudiri, performs 99 *yāgas* before age 35 and stops there only at Indra’s intervention. All Nambudiri families with *śrauta* rights today trace these rights to participation by an ancestor in these 99 rituals; Agnihotri’s Brahman priest was thus the founder of the *Āžavancheri Tambrākkaḷ* lineage, one of the two traditionally leading Nambudiri families in Kerala. Agnihotri’s eleven siblings also go on to excel in the respective realms in which they were raised. One of them adopted by a carpenter family acquires the title *perunthacchan*, the master *takṣaka*/carpenter, another raised in a Tamil

*vellāla* home is *valluvar*, author of the Old Tamil *Kural*. A famous moment in the legend is the coming together of the twelve children to celebrate their father's *śrāddha*: vegetarians, meat eaters, untouchable and ritually pure, high and low—all gather in Agnihotri's house. Sridevi brings this motley crowd together, keenly alive to the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in such a gathering in a caste society, but allowing each one full play as an individual.

A benign caste society? A hierarchical arrangement that allows for each member's full potentiality? Such seems to be the Keralan society of the Agnihotri legend and its sensitive interpretation in Sridevi's novel. This construct contrasts instructively with the conventional discourse on caste and its calamitous features. The very fact that such an ideal is imagined points to a history of caste in Kerala different from other parts of India. And such a picture arguably approximates the reality of Kerala as well: we know that contacts between Nambudiris and non-Nambudiris are common and even intimate through the *vivāha* marriage and *sambandha* systems. Moreover, the once ritually impure castes have Sanskritized themselves into honorable niches in the caste hierarchy. But the legend and Sridevi's novel tell us perhaps of a greater truth. Several of the children of the Brahman-*paraya* couple have Tamil antecedents: to *Tiruvalluvar*, already noted, can be added *Pāṇanār*, the bard figure of the Sangam poetry and *Kāraikkal Aṇṇa*, an early *śaivite nāyanār*. Together then, the twelve children of the Brahman-*paraya* couple point to a trans-Kerala reality; they may be seen as the product of the first acculturation between Brahman immigrants from the north and the indigenous people of the Tamil country, the Sangam poetry being a product of this. The group that came to be called Nambudiris subsequently in Kerala lived then in the Tamil country as well, along with other *pūrvaśikhā* Brahman groups, such as the *dīkṣitars* of *Cidambaraṃ* and the *cōliya* Brahmans, performing *śrauta* rituals according to the same *śākhās* and *sūtras* of *Kauṣītaki Ṛgveda*, *Jaiminīya Sāmaveda*, and *Baudhāyana/Vādhūla Yajurveda* (See sections 1 and 2 above; Mahadevan, forthcoming.)

## 10. Conclusion

Our title makes the claim that the Trichur *agniṣṭoma somayāga* represents a turning point in the Nambudiri tradition. We think that the Trichur *yāga* represents a new *śrauta* model in the sense that its patron is the public at large. It is what the 2003 *udgātā* priest characterized in private conversation

as a *parasya*, i.e., “public” *yāga*. The last *śrauta* rituals of the old model, performed by a private family in the country from resources drawn from its own landed wealth, took place in the 1950’s and 1960’s. But with the land reforms of the 1950’s, such resources had already come to an end. The 1975 *agnicayana* was possible only because of the support of foreign, principally American, foundations and a few individuals. The continuance of such generosity is hardly a firm foundation for keeping the tradition alive. The 1990 Kundoor *agnicayana* was performed at least in part to show that Panjāl *agnicayana* was not the last and that Keralans themselves can sustain the tradition. The money needed for the ritual was raised principally by one individual, a non-Nambudiri, Dr. T. I. Radhakrishnan. The 2003 *yāga* would also have been cast in the same vein, but for the differences between Dr. Radhakrishnan and the Nambudiri *śrauta* leadership, the latter centering around now the Brahmaswam Madham at Trichur rather than solely on the Vaidikans and their network of priests. This body finally took the matter into its own hands, and it gradually became obvious that the public could and should be the patron. The younger Nambudiris, some of them with experience in computer and information technology, brought to the whole project expertise of the modern world. At the beginning of the ritual, the question of money for the *yāga* was still clouded, but as it proceeded, with the collection at the gate and the institution of *vecchu namaskāram*, the picture cleared, and the public rose to the occasion. There is very little doubt that the next *yāga*—one is proposed as early as next year—will follow this model.

True, in the process, the *yāga* became exposed to a degree of urbanization and its baneful influences: to the traditional eye, the cameramen of news agencies, the TV crew and the public address system seemed to give the ritual an aspect of show. But it opened the event to ordinary people: hundreds came seeing it no doubt as a Hindu, rather than Vedic, ceremony and left money with a prayer. Even academics—anthropologists, historians, mathematicians—came from Kerala’s universities. There were seminar-like events about *śrauta* ritual, away from the *yāgaśālā*. A set of spare implements used in the ritual—the different wooden spoons used for offerings and oblations, the clay pots used for the *pravargya* and Soma preparation, the *agni*-making set and other special items—all were on display at an exhibition in the Madham buildings. Finally, the powers of the state of Kerala descended upon the site: no less than three ministers were received near the *yāgaśālā* by the Madham personnel as the ritual itself went on apace.

Much of this was possible only in the urban setting of Trichur. And the extent of the public participation, from ordinary citizens to the powers that be, cast the Trichur *somayāga* in a democratic light.

In a way, this resembles the history of *śrauta* tradition in India in the past. In earlier renewals, during Gupta, Pallava, Cola or Vijayanāgara dynasties, patronage was provided by kings. The state in democratic India, with its constitutional separation of powers, cannot provide that, but a benign show of interest is helpful to the public at large. And who would want more than a benign interest from the state? It would be unfortunate if the present government in Delhi were to obfuscate Vedic ritual with the ideological strains of Hindutva.

The involvement of the public in the present ritual is not a product of the imagination of the present writers. It does not mean that there were open discussions on the value of Vedic ritual or that the ritual had entered what is now sometimes called “the public sphere.” But that involvement is substantiated by the gate collections and donations from the public without which the *yāga* might have resulted in bankruptcy for the *yajamāna*, the Madham or both. This is bound to create interest on the part of future *yajamānas* as well as aspiring *śrautins* who have to go through years of training and preparation in the hope that they may earn a livelihood from *śrauta*. But money is not everything. Also needed are a sense of vocation on the part of the *yajamāna* and a total commitment and dedication to the intricacies of chants, recitations and rites on the part of the officiating priests. At present there are clear signs that such a *śrauta* spirit is thriving. To that ample testimony was borne by the 2003 Trichur *yāga*.

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