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## **Agni and the Foreign Savants**

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# Agni and the Foreign Savants

Itti Ravi Mamunne

“What has not been lost over the past 50 years! *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* recitation for example. Now the last reciter of the complete *Samhītā* is also gone. Oh well.”

Michael Witzel, Indology List, 2/11/2003.

## The translator’s note:

I spent two weeks with Frits Staal at his house in Oakland, writing up our paper on the 2003 (April 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>) Trichur *sōmayāga*. While browsing in his deep and ample library shelves, I came across 14 old copies of *Anādi*, a Malayalam monthly on Vedic matters with special emphasis on *śrauta*.

Erkkara Raman Nambudiri, generally thought to be the foremost Nambudiri *śrautin* of the second half of the 20th century, published it for about five years, starting from 1973. Naturally the 1975 Paanjaal *agnicayana* was a central event for the monthly: it published several articles about the ritual. One of these is being translated here.

The author of the article is Itti Ravi Nambudiri, later listed as a co-author of Frits Staal’s monumental Agni and mourned so elegiacally by Michael Witzel in the epitaph above. Itti Ravi tells with characteristic energy and gusto how the 1975 *agnicayana*, after many years in planning and despite some last-minute problems that nearly de-railed the project, is now an imminent reality, within the month. (Significantly, like a sister article to Itti Ravi’s, appears next to it in the monthly Erkkara’s detailed schedule of the 12-day ritual, something that a person attending the ritual might keep in hand to follow the proceedings.) The story that Itti Ravi tells at the eve of the ritual is about the collaboration between two Western Vedic scholars (Frits Staal and Asko Parpola) and the Nambudiri *śrauta* establishment, a collaboration that has made the impending ritual possible. He tells of his first meeting with these two scholars and of their interest in his birth Veda, the *Jaiminīya Sāmaveda*, leading to a complete taping by him -”textualization” of oral

theory-of this very rare and early *śākhā* of the *Sāmaveda*. Soon an interest in the actual performance of a *śrauta* ritual, manifest as early as 1961, unites the two sides, the Western scholars with access to funding agencies of the West and the other side, the Nambudiri community with its trained *śrauta* corps, resulting in the 1975 event. Itti Ravi was its *udgātā*, the principal *Sāmaveda* priest.

The 1975 *agni* is a seminal event for the modern Nambudiri *śrautism*. There have been three *śrauta* rituals by Nambudiris after the 1975 *agnicayana*, the 1984 *agniṣṭoma* at Trivandrum, the 1990 *agnicayana* at Kundoor, and the 2003 *agniṣṭoma* at Trichur, all from native resources, but all thought possible by Nambudiris *śrautins* today only because of the first one, the 1975 Agni. Thus Itti Ravi’s article may be of interest to Vedists. It is also of interest as a piece of reverse anthropology: the instance of the observer observed. True, Itti Ravi shows himself to be a little gaga over two “*sāyips*” gone “native,” but otherwise his outlook is strict professional Vedism, that of millennia-old instinct of protection (*rakṣa*) of the Veda and how to advance its interests. Altogether it is a revealing exhibit of anthropology: the “native” never is, or was, wholly an inert object, contrary to all the post-modern lucubrations on the matter, nor is the observer always the animate subject: the discourse flowed both ways, sometimes, as if by miracle, resulting in an *agnicayana*. I have tried to capture Itti Ravi’s tone of informality and directness by being at times literal in my translation. I have provided explanations through footnotes for obvious vagaries-of facts and information.

**Text:**

The president and the vice president of the international committee that is organizing the performance of Agni are, respectively, Professor J. F. Staal and Dr. Asko Parpola. I note here some details I know about them.

Professor Staal’s current address is “South and South-East Asian Studies, California University, USA.” He was born in Holland in 1930. His parents died in the Second World War. It was an adoptive mother who looked after him and protected him.

After his initial education [in Holland], he came to India to study German and Sanskrit in Benaras Hindu University. He learned some Sanskrit in Madras as well. He came to Kerala in 1957.

Although he was professor then in England, he stayed in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and taped several parts of the three Vedas and took many pictures. He wrote then an erudite book called the Nambudiri Veda Recitation. It was on that occasion that I first met him. When he came to my house in Panjal, he was wearing just a *dhōti* and shirt. I thought it was a Nambudiri coming to my house. A very white Nambudiri. Only after exchanging information did I realize that he was a *sāyip* [Sahib].

He had come to record a little *Sāmaveda*. As there was no electricity in Panjal those days, he left after fixing a day to come to *chērpū* at [Younger] Brother's place.

He came to *chērpū* on the day arranged. He taped *Yajurveda's ghōṣam*. And that day and night and the next day till 10' O clock we talked and taped *Sāmavedam*.

Kerala was a place he loved. His opinion is that the cultural tradition of Kerala is very old. He has married a Kerala woman in the Kerala way, witnessed by fire or *agni*. When he came to my house, he said that he wanted to examine the palm leaf manuscripts in the shelves. Their script was Malayalam. I saw him read these manuscripts, something Malayalis themselves can do only with difficulty. I also realized that he could converse in Malayalam to an extent.

It was in the month of February 1962 that he came back again to Kerala. The plan then was to perform a *yāgam* (*agniṣṭoma*), filming it and tape-recording. We went to Kollengode to arrange for *sōmalatā* and black deer skin. I took him there to show the *sōmalatā*. I travelled with him in a car to many places in connection with arrangements for the *yāga*. We could not get anybody prepared to perform the *yāga*. At *mādambu's* (Frits Staal's classmate from Benaras) place and at my house, he taped the mantras of the entire *yāga* (*rks*, *yajus* and *sāmam*) It was in January of 1971 that he came to Kerala a third time. He stayed with me for a week. And he recorded parts of the *Sāmavedam*. It would take about 100 hours to tape all of the *Sāmavedam*. He bought a new tape recording machine and gave it to me. Is this not an aid (*upayuktam*) to me, I asked him. He asked me what I meant by aid,

*upayuktam*. I explained to him that that is the term used to describe items, like clothes, needed to do the *kriyās* of a ritual.

It crossed our minds if we should not try for a *yāga*. But there was not enough time that year. Then I remembered something. In April 1970, during the season of *yāgas*, on the east side of the *yāgaśālā*, during a conversation among Erkkara Raman Nambudiri, Dr. Sree Krishna Sarma, Maṛēth kāpra Narayanan Sōmayājippād and others, Erkkara had said, “We must perform a *yāgam*.” With this in mind, I said to Staal that we must perform the *agni* itself. He became even happier. He said firmly that whatever the expenses we must perform [the ritual]. Thus we decided to try for the *agni* in 1974. I told him that I would write to him after consulting with Erkkara. He knew Erkkara well through Sree Krishna Sarma.

It was in 1971 March that a Finlander named Asko Parpola came to Kerala. He is world-famous for his learning. He greeted me at our very first meeting with a book in English he had written about *yāga*. *śālās*, *dhiṣṇyas*, *kunḍas* and other such items that had been described in the book in detail, with their plans, their numbers. I began to understand him as a man who had worked for eight years to understand all about *yāga*, as a man who had digested in addition the cosmic work, “*Bhavathrāṭiyam*.” His mission in Kerala was to study matters relating to the *yāga* in general and the *Jaiminīya Sāmaveda* in particular. I shared with him what I knew about the function of the *Sāmaveda* in the actual performance of a *yāga*. To talk about the remaining part, I took him to Erkkara at Mūkkuthalakke. With the help of my English-knowing son, they talked for more than five hours. His regard and reverence for Erkkara knew no bounds.

He went to Guruvayur later that day. Wearing a simple dhoti around his waist and covering his upper body with another, both Āñjam Madhavan Nambudiri’s gifts to him, he waited and watched that day’s procession of god. He asked me if the sign on the hood of the snake in a picture outside the temple was not the mark of Krishna’s feet. I began to realize that he was equally learned in the Hindu religion and its different stories and traditions.

While at *mūkkuthalakke* [Erkkara’s house], we also went to *pakarāvūr* Krishnan Nambudiri’s place to photocopy *Sāmaveda* manuscripts. He took pictures of hand movements and hand mudras of *Sāmaveda*.

He went afterward to Ceylon [Sri Lanka] and came again to Kerala on his way back. He went to the *Narippatta Pattērimana*, near Kotimunda in Pattambi, home of Bhavathrāta, the author of Bhavathrātiyam; thence to Kotanāttu mana, Mēžathōḷ Agnihōtri's home; thence to Yañjēs̄varam where the *āgnihōtri* performed his 99 *yāgas*; and thence finally to the spot of White Rock on which Bhavathrātan had spread his clothes for drying, leaving on the rock a white mark. And he took scores of pictures. On leaving he told me that he learned more about *yāga* in eight days with us than in eight years.

These two men do not wear shirts when they are in Kerala. They would sit smack on the floor and eat their meals. As it was mango season, we had at my house the Sour Mango dish. "Nowhere else in India was food as tasty," this was what they said. It did not seem flattery to me. Within a year I taped all of the *Sāmaveda*. I accomplished this task by myself and at my own convenience. I had some sit with me at some parts to be free of error.

In 1972 Parpola came to Delhi for the Veda Conference [World Sanskrit Conference]. He came here as well then. He took with him the tapes of the *Sāmaveda*. Had I thought of the performance of *agni*, he asked. I also received Staal's letter. I talked to Nellikkattu Ākkitiri, Erkkara Raman Nambudiri and Taikkattu Vaidikan about this. After much calculation, I wrote that the cost for *vaidika* and *laukika* would come to Rs. 25,000. Staal was away in Japan and Nepal on official business at this time. Because of this, it was Parpola that handled all the correspondence.

Based on the estimates we had sent, Parpola wrote to the scholars of various lands asking for help and cooperation. He forwarded all the replies to me. Some had expressed doubts if all of the *yāga* could be recorded; some had wondered if foreigners could "come near". Some also pointed out that the estimate's amount would not be enough as the price of a gold sovereign had doubled in 1973 from its 1972 price of Rs. 120.

In 1973, there was a conference in France of scholars of Western culture and civilization. Parpola attended this conference. After consulting in this conference with many different scholars, the plans for the 1974 *agni* were postponed to 1975. Their expectations were that the promised donations will begin to come in the course of 1974.

Staal was staying in the mountains of Nepal in 1973. He came to Delhi in December to find out what happened to the efforts for the *agni*. It was certain

now that there would be no *agni* in 1974. Disappointed, even despairing, he went back to America without even seeing me in Kerala. He took over from Parpola the charge of planning and organizing work for the *agni*. By then an international *agnicayana* committee had taken shape. As is well known, a [Malayalam] translation of Parpola's circular of 5 February 1974 appeared in the October-November issue of the *Anādi*. This circular was sent to all the governments of the world. Many have made promises of help. We are still at work trying to raise donations.

In June 1974 I held another meeting with Erkkara on this matter. His opinions were optimistic and encouraging. At that juncture, Staal's letter came. He wrote that all the needed monies would be available in advance and the efforts for a 1975 *agni* should begin in earnest.

The first task was to make arrangements for the making of 1110 bricks. Toward that, a decision as to who is to be the *yajamāna* had to be first made. The length from the *yajamāna*'s toes to the tips of middle fingers of his hands raised stretched above his head as in worship of god must be measured and a measuring stick of this length must be made. The dimensions of *śālā*, bricks, *mahāvedi* and many other items are derived as a factor of the length of this measuring stick. I wrote to Erkkara to determine an auspicious day, the right venue and the *yajamāna* for the ritual [*kriyā*] of cutting this stick. Accordingly, Erkkara, Sree Krishna Sarma, I, Akkitham, Amettur met on June 29 at Taikkattu Vaidikan's residence. The person we had intended as the *yajamāna* was not there, however. He was brought. Due to ill health, he wanted to be relieved of the arduous position of the *yajamāna*, agreeing instead to undertake *hautram*. Efforts went on to find a person who was eligible to be *yajamāna*. I spoke to many people. I did not get proper replies from anybody. Meaning: nobody was ready. Suddenly it was the opinion of some great minds that the plan to film the *yāga* would detract from the purity of the intention behind the *yāga*; the purity of the ritual offering [*dravya*] would be compromised; the killing of the animal is violent and is a sin.

I believe it was in the 1140's [Malayalam calendar corresponding to 1960's], the time of registration at Sukapuram. It was the time when thousands of rupees were available from the Kathanoor-Shoranur Madhams. Eight *yāgas* took place from these monies. There was somehow no problem then of purity of intention for these great minds, no problem with the purity of oblations. And the killing of an animal was no violence. Now everything is

the opposite. I leave it to my readers to conclude about this sudden mysterious change in people. I am reminded of the story of the fox that decides that grapes are sour when it is not able to reach them despite all the jumping.

It was our desire to hold the *agni* at Taikkat as an *agni* has not taken place there in such a long time. When it became clear that this would not be possible, we went to Cerumukku house and met with Cerumukku Vallabhan Somayajippad. He said that there was not enough time for a 1975 *agni* and we should plan for the next year. I wrote this to Staal.

I received two letters from Staal, in October and November of 1974. The summary of the letters was this: under no circumstances can the *agni* be postponed. Many institutions, the government of Japan, and governments of many other countries have undertaken to help toward the *agni*. Many had already given money toward it. If it does not take place in 1975, it will never take place. This is a last chance.

Staal came here in December. We went and saw Cerumukku Vaidikan Somayajippad and Erkkara. It was decided that in this year itself, that is 1975, the *agni* will be performed, and that Cerumukku Nilakandan Somayajippad will be the *yajamāna*. Thus, preparations are under way for the *agni*, scheduled to take place at Panjal on April 12, 1975.

If we have Sukapuram Daksinamurthi's blessings, this and more will take place. Let us pray for them: *namaśśivāya śānthaye, śuddhāya paramātmāne, sacchidānanda rūpaya, dakṣiṇāmūrthaye namah.*