

# The Turning Point in a Living Tradition

## *Somayāgam 2003*

T. P. Mahadevan & Frits Staal

### *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.<sup>1</sup> It was preceded by “Ādhānam,” i.e., *agnyādhāna* or *punarādheya*, on April 6. The location of the ceremonies was the “Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam,” the Northern (*vadakke*) 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 *sainnyāsins* of which 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 “Agni” or *atirātra-agnicayana*. One of the many characteristic differences between the two rituals is that there are twelve “Soma-sequences” in the *somayāga* and twenty-nine in the *atirātra-agnicayana*. A soma sequence consists of a Sāma-veda chant (*stotra* or *stuti*, as the Nambudiris call it), ṚṚgveda recitation (*śāstra*), 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 *somayāga*, but all of them are not the same. And only a ritualist who has performed a Somayāga and become a Somayāji, is eligible for an Agnicayana and to become 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

<sup>1</sup> We are profoundly grateful to Vaidikan Taikkat Nilakanthan Nambudiri, Vaidikan for the 2003 Somayāgam, and to Shri O.N.Damodaran Nambudiripad, Vice President of the Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam, for welcoming us on the occasion of the Somayāgam performance and assisting us in countless ways. For assistance with the preparation of our article and answering numerous questions we thank again Shri O.N. Damodaran and especially Shri P. Vinod Bhattatiripad, Joint Convener of the yāga and CEO of [www.nambudiri.com](http://www.nambudiri.com). Credit for the photographs of Figs.1 and 3 is due to an unknown photographer at the site; for Fig.2 to Adelaide de Menil (Staal *et al.* 1983, I:365) and for Fig.4 to TP. This article is a revised version of the one that was published in the *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies (EJVS)* Vol. 10 - 1. With the exception of Section 6, all names are given in their customary modern Romanization.

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 *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 1994 *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. 1; Fig.2)

## 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, were transmitted outside literacy, as are 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. 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.

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 *pūrvasīkhā* Brahmans with their fronted top-knots and the second by the *aparāsīkhā* Brahmans, their top-knots toward the back of their heads, making a pony tail. The *pūrvasīkhā* 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 *aparāsīkhā*, is a later event dating from the Pallava age of Tamil history, from the 5<sup>th</sup> 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 *aparāsīkhā* 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 Agni, there would not have been one in 1990; but for 1990, there would not have been the 1994 *Agniṣṭoma*; but for 1994, 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 has now arrived and many of its members are eager to receive instruction, unlike a few decades before. They accept the value of the old tradition, realize that it was getting weaker, the expertise being thinner and distributed among fewer people, but also see a chance of earning a livelihood from *śrauta*.

Unlike the Tamil Brahman *agrahārams*, which are situated at the center of villages, almost all Nambudiri houses were, in the past, situated in the countryside. Ritual performances took place there, as in Panjal and Kundoor. The 1984 performance 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.<sup>2</sup> A township of 50,000 people, Trichur, with its celebrated Nambudiri-run *Vadakkunnātha* 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](http://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

<sup>2</sup> Since the name of this well known institution is generally romanized as Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam and often referred to as Brahmaswam Madham, we shall retain those appellations. A more detailed account of the Madham follows in Section #5.

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 is 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 Agni 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<sup>3</sup> their minuscule traditions 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 Subrahmaṇya – the one Sāmaveda priest whose task is limited to reciting the *subrahmaṇyāhvānam*. There has been an increasing demand for tape recordings made in the past and especially at the time of the 1975 performance.

3 Sigmund Freud called it "der Narzissmus der kleinen Unterschiede" (*Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 12, 169. We owe this reference to Dr. Geoffrey Masson).

Taikkat Vaidikan approached FS about ways and means of obtaining copies of all recordings he had made since 1957<sup>4</sup>.

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 *Ṛksamhitā* recitation continues to be strong, but the ritual does not follow the Samhitā 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 Samhitā*, 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 might have been 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* had 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 *ṛt-vigvarāṇam*, has to recite a set of mantras, the recitation is prompted by a student

4 The originals of these recordings, some of which have become brittle, are now at the Berkeley Language Center at the University of California, Berkeley, which has undertaken to digitize them and transfer them to CDs, other suitable electronic media, and ultimately place them on their website with “streaming” facility. A separate set of CD copies will be made for the Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam.

who stands next to him and recites each verse before him, after which he repeats it *ritually*. 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 Agniṣtoma, the Hotā has to recite six *śāstras*; and Maitrāvaruṇa, Brāhmānacchamsin 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 *prātaranuvāka* 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 perfection of his *śāstra* performances. Seated facing east along the *prṣṭhyā* 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 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 the angle of a larger triangle. At another angle of that large 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 the 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 Saṁhitā which has nothing to do with the difficulties of the *prātaranuvāka*. All it shows is that he may have been a little 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 *Vadakkunnātha* temple in Trichur where they would partake in the *naivedya* offerings and receive some training in Ṛgveda recitation. Subsequently they were accommodated in a separate building, the Vadakke Madham Brahmasvam or Brahmasvam Madham, where they received a more advanced education in *Ṛksamhitā* with *padapāṭha* and *vikṛti* recitations such as *krama*, *jaṭā*, etc. No doubt, most children had begun their *samhitā* 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. They 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 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 *śrautasamskāra*. 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 Udgātā, 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 upto the Trichur yāga, 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, Bhavathratan 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 *Vadakkunnātha* temple. Traditional *paḍ-cavādhyam* 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 Nambūtiri Gotra: Vaiśvāmitra. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 48.
Yajamānapatni:	Èhanya Pattinādi Antarjanam. Age: 39.
Adhvaryu:	Kāvapra Mārath Śankaranārāyaṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Āṅgirasa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 34.
Pratipasthātā:	Puthillam Jayarāman Nambūtiri Gotra: Kāśyapa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 49.
Nestā:	Nārās Vāsudēvan Nambūtiri Gotra: Kāśyapa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 20.
Unnetā:	Kāpra Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Āṅgirasa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 50.
Hotā:	Neddum Bhavatrāthan Nambūtiri Gotra: Kāśyapa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 52.

Maitrāvaruna:	Êkkara Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri. Gotra: Vaiśvāmitra. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 34.
Acchāvāka:	Kāpra Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Āṅgīrasa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 50.
Grāvastut:	Kīsmudayūr Paramēśvaran Nambūtiri Gotra: Kāśyapa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 57.
Udgatā:	Toṭṭam Kṛṣṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Vāsiṣṭha. Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 45.
Prastotā:	Toṭṭam Śivakaran Nambūtiri Gotra: Vāsiṣṭha. Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 38.
Pratihartā:	Maṅgalathēri Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Vāsiṣṭha. Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 58.
Subrahmaṇya:	Maṅgalathēri Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Vāsiṣṭha. Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 58.
Brahman:	Kariyaṇṇūr Divākaran Nambūtiri Gotra: Āṅgīrasa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 42
Brāhmanācchaṁsin:	Kuśiyāmkunnaṁ Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri Gotra: Vaiśvāmitra. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 27.
Agnīdhra:	Nārās Agnīsarman Nambūtiri Gotra: Kāśyapa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 53.
Potā:	Paṅṭaṁ Subrahmaṇyan Nambūtiri Gotra: Kāśyapa. Sūtra: Kauṣītaki. Age: 10.
Sadasya:	Pantal Damodaran Nambūtiri Gotra: Bhārgava. Sūtra: Baudhāyana. Age: 35.
Kautsan: (Soma merchant)	C. P. Rāmasvāmī 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 *aupāsanāgni* altar, was located to the north of the *āhavanīya*. FS asked the Baudhāyana Sadasya, who is also a Śulbaśāstrin, what its exact location should be and his answer was prompt: 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 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 episodes here haphazardly, many of them of a non-ritual nature, and beginning with the always spectacular *pravargya* ceremonies on the 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> day, when each time the flame shot up about 3 feet high. It did not satisfy the Maharashtrians 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 *yāgasālā*, 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 *yāgasālā*. It is of special interest, illustrating as it does not only the 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 soured into the nineties. The climax of the entire *yāga* began in the early hours of the 5<sup>th</sup> day, with the *prātaranuvāka* at 2.40 AM and the *saptahotr*, discussed in Section #4. With the *bahispavamāna* 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 Sutra is silent about their number, and so we hope that Jaiminīya specialists will throw light on the matter. (Fig.3)

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?<sup>5</sup> 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 *śastras* that continued on well into the next morning and early noon. The *avabhṛtha* 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 which included that of the media. Dakṣiṇāmūrti is the presiding deity of the temple at Sukhapuram village, the grāmam with which both the Taikkat and Cherumukku Vaidikan families are affiliated (Staal et al. I:175). It faces south as its name indicates. In the Taikkat *mana* there is also a Dakṣiṇāmūrti image, but it faces west since all shrines within Nambudiri houses face west. Whenever the Taikkat 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 tea-

5 The Sāmaveda Śrauta Sutras declare that the chanters can now eat and Caland & Henry, page 181, write: “il leur est permis de se livrer à un entretien mondain et de manger.” Baudhāyana Śrauta Sutra 14.9:169.2 seems to go further and mentions refreshments also for the hotā and his reciters (*hotrakāṇām saṁtarpaṇam*). It supports the thesis of Staal (forthcoming) that inside the *sadas*, after the *bahiṣpavamāna* is over, chanters and reciters came together ritually for the first time in the history, launching thereby the development of *śrauta*. But the idea of the ritual enclosure as a historical map (Fig.1 in that article and cf. Staal 1999 and 2001), though basically correct, stands in need of qualification. The *dhiṣṇya* shapes that correspond to the hearths that were excavated at Pirak do not come from the earliest *sadas*, but from a stage of *sadas* evolution that is intermediate between the *agniṣṭoma* (where they are mere mounds of earth: *khara*) and the *agnicayana* (which introduced kiln-fired bricks: *iṣṭakā*) since the *dhiṣṇya* bricks are sun-, not kiln-fired.

cher 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 of those who are in their thirties and forties; and the future generations include 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. In a presumptuously comparative spirit we might add, that Klaus Mylius, the *Jubilaris* of our *Festschrift*, and FS are coeval with the first group, TP with the second and the majority of our hoped-for 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 4.)

“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 Taikkat 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 Ṛg-vedins by birth: the families of Cerumukku and Taikkat. The 1975 performance was organized by Cherumukku 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 Somayāgam. 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 *agnicayana*, 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 Pratiprasthātā in 1975 and acquired the title of Somayajipad in 1994 after being Yajamāna of the Somayāgam that was performed at Trivandrum. 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 Akkitiripad.

“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 fulfill.

B6. Cherumukku Vallabhan Nambudiri.

Cherumukku 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 Cherumukku 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 *śāstra* 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 *śāstra* 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 and others have 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 their degree of expertise of Jaiminīya praxis which 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 *dīkṣā*, a most honorable duty exercised in 1975 by Erkkara himself. Officiating in 2003 as Sadasya at age 35, he is now an all-round 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 English. He has the entire *Ṛksamhitā* 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)

C12. Pandam Subrahmanyam Nambudiri.

Pandam Subrahmanyam could not have officiated on any earlier occasion but assumed the office of Potā in 2003 at age ten. In his performance of *āpyāyanam*, his thumb in bandage from a recent mishap, he looks over the Soma bundle at his preceptors, Cherumukku Vallabhan straight in front of him and Kapra Sankaranarayanan Somayajipad to the right of Cherumukku. 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 short black beard between the legs of the Soma stool, Taikkat Vaidikan, leaning forward and partly visible to his right, the face of the 1975 Hotā between Kapra and Cherumukku. Pandam Subrahmanyam's sprinkling of Soma with mantras, to which we have referred already, graces our title page.

### 9. Malayalam 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* and many more rolls of film now at the Smithsonian. Likewise, when there were morally, religiously and politically motivated protests by Gandhians, Jainas, and Communists against the sacrifici-

ce of real animals on the eve of the 1975 *agnicayana*, 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: *Anmāyamaḍhanam*, “The Churning of Tradition” (1976); *Ekāhasattraṅgal*, “Ekāha and Sattra Rituals” (1978); and *Śrautakarmavivēkaṁ*, “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, *Atirātrathinte kriyā saṁgrahaṁ* “Summary of the Ritual Acts of the Atirātra”, originally published in *Anādi* [3.3.3:8–12], which gives a step by step account of the entire ritual on the eve of the actual event. Essay #16 *yajōappaśu* 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 *Anmāyamaḍhanam* which won the Kerala Sahitya Academy prize for the year 1978. *Ēkāhīnasattraṅgal*, “Ekāha, Ahīna 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 Kauṣṭaki Brāhmaṇa from memory to E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma for his 1968 edition). This slim volume was much used by the commentators through the public address system. Erkkara's third book, *śrautakarmavivēkaṁ* “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 deals with the *rājasūya*.

Two other books of *śrauta* interest were *Śrauta śāstra pāraṁparyam kēralathil*, “The Science of Śrauta Tradition in Kerala,” of 1990 by the famous Malayalam poet Mahākavi Akkitham and Rajan Chungath's *Śrautam* of 2002. Polemical in tone and nature, Akkitham's 12 essays are devoted to plead the spiritual (*adhyāt-mika*) and material (*bhautika*) benefits of *śrauta* rituals against skeptical scientism.

Refuting the thesis that the entire tradition is retrogressive, Akkitham, 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 Akkitham'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 *yāgasālā*. Although a scientist himself, Chungath is content to report without comment the various "scientific claims" such as Dr. Ramachandran Nair's that there was "a measurable decrease in fungus, bacteria and other pathogens in the immediate vicinity of the *yāgasālā*."

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 Mēlathōl Agnihōtri, 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 20<sup>th</sup> century in what is generally accepted as a classic about Kerala folk lore, namely Śankunni Mēnōn's *Aitihyamāla*, "Garland of Legends."

Agnihōtri'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 Nambudiri 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 Agnihōtri a microcosm of the caste society of Kerala. All the children follow their caste functions: Agnihōtri, raised from infancy as a Nambudiri, performs 99 *yāgas* before age 35 and stops there only at Indra's intervention.

The Nambudiri tradition sees Mēlathōl Agnihōtri as re-establishing *śrauta* Vedism. It may have a basis in history: Mēlathōl may well be based on a historical figure who led or was associated with the *pūrvasīkhā* migration from its Cola heartland to Kerala in the fourth or fifth century CE during the Kalabhra interregnum. Tradition places him in the fourth century CE and he does have ties to the Kaveri river in legends.

In Sridevi's novel, Agnihōtri'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 takSaka/carpenter, another raised in a Tamil VII home is Vallar 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 Agnihōtri'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 Agnihōtri 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 Arimma, one of the 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 *Pūrvasīkhā* Brahman groups, such as the Dīkṣitars of Cidambaram and the *cōliya* Brahmans, performing *śrauta* rituals according to the same *śākhās* and sūtras of Kauṣītaki, Jaiminīya and Baudhāyana/Vādhūla (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.<sup>6</sup> 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 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 in order to show that Panjal was not the last performance and that Keralans themselves can sustain the tradition. The money needed for the ritual was raised principally by one person, a non-Nambudiri, Dr. T. I. Radhakrishnan. The 1994 Trivandrum Somayaga by and large followed the same model. The 2003 yāga would also have been cast in the same vein, but for the differences between Dr. Radhakrishnan and the Nambudiri *śrauta* leadership, now centering around 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

6 The term *para-* in that meaning has a venerable history in Kerala astronomy and mathematics which are also in large part a product of Nambudiri genius. The *Parahita* system of astronomical computation is based upon the *Āryabhaṭīya* and was introduced into Kerala in 683 CE. A Malayalam commentary explains the name as follows: *yātoru saṁskāram koṇṭu ellā janāṅhalkkum sammatām vannatināl parahitam ennu ā gaṇitattinnu pērum vanṇu*, “since this tradition of computation was accessible to all people, it acquired the name Parahitam” (Sarma, K.V. 1954: vi). A much earlier expression of a similar view occurs in texts such as the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (III.129) where the Buddha explains to his monks: “Three things are hidden and not public (*paṭicchannāni vahanti no vivaṭāni*): the wife, the mantras of Brahmins, and erroneous views. Three things shine in public and are not hidden (*vivaṭāni virocanti no paṭicchannāni*): the moon, the sun, and the *dharma* that has been expounded by the Tathāgata.”

TV crew and the public address system seemed to give the ritual an aspect of show. But the Nambudiri Dakṣiṇāmūrti was also there to open the event to ordinary people: hundreds came seeing it no doubt as a Hindu, rather than Vedic, ceremony and left money with a prayer. 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 which facilitates public participation, from ordinary citizens to the powers that be.

In a way, this resembles the history of *śrauta* tradition in India in the past. In earlier renewals, during Gupta, Pallava, Cola or Vijayanagara 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 Hindutva’s ideological strains.

The involvement of the public in the 2003 Somayāgam is not a product of the imagination of the present writers. It did not mean that there were open discussions on the value of Vedic ritual or that the ritual had entered what is nowadays sometimes called “the public sphere.” But that involvement is substantiated by the gate collections and donations 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 officiants 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 on the increase. To that ample testimony was borne by the 2003 Trichur *yāga*.

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*T. P. Mahadevan: More on pūrvasīkhā*

Placing our discussion of the 2003 Somayāgam in a wider perspective, G. Ehlers (2003) shows that the *pūrvasīkhā* is alluded to in TS 7.4.9 and other Vedic compositions as the coiffure worn by *sattrins* at the end of the *gavāmayana*. It must be assumed that the *sattrins* began their year-long ritual with a *pūrvasīkhā* tuft, the skull area around it shaved, but as the *sattrā* proceeded, the hair around the *pūrvasīkhā* tuft grew. This hair is shaved off at the conclusion of the *sattrā* leaving again the tuft. Ehlers points out that the texts compare these tufts to the new horns of cows—emerging in the tenth month, curving backward by the twelfth, the cows having been the original performers of this particular type of soma ritual. Two points may be made here with respect to Ehlers' comments.

1. These references may not be the first in Vedic texts. At RV 7.33.1a, the Vāsiṣṭhas are said to wear the *kaparda* on their right: *dakṣiṇaskaparda*. The later tradition tends to see this phrase as describing a *pūrvaśikhā* worn toward the right on the front of the head. Sāyaṇa is followed by O.M.C. Narayanan Nambudiri ([1982] 1995. Vol. 7: 264–265) and Vallathol (1982. 2:209), both authors adding that the Vāsiṣṭhas wore it to the right.

Witzel (1999:10) regards *kaparda* as probably non-Indo-Aryan, whereas the name of its wearers, Vāsiṣṭha, is decidedly Indo-Aryan: a case of an indigenous or non-Vedic hair fashion borrowed by the Vāsiṣṭhas? The *sattrins* of Ehlers' TS passage may well be Vāsiṣṭhas too. They are referred to in TS 7.4.7, a passage adjacent to Ehlers' citation. The Vāsiṣṭha gotra is common among the *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans of my forthcoming study.

2. Of great interest is Ehlers' discussion of the Vedic use of cow's horns as a metaphor for the *pūrvaśikhā*. Such a metaphoric link is attested in references to *pūrvaśikhā* in Sangam poetry except that the animal is the horse, with its mane replacing the cow's horns. Thus at KapilaR's AinkuRunūru 202 occurs the verse, in A. K. Ramanujan's translation (1985:9):

And all those horses of our man of the tall hills  
Have tufts of hair like the Brahmin urchins of our town.

At PommiṭiyāR's PuRanānūRu 310.11.6–7, G. Hart translates (1999:179): “the tuft on his head like mane of a horse”. Indeed this link between the horse's mane and *pūrvaśikhā* is common in Sangam poetry so much so that G. Hart (1999) has an individual entry for *kuṭumi*, the Tamil word for *pūrvaśikhā*, in the index of this volume. The Tamil *kuṭumi* originally signified the “summit of a mountain, top of a building, top of a building, crown of the head, a bird's crest” derived by Burrow and Emeneau from \**koti* for “banner, flag, streamer” and \**kotu* for “summit of a hill, a peak, a mountain” (DED 2049). N. Subrahmaniam (1966:287) has five entries for *kuṭumi* with a similar range of meanings and comparanda from a number of Sangam texts. It must be assumed that when the *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans arrived in the Tamil country in the Sangam period, the native term was extended in its referential range to include the top knot, suggesting acculturation of the immigrant Brahmans with the Tamil-speaking indigenes. Conversely, a process of Sanskritization was at work as well: a key figure in Sangam poetry is the Pandiyan king Paliyāgaśālai Mutukuṭumi Peruvaluti, performer of many *śrauta* rituals with *kuṭumi* in his very name, presumably with the *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans serving as his priests. It would seem to follow that *kuṭumi* signified at this period in Tamil history only the *pūrvaśikhā* mode but that its use broadened and came to include the *aparaśikhā*. In the end, the latter became the chief referent and when *pūrvaśikhā*

was intended, it had to be mentioned explicitly as in the common phrase of modern Tamil *mun kuṭumi*, “front (*mun*) tuft.”

*Abbreviations and Bibliography:*

- RV: *Ṛgveda-Samhitā*  
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