The Turning-Point in a Living Tradition

somayāgam 2003

by T. P. Mahadevan & Frits Staal

ISSN 1084-7561

http://dx.doi.org/10.11588/ejvs.2003.1.743
The Turning-Point in a Living Tradition

somayāgam 2003

T. P. Mahadevan & Frits Staal

Fig. 1. Potā sprinkling the Soma with mantras at āpyayanam.
1. Introduction
2. Background: The Oral Tradition of śrauta
3. Breathing New Life into a Tradition
4. Three potās, Four adhvaryus and Seven hotās
5. Preparation and Training
6. The yajamāna and his Priests
7. The Performance
8. Twelve Pillars of śrauta
9. Literature
10. Conclusion

Bibliography
1. Introduction

During April 7-12, 2003, a “somayāgam,” i.e., agniṣṭoma-somayāga, was performed by Nambudiri Brahmins in Trichur in central Kerala, formerly the Cochin State. 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 (vadakkē) of two Vedic institutions within Trichur town where the Rgveda has been taught to young pupils for four centuries or more. (The Southern Madham is for saṁnyāsins 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), Rgveda 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 Brahmins in the Palghat valley, a gap in the Western Ghats that separates Tamilnad and Kerala from each other. These Brahmins 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.

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 Rgveda, 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 śrautā 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 aparāśikhā 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 aparāśikhās, 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 aparāśikhā 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 Rgveda 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 Brahmawsm at Trichur. A township of 50,000 people, Trichur, with its celebrated Nambudiri-run Vatakunnātha 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 Brahmawsm 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 Rgveda recitations and Yajurveda mantras and kriyās, whatever their Veda of birth. All recent performances have been organized by Vaidikans who belonged to the Kauśītaki school of the Rgveda. Major Yajurveda officiants such as the
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 subrahmanyaḥvānam. 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 Śāmaveda 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 rks within a given hymn and requires extraordinary transformations to which the rks 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 *Rgvedins* 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 ṛṣṭoma 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 *grhya* and more fully in *śrauta*, prompting works as follows. If the designated priest, who had been elected at *rtvigvaranam*, 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 assistants of the prompter, the prompter himself and finally the officially elected *adhvaryu*.

The use of prompting is not allowed in the case of the *śastras*, which consist of *rks* culled from different hymns of the *Rgveda*. They are often long and the sequence of the *rks* that make up a given *śastra* 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 *rks* should be recited within a single breath. In the *agniṣṭoma*, the *hotā* has to recite six *śastras*; and *maitrāvaruṇa*, *brāhmaṇācchāmsins* and *acchāvāka* two each. There was a general feeling that the *maitrāvaruṇa* had problems with control of breath, but the *hotā*’s *śastra* 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 Rgvedic verses, picked, as in a śastra, from different hymns of different books, and arranged in an order different from that in the Rgveda. The hotā’s delivery of the prātaranuvāka did not match the excellence of his śastra performances. Seated facing east along the prāṭhyā 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 Rgveda 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 Rgveda 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 ēkṣ 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 Rgveda 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 Vatakunnatha temple in Trichur where they would partake in the naivēdyā offerings and receive some training in Rgveda recitation. Subsequently they were accommodated in a separate building, the Vadakke Madham Brahmasvam or Brahmasvam Madham, where they received a more advanced education in rk samhītā with padapāṭha and vikṛti recitations such as krama, jaṭā, etc. No doubt, most children had begun their samhītā 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 rivik 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 śrautasamśkāra. 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 Rgveda 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 Vatakunnatha temple. Traditional pajañavādhyam 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


adhvarya: Kāvapra Mārath Śankaranārāyaṇaṃ Naṃbūtiri

pratipaśṭātā: Puthillaṃ Jayarāma Naṃbūdiri

nēṣṭā: Nārās Vāsudēva Naṃbūtiri

unnēṭā: Kāpra Nārāyaṇa Naṃbūtiri
hotā
Gotra: kāśyapa.
Sutra: Kauśitaki. Age: 52.

maitrāvaruṇa:
Gotra: vaiśvāmitra.
Sūtra: Kauśitaki. Age: 34.

acchāvāka:
Gotra: āṅgirasa.

grāvastut:
Gotra: kāśyapa.

udgātā:
Gotra: vāsiṣṭha.
Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 45.

prastotā:
Gotra: vāsiṣṭha.
Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 38.

pratihartā:
Gotra: vāsiṣṭha.
Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 58.

subrahmaṇya:
Gotra: vāsiṣṭha.
Sūtra: Jaiminīya. Age: 58.

brahman
Gotra: āṅgirasa.
Sūtra: Kauśitaki. Age: 42

brāhmaṇacchaṁsin
Kužiyāmkunnaṁ Nārāyaṇan Naṅbūtiri

agnidhra:  Nārāś Agniśarman Naṃbūtiri

potā:  Pāṇṭam Subrahmanyan Naṃbūtiri

sadasya:  Pantal Dāmōdaran Naṃbūtiri

kautsan  C. P. Ramaswamy
(soma merchant)

7. The Performance

Since the yajamāna had not kept his fires burning, the ritual performance had to start with punarādheya/agnyādhāna or ādhānām. It took place on April 6 outside the prācīnavaṃśa 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 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 arāṇi stick, drilling it into a hole in the lower arāṇi. 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 Maharasthra. 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 worshiping 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 saptahotṛ, discussed in section 4. With the bahīspavamāna 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 sarpana cortège 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 bahispavamāna was followed by another unexpected scene. The priests did not only resume their sarpana 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 bahispavamāna 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 śastras that continued on well into the next morning and early noon. The avabhrītha bath occurred only late afternoon on April 12 and it was almost nightfall when the sālā 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
dakṣiṇāmurti 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 dakṣiṇāmurti 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 Rg- 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 Rgvedins 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).


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 śastra 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).


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 Kauśitaki Rgvedin 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.

“Ākkitiri” 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.


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.


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.


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
competence 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.


Damodaran, the Pantal Vaidikan, final member of our core group, is not the
least. He is not by birth a Kauśitaki Ēṛgvedin 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 praśārtham addressed to the
yajamāna after his diksa, a most honorable duty that was exercised in 1975
by Erkkara himself. Officiating in 2003 as sadasa 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. Sankaranarayan

Kavapra Sankaranarayan, the prātaranuvāka expert, and the eighteen year-
old son of Kavapra Marath Sankaranarayan Somayajippad (A4), is a very
bright student of Sanskrit and fluent in English. He has the entire ērk Samhita
behind him and is on the threshold of viṅkti mastery. The 2003 hotā was all
deerence to him although Sankaranarayan was his prompter and more
than thirty years his junior.
Fig. 4. Members of the younger generation, including bespectacled Sankaranarayanan.


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 agnistoma 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 yāgasālā, 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: Ānmāyamaḍhanam, “The Churning of Tradition” (1976); Ekāhīnasathraggal “Ekāha and Sattra Rituals” (1978); and śrautakarmavivēkām, “The Investigation of Śrauta Rituals” (1983). The first one, now rare and out of print, is a collection of 18 essays, some from the śrūti magazine Anādi, “Beginningless,” he started in 1973. The first eight essays contain a survey of śrūti 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 samgrahām “Summary of the Ritual Acts of the Atirattra”, 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 mahāśayamār “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 ānmanyamadhanam which won the Kerala Sahitya Academy prize for the year 1978. Ekāhinasatragñal, “Ekāha and Sattra Rituals,” is made up of 85 paragraph-length vignettes on all matters śrauta: the three kinds of śrauta rituals, (ekāha, ahaṇa 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 stūtis and śastras; the three savanas. Some of these are brief Brāhmaṇa-like expositions (no wonder: let us remember that Erkkara dictated the entire Kauśītaki 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 cāturmāsyā 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 śastra pāramparyam kēralathil, “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 śrāutism, and his profusely illustrated book easily fills the need for a handbook on the subject for an inquisitive layman. Of special interest is Chungnath’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 Mēžathōḻi agnihotri, 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 nāmbūdīri 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 paṟaya (“Pariah”) woman. Abandoned at birth by a river bank, the infant is rescued and raised as a Nambudiri by a Nambudiri woman. The Brahman-paṟaya 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 Āḻavancheri 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 Tiruvaḷḷuvar, already noted, can be added Pāṇanār, the bard figure of the Sangam poetry and Kāraikkal Amma, an early śaivite näyanār. 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 dīksitars of Cidambaram and the cōliya Brahmans, performing śrauta rituals according to the same sākhās and sūtras of Kauśitaki Rgveda, Jaiminiya 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 Panjal *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.

**Bibliography**


**Malayalam**


