

3. METHODS AND FIELD-WORK

STUDYING AN ANCIENT LITERATE CIVILIZATION

Colonial anthropology in India in the 19th century was mainly concerned with imposing a meaningful order on the variety of Indian reality and determining a hierarchy which could be used by the British administrators. Physical anthropology and 'indexical' evidence were emphasized. To free themselves from the intimacy of the academic and administrative investigation, some scholars at the turn of the century shifted focus from caste society towards tribes. This also seemed to fit better with the emerging stress on an anthropology based on field-work in a small-scale society. After independence, academic interest predominantly shifted to detailed village ethnographies among caste society. (Pinney 1990a: 252-261.)

Another branch of research, Indology or the philological study of ancient Indian written texts, languages and culture, has been strong for more than two centuries. In 1786, Sir William Jones pointed out similarities between Sanskrit, Persian, Latin and Greek and thus gave a decisive impulse to the comparative study of Indo-European languages and therewith the birth of modern linguistics. Jones also translated into English some of the best known Sanskrit classics, Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā, Jayadeva's Gītagovinda and Manu's Laws, while Henry Thomas Colebrooke published many pioneering studies at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, including the first knowledgeable essay on the Vedas. (Jones 1799; Colebrooke 1837; Windisch 1917: 23-36.)

These two lines of study were largely kept separate for a long time. Robert Redfield was one of the first anthropologists to combine the sociological and philological approaches in general. M. N. Srinivas published the first anthropological monograph to show how a Great Tradition could be analyzed within a social anthropological framework. Since then, many scholars have combined the use of textual sources with field observation of social life in their work. While Louis Dumont admits that old Sanskrit texts should not be used indiscriminately, he criticizes the tendency to exaggerate the contribution made by direct observation alone. In his opinion, the distance between what field studies reveal and what the ancient sources provide is likewise exaggerated. (Srinivas 1952; Redfield 1956; Singer 1972: xii-xiii, 6; Dumont 1972: 67-68.) I believe that it is fruitful, especially



Fig. 6. IR studying his palm-leaf manuscripts. Photo AP 1971.

when studying the Nampūtiris, to be aware of the textual evidence, as the Nampūtiris themselves are.

In the study of literate civilizations, then, old texts and present conditions should be compared in order to understand the interaction between the underlying pattern and the reality. According to Francis L. K. Hsu,

...the main effort should be concentrated neither on the overall idea, pure and simple, nor on the localized reality of any particular time and place, but on the interaction between the ideal and reality and on the significance of both in terms of the whole. For example, in the case of India, the sacred books and most of the literary creations such as myths, folk tales, dramas, novels, etc., probably express aspects of the ideal more than reality. The contemporary facts garnered in different parts of the country, either by the sociological technique of topical inquiry or by the anthropological technique of community study, naturally approximate reality more than ideal. It is imperative that we attempt to ascertain the link between them in any literate society. (Hsu 1970: 528.)

McKim Marriot and Ronald B. Inden do not consider Hindu writings to be ethnographic or descriptive, nor do they see them merely as records of the 'ideal

culture' or prescriptive. They see them as records of the cognitive concepts, statements of categories and their relationships, the ways of thinking of reflective, educated Hindus. They use them as analytical sociological models, and prefer to read them literally rather than symbolically. Codes, observed behaviour, or informants' statements may be looked at as different aspects of a single reality of ordered phenomena. (Marriott & Inden 1977: 229; Kolenda 1978: 68.)

Studying a group of people which has been as rule-oriented as the Nampūtiris requires consideration of the fundamental question in social anthropology of the role of the social system *contra* that of the acting individuals. Instead of an either/or attitude towards this question I have adopted a more flexible one inspired by Pierre Bourdieu. I study the social system which tends to preserve the society practically unchanged, the choices which acting individuals or groups have within the structure, the struggle between the orthodox and those who want to change the system, and the capacity of individuals or groups to change social rules. (Cf. Bourdieu 1977; Høiris 1993: 43-46.)

Talking about Hindu transactions, Marriott says that codes for conduct (*dharma*) are naturally embodied in actors, and that the separability of action from actor, code from substance, norm from behaviour, is generally absent in Indian thought. Those who transact, as well as what and how they transact, are thought to be an inseparable substance-code, the term being used for the belief in the non-duality of all such pairs as listed above. Further it is assumed, according to Marriott, that there is a constant circulation of particles of substance-codes, and an inevitable transformation of all natural entities by combinations and separations of their substance-codes. (Marriott 1976: 109-110.)

Code and substance, then, would not be separable and substance-code would be in constant transformation. But Indian thought has also created texts, oral and written, in which codes for conduct are embedded. The oldest texts are considered to be superhuman and eternal truth, and the human commentary on these texts is also considered to be sacred. Therefore there has been an effort to preserve the ancient texts in an unchanging form for thousands of years, and there were effective and reliable memorizing techniques even before the texts were written down. An embracing code for transactions among the differentiated genera of beings inheres in the Brahman (cf. Marriott 1976: 113), but likewise it can be thought to inhere in some texts. And a code, in a well memorized or written form, and substance, can have a separate existence.

With this in mind I have compared, as separate from each other, observed and reported behaviour on the one hand and the codes that continue to exist in a completely or relatively constant form on the other. Another matter is that there can be several variants of texts of nearly the same or different age.

The continuous interaction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition expressly discussed since the early 1950s by Robert Redfield, Milton Singer, M. N. Srinivas, McKim Marriott et alii, is related to my theme of change.

The Great Tradition was the world of Sanskrit written texts, by means of which the literati throughout South Asia communicated with each other, by means of which they created the rules, the high ideals, that they thought all people should follow. The Little Tradition was the mass of village praxis and local lore, all the unwritten (or largely unwritten) 'manners, customs, and ceremonies' by means of which ordinary people ordered their lives, the multiplicity of contexts in which the rules of the texts might or might not be more or less enacted. (Trawick 1990: 23.)

Text and context, ideal and experience are names for the two poles. But as Singer (1972: 4) pointed out, the distinction between textual and contextual is not equivalent to Redfield's distinction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition, because the former refer to methodological approaches and the latter to the cultural content of two aspects of culture. Still, the Great Tradition tends to be stored in texts, oral or written, sung or acted.¹⁰

In this study I compare my observations with classic and regional texts, which reveal how the Indians in general and the Kerala Nampūtiris in particular think, and how they see their reality. Whether the special Kerala rules, which will be discussed later, should be considered as Great or Little Tradition is ambiguous, as they are Sanskrit texts obviously written by the learned Brahmins, but represent local custom. As such they might be seen as a result of an interaction between the two.

Two different ways of change, originally viewed as two paradoxical processes presenting a dilemma, are commonly recognized in India since Srinivas's work on the Coorgs: Sanskritization/traditionalization and Westernization/modernization. Sanskritization refers to the tendency of some lower castes, in their effort to raise their social status, to move toward greater traditionalization, like adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, as a result of modernizing forces such as literacy and urbanization. Village ritual and pantheon are also Sanskritized. Thus local deities are assimilated to the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, such as Śiva or Pārvatī. By Sanskritization one originally understood lower caste emulation of the Brahmin life style. Later the term was broadened to refer to the emulation of the style of dominant castes of any higher *varṇa*. (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: ix; Srinivas 1952: 30; Alexander 1968: v; Hsu 1973: 531; Kolenda 1978: 99-100.)

¹⁰ Lars Kjærholm (1986: 123-124) claims that the study *Les Dieux et les Hommes* by Marie-Louise Reiniche (1979) demonstrates how much damage the Great-Little tradition dichotomy has done to the study of religion in India, as it gives more weight to some parts of the intricate structure which is Hinduism, and in an arbitrary fashion declares some parts of the whole to have greater importance than others. But in my opinion, the distinction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition is an excellent means for explaining the unity in the immense variety existing in Indian culture.

Y. B. Damle (1962-63) applied the reference group theory, developed by, for instance, Robert K. Merton (1959), for comprehending the underlying similarity in these seemingly paradoxical processes. Hsu (1973: 531-532), too, introducing the concept of time lag, was able to incorporate traditionalization into the modernization process, because in their status-raising efforts low-caste groups take as their model the higher castes at least as they used to behave, even if the latter may have already moved towards emulating modern Western life style.

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD

Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim proposed a sociology based on the assumption of society-wide principles having analytic priority and structuring smaller-scale social phenomena. The outside-in ethnography strategy is well established in Indian studies, and Louis Dumont's work is a well known example of this. The opposite approach, focusing on an inside-out ethnography, can be said to have its roots in Max Weber's sociology. (Cf. Gray & Mearns 1989: 18-19.)

A number of scholars working on South Asia have taken an inside-out perspective in studying complex societies. T. N. Madan (1989: 11) refers to the post-structuralist phenomenological turn in theoretical orientation, in its attention to the native point of view, as holding the promise of a revival of interest in the concrete. These scholars have given 'ethnographic priority' to the household, while not denying the benefit of the complementary outside-in perspective. (Gray & Mearns 1989: 13, 18-21, 24.)

Establishing the distinction between household and family, Adrian C. Mayer (1960: 177, 182) defines household as consisting of those people who share a cooking hearth, pool their incomes and have their living expenses in common. Other anthropologists mention that a household is meaningful if not structurally oriented by kinship reckoning (Gray & Mearns 1989: 22). A household is thus understood as a confluence of three forms of social relations, that of kinship, production and consumption. This means that kinship is not a necessary or sufficient condition of membership in a household, as even other people can be incorporated, but that it provides a core for the structural and conceptual dimensions.

While production is the second matrix of the household, there may be different arrangements in which either all earnings, only part of them, or possibly none of them, are pooled by its members. Following the Hindu concept of the *gṛhastha āśrama*, the life stage of the householder, John N. Gray and David J. Mearns suggest a holistic conception of the household, which includes its procreative, sacrificial, productive and distributive functions. The sharing of the cooking hearth and commensality, again, Gray and Mearns suggest to be a metonym of the general

right of membership to household income for the provision of all culturally defined subsistence needs. (Gray & Mearns 1989: 22-24; Sharma 1989: 44.)

Oscar Lewis, who was a pioneer, published case studies of five Mexican families in 1959. He shifted focus from primitive and preliterate peoples to peasants and urban dwellers of underdeveloped countries, and from communities or individuals to families. He tried to give the reader an intimate picture of them through the minute observation of their typical daily life. Lewis combined this with three other approaches, namely, comparative and analytical, autobiographical, and one where he selects for intensive study a particular problem. According to Lewis, selecting one day as the unit of study provides an excellent medium for combining the scientific and humanistic aspects of anthropology.

An intensive study of families has many methodological advantages. A family is a natural unit of study, a small social system, which lends itself to the holistic approach of anthropology. Moreover, says Lewis, it helps to get beyond form and structure, to see individuals, not stereotypes and averages. (O. Lewis 1959: 1-5.) Lewis made full use of the autobiographical method in his later studies.

In the 1970s studies of sexuality and women brought family and household more into focus. Jean Briggs (1970) based her intimate and personal one-family-study, a portrait of an Eskimo family, on her field-work in 1963 and 1965. The trend has continued, and a South Asian example is the study of love in an Indian family by Margaret Trawick (1990).

My work belongs to that genre of studies which takes as its starting point one or a few families or households in a complex society. Apart from an inside-out approach I find it enlightening, for instance, to start from typically Indian thought systems, principles and explanations, and see how they are manifested in concrete cases. The Marxist analysis, again, has given me inspiration in its concern with the way cultural ideas serve political and economic interests.

SOURCES AND FIELD-WORK

Sources

The main text to which I relate the observed reality is the *Śāṅkara-Smṛti* ('Śaṅkara's Laws') also called *Laghudharmaprakāśikā*. I have almost exclusively made use of the fourth section of the twelfth chapter of the *Śāṅkara-Smṛti* which enumerates the so-called 64 *anācāras* or 'irregular customs' followed by the Nampūtiris. They are also referred to at times as *keralācāras*, 'customs of Kerala', as they are believed to be modes of behaviour peculiar to Kerala. I will refer to this set of rules as Śaṅkara's rules.

According to one tradition, the *Śāṅkara-Smṛti* is believed to have been promulgated at Kollam on the 25th August 825 AD by the Śaṅkarācārya, the greatest

authority of the Advaita Vedānta system of religious philosophy, for the opening portion of the work gives the author as an ascetic called Śaṅkara. The work also declares itself to be based on a *Bhārgava-Smṛti*, attributed to Paraśu-Rāma, an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, and the legendary creator of Kerala. (Cf., e.g., Logan 1951: 155; Iyer 1977: 42.) According to F. Fawcett, the 'irregular customs' were said to have been promulgated about 1100 AD.

William Logan (1951: 156) came to the conclusion that Śaṅkarācārya could not have promulgated the 64 rules, because (according to the most recent authorities of his day) he was not alive on the 25th August 825 AD. Other sources, however, continued to consider the author to be this great reformer (cf., e.g., Fawcett 1900: 54; Iyer 1977: 42). The period when Śaṅkarācārya lived is usually quoted as 788-810 or 820. The well-known Vedānta scholar Hajime Nakamura (1983: 89), however, refraining from giving any exact dates, concludes that Śaṅkara was active during the early half of the 8th century. Without discussing the details, Kunjunni Raja (1980: 243) speaks of the work as having been wrongly attributed to the great Śaṅkara.

Ullur S. Parameswara Iyer (quoted in S. V. Iyer 1977: 42) suggests that the author could be another person, namely Śaṅkarapūjyapāda, a Nampūtiri who lived in the 14th century. If the power of the Nampūtiris did not begin to grow significantly until the 12th century, as has been suggested, and if they only then started to avail themselves of the matrilineal polyandrous system of other castes, a system which it can be supposed was already in existence, then it is also obvious that the earlier Śaṅkara cannot be meant. This is shown by the rules AP 60-62 where the Nampūtiri and Nāyar inheritance systems are already referred to.

I came across Śaṅkara's rules in several works as English translations. F. Fawcett (1900: 54-56), Edgar Thurston (1909, V: 185-189), and L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer (1912, II: 262-266) give the rules in nearly identical form. A translation which appeared in the 19th century, that found in Logan's work *Malabar* (Logan 1951: 156-157), might be the basis for Fawcett's translation, if he did not have a Sanskrit or Malayalam text to hand. Logan himself (1951: 155) refers to other earlier versions. He specifies one of them, to be found in the *Indian Antiquary* 4 (1875), p. 255[-256]. Looking up this reference, one finds N. Sankunni Wariyar's review of 'Keralācharām' [sic], or the Practice of Malabar (Calicut 1866, 19 pp.)¹¹. Logan says that his own version is derived from personal communication with men learned in such matters. On the whole, Logan, Fawcett, Thurston and L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, present the same interpretation of the rules. They have even been numbered in practically the same way. Wariyar's version has some devi-

¹¹ It has proved impossible to procure the original pamphlet that N. Sankunni Wariyar is referring to, but I will make some use of the version of the rules that Wariyar has given in his review.

ating details which call for attention. There is, however, a recent and more deviant translation and interpretation by S. Venkitasubramonia Iyer (1977). The rules are not numbered in this source, and it is not always possible to point to a corresponding rule in the previous ones.

To be on safer ground as to the meaning of the rules, I asked AP to try and find a text giving the rules in the original language. After a few years he got hold of the only existing edition printed in Malayalam characters (Paramēśvaran Mūssatū 1905/06). It appeared that the rules had not been numbered in this Sanskrit text, and that it is possible to divide the text in different ways into 64 individual rules.

To give the reader an opportunity to make independent judgments, I will present in an appendix (1) the original Sanskrit text with (2) its Malayalam commentary in AP's transcription, and then (3) the rules as interpreted by AP in English, including AP's suggestion of how to divide the text into 64 individual rules¹². This division is indicated throughout in the text by putting the letters AP in front of the number. Then (4) I will quote the rules as translated in Logan (1951: 156-157), with Fawcett's (1900: 54-56) minor changes and comments. Finally the rules given and grouped by S. Venkitasubramonia Iyer will be discussed and compared with the other sets (5). AP's interpretation is taken as the basic set of the rules which is referred to. It will appear from the discussion in the appendix that the most frequently quoted interpretations and translations of the rules may not be the most reliable ones.

By the nature of their title, the 64 rules could be expected to be peculiar to the Nampūtiris of Kerala. However, according to Fawcett (1900: 57), four of them, and according to S. V. Iyer (1977: 42-43), most of them, with only a few exceptions, are common to all Brahmins. I asked the opinion of Professor E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma on this matter, when I went through the rules with him in 1992. He selected 16 rules¹³ which in his opinion were peculiar to Kerala, the remaining rules, which are the majority, being common to the rest or a large part of India.

The rules and customs enumerated by Śaṅkara tell about the rituals and social conduct of the Nampūtiris, their intra- and inter-caste pollution, cleanliness and bodycare, dress, food, women and different life stages. They also refer to other castes. Many rules have relevance in several categories and could be discussed in

¹² AP checked his translation by consulting our late friend Professor E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma, who was a Tamil Brahmin born and brought up in Kerala (A. Parpola 1995: 16).

¹³ Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1998: 175), commenting on my article 'Kerala Brahmins and Śaṅkara's laws' (M. Parpola 1998), presumes that the selection of sixteen rules peculiar to Kerala by E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma is dictated by a numerical preference rather than objective facts. This may often be the case in India, but here it is not so: my respected informant was certainly not aware of what the total number of rules peculiar to Kerala would be when, reading them aloud to him one by one, I asked him if the rules, according to his personal opinion, were valid in Kerala alone.

many different contexts. For instance, the prohibition of eating the food offering made to Śiva has to do with religious practices, food and pollution. In each case I have had to make a choice, because I have not found an original grouping of them according to Nampūtiri thought and categories. A representative of India, S. V. Iyer, it is true, classifies the rules into six groups, though, he says, no such order is followed in the text. (Iyer 1977: 43ff.) This classification, however, is the work of an outsider, a scholar, not a representative of the Nampūtiris, and therefore I have chosen not to follow it.

I have come across another set which claims to present 64 features peculiar to Kerala, namely that given by Dr. Hermann Gundert, a German missionary and a great scholar of the Malayalam language. Gundert's *Schriften und Berichte aus Malabar*, published for the first time in 1983 from his manuscripts, mainly goes back to the time that he spent in Malabar between 1836 and 1859. The book (Gundert 1983: 120-126) contains this set of 64 customs with the title *Keral'-achara-sancshepam* (better – *anachara* – 'miscustoms'). These customs have undoubtedly come into Gundert's hands as a Malayalam manuscript, as he often gives a word or words in parenthesis in this script and language. The rules also refer to Śaṅkarācārya, but do not claim to be his famous set of rules.

The contents of these Malayalam rules are partly the same as those by Śaṅkara, but some rules are quite different and others are missing. Evidently these rules are not based on the same Sanskrit text as are the other sets of 64 rules discussed above. On the other hand Fawcett's translation sometimes seems to have been influenced by this Malayalam set of rules. It is possible that for the translation of the rules the assistance of a native speaker of Malayalam who knew the Malayalam rules as well has been used.

It is clear then that at least two, and probably even more, sets of special rules for Kerala have existed side by side. It is, as I said before, presumed that Śaṅkara's rules were compiled in the 14th century. It can be assumed that the set published by Gundert was compiled considerably later, at a time when the Europeans had an established high position in Kerala. This is revealed by the custom numbered 63, in which it is said that Europeans, etc. pollute only by touch, i.e. not by sight and proximity. Appendix 6 repeats this other set of 64 rules, giving in parenthesis not the key-words in Malayalam script as in the original, but AP's transcription of the words. I will refer to this set as 'Kerala customs according to Gundert'.

It is interesting to note that some Nampūtiris are still aware of the existence of *Śaṅkara-Smṛti*. I will quote a letter to me from November 1985, dictated by Śrī Muṭṭattukkāṭṭu Iṭṭi Ravi Nampūtiri (henceforth IR) and translated into English and written down by Muṭṭattukkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Subrahmaṅyan Nambudiri (henceforth MS).

I have got a manuscript of Śāṅkara-Smṛti (Sanskrit in Malayalam script)¹⁴. You know, we had a living tradition. We learned from our elders what to do and what not to do. Of course we knew about 'Śāṅkara-Smṛti', but we had not felt the need to study it as tradition had already taught us and we were following those rules. This was the case when I was a boy. You know the present situation. These rules have no social relevance now. It is up to the individual and the family whether to follow or not to follow the rules – of course only the rules which are not against law.

A much younger man Muṭṭattukkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Nārāyaṇan Nampūtiri (henceforth Uṅṅi), IR's cousin's grandson, writes in 1986:

I don't know much about Śāṅkara-Smṛti and about the 64 *anācāras*. – We are referring to Manu-Smṛti.

He refers, not to the rules peculiar to the Nampūtiris in Kerala, but to Manu's Laws, one of the ancient Dharmaśāstras applicable to all Aryans from ancient times, much earlier than Śāṅkara-Smṛti, and well known all over India. This means that the Vedic and classical Hindu background and texts, common to all Brahmins of India, are also relevant for my study. For instance, pollution rules included in the ideology of these texts overlap with my special sources. As I am trying to study not only the ideal culture (or the cognitive concepts) of the Nampūtiris and the relationship of this with their actual behaviour, but also to seek some evidence of the actual situation in different time levels, I will refer to some published sources from the beginning of the 20th century.

One important source is the article on Nampūtiris in the *Madras Government Museum Bulletin* of 1900 by F. Fawcett, Superintendent of Government Railway Police, Madras, and local correspondent of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. The author states that his notes are an attempt to describe the people as they actually are, and not as they are supposed to be in the books on Hinduism. The notes are said to be the result of the author's field-work during three and a half years in Malabar, and he states that books have not been consulted except where the fact has been notified. (Fawcett 1900: 2; 1901: v.)

In *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras 1909), in the chapter on the Nampūtiri Brahmins, Edgar Thurston, Superintendent of the Government Museum, Madras (Fawcett 1900: 2) and Superintendent of Ethnography for southern India, says that with the exception of the notes by Mr. N. Subramani Aiyar his article is a reproduction, with very slight changes, of Mr. Fawcett's account (Thurston 1909, I: ix-x; V: 152, 154 footnotes).¹⁵

Another early source is L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer's *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin* 1909-12. This work has the advantage of having been written by a native

¹⁴ AP never saw this among the manuscripts belonging to our hosts.

¹⁵ I have not been able to get my hands on N. Subramani Aiyar's notes in *Malabar Quarterly Review* 7(1) (1908), in spite of the efforts of the Helsinki University Library, but I have used his information through Thurston's book also concerning other castes.

of India who had an official position under the Cochin government. He was Superintendent of the Cochin Ethnographical Survey at Trichur, the city that was the centre of the district where we did most of our field-work. However, it is often difficult to know whether a piece of information comes through the author's own experience or from another source. His text echoes other sources even when he does not give a reference. The works of the above authors can be seen as the tail-end of the codifying attempt of British colonial anthropology in the 19th century (Keane 1909: lxvii; Pinney 1990a: 261).

Although the census reports of the 19th century and of the turn of the century are criticized as being unsatisfactory on some points (cf., e.g., Dumont 1972: 188), such as how they emphasize and make more rigid some aspects of caste, and present an unchanging view of society (cf., e.g., Bayly 1990a: 130), they are a useful starting point for a discussion of the different groups in Kerala.

From the 1960s we have valuable information concerning the Nampūtiris in the works of Joan P. Mencher and Helen Goldberg.

Two important unpublished sources that I have frequently consulted are the memoirs – commissioned by AP – of IR and Śrī Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Nīlakaṅṅhan Akkittirippāṭṭu (henceforth NNA), IR's old Nampūtiri neighbour and distant relative, who was referred to as the most orthodox Nampūtiri in the village. The former of these memoirs was partly written in Malayalam by IR himself, and partly dictated by him and written down in Malayalam and translated into English by IR's eldest living son MS. The latter memoirs were dictated by NNA, and written down in Malayalam and translated into English by his son Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Vāsudēvan Nampūtiri. Both memoirs are being prepared for publication; in my work the references are to the manuscripts.

An important source for the traditional life of the Nampūtiris is the memoirs of Kāṅṅippayyūr Śāṅṅkaran Nampūtirippāṭṭu (1963) in three volumes, but as they have been published in Malayalam alone, I have been able to consult only some parts through the English translation that is being prepared by AP and G. Gopinathan (started in 1997).

In the following, then, I am going to take one source in particular, Śāṅṅkara's rules, along with some more ancient texts, as the ideal and baseline against which to compare the behaviour of the Nampūtiris that I study. I also use general information about the Nampūtiris, as given in sources from the beginning of the 20th century and later, to compare the present situation with. I will also enquire whether the Kerala customs according to Gundert are known to have been followed by the Nampūtiris, and if so, whether they are still followed. As I have information concerning one Nampūtiri family over several generations, although not on the same level of intensity for all generations and all topics, I am going to take this time span to trace continuity or change in the areas covered by the sources used as a baseline.

My information comes through IR's and NNA's memoirs of the several generations that they describe, and through my own work up to the present day.

The focus of my work

Only 1-2% of the Nampūtiris of Kerala, less than twenty families, belong to the Sāmaveda. Most Sāmavedins in India belong to the Kauthuma school. In the latter half of the 19th century A. C. Burnell discovered the existence of another major branch of the Sāmaveda, called Jaiminīya or Talavakāra, which still flourished in south India. (Renou 1947: 87-129; Staal 1961; A. Parpola 1973: 6-7; 1985: 7.)

AP has endeavoured to chart the distribution of the Jaiminīya Sāmaveda Brahmins, and to study the history, manuscripts and rituals of this rare school. One of the few Jaiminīya villages is Panjal in the Trichur district of Kerala. Frits Staal, following in the footsteps of Arnold Bake, has done significant field research on the Vedas in south India since 1957, and recorded ritual songs in this village. One of the foremost Jaiminīya Sāmaveda experts in Panjal was Frits Staal's main informant IR, who also became AP's main informant in 1971.

Earlier, the Nampūtiris had strictly excluded outsiders from their rituals, and from their lives in general. Almost a hundred years ago, Fawcett (1900: 33) called them the aristocrats of the land, marked most impressively by two characteristics, exclusiveness and simplicity. Of all the people that he had known in India they were, the wildest jungle people excepted, those least influenced by contact with the English. Gradually, however, the attitudes of the orthodox Nampūtiri elders started to soften, as even in south India the number of people who master their Vedas had dramatically dropped during the past 50 years.

Some Nampūtiri experts, realizing that many of their ritual practices were disappearing and needed to be recorded, accepted outside scholarly and financial help. The grand *agnicayana* ritual was performed and recorded in Panjal village with the help of foreign scholars and technical experts in 1975. The Academy of Finland sponsored AP's participation in that project. Among the results of the project was a two-volume book called *Agni* (Staal 1983), and an edited 45-minute film called *Altar of Fire. The Illustrated Weekly of India*, published in Bombay, carried a prominent report on the event. After this the village and the performers of the ritual became known to many people in India and abroad.

The next urgent task for Vedic research in Kerala became the preservation of the much more modest domestic or *grhya* rituals of Jaiminīya Sāmaveda. This task was tackled by AP in 1983. We spent, the two of us together¹⁶, two months (from October the 14th to December the 14th) in 1983, one month (from January the 21st

¹⁶ On several further occasions AP has been to Kerala on his own.

to February the 21st) in 1985, about three weeks (from February the 10th to the 28th) in 1990, one week (from December the 16th to the 23rd) in 1992, and three weeks (from December the 29th to January the 19th) in 1995-96 in Kerala. We made Panjal village the base of our field-work. We stayed in Ravipuram, the home of IR and his wife Śrīmatī Devakī Antarjanam (henceforth DA).

My starting point in this study is one married couple, IR and DA, and their household. While restricting my study mostly to our host family and their relatives, I also include some friends and acquaintances inasmuch as I made contact with them or got information on them. Previous generations are also referred to. There are altogether some two hundred Nampūtiris (that I met myself or read about in IR's memoirs or heard the others tell about) which provide material for my study. Naturally, I cannot study all individuals with the same intensity, and some of them are mentioned only in passing, or anonymously.

I thus mainly concentrate on the life of one kin group or family. I use both terms in a broad and loose sense including distant relations and relations of affinity. (Cf., e.g. Seymour-Smith 1986.) I even discuss some people of other castes which are in contact with the family. A precondition for including a person in my study is mostly that he or she is known to me through the central people, i.e. the person is significant through their choice, not mine. Some of the individuals live in the same house, or at least the same village as the couple, others have moved away, even to foreign countries. As a rule, I do not hide the personality or place of residence of my informants, as they did not wish me to. Panjal village and its characteristics are too well-known for it to remain anonymous. Besides, IR's and NNA's memoirs, two of my important sources, were written for publication.

In our hosts' household lived IR's and DA's son MS, the latter's wife Umā-dēvi (henceforth U), and two unmarried sons Ravi (henceforth Rv) and Rāman (henceforth Rm). IR's other children and grandchildren often visited Ravipuram with their families. We could visit some of IR's married children, grandchildren, and more distant relatives living in or outside Panjal. We also came into contact with other Nampūtiri friends and some servants and helpers of the house, including the craftsmen who regularly or traditionally supplied goods for the family. Before our third stay IR had departed in 1989. Since 1992 there was a new member in the family, namely Rv's wife Sāvitrī. Rm was away in Bombay in 1992 and (excluding some holidays) has been in Saudi Arabia since 1995. In October 1996 we were informed that DA had passed away peacefully, but another new member, Dēvī, the girl that Rm married during his short stay in India, joined the family in December the same year. NNA reached the age of 92 and passed away in the autumn of 1997.

I consider my material to be fairly representative of a large part of the Nampūtiris for the following reasons. In the early part of the 20th century, the number of this group has been estimated to be less than 0.5% of the population of Kerala

(Fuller 1976: 37; Paulini 1979: 96). In the 1968 Kerala sample the figure for Brahmins, Ambalavāsis and some others was 1.8%, so that the total number of the Nampūtiris is not great. The area where the Nampūtiris lived and mostly still live is rather limited and isolated for geographical reasons, which as such tends to make the culture more homogeneous at least in central Kerala. As the Nampūtiris have been very particular about keeping their caste pure, there has been a strict and more or less uniform code guiding the lives of most Nampūtiris, as the code is for the purity of the group, not of an individual family or area.

This *jāti*, like *jātis* in general, is mainly endogamous, while the brides are chosen from different parts of Kerala. This is the case within the group of people among whom I have done my field-work. The brides have come from different parts of Kerala, and the women of the family have dispersed through marriage to different parts of the area. The family has relatives in most parts of Kerala (IR, III, p. 121). In this way the customs of different families do not have a totally separate history, especially as religious and family meetings have brought Nampūtiris together to mix with each other. In spite of this expected relative uniformity of Nampūtiri culture, as has been found in many anthropological studies, all families are different. Other scholars have pointed out that there was some preference for marriage within the same *grāma* (see Chapter 8) or at least not over long distances, since customs in different *grāmas* varied (Mencher & Goldberg 1967: 98). It is not my claim therefore that my findings are true of all Nampūtiris.

Our way of life among the Nampūtiris

I did not experience any veritable culture shock in Kerala, but there were many interesting surprises waiting for me. One of them was the Keralites' attitude to night's rest. It was not considered necessary or important to let others rest peacefully. Devotional songs filled the air very early in the morning, and loud bangs were heard from the temples and churches in the middle of the night. Other ceremonies like dance dramas went on loudly through the night. Youngsters did not hesitate to wake up their parents to open the door latches after they returned from their nocturnal wanderings. Old people were not more discreet. I was woken by a hair-raising scream 4 o'clock at night when I was sleeping in the main building for a few nights in 1983. It was DA shouting something at the foot of the stairs leading to MS's, U's and the boys' upstairs bedrooms. I was sure that IR's life was in danger. It turned out, however, that DA simply did not find the tea leaves in the kitchen and she wanted to ask U about them.

AP's interest in and knowledge of Vedic texts and rituals as well as his respect for the Brahmin traditions won him wide appreciation among the Nampūtiris. The



Fig. 7. Making a Nampūtiri lady. IR winding the cotton string for MP's Āsyan Nampūtiri marriage badge in 1983. Photo AP.

most respected ritualist, Ērkkara Rāman Nampūtiri, even suggested (Nampūtiri 1983) that he might be the incarnation of Bhavatrātan, the 8th century Nampūtiri commentator of the Jaiminīya Śrauta-Sūtra and the Jaiminīya Gṛhya-Sūtra, whose work AP is editing. This opened the Nampūtiri doors for us even to the most intimate parts of their homes. There was not a place in Ravipuram which we could not enter, and we very much appreciated our access to the kitchen, where normally only the Nampūtiris could go. That truly made us feel that we were family members, for, while even both the family tank and the temple tank could be used by the Śūdra Nāyar servant woman, the kitchen should not. We were sleeping on the floor in the house originally built for the bachelors. Short-term visitors often slept in this fashion, inside the houses or on the open porches. In 1995-96 we slept in beds in the main building in Rm's room, as he was absent.

During our first stay we wore dresses (except the underwear) very similar to those of the Nampūtiris. The family goldsmith even made me a marriage neck ornament (*tāli*) of the type that the ladies of our host family wear. We were expected to represent the Nampūtiri caste respectably, and my going out wearing, for example, a

T-shirt instead of the bodice and without a petticoat were severely objected to. Also my wearing a scarf for protection against the sunshine was resented, because the only females to cover their heads in Panjal are Muslims and labourers. My putting on a European dress was tolerated whenever I started for a longer journey, but the more I looked like a Nampūtiri woman while mixing in their circles the more this was appreciated. However, an old Nampūtiri lady living in Panjal seemed to resent my wearing the *tāli*. It would seem that everything belonging to their group was considered by her unsuitable for an outsider to wear.

During our following visits I wore Indian clothing only in special ceremonies, because I felt uncomfortable in the local attire and it was also difficult to keep tidy. On the other hand I wanted to test what would happen if I did not wear it. I was constantly reminded by the ladies that European dresses are bad (especially sleeveless ones and those which expose legs), theirs being the best dress for ladies to wear. I for my part told them that if I were to expose my midriff, as they do, in my office or on some formal occasion in Finland, it would be considered in bad taste.

Foreign men wearing Western style clothing were not considered unfit in everyday situations, at least people never complained about it, but it pleased our host family if they wore the Nampūtiri attire. Also men had to wear local dress in certain religious ceremonies. Many Indian men like to wear Western-type dress or at least a shirt when they go outside their village. The attitude of the two sexes in this case was in accordance with the dichotomy which the nationalist movement supported.

We were allowed and encouraged to take our morning and evening baths in the family tank or, later, in the bathrooms. One of the most bewildering situations in my life was when I stood for the first time by the family tank in broad daylight knowing that I could be observed by many eyes. I certainly did not know how to wash myself properly without taking off my clothes, which modesty prevented. I also worried whether I acted according to the Nampūtiris' moral and ritual code. The possibility of using a bathroom in later years was a great relief. My Western toiletry was examined with curiosity and, in fact, partly adopted by the women. AP and I rinsed our mouths after the three daily meals in the proper Nampūtiri way, taking water from a spouted metal vessel (*kiṇṭi*) which the whole family used, or, in later years, from a tap.

We took our meals together with the family, sitting on the floor side by side or opposite the family members. In big festivals we sat in the same row at meals and were treated like Nampūtiris in private houses and their compounds, but if the guests took their meals in temples owned by several houses jointly, we could not be there. Our seats at home were the 3-5 cm high tortoise-shaped wooden sitting planks (*palakam*) only used by the Nampūtiris, and we could choose any of the

seats belonging to the house. Only the extra-big one, an oval 'grandfather *palakam*' we were shy of using. In later years we sat on benches at a table.

Our meals were served on stainless steel plates (*kiṇṇam*), which we had been told to buy for ourselves in the nearest town, and which nobody else would use. In feasts all guests ate from pieces of banana leaves. Our plates as such were not considered unclean, and we were even asked to donate them to the family when we left Panjal. This is well in accordance with rule 39 in Kerala customs according to Gundert, in which it appears that a plate itself, after it has been washed, is not polluting. Later, we borrowed plates that belonged to the household. We used our plain right hand for eating as is the custom. Only the buttermilk and the sweet liquid gruel (*pāyasaṁ*) were often given to us in metal tumblers to drink, because the hosts and hostesses had seen how difficult it was for us to eat them from the plate.

The meals consisted of lacto-vegetarian food, as the Nampūtiris are, or should be, strict vegetarians. Very seldom did we get any uncooked food, like small bananas, jack-fruit or mangoes. The ladies of the house often complained that they were not feeling well, and gladly had some vitamin pills from our store. Even if we had meals in some restaurant away from the village, we usually preferred to stick to the vegetarian diet, because we had no appetite for non-vegetarian food in the hot climate.

We usually refrained from smoking or taking alcohol, as Nampūtiri ladies never do either, and those modern men who consume alcohol do it only out of sight of their families and especially their elders. It is common knowledge that some lower caste women and prostitutes drink alcohol and smoke, but I was never in a position to see them do it. To the local pub (where of course the Nampūtiris were not supposed to go) only men used to go. I went a few times together with some Westerners or some young Nampūtiri men. For strangers who saw me in the pub I was probably a loose-living Western woman. My going out in the evenings with AP or the young men in the village was accepted, although a Nampūtiri lady would not have done so. My going out to swim in a river or the sea only wearing a bathing costume was a topic of discussion.

We did not much participate in the household work. Nampūtiri men have very few domestic duties on ordinary days, while ladies drudge from dawn till dusk with the exception of the afternoon resting hour. My help in the cooking of Indian meals was not encouraged, but not absolutely forbidden either. I tried some few preparatory tasks like grinding. AP sometimes helped to draw water from the well, which was both appreciated and laughed at by the ladies, and feared by the men as the start of a new custom. (AP justified this activity by pointing out that he is a *vellakkāran*. This word means 'white man, European', but also 'water-man'!) The buying of food from town was the only task which was often left to us.

We could follow DA's daily ritual of lighting the lamps, worship (*pūja*) and any religious act (*kriya*) which IR or she performed, and take the same kind of passive part in them as did the family members. IR called me his daughter and willingly chose me as the consecrated subject of a ritual, either real or simulated. He treated AP as a pupil of the Veda. But although we could follow and record, for instance, the *śivarātri pūja* which DA performed in the house, we could not touch the family idols brought from the temple for the occasion. This too further defines our dubious position in the family: Śaṅkara's Law (AP 52) states that one should avoid the images of the gods being touched by the Śūdras, etc. On the other hand we were treated as higher than the Śūdras in another respect. It was customary already in the 19th century (for the Nampūtiris, no doubt) in Kerala according to Gundert (63) to view Europeans etc. as having such a high position that they only polluted by touch. Even our touch was not felt to be polluting by the family members.

We were allowed to take part in ceremonies like the wedding, the first feeding of solid food to a baby, and entering a new house, even in some other Nampūtiri families' homes. Elsewhere in the village there were more restrictions than in Ravi-puram, however. We did not get an invitation to join the ritual in memory of a deceased relative (*śrāddha*) in 1983 although our host family made inquiries about the matter. A *śrāddha* is a particularly delicate ritual, but in other cases, too, our participation had to be discussed in advance with the elder members, and it was not always welcomed. In 1992 we were, for the first time, allowed to watch a *śrāddha*, which took place in Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Mana, the most orthodox household in the village, but even then we were not allowed to record it on film or tape.

We were not allowed to be present and record the morning worship in the original mansion of the joint family, although we were allowed to photograph the room and the idols at another time. Although AP was allowed to photograph and video-record NNA performing his morning *pūja* inside the house, we were not allowed to touch even the walls of his family temple or the milk cup of the serpent grove. But IR's son-in-law, Kainikkara Nārāyaṇan Nampūtiri, residing in Alleppey district on the coastal area, made a concession and let us enter the private family temple in his compound, and watch and record the morning *pūja* performed there. We were also allowed to see and record from outside the ladies' worship in the tiny Bhagavati temple in the same compound.

The opinions of other Nampūtiris had to be taken into account also in regard to the village temples. We were not allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temples (*śrīlākṣṇam*), and the space surrounding it (*matilakṣṇam*), although we were taken to other parts of them. The younger Nampūtiri men even suggested that AP should take a bath in the innermost tank of the Nampūtiri temple at night, as an adventurous sport! His bathing in the great outer tank was not objected to, but on his previous visits to Panjal AP had not been allowed to enter even the sides of the

inner tank. The strict Kerala rules forbidding at least non-Hindus to enter the temples were, then, relaxed a little, but not nearly as much and as often as is usual in Tamil Nadu. The rules became stricter for us again in the 1990s. DA always gave us a share of the sweet gruel cooked in the temple by the priest. But no matter how ardently I wished it, I was not allowed to take a bath and swim in any temple tank.

All in all, we were treated sometimes like Śūdras, sometimes like Nampūtiris under some pollution, but mostly as Nampūtiris who are ritually clean. To complicate the matter further, we were sometimes treated like persons outside the caste system. This happened when we were not allowed to enter the public temples, where even Untouchables can nowadays go.

The subordinate nature of my task limited my possibilities. I used to lose my temper from time to time when work was too difficult, and I always felt ashamed afterwards, as it was not common for Nampūtiri ladies to explode or show that men got on their nerves. The men used to watch me with curious interest, and tried to soothe me. They sometimes treated me almost like a patient, and even before I got upset, they told me not to. In a letter dated 1st August, 1984, Jhon Fredreicks, a young Roman Catholic friend and colleague of Uṇṇi, who helped me in the difficult task of transporting and sending the artifacts that I had collected for the museum, wrote to me:

I trust that you completed all formalities and the items have been put on display at the museum and we just can imagine Mrs. Marjatta Parpola proudly displaying the artifacts, probably now the sole authority on Indian culture and traditions particularly pertaining to Nampūtiris of Kerala 'pounding away' at a bewildered audience the experiences and tales of woe and adventure. (Flare-ups here were superb.)

The collecting and photographing which I did for the museum was understood by the Nampūtiris as real work. Also my having money for buying the artifacts, separate from AP's money, gave me weight as an individual. The documentation of the traditional culture by means of artifacts and by noting down old customs was considered desirable and valuable by them. AP working together with IR and studying the Vedic manuscripts was counted as working in earnest, but the work for my study was long considered to be a pastime. My methods of watching life around me and asking about non-Vedic matters, without even collecting data after data for a survey, was considered lazy. Unfortunately, the unbearable heat sometimes made me look even lazier, but at least I could show my swollen limbs as physical proof of the climate having an effect on me.

At the end of my second field trip some of my informants asked me if I was just following AP as a wife, and asking the questions for fun, or was I perhaps serious about what I was doing. I always told them that I was serious about my work. Gradually my interest in change was also understood. In the beginning of the

later field trips, my informants hurried to tell me about all possible innovations that had taken place in the village since my previous visit.

Field methods

I did not, then, keep neutrally in the background, but had emotions and opinions, was influenced by my Indian friends, and influenced them. In my study I tell of personal experiences. I made use of my knowledge of my own culture, and constantly made comparisons, both silently and aloud, between that and the culture of the Nampūtiris.

For effectively capturing native meanings and being able to transfer them to the reader, the ideal would be a complete knowledge of the language of the informants as well as the language in which the report is written. This is seldom the case. For others, like myself, knowledge of the informants' language must mostly remain incomplete, often simply poor. My native language is Finnish, English being a foreign language to me, as is Malayalam. Not being a Sanskrit scholar myself, nor an expert on any modern Indian script or language, I would not have ventured to begin this study without AP's promise of help whenever language problems appeared, and this he has done. Firstly, some texts are not translated at all and, secondly, the risks of misunderstanding, when one relies on English alone or on other translations of the texts, are too great.

Among the persons living permanently in Ravipuram only MS, Rv and Rm could speak English when we arrived, but while I was learning a little Malayalam, U learnt a little English. While MS was helping AP in his work with IR, and the young men were away from home, I had to manage with the ladies alone. Sometimes I got assistance from DA's nephew Vaikkākkara Citran Nampūtiri, Jr, or IR's cousin's son Muṭṭattukkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Nīlakaṅṅhan Nampūtiri, or the latter's son Uṅṅi. Other visiting relatives and friends were often helpful, too. Those women who had been allowed to go to school could also speak English. MS, a very important informant, got his education in an English-medium school. When my informant was MS, who can accurately express native meanings both in English and in Malayalam, the shift of code was in safe hands.

To be sure that I got my information right, I often had it written down in my note-book in Malayalam language and script. Later, this text was transcribed by AP and translated by him or by MS. If I could not make myself clear for the ladies, and/or if I was not sure about the answer, I used my short notes for a more thorough interview when MS could aid. This usually took place on the cool outer verandah immediately after DA had lit the wicks at sunset, and also the ladies could sit down for a while before serving the 8 o'clock meal. The atmosphere was pleasant and relaxed. IR had already retired, and the young men had gone to meet their

friends. But even then it was usually difficult to get DA to stop and tell something, as she found more important tasks to do. This remained a problem, since she knew a lot more about, for instance, rituals than do the younger women.

I used as field methods observation, participant observation, and interviewing, both unstructured (undirected, open) and semistructured (focused, theme) interviewing. Sometimes I used photographs of our family and life at home to elicit questions and revealing reactions. I photographed many situations and sometimes had them videofilmed for later study. During our second stay I interviewed from photographs taken during our first visit. There were practical reasons¹⁷ why I did not tape-record my interviews in 1983. Noting down the results in writing turned out to be such a satisfactory work-method that I decided to continue in the same way. The many everyday and ritual artifacts bought for the National Museum of Finland collections made it possible to study the material culture more thoroughly at home.

The decision to participate or not in the life of the Nampūtiris was not always left to us. And at times our concern about our health and comfort prevented us from participating. I paid the price for being too careless as regards food and drink when, after my first stay, *Trichocephalus trichiurus* was discovered in my intestines, and after the second stay amoeba. But it is probably what was consumed on the road, not in private households, that is to blame.

I gave a green light to that side of my personality which is slightly naive and impulsive and eager to learn all about alien matters. A childlike person is willingly instructed and also forgiven if he or she makes mistakes. People soon got used to my being bold, fickle and rash, different from Kerala ladies, and there were situations where even quite delicate matters came up without the Nampūtiris taking too much offence. The informal attitude helped me in my observation work as the people could leave me alone with my work without feeling obliged to be strained or entertain me all the time as one entertains a guest. On the other hand, only very few were willing to fulfil my wishes as promptly as AP's wishes. My opinion on plans was seldom asked, and I had to find ways to be able to get results in many areas of my work.

My willingness to help in healing matters was appreciated. I did not do anything dubious, simply opened my medicine bag when vitamins, disinfectants, plaster, aspirin or liniment for aching backs or heads were needed, and tried to persuade people to go to health centres¹⁸. The best medicine of all, however, which I could

¹⁷ Good batteries were difficult to get, and the current was most unreliable.

¹⁸ Although there are undoubtedly more health services available in Kerala than in other parts of India, many people, especially elderly servants, approached me with their problems. They showed me, for instance, soles with large mycosis infections. Poor people found it difficult to travel to health centers and leave their jobs for a day. Many people did not believe that the medicines that were available for them were as effective as the medicines that I carried.

give seemed to be paying attention to those who seldom got it. It was even understood and expressed by Nampūtiri men that ladies often complained of some physical ailment the reason of which was psychological. I think that many women enjoyed the interviews, the information that they could give being made important in the presence of others.

After returning to Finland I continued to interview MS and Uñni through correspondence. They took great pains going around and asking others whenever they did not know the answer or were in doubt. When MS visited Finland in 1990, he further answered my questions. After reading my manuscript, MS wrote to me in a letter dated 16th April, 1993:

Your method and style of presentation is fine. Life comes direct.

MS said to AP in December 1994 that he feels that I have covered Nampūtiri life fairly comprehensively. Further he expressed his opinion that it is useful for the traditional Nampūtiri life to be documented now, because even his own generation is in doubt over certain matters, and things are changing fast.