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The Veda and the Patronage Economy of the Hindu Temple An Early Modern Case from Kerala *

ABSTRACT: The ambiguous relationship between the Veda and Hinduism has attracted considerable scholarship. So have recent cases of revival and redesigning of Vedic ritualism. Much less has been written on the concepts, forms and actual practices of the coexistence of temple ritual and the Veda within the territory of the Hindu temple. This relationship, by no means homogenous and not easy to articulate, must often have been problematic while engaging issues of identity, eligibility, agency, economy and power. It remains relevant to contemporary national Hinduism and political scene. From the early years of temple Hinduism, the presence of the Veda in the Hindu temple depended on a dynamic process of inclusion and exclusion with prestige game, status aspiration and competition among ritual agents. To make sense of this relationship, the essay proposes a historically informed perspective set against a background of regional patterns of patronage and temple economy while addressing a variety of such relationships from historical Malabar (today's Kerala) with a focus on the temple ritual of *vāraṃ*.

* This essay is based on a research project supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, research grant no. 2018/31/B/HS2/02328: UMO-2018/31/B/HS2/02328.

KEYWORDS: patronage economy, temple Hinduism, Veda, brahmin/s, brahman/s, ritual prestige, Kerala history, Brāhmaṇa/s

I take the “patronage economy of the Hindu temple” to be an ever-evolving network of socio-economic and symbolic links centred on the temple and binding social and ritual actors (human, divine and material), in relations of privilege and duty, coexistence and rivalry, service and favour, gift-giving and gift-receiving, ceremonial acknowledging, accepting and denying, reciprocating, re-confirming and renewing. And I propose to see this network shaped in no mere manner by the media of inscription and communication, such as genres of ritual and memory-cum-oral performance; letter, document and book writing; regular hosting of festive and ritual events; staging of performative arts, including theatre. Most, if not all, of these relations tend to embody, express and stimulate regularly recurring transactions of symbolic and socio-economic character that might look haphazard to an external eye just for the reason that they do not necessarily follow any of the recognizable economic model/s of operation. Central actors that this essay focuses on are members of a specific, localised and historically positioned community of Panniyūr Nampūtiris, a community within the otherwise broader group of Kerala Nampūtiri Brāhmaṇas,¹ in the historical moment remembered as turbulent times of change in the mid-18th century Malabar; the moment marked by expansion and eventual dramatic

¹ While often actually decided by editors and publishers, the way we refer in writing to individuals and collectives of the complex social matrix of India in general and Kerala in particular, or any area for that matter, is never innocent. It brings with the choices we take the whole complex history of European appropriations of the dominant ideology of caste and its actual social practice (two different realities). I chose to use in this essay the term Brāhmaṇa, and neither that of Brahmin nor brahmin, in order to avoid connotations suggested by both the latter ones. I prefer too to use the fully transliterated version to that of Brahmana or Brahman as possibly the most neutral choice to make. In this I follow examples of, among else, Veluthat 2017. If not otherwise indicated, all other Sanskrit terms appear in the form they take in Malayalam sources referred to in the essay.

end of the old regime of the kings' of Calicut (Zamorins') rule that yielded at first to the destructive raids by Mysorean armies of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan only to reassemble, in the entirely new frames of the British Malabar, upon the treaty ending the Mysorean Wars in 1792. The essay shall look at this community, especially in their capacity of guarding and transmitting its own foundational cultural treasure of the Veda through socio-religious institutions centred on the Brāhmanically controlled temple (other temples of the region remained controlled by other social groups). In this case, the focus will be on a specific ancestral village temple of Panniyūr, central Malabar, and additionally on a network of lesser rural temples controlled by the families of the Panniyūr group of Nampūtiris in central Malabar (today's Malappuram district). That being so, the major research problem of the essay remains the nature of the ambiguous relation between the Veda and the temple and its economic background. I propose to examine this relation in order to identify and analyse the socio-economic basis that would have not only determined but also stimulated and shaped these relations; this will be done by way of close reading of an episode in a recently edited, early modern Malayalam (and occasionally Sanskrit) autobiography by a member of the community in question, namely *Appattū aṭīriyūṭe ātmakatha* (henceforth *Ātmakatha*), or the *Autobiography of Appattu Aṭīri*² to which I return later.³ In line with the title of my essay, the first thing I intend to do is to draw the attention of the reader to the nature of geographic locations and place-names found in the narrative as referring to temples, villages and Brāhmanical communities.

² This Autobiography appeared for the first time as included in the work *Vellayūṭe caritram*, ed. by N. M. Namboothiri and published for the first time in 1998 (Namboothiri 1998). For textual history and literary character of the *Ātmakatha*, see the recently published Shulman 2023.

³ The text of *Ātmakatha* was discussed in Haridas 2020, an important and informative essay, but from a different perspective than the one adopted here.

Temples and Brāhmaṇas

In the early modern and colonial history of Kerala, the distribution of Brāhmaṇa settlements always remained uneven and fragmentary. This pertains to several distinct groups that claimed Brāhmaṇhood in one way or another, as it does to one specific group (itself made of several sub-groups) of Nampūtiris. The presence of allegedly indigenous groups claiming special type of Brāhmaṇhood for themselves marked the cultural geography of the region with the ideology of superior ritual, social, and sometimes also political status. This has been substantiated by them by using the charter myth of descent from the mythical figure of Paraśurāma who has been said in the chronicle named *Kēraḷōlpatti* ('The Rise of Kerala') to have granted the land of Kēralas to them as best candidates to protect it.⁴ Along with the land, Paraśurāma presented them with a ready-made pattern of settlement and organization within thirty two "villages" (*grāmas*), or settlements, each of them centred on one specific temple consecrated to a specific deity. Most, if not all, of the settlements listed in *Kēraḷōlpatti* have been identified historically and geographically.⁵ Most reproduced the organization pattern with a Brāhmaṇically controlled temple as their centre not only in topographical and ritual but also in economic and often political sense. However, Brāhmaṇical temples of Kerala have never constituted a homogenous class. Neither were all temple agents sporting a sacred thread recognized as Brāhmaṇas. Thirdly, not all Brāhmaṇical temple agents represented any one single Brāhmaṇical group of the same ritual and social status, and by no means single level of proficiency in Vedic lore. Nor had the temples ever been public spaces in the sense of being open to the "general public," for the very reason that no cultural equivalent of such a concept seems to have ever been in operation. Kerala temples always belonged to someone, even if this

⁴ One of the earliest literary traces of the story is *Tiruniḷalmāla*, probably of the 13–14th century CE (*Tiruniḷalmāla* 1.7).

⁵ For the complete list of the Nampūtiri settlements identified against the map of Kerala, see Veluthat 1978.

someone was a collective body, and that this someone represented a specific social group believed to be identified by descent, rights, duties, and customary rules and practices of behaviour (*ācāra*).⁶ Even though, the temple and its land formally belonged to its presiding deity.

Regional temple and Vedic cultures

Besides the few that enjoyed regular ritual patronage and/or suzerainty of royal families, communities of various social status used to claim control over their own temples, some of which remained closely related to specific households or clans, others to castes or village collectives, while still others approximated the label of village temples with rights, duties and privileges shared and contested by several communities of graded aspirations.⁷ Most of those that claimed the status of *kṣētram* (Brāhmanical temple, lit. ‘arable field’) were expected by the regionally dominant ideology of Nampūtiri Brāhmaṇas to follow procedures of their ritual manuals (*Tantrasamuccaya*, c. 15th century), accept ritual supervision from specialized Tantri families of Nampūtiri origin and employ Brāhmaṇa ritual specialists (not necessary Nampūtiri) for daily liturgy in their *śrīkōvils* (or, the *sanctum sanctorums*).⁸ In a simplified picture, their

⁶ On connotations of this terms in the context of the indigenous legal traditions of Kerala, see Davis 1999.

⁷ Acc. to Veluthat (2017: 20) “we can consider two kinds of temples, namely, (...) ‘royal’ temples and what grew up as centers of agrarian corporations and Brāhmaṇa settlements, the latter with claims to a richer religious tradition behind them.”

⁸ The concept of temple as *kṣētram* (‘arable field’) refers to its foundational act including ritual ploughing of the land plot (see *Tantrasamuccaya* I.55, Unni 2014 I: 33) and associations with growing and prosperity (*vṛddhi*). Following proper liturgy and managed rightly by the *ūrāḷars*, the *kṣētram* is expected to grow not only symbolically but in actual size of its possessions actually owned by temple deity, scale of its activities and prosperity of its patrons and devotees. Economic success of a temple tends to be seen as function of daily cult and believed to reflect the condition of the deity. It is the lack of *kṣētram vṛddhi* due to a crisis that is

administration remained often in the hands of collective bodies reflecting local balance of power shared by influential landed families. Members of the latter tended to be collectively referred to as the *ūrālars* (‘patrons’, ‘managers’), while formally, and later also legally, the temple and its divine estate (*dēvasvam*) remained owned by the temple’s God, him- or herself.⁹ If skilfully managed, a temple complex could aspire to the role of a local economic centre functioning as a communication-cum-transaction hub in the monsoon type of agrarian economy with its astrologically calculated liturgical calendar of recurring activities reflecting the yearly vegetation cycles and its complex division of labour that connected to honours and obligations of specific groups of insiders (*ampalavāsis*) and wider circles of clients, contractors, and devotees. Para-banking and financing services related to investment in agricultural production put the temples in the position of fastest economically growing institutions.¹⁰ Some employed their own military protection in addition to sporting often a fortress-like layout with thick brick walls to protect their treasures.¹¹ Historically, quite a number of them grew to the proportions of little temple states claiming the status of *saṃkētam* (lit. ‘asylum’) with (semi-)independent political status, administration and militia.¹² Nowadays, most temples—though

addressed by the two textual sources for this essay. See, for instance, *Āmakatha*: 60–61. For Kerala temple rituals, see Sarma 2022; Unni 1990; 2006.

⁹ Contemporary Kerala model of legal status of the temple and its historical development only to some extent mirrors the Tamil one. For the latter, see Presler 1987. For the Kerala one, see Gurukkal 1992; Tarabout 2009; Berti 2020. For legal transactions “in the name of God,” see Krishna Ayyar 1940: 507.

¹⁰ For the pre-modern temple economy in a South Indian context, see Stein 1960; Appadurai 1981; Presler 1987.

¹¹ For the rise of medieval Kerala Brāhṃanical temples, see Narayanan: 1994: 313–314; Veluthat 2017: 16–17.

¹² On the status and location of Kerala temples in wider socio-historical context, see Ganesh 2016: 255–58; Tarabout 2009; Gurukkal 1992; Veluthat 1978: 90–91; Krishna Ayyar 1938; 1940. For South Indian context, see Appadurai 1981. Narayanan and Veluthat (1983: 269) define *saṃkētam* as “temple corporation, with forces for self-protection, under the supervisory authority of a prince selected for

there are exceptions—remain under the supervision of Dēvasvam Boards, or the governing bodies introduced to control temples' economies in British Malabar, and before long, also by the modernizing “native” kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin in the late 19th century.¹³ Family-owned temples opened, in grading scale, to the public are still to be found today or even more complex structure of ownership and control, must have been in place before the modernizing colonial and native states took over the control initiative. Vide the Malayalam novel *Indulēkha* (1889)¹⁴ featuring a scene in which a *kāraṇavan* (‘manager’) of a joint matrilineal family household of Nair descent quarrels with a Tamil Brāhmaṇa of his dependence and in a feat of anger bans him from entering the temples (sic!) supported by the family, as well as other spaces within the family jurisdiction: *maṭhams* (providing food and accommodation) and *ūttupuras* (dining halls catering free food to Brāhmaṇas in travel).¹⁵

This Brāhmaṇically oriented temple culture of early modern Malabar was characterized by shared region-specific functional concepts, including architectural layout, codified rules of liturgy, a temple-centred pattern of agrarian economy. Its functionaries, supporters and customers developed a pattern of relationship with the Veda that accommodated Vedic textuality not only with selected *mantras* for the service of *pūjā* or *homa* liturgy, but entire regionally

the purpose.” The greatest of the “temple states” is said to have been Peruvanam covering “four to five hundred square miles” (Krishna Ayyar 1940: 508).

¹³ Note how helpless the central government was with the recent temple crisis of Padmanabha Svāmi Kṣētram. See Gurukkal 2011.

¹⁴ The original Malayalam novel, authored by O. Chandu Menon (Candumenon) has been translated several times into English, with the 2005 translation by Anitha Devasia, published by Oxford University Press being the most recent and most easily available.

¹⁵ Both forms happened to be patronised not only by royal families, but by other families of good economic standing and social status ambitions, including wider caste conglomerate of Nayyars, Potuvāls and others. For a scene of banning a Tamil Brāhmaṇa from temples supported by a Nair joint family (*taravātu*) household, see Candumenon 1889: 89–90.

specific rites of testing skills and competencies in Vedic transmission as such.¹⁶

Ideologically, the campus of Hindu temple in general, and of Kerala Brāhmaṇical temple in particular, hardly fitted the Vedic context conceptually. Yet, we learn from the medieval inscriptional corpus and the later written sources, of literary or documentary type, of links between temples, and Brāhmaṇa groups associated with the Veda. What sort of relationship it was remains by no means clear, undoubtedly embracing much more complex mutual exchange of services than the one suggested by known instances of securing financial basis for those Brāhmaṇas who practiced the Veda by way of a royal inscription placed on the temple wall. Whereas Vedic ritualism in the proper sense remained outside the temple and had nothing to do with temple liturgy, the education and transmission process shows historical links to temples as venues for teaching and spaces for testing Vedic recitation. Both developed intricate links to temple economy and surplus distribution.¹⁷

Rival factions fight over rights to Vedic study

It has been often taken for granted that the right to study the Veda has always been one of defining features of any Brāhmaṇa, even though not all of them engaged in the regular effort of *svādhyāya* ('personal recitation').¹⁸ We know only too well that historical reality might have looked quite different: not only individuals but whole communities' claims for Brāhmaṇhood and *vedādhikāra* (eligibility

¹⁶ This distinction is fundamental for understanding the difference between secondary adaptation of the fragmentary Veda and the presence of a specific Vedic textual tradition within the space of the temple. Incidentally, it remains the focus of the *Ātmakatha* in which Aṭīri attempts to mobilize his own community for the effort to revive its Vedic tradition. See, *Ātmakatha*: 60 and 61.

¹⁷ For a useful recent resume of voices in argument on probable historical Vedic roots of early Hindu temple liturgy in general, see Orr 2018.

¹⁸ For a regionally focused view on the concept, see Galewicz 2011. For a general reference, see Malamoud 1977.

for the Veda) happened to be contested, competed with, disputed or denied. A few instances from medieval inscriptional corpus are telling in this respect even though their context often escapes us.¹⁹ A source from the archives of the Zamorin kings of Calicut features an entry recording a sum of 23 thousand *paṇams* paid to the Zamorin's treasury by the Brāhmaṇas of Panniyūr for restoring their caste status to them (Haridas 2020: 1945). The record refers to one of the foundational stories behind the Nampūtiri community in Kērala, the so called *kūrumsaram*, or factional feud, between two groups of Nampūtiri Brāhmaṇas connected to two prominent *grāma* settlements organized around their respective village temples dedicated to protective deities (*grāmadevatās*): the Panniyūr settlement with Vārahamūrṭti (Viṣṇu) temple and the Covvaram (otherwise: Cōkiram, later: Śukapuram) with its Dakṣinamūrṭti (Śiva) temple.²⁰ The feud is attested to in literary sources dated to the early 13th century and has raged for centuries polarising central Kerala into two camps, with King of Kochin and his allies backing Covvaram, and the Zamorin with his feudatories siding with Panniyūr.²¹ The feud contin-

¹⁹ Cf. studies on copper inscriptions from the Triruvalla temple, especially those referring to the king's withdrawal of Brāhmaṇa privileges and caste degradation; see, Veluthat 2017: 23; Suresh 2003: 503; Gopinatha Rao 1956: 136.

²⁰ The two settlements had been seen as prominent relatively early. They appear as witnesses to the grant by Virarāghava Cakravarti of 1225 CE (Narayanan 2013: 279, Veluthat 1978: 73). Among earliest literary occurrences are *Tiruni-lalmāla* (1.7), *Uṇṇicirutēvicaritam*, *Candrōtsavam*, dated approximately to the period of the 13–15th century. Later it is referred to by de Couto and Visscher (Letter VIII), however under distorted names. For general context, see Veluthat 1978: 72–76. For the meaning of the concept, see Freeman 2020: 79.

²¹ Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas are said in the *Koḷikkoṭan Granthavari* to have paid in 1760 CE the sum of 23 thousand *paṇams* in addition to cessation of some of their lands so that their full Brāhmaṇhood and caste be restored to them (Krishna Ayyar 1938: 98, fn. 1 and 335; Namboothiri 1998: 22, fn. 6; Haridas 2018: 70, fn. 27; 2020: 1945). Even though an elaborate ceremony is said to have marked the reinstatement of the degraded Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas to their Nampūtiri status to which the newly crowned Zamorin stood witness in 1768, the very next year the Covvaram Brāhmaṇas petitioned the Zamorin (and Cempulānñātu, the influential pontifical leader and *samnyāsī* of the Tēkke *maṭham* in Trichur) to stop the Panniyūr

ued with ups and downs through several stages. In peak moments the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas even took to arms and attacked their rivals inflicting severe losses to their village.²² Neither the circumstances nor the date of its beginning are not known to us. Some scholars (e.g., Krishna Ayyar 1938: 26) assumed that it may have been connected to the recorded names of Covvaram Brāhmaṇas invited to Zamorin's court to supervise the *hiranyagarbham* ('golden womb') ceremony. This adapted Purāṇic rite had been known as being resorted to by Indian rulers lacking pedigree with a view to make them into proper Kṣatriyas.²³ The Zamorins apparently needed an upgrade in their caste status. When Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas, their natural allies, declined to conduct it, the Zamorins turned to Covvaram Brāhmaṇas who gladly rose up to the occasion. A better-known part of the historical contexts of the events relates them to the Zamorins' political ambitions and expansion towards the south beyond the Bharatapuḷa river where kings of Kochin have always allied themselves through ties of temple patronage and mutual support with the Brāhmaṇas of Covvaram (Śukapuram) village. Shifting major royal patronage from Panniyūr to Covvaram required a suitable pretext. And had its price, too.

Brāhmaṇas from practising the Veda after the former had been seen performing the Veda (*abhyāsa*) (Veḷḷa: 71).

²² For a vivid description of the attack and its aftermath, see the *Āmakatha*: 64–65. We must keep in mind that the cultural memory of the earlier phases of the feud connects to a subsection of the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas who carried arms and were, therefore, excluded from full Brāhmaṇhood, including Vedic study. See the *Keraḷōlpatti* passage in which Panniyūr features among Brāhmaṇa villages whose inhabitants (some, not all) accepted arms from Paraśurāma. A curious passage in the *Āmakatha* (65) says that the Covvaram Brāhmaṇas could not retaliate the attack of Panniyūr (“iṅṅōṭṭu pakaram ceyyāyilā, atukoṅṭu avar iśvarasēvayum ceytirun-nār” – “To this [the attack] they could not retaliate. This is why they started *sēva* to the Lord”). No reason is given, but Covvaram is not mentioned among villages which accepted arms from Paraśurāma in the *Keraḷōlpatti*.

²³ Other rulers of the region resorted to this ritual in order to be recognized as Kṣatriyas: for a Travancore version of the Golden Womb rite, see Bayly 1984: 190–191. An early modern pattern for the same could be settled more to the North by Śivajī's coronation ceremony in 1674.

***Ātmakatha* as textualized conflict and instrument of action**

How these vaguely remembered circumstances connect to the story of the conflict recorded in the *Ātmakatha* is not always clear.²⁴ The *Ātmakatha* resumes where legend, cultural memory and reconstructed history leave the reader. The initial phase of the conflict between the Zamorin and the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas is said to have culminated with degrading one part of the Panniyūr community to the status of Nampīśans (regarded as fallen, quasi or half-Brāhmaṇas) on the pretext of the alleged desecration of the main idol and migration of several families from Panniyūr.²⁵ The echo of this can be heard in *Ātmakatha* as its immediate past. The story features the Covvaram Brāhmaṇas visiting on a ritual occasion a temple controlled by the Panniyūr group. Indeed, the two main temples (Vārahāmūrtti and Dākṣiṇāmūrtti) stood at the distance of only about one hour's march from each other and the settlements were central to their own temple networks which thus partly overlapped with each other. The networks operated very much as an effective communication medium for the flow of people, information, ideas, orders, and resources. The space they marked included, however, temples and shrines of other groups too, including other Brāhmaṇas.

²⁴ Krishna Ayyar (1938: 26 fn. 7) provides names of two prominent Covvaram Brāhmaṇas invited by the Zamorins who "in all probability" assisted in the ceremony of *hiranyagarbham*. Another royal status confirming ceremony, the *tulābharam* (king's weight in gold given over to the Brāhmaṇas), is believed to have been celebrated by the 116th Zamorin eventually in 1757, not in Calicut but in Trichur. It is mentioned, too, by Veḷḷa himself in a passage referring to later instances of the Covvaram opposing the reinstatement of the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas (*Caritraṃ*: 45). The Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas are said to have been restored to their Nampūtiri status (after paying 23 thousand *paṇams*) by his successor, the 117th Zamorin, in 1760 (Krishna Ayyar 1938: 26, 335).

²⁵ See Krishna Ayyar 1938: 98, 335. Haridas (2018: 1945) supplies the term *Mūssatu*.

The temple as a medium of power

What is crucial from the point of view of this essay is the fact that it was the temple that served as the means through which the utmost degradation of one party to the feud started and it was through a temple-reoriented Vedic ceremony that the initial blow to the identity of the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas came to be delivered at the hands of the king. Moreover, it was the agency of the temple that the king targeted in the first place with the intention of depriving the community of its defining links to the Veda, identity markers and means of subsistence. And, eventually, it was again through the agency of the temple that the downgraded community decided to seek the restoration of its rightful, acknowledged identity and social standing. Cultural traces left by the centuries old feud could not have been more visible and consequential. The deep rift within the wider Nampūtiri group did not go unnoticed by the British Malabar administration. It has been fully taken note of by ethnographically shaped “state manuals” published by the Madras Presidency government and soon mirrored by printed “portraits” patronized by the “native” States of Cochin and Travancore in late 19th and early 20th centuries. In them, Nampūtiris appeared as one among multiple native groups classified as tribes and castes (so did Nairs from which most royal families descended). In one such reference book, named the *Castes and Tribes of Cochin*, Ananta Krishna Iyer, its author (a Tamil Brāhmaṇa by origin) noted:

Papishtanmar-The Nambuthiris of this class had by their conduct disqualified themselves for respect or equal rights and privileges with the other Brahmans. To this subdivision belong the *Oorillapari-sha-Moossads*, who accepted the gift of land from Parasurama, the Panniyur villagers who scandalised the feelings of other Brahmans by offering an insult to their idol Varahamurthi, and the Nambuthiris who murdered the sovereign to please their caste-men, (...) The whole community of the Nambuthiris may (...) be divided into Othullavar (vedic) and Othillathavar (non-vedic). The former are privileged to recite, and expound the Vedas, and perform the sixteen ceremonials

(Shodasa Kriyas), while the latter can neither study the Vedas nor superintend (...) the above ceremonies. (Ananta Krishna Iyer 1909: 176)

While more or less fanciful stories have been in circulation (Logan 1887 and Ananta Krishna Iyer 1909 make ample use of them) to explain how it happened that a community of full Brāhmaṇas got reduced to quasi-Brāhmaṇas “without the Veda,” very rare do we hear how this deprivation of status could, and still rarer, how it did actually happen historically. While regional cultures of Vedic Brāhmaṇa communities developed their own distinct set of socio-cultural institutions that embraced elements of Vedic textual and ritual traditions to various degrees, each and every one of them deserves a separate study. The perennial problem, namely to whom did the Veda actually belong when many laid claim to control it through securing a ritual agency, and how this translated into political and social agency, appears to have often shaped the relations between the Veda and the temple.²⁶

***Vāraṃ*: The Veda for a temple recital**

Thanks to the “ethnographic turn” in the functioning of the East India Company and later, the British administration, we have a “record” of *vāraṃ* ritual in *Castes and Tribes of Cochin* (Ananta Krishna Iyer 1909: 253–257). In it, the Vedic recital called *vāraṃ* may be seen as held yearly in the *kūttampalam*, or a playhouse (lit.

²⁶ Almost no historical instance of links between the communities guarding the integrity of the Veda and political power has had a chance to attract a sustained scholarly attention. This might be due to several reasons. One being the long-standing asymmetry between the classical Indology and Vedic studies favouring stable textualities on one hand and the anthropological research interested rather in the subaltern than the dominant on the other. Another is the scarcity of sources meaningfully recording such relationship. With a notable exception of royal inscriptions registering (usually briefly) donations to the Brāhmaṇa communities in earlier period, we have not much to rely on for the early modern period. This may change with more attention to vernacular literature.

“temple for theatre”), inside the Kaṭavallūr temple campus, during an auspicious period of *maṇḍalam*. According to the author, the *vāraṃ* could start only after “a small amount of money” was ceremonially placed “in the presence of (...) senior members.” It was then taken by temple officers of high rank (some, probably, half-Brāhmaṇas), the lights were lit, and main deity decorated and fed with sweet bread to be distributed later among the Brāhmaṇas assembled in the temple. The performers were next supposed to bathe in the temple pond and oil their bodies before proceeding to worship the deity. Only after the evening *pūja* in the *śrīkōvil* was done and the camphor lights of *dīpāradhana* lit, did they take their seats for the recital of *vāraṃ*. But not until another ceremonial gift was made. Here again, the author mentions money in association with *vāraṃ* in the temple. This time it is “a sum of money necessary for the expenses of the feast (*ibid.*: 255).” Thus, we learn about a feast to crown and mark this and any *vāraṃ* as a successfully completed ritual. The feast concluded *vāraṃ* not only in the communal consumption sense. During the feast the two most demanding skills of Ṛgvedic chant were put on show by pairs of reciters while others enjoyed food carefully listening and watching out for mistakes that might creep in.

K. N. Ananta Krishna Iyer does not say all that we could have hoped for. And our sources for *vāraṃ* in its wider temple context are meagre. Except for several descriptions of its recent revival, we have next to nothing in terms of historical evidence for the origin and regional career of this unique ritual. This pertains more generally to the Veda in the temple understood not merely as fragmented mantras used by temple officiants, but as integral Veda performed by virtuoso reciters. The latter embody a state-of-the art skill of an entirely different nature than mere memorization, namely a competence to effectively navigate the entire body of a canonical Vedic textual compendium including text-retrieving and unit-processing in linguistic operations that required high level of calibrated concentra-

tion. *Vāraṃ* proves to be intimately connected to the Veda in the latter sense.²⁷

More recent descriptions (Galewicz 2005 and 2011) show that *Vāraṃ* indeed look as a Vedic recital (most often, though not only, from *Ṛksaṃhitā*), carried out, however, not in the linear order of words, but according to specific modes, or algorithms, performed as a show of skill and proof to Vedic textual competence. To perform in a *vāraṃ* is a bold claim to such a competence and an act fraught with the risk of failure. A passage to be recited is decided by a peculiar ceremony in which an arrangement of 12 stones is placed on the temple floor in concentric circles. On seeing the stones touched in three turns by an elder expert, the reciter is expected to decode the coordinates of the passage to be performed in terms of the inner architecture of the compendium in question—the *Ṛksaṃhitā* number pointing to Book, Lesson, and Group—*aṣṭaka*, *ōttū* (Skt. *adhyāya*), and *varggaṃ* (Skt. *varga*). As a proof to the correct recognition of the passage, the reciter goes first through the identified passage with the Nampūtiri-specific hand gestures (*kaikaḷ* or *mudra*, Skt. *mudrā*) while being assisted by a helper of his group. Only then may he proceed to voice the passage according to the principles of recitation adopted for the *vāraṃ*, which generally follow the recitational mode of *krama-pāṭha* ('step by step recitation').²⁸ As mentioned above, we grope in the dark as far as cultural history of *vāraṃ* in the temple is concerned.

²⁷ As we shall see, this distinction is of crucial importance for the *Āmakatha*: Aṭīri attempts to mobilize his own community for the effort to revive its full Vedic competency. While specific Vedic *sūktas* (here *Rūdrasūkta* and *Varāhasūkta*) may be focused on during the *sēva* worship of Bhagavān (*Āmakatha*: 60), it is actually a sincere effort (*yatnam*) towards reactivating (after a twelve years' break) of the complete Vedic textual competence (*purṇa āmnāyajapaṃ*) which actually matters. See the *Āmakatha*: 61.

²⁸ In the simplified form this combines rules of *saṃhitā* (continuous) with that of *pada-pāṭha* (or isolated word) recitation modes into an algorithm of | ab | bc | cd | etc. with no *sandhi* assimilation on the borders of each two element groups. See Galewicz 2011.

In this predicament the textual source that has recently surfaced in Kerala surprisingly comes to our aid. It is *Appattū aṭṭriyūṭe āmakatha* (referred to as *Āmakatha* in this article), or the *Autobiography of Appattu Aṭṭri*.²⁹ It appeared first in 1998 as an appendix to another, closely related work titled *Vellayūṭe caritram* (henceforth *Caritram*), or *Vella's Chronicle*, which indeed embedded it within its own story.³⁰ The *Caritram* was written in 1781 by Vella, a prominent member of the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇa community, and remained unknown until it surfaced in a court case in 1960 and reached the historian N. M. Namboothiri who prepared its edition, based on the received transcript, only in 1998.³¹ The *Āmakatha* was later re-published, as an independent text with an introduction by V. V. Haridas, in 2018. The re-discovering, re-writing, and transcribing does not end here. The textual history of the twin “works” is indeed breath-taking and could well fit a postmodern novel while playing the idea of a text within a text within a text in receding concentric circles of embedding. Both texts are of pronouncedly narrative structure and documentary character. They drew some interest of Kerala historians, mostly with reference to the history of the 18th-century Hyder Ali “invasion” of Malabar and the end of the old regime of the Zamorins of Calicut. Both remain rather isolated as textual types, if not as genres.³² While the *Caritram* resembles a community chronicle, the *Āmakatha* bears a stronger personal

²⁹ For textual history and literary character of *Āmakatha*, see the recently published Shulman 2023.

³⁰ Later reprints of the *Vellayūṭe Caritram* do not reproduce the appended *Āmakatha*.

³¹ We learn, however, from the preface by A. A. Nampūtiri, that before having been edited in a book form, episodes of the *Caritram* appeared in Trichur in a local journal *Yōgakṣēmam* (Namboothiri 1998: 8).

³² See Shulman 2023: 118–120. A good number of events narrated in the *Āmakatha* and the *Caritram* find corroboration in a text of a more “properly” historical character—the understudied *Cittūr granthavari*, a family register-cum-chronicle of a Nampūtiri house of Cittūr connected to the Peruvanam temple but tracing its origin to Panniyūr. See Krishnan Namboodiripad 2022. I thank Abhilash Malayil for introducing me to this important source.

character with a marked emotional dimension and astrological component. As a rare instance of localized and richly detailed autobiography, it offers a precious window into the actuality of communal and family life at the time of its composition (c. 1710). Not only does it feature a prominent voice of a woman in matters of *dharma*-related duties and decisions but also a vision of circumstances in which text registering this voice should be discovered and made use of by its future readers.³³ Indeed, does the *Ātmakatha* present itself in the garb of an instrument of action for future generations? First, and in its own words, it is supplied with (and supported by) a divine vision of the community's future, astrologically calculated chronograms, and instructions for the prospective readers, and all that is written down as one document. Second, it is furnished with a warning against uncontrolled use and instruction to be hidden and disclosed only to worthy readers. It has a distinctively personal character connecting it to the very identity of Aṭiri and his community. So do figures of protecting deities and household ritual utensils of Aṭiri that he decides to carefully secure by burying them by a more remote temple of Māvāra, for them to be found and made proper use of by his descendants when the time is ready.³⁴ All with a view to restoring the lost standing of the community struck by the disgrace of the Zamorin king. The later narrative of Veḷḷa's *Caritram* includes the circumstances of the discovery and use of the *Ātmakatha*, with Veḷḷa eventually emerging as the imagined reader of the *Ātmakatha* (*Caritram*: 41–42). The *Caritram* largely confirms Aṭiri's visionary project while also legitimizing that of Veḷḷa himself (re-consecration of Panniyūr's temple of Varāhamūrṭti). Both texts appear to stand to each other in a specific, mutually supportive relation, with mirroring structures not always easy to understand. The textual history of the *Caritram*, including its handing over by Veḷḷa's descendants in the shape of a transcript of the original 44

³³ For the strong female voice in the *Ātmakatha*, see Galewicz 2023. More on proleptic style, see Shulman 2023.

³⁴ On the intimate correlation between domestic gods with *tēvāram* utensils and the persona of the householder, see Mucciarelli 2024 (forthcoming).

palm leaf *ōlas*, seems to mirror the scene in which the transcript of the copper plate original of the *Ātmakatha* was handed over to Veḷḷa during the reconsecration of the Panniyūr Varāhamurti.³⁵ Thus, Veḷḷa's *Caritram* includes the text of the *Ātmakatha* as a result of transcription from a mysterious source, i.e. a copper plate procured by a descendant of Aṭṭiri during the reconsecration of Panniyūr's main deity.³⁶ However, for this essay it is an account of the temple-located Vedic ritual of *vāraṃ* that is of primary concern.

The *Ātmakatha* actually opens with rather dramatic circumstances of the violently interrupted *vāraṃ* set in a local Śiva temple of Veḷḷallūr, closely allied with Panniyūr.³⁷ A number of otherwise important details remain unspecified: why was it Veḷḷalūr rather than Panniyūr temple where the *vāraṃ* was performed? What was the relation between the two temples and their locales? Why was *vāraṃ* so important? From the fact that a bunch of Brāhmaṇas from rival factions appeared at the time for the *vāraṃ* to start, we may presume that Veḷḷalūr temple may have been a customary location for its recurring performances.

³⁵ See Nampūtiri 1998: 9–10. Nārāyaṇan of the Veḷḷa mana of Tavannūr is said to have procured the manuscript of Veḷḷa's *caritram* for M. N. Nampūtiri in 1965. See Haridas 2018: 10 and Mujeebu Rehman 2005: 97.

³⁶ Probably a set of or a longer, thin and coiled copper plate with inscribed text. See Haridas 2018: 29 and Nampoothiri 1998: 9. Veḷḷa writes around 1781 about the events that he somehow witnessed between c. 1750–1780, among others, of Hyder Ali's intrusions into Malabar and his own role in negotiations and other events. He also refers to the account of Aṭṭiri's younger son or his nephew who provided Veḷḷa with the enigmatic copper plate as well as Aṭṭiri's text in a *grantha* book, both written in a code-script or difficult handwriting which he himself copied (see Introduction in Haridas 2018). The same year (1757) Hyder Ali's army entered nearby Palakkad. Also, the same year Veḷḷa started the process of re-installing Varāhamūrti image in the Panniyūr temple by first unearthing the hidden *pūja*-utensils.

³⁷ The Veḷḷalūr Śivakṣētram temple can be seen today c. one km from the Edappāl–Paṭṭāmpi road/Engineer Road cross. If my identification is correct, in its present form it consists of two beautiful round-shaped *śrikovils*, of *garbhagrihams* of comparable size, positioned side by side. One houses the image of Śiva, the other the idol of Mahāviṣṇu.

The episode begins with an emotionally loaded passage, written partly in Sanskrit, which formally belongs to Veḷḷa's embedding story that frames the *Ātmakatha* from outside. It alludes to his finding and transcribing of Aṭīri's text incised on a copper plate (the future *Ātmakatha*). But also sums up Aṭīri's story as if his own in a sort of proleptic foreshadowing of what is to follow, and directly reproaches the Zamorin for treacherous deeds that he perpetrated and atrocities he inflicted on the Panniyūr community. It alludes to a curse on the Zamorin's house and lineage bound to fall from the hands of an alien king as well as to the warning that the writing containing all of that (the *Ātmakatha* itself) should not be shown to random readers but wait for the auspicious "time of fulfilment" (*prāptakāla*) when its tutelary god returns to Panniyūr in full glory. In his *Caritram* Veḷḷa essentially confirms the identity of his book with the rescued original source (*māṭṛkagrantham*) and accordingly warns against its random disclosure.

The same episode provides also connection to past events in which a faction of the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas had been reduced to a low status resembling that of *grāmaṇi* Brāhmaṇas (arm-bearing Brāhmaṇas not entitled to the Veda) and eventually even to the entire losing of their caste and becoming *bahirpāñcakār* (one of the 'fifth outer castes').³⁸ Only then does Aṭīri narrate the events of the *vāraṃ* which may have taken place c. 1710 CE. His narrative spans space dotted by temples and dispersed villages, most within a marching distance of an hour, some a bit further away. Thus, in a wider angle, emerges a core network of temples with a ritual centre, Panniyūr Vārahamūrti, to the North, almost by Bharatapuḷa river, or a line of contest between Calicut and Cochin; Tavanūr where the Veḷḷa family household is located to the West-North; and Māva-

³⁸ See *Ātmakatha*: 30. Other sources speak of Panniyūr Nampūtiris reduced to the status of Nampisāns (half-Brāhmaṇas deprived of the right to study the Veda). See Krishna Ayyar 1938: 26, 98.

ra Bhagavati temple where Aṭīri used to teach *Ṛksaṃhitā* to Brāhmaṇa boys to the South of Veḷḷalūr.³⁹

King's men stop the *vāraṃ* (*vāraṃ muṭakki*)

But Aṭīri did not witness the events himself. They were recounted to him as a detailed report (*kanakku*), by one Talēḷi, in an *ōla* palm-leaf letter that Aṭīri received while away from Veḷḷalūr. Somewhat formal in tone, the account takes for granted a number of details which Aṭīri must have been familiar with. According to it, apart from the apparently expected Nampūtiris from the rival Covvaram village, there were other visitors to the Veḷḷalūr *vāraṃ*: a group of armed king's men led by a mysterious *āryaparadeśi* (a foreign, probably Tamil Brāhmaṇa). The king's men came to communicate a new order (*kalpana*) according to which Panniyūr people were no longer allowed to perform *vāraṃ* and should cede it to the Vedic experts from Covvaram. But Panniyūr elders did not yield and *vāraṃ* started and continued with Aṭīri's own son and cousin to perform second in turn. And this is when the forceful interruption occurred: the Tamil Brāhmaṇa (who had the access to the premises of *vāraṃ*) approached one of the performing youngsters and pulled his *muṇṭu*. This was act not only of unspeakable insolence but also of ritual pollution that could by no means be tolerated or circumscribed (*Āt-makatha*: 33).

Surprisingly, Talēḷi's account gives not only the moment when the king's envoy decided to interrupt the proceedings of *vāraṃ*. It indicates also the exact textual location of the interruption, and shows also how the polluting of the reciters' bodies by the touch of

³⁹ A rare insight into the functioning of the Panniyūr temple is offered by the *Cittūr granthavari* which lists all actors officiating in the temple's internal and external affairs. Panniyūr must have been a huge institution with a complex and intricate mechanism of administration including hereditary rights into specific areas of temple affairs. We learn, too, that the Panniyūr temple was hugely rich with gold assets and other treasures.

an outsider forced *vāraṃ* to stop.⁴⁰ We learn, too, that the incident triggered a regular fight between the Panniyūr people and the king's men in which the latter came out defeated. And we hear about the dreadful consequences that followed: two young reciters (and Talēli) were taken prisoners to the utter despair of their mothers. One of them may be seen later speaking Sanskrit (sic!) to the Zamorin king in words showing the true prestige of *vāraṃ*.⁴¹ More consequences followed: a forceful stopping of the Veda teaching in Panniyūr and the eventual degrading of the community in its ritual and social status or means of subsistence. Maybe that is why the events are introduced with a curious reference to *kōppū* ('jewellery', 'valuables', 'assets') and Aṭīri's complaints regarding the end to the custom of offering family jewellery to the temple treasury (the custom must have been a form of collective patronage providing economic basis for *vāraṃ* and other "temple arts").⁴² The term connects also to the future reconsecration of the Varāhamūrti in Panniyūr, the puzzle of its double main deity (*paradevatā*) and the crucial concept of "temple-growth," or *ksētravṛddhi*. We shall return to it later.

Veḷḷalūr appears to be located midway between Panniyūr and Covvaram, within a marching distance of a little over an hour from both locations. Before setting off for Veḷḷalūr, members of both parties probably gathered in their respective, original village temples to seek permission from their protecting *grāma devatās*. Now, let us take good notice of one little detail in the story: the Covvaram party is reported by Talēli (to Aṭīri) to have performed their morning *tēvāraṃ* worship in the Veḷḷalūr temple after bath and introductory rituals (*ūttu*) and before eating (probably in a local *maṭham*). For

⁴⁰ It is not clear why a precise location of the passage (RS 1.107.2a: *upa no dēvā*) when the recital had been interrupted was so important for Talēli to report to Aṭīri. Neither why Aṭīri includes it in his story.

⁴¹ The boy complains about the Veḷḷalūr events. The king blames his men and promises quick solution (*Āmakatha*: 37).

⁴² While exact meaning of *kōppaliyāttavar* escapes us, it must refer to an economic basis for *vāraṃ* and the concluding feast (*vide*: one of the meanings of *kōppu* acc. to Gundert being 'banquet', *kōppuḷlabhojanam*).

this they must have arrived a day earlier. But the king's men, including the mysterious Noble Foreigner (*āryaparadēśi*) acting as the captain, arrived at the scene on the day of *vāraṃ*, exactly when the Covvaram party performed *tēvāraṃ* (*Ātmakatha*: 31). Thus, the whole alien cohort, comprising both groups, did not arrive at Veḷḷalūr together, and probably not with the same intention. The Covvaram Brāhmaṇas must have had a role to play in the *vāraṃ*, anyway.⁴³ The king's men bluntly communicated the royal order: "These people are not supposed to sit for the *vāraṃ* [anymore]. Let the Covvaram people sit for the *vāraṃ*."⁴⁴ This sounds ominous to the ears of the Panniyūr people because it not only means an encroachment of others into their own territory but spells a reverse in their hitherto alliance with the kings of Calicut. On this occasion a longer exchange of arguments between the Panniyūr elders and the king's men issues. We learn from it of a story which Aṭṭiri and his kins must have been well familiar with: in the past the relationship between the Zamorin rulers and the Panniyūr Nampūtiris was a cordial one, but there was friction, too, when a faction of the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas had been degraded to the status of half-Brāhmaṇas by the Zamorin for their involvement in the desecration of the Vārahāmūrti idol in the Panniyūr temple. Echoes of rifts and factions among the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas that reach us apparently intercalate with the more recent periods of stability before one of the families of the pro-Zamorin faction entered into marriage relationship with a family of the degraded group thus breaking the king's earlier rule that ritually separated the two. This at least is given as the reason behind the Zamorin's abrupt change of attitude and his drastic order. The argument with the king's men soon transforms into a quarrel when it gets dark and it is high time to start the *vāraṃ*. We thus learn that the *vāraṃ* Vedic recital in temple should start after dusk.

⁴³ The Covvaram group is said to be specifically made of those representing the household of Ātrapiḷḷi and those coming from the Tekku *maṭham*, probably the centre for Vedic teaching in Trichur.

⁴⁴ "ṭi vanna cōrutukār vāraṃ irikkaṇaṃ ennum ijjanaṃ vāraṃ irikkarutu" (*Ātmakatha*: 31).

Also, that a ritual gesture of placing a sum of money in a temple room (*ampalam muri*) was considered a signal for initiating the show. But why should they hurry up? And why Talēḷi's written account is so detailed in specifying the exact place where money should, and actually was, placed?

Further on, when we already know that *vāraṃ* was stopped, we learn of one of the dire consequences of it remaining incomplete: the final banquet, or *sadya* feast, could not be held as the customarily conclusion. Voices of the witnesses to the events in the narrative make it clear why the *vāraṃ* was perceived as failure: it failed to be transformed into an offering to the presiding deity of the temple. Even worse: all the rich provisions for the *vāra-sadya* feast, including food cooked in temple kitchens by temple cooks, had been perceived as wasted.

Even though the *Ātmakatha* does not say this, we may presume, taking hints from the contemporary revivals of the performance, that the ritual of *vāraṃ* is by necessity embedded within the temple sacred economy and connects both to a specific temple's spatial layout as well as to the astrological time, particular temple festival calendar and the time of the day within the daily routine of activities of this particular temple. Apparently, it may take place as a standalone ritual or as a part of a bigger whole.⁴⁵ Leaving the latter aside, as an independent ritual, *vāraṃ* tends to be performed during time periods considered auspicious. Some temples claim to hold so called *kārttika vāraṃ* on every *kārttika nakṣatram* asterism. Other prefer one auspicious period called *maṇḍalam* in the month of Vṛścikkam (mid-November to mid-December).⁴⁶ In daily ritual time, *vāraṃ* falls in late evening, after the lighting of the tower of lights. It needs to neatly fit the time left before the evening *pūja* and feeding of the god start. The important conclusion of the *vāraṃ* is the *vāra-sadya*, or communal feast offered first to the Brāhmaṇas who are served in the very place where *vāraṃ* is performed, and then in the outer

⁴⁵ Like that of the recurring, annual Vedic competition of *anyōnyam*. See Galewicz 2005; 2011.

⁴⁶ On time reckoning in Kerala, see Sarma 1996; Tarabout 2002.

space to the general congregation of devotees as *prasādam*. The feast is said to coincide in time with the *naivedyam* ritual inside the *śrīkovil* and the food offered is believed to be the remnant of god's meal. To make the connection between the resounding Veda and the climax of temple daily life even stronger, during the *sadya* feast two Nampūtiri chanters are expected to perform the two most difficult examples of the Vedic recitational art: the "twisted hair" recitation (*jaṭā*) and the "chariot" recitation (*ratha*).⁴⁷

Now, the feast, or *sadya*, needs resources to be mobilized and secured, temple officers to arrange, temple staff to clean, decorate, light and otherwise prepare the space, cooks to cook and people to serve and clean. In other words, it needs a recurring (ritualized) pattern of patronage to make the feast economically feasible and ritually sound. In this connection a particular type of *vāraṃ* should be mentioned, namely one performed as *valīpāṭu* ('intentional/pledged offering'). In this respect, a Vedic recitation by the acknowledged performers can become a solemn temple offering by a devotee (or a group of them) acting as a specific patron. In that matter it will not functionally differ from such instances as the theatrical *kūttu* staging of *Mattavilāsam* (the temple performance of a play, an instance known as *valīpāṭu*, or "votive" offering with a particular intention) or Kathakaḷi performances offered as temple *valīpāṭu*.⁴⁸ As *valīpāṭu*, the *vāraṃ* becomes a "substance" offered by a devotee just

⁴⁷ Both are performed by pairs of squatting chanters facing each other. The former is based on a doubled *krāma* made especially challenging by the fact that the same word unit (b, c or d below) is recited at the same time with different endings and accents by the two performers. The latter "consists in principle of a reiterated return to the first word of a verse" while adding one more word with each next return. Forward recitation takes different word endings than the backward one realized only by one of the two performers. It requires mathematical planning and musical sense of cooperation. See Galewicz 2005; 2011.

⁴⁸ For instances of Kūṭiyāṭṭam plays conceived as temple offering, see Johan 2017: 65. On Kūttu performances patronized as "votive offerings" in the form of *valīpāṭukūttu*, see Narayanan 2020: 135 (*vāḷīpāṭukūttu* comprises votive offerings to the deity most often in prayer or thanksgiving for some auspicious event, such as a wedding, issue of progeny, etc.).

like any other simple *valipāṭu* offering, be it a turmeric powder, ghee, flowers or any other auspicious object or action, including—as advertised by temples today—the offering of a simple Vedic mantra or *sūkta*. As far as the location of *vāram-irikkal* (‘sitting for *vāram*’) is concerned, the contemporary revival events have *vāram* performed within the temple’s inner enclosure, usually in the space referred to as *nālampalam* (a rectangular structure enclosing the main temple), on a platform within the *mantapam*, especially in the *kūttampalam*, or a pavilion otherwise used for theatre performances. This location adds to the link between Vedic *vāram* and temple theatre performances understood as acts of offering.

Now, in order to bring the Veda in its integral shape into the temple, it takes first and foremost the *vedādhikāra*, or eligibility to learn, study and perform it.⁴⁹ This is a recognition acquired by birth. But also, and in the case of Nampūtiris crucially so, a recognition by competence granted (as it happens in *vāram*) by the peers, often competitors. Apparently, the *vāram* itself, as other temple rites, needed a critical authorisation too: that of the king. And here the historical evidence from the narrative of Veḷḷa and his ancestor Apattū Aṭṭiri offers an unprecedented insight into its very working, and the dynamic nature of the relationship between the Brāhmaṇa groups of high aspirations and the king’s power in general. Of course, recognition as a full-titled Nampūtiri Brāhmaṇa meant access to land tenures and other grants, honours and privileges. At least as far as their beneficiaries enjoyed the king’s authorisation. But it meant following the customary behaviour rules of *ācāra* too.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Peculiar to the wider community of Nampūtiris is their division into sub-groups of families entitled to study and perform the Veda and those who are not and specialize in other knowledge systems instead.

⁵⁰ The *Āmakatha* seems to refer to the principle of *ācāra*, according to which a breach in following the accepted rules of behaviour recognized as proper to the group of that status may be punished by the king. On the other hand, history knows of Brāhmaṇical form of protest against king’s rule by way of refusing food, called *pattini*. See Vijayalakshmi 1999.

In this respect it might be worthwhile to briefly refer to the basic forms of Brāhmaṇa land tenure in Malabar of the period. Namely, those named *brahmasvam* (land holdings or vested rights by Brāhmaṇa families upon legal act of donation with an aim) and *dēvasvam* (lands permanently held by gods or presiding deities of specific temples).⁵¹ Both inevitably evolved over time and in the early 18th century must have looked somewhat different than those known from the inscriptional corpus of the Perumal times up to the 12th century. Whatever be the nature of this historical reconfiguration, for our immediate purpose we are safe to presume that patronage over the preservation of the Veda and Vedic traditions of specific Brāhmaṇa communities must have related to their members' rights and duties concerned with teaching and periodical testing (such as *vāraṃ*) of their competence in sustaining the Veda.⁵² And the latter ones must have had an economic basis somehow related to the two forms of land tenure. That these rights may have been suspended, withdrawn or revoked from members of these communities we have little traces for the period, though earlier inscriptions refer to downgrading of the Brāhmaṇas which must have had resulted in them being deprived of their land tenure rights. Aṭṭiri's *Āmakatha* makes several references to the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas being targets of forceful dispossession with respect to their landed properties, including crop lands (*ulpatti*) having been blocked or destroyed, else otherwise precluded from being utilized, or the entire *brahmasvam* entitlements retracted.⁵³

As noted above, the rivals to Vellalūr *vāraṃ* knew about its date well in advance so that they appeared before its commencement. So did the king's men. Any announcement of *vāraṃ* by

⁵¹ On the evolution of the land-holding concepts of *brahmasvam* and *dēvasvam*, see Ganesh 2009: 11–12.

⁵² In other regions of the Indian subcontinent the patterns for sustaining Vedic education may have and probably did look different with partially shared ideology. For inscriptional evidence thereof in region of Orissa, see Rath 2011.

⁵³ See “forceful stopping of agricultural land activities” (*ulpatti kuttimuttakki* in: *Āmakatha*: 35) or revoked *brahmasvam* land entitlements (*Āmakatha*: 29, 31, 41).

a local community must have been considered an act of claim to Vedic dexterity, ritual superiority and economic privileges accruing from both. And both depended not only on the *veda-adhikāra* (eligibility for the Veda) but on the actual and effective competence in performing Vedic textuality to the standards checked on the spot by peers and rivals.⁵⁴ The story tells us that undermining both could spell disaster. It tells us also that Brāhmaṇhood not necessary used to be securely tied to birth and that king's powers, if cleverly deployed, could put an end to the caste, condemning one to the status of a half-Brāhmaṇa with no Veda (*ōttilāṭṭa*) or a fallen Brāhmaṇa (*patita*). In the case of Aṭīri and his people, we can see how the community tries to stand by their rights as much as it is possible: when the Zamorin extends his ban on *vāraṃ* in the Veḷḷalūr temple to their right to teach the Veda in any of their temples (*devālaya*), they hold a meeting demonstrating their power, and decide to withdraw to their households thinking them safe from king's wrath. How wrong they were, tells the bitter account of Aṭīri: another order threatens with destruction any household found to teach the Veda, and the king's men raid houses one by one, stop work on Brāhmaṇas' fields, pull down the roofs of those who dare to resist king's will and at times even resort to physical violence. This spreads terror among the Panniyūr community, only to be made worse by revoking their rights to the *brahmasvam* lands. Many leave to find refuge elsewhere, adopt customs of their rivals, forget their own identity. But others stay, trying to understand what happened and figure out what can be done. Aṭīri seems prominent among the latter.

The picture of the double connection of the *vedādhikāra* that emerges from our two stories puts into relief a kind of complex pattern of patronage. In it, the right to teach the Veda opened the community to the system of grants in the form of *brahmasvam* lands as well as to entitlements for specific benefits from the temple systems of redistribution of goods. Not only in the form of annually recur-

⁵⁴ On the concept of *vedādhikāra*, see Galewicz 2010.

ring *vāram* with Brāhmaṇa feasts, but also as benefits accruing from, among others, guaranties of gold assets amassed in temple treasuries.⁵⁵ The *Caritram*, Veḷḷa's chronicle, shows how temple treasury (*bhaṇḍāram*) assets could be built around a common cause, and the *Cittūr granthavari* holds a warning how speculative, if not fraudulent, could be the actions of those who knew how to play the system for their own benefits.⁵⁶ Anyway, both Veḷḷa's and Aṭṭiri's texts, supplemented by the somewhat later *Cittūr granthavari*, open us to the universe of the early modern temple economy. Its intricate machinery is displayed for our eyes in *Caritram*'s chapter named "Sāmpattika nērukkam" ('Financial Straits,' *Caritram*: 40–41). The chapter introduces the reader to the economy of re-consecration of the Panniyūr idol of Varāhamūrti that eventually saw the light of the day after years of preparations and painstaking fundraising among the Panniyūr people by Veḷḷa and his little party, all in the hope of wresting back their identity. One comes to see by this how the Veda connects to the temple economy, even though the ideology of temple's daily liturgy may very well do without it.⁵⁷ Only by re-establishing a powerful deity at the centre of its life could the community entertain hopes for the stigma of *ōtillātta* (deprivation of the Veda) to be taken away from its members. Even though in 1760 the community paid to the Zamorin's treasury a substantial amount to be re-established in its Brāhmaṇhood, it still needed to mobilize more assets by pledging family jewellery as a guarantee for the smooth operation of the divine estate possessions (*dēvasvam*) of the newly consecrated deity of Panniyūr eight years later. And yet, the power of the stigma can be seen in the last paragraph of the

⁵⁵ For gold assets, guaranties, loans, etc. as essential element of temple economy, see Gurukkal 2010: 294–297.

⁵⁶ See the account of the forceful digging for the treasures in the Panniyūr Northern Sanctum and subsequent opening of a chest belonging to temple *bhaṇḍāra* only to retrieve solid gold which is then sold to Muslim merchants for the amount meticulously recorded by the *Cittūr granthavari* (Krishnan Nambodiripad 2022).

⁵⁷ This seems to resemble in more than ne respect the nature of the ties between temple economy and Kūttu performances. For the latter, see Narayanan 2022: 60–74, 193.

Caritram alluding to the events accompanying the coronation of the new Zamorin that took place the following year. On that occasion their rivals petition the Zamorin once again so that he may preclude the Panniyūr Brāhmaṇas from practicing the Veda.⁵⁸ A cross-reference from the house chronicle of the Cittūr family confirms most of the details given in both Veḷḷa's and Aṭīri's texts.⁵⁹ Their significance for understanding the working of the early modern temple economy and its relation to the communities practicing the Veda only began to be fully taken into account. The economy of patronage working on and propelling the nexus of power and prestige remained always precarious to the insiders. And the balance of power never remained stable for good and for all but was always in need of recalibrating and reconfirming, among others, by smoothly recurring rituals.

Mobilizing collective effort for the sake of agency

Aṭīri's *Āmakatha* appears to record the cultural memory of the conflicts woven out of several time layers, quite often side by side, in spite of their temporal distance. Often, the events are given detailed time coordinates including the day and the hour, although the date is usually indicated through a coded chronogram. At times this resembles astrological charts in the style of the genre known as *kāla-jñānam* with the key concepts deployed being probably those of *sēva*, understood as devoted dedication, and *yatnam*, or effort and mobilization. This is evident especially in the later part when Aṭīri assumes more and more the role of a teacher. And the inner logic of events proves finally to reveal the *Āmakatha* as an instrument of action, even if this action is performed mainly by playing on emotions. The concept of effort that the community needs to seriously

⁵⁸ See *Caritram*: 71. Covvaram Brāhmaṇas petition the same influential Svamiyār of Tēkke *maṭham* in Trichur.

⁵⁹ This generally holds true for dating by Veḷḷa while Aṭīri refers to time mostly by chronograms.

embark on in order to redefine itself in its full Brāhmaṇhood has a number of dimensions in Aṭīri's teaching. But one of them stands out as critical: the effort to revive the community's competence in the Veda understood as *āmnayajapam* ('voicing scripture', or memory storing, retrieving and chanting skills).⁶⁰ Now, we must keep in mind that at least twelve years must have passed from the forceful stopping of the *vāraṃ* and banning Vedic teaching by the Panniyūr people to the moment when Aṭīri pledges a new *sēva* to Īśvara (Śiva of the Northern Sanctum of the Panniyūr temple). And still more to the moment when Veḷḷa takes over and pushes towards reconsecration of the Varāhamūrti temple and rejuvenation of the community. Twelve years with no ongoing training may prove destructive to memory. Over this period Aṭīri was busy with his intense *sēva* adoration of the Śiva of the Northern Sanctum. And it is a part of the vision granted to him by Īśvara in recognition of his (and his wife's) sincere *sēva* that a collective effort to revive the full-fledged Veda competence is voiced as indispensable for the community's future prosperity. In the same passage Aṭīri formulates the crucial distinction between two forms of the Veda's presence in the temple. The first appears to be functional with reference to the temple liturgy. It takes shape of selected *sūktas* only: here *Rūdra-sūkta* for the *sēva* of Īśvara and *Varāhasūkta* for the future reconsecrated Varāhamūrti (*Ātmakatha*: 60). The second, altogether different from the first, embraces the whole of the community's Veda and requires a collective effort (*yatnam*). Aṭīri concludes with a direct injunction, now speaking out in announcement of divine provision: "(...) You must make an effort and exert your will to master your [Vedic] tradition!"⁶¹ However, the ideology of *yatnam* ('effort') appears to be dressed as or merged into the *bhakti* message of *sēva* dedication and divine grace assisting human success.⁶²

⁶⁰ See *Ātmakatha*: 60–61.

⁶¹ "(...) *yatnam ceytu āmnayamuṅṭṭākkikolleṇam*" (*Ātmakatha*: 61).

⁶² A configuration of key terms in the passage conceptually fuses *sēva* ('dedicated service') and *yatnam* ('concentrated effort'), with *karuṇa* and *bhakti* at individual as well as collective level.

The community temple emerges in the story as an institutionalised security against instability, confusion, enemies, and other fears (*bhīti*) and dangers (*āpattu*, *Āmakatha*: 65), and its primary deity is believed to be dwelling in the image—a powerful instrument of benefaction, protection, but also retaliation (through the power of *mantravāda* if needed)—consecrated in the *śrīkōvil*.⁶³ In this system, crucial proof of the temple deity’s protective powers was measured by the condition of his/her *dēvasvam* possessions and prosperity of the deity’s dependents, including beneficiaries or *brahmasvam* holders. Conversely, the growth of the community temple (*kṣētravṛddhi*) remained tuned to the Brāhmaṇa’s community effectively proving its capacity to sustain its Veda vis-à-vis the regional power and rival communities (*Āmakatha*: 61). Any serious misfortunes in the operation of the temple tended to be assessed against probable causes by “questioning [the divine]” (*[dēva] praśnam*) procedures including astrological circumstances.⁶⁴ As a result, quite often bad management is mentioned as linked to flaws in idol’s installation or worship. In extreme situations of severe deterioration of temple economy, a re-installation of the deity’s image was resorted to. An echo of a crisis of that kind is probably to be detected behind the *Āmakatha*’s story when we take a clue from related source of the *Cittūr granthavari* referring to the mismanagement of the Panniyūr temple.

All in all, depriving the whole community of the economic base of their existence in the form of *brahmasvam* lands proved to be possible due to the mutual relationship of Brāhmaṇas as guardians of the Veda and the temple. That relationship was played out by the

⁶³ Even if imagined, the weapon of astrological prediction deployed with temple economy of prestige produces ominous sounds in the passage where Aṭṭiri tries to mobilize the spirits of his community by visions of future danger befalling not only Covvaram (its old enemy) but other rivals who schemed against them too, like Brāhmaṇas of Irīññālakuṭa who took part in the excommunication of Panniyūr in the past (*Āmakatha*: 65).

⁶⁴ G. Tarabout proposed to render it as “question sur la divinité” or “question posé à la divinité” (Tarabout 2006: 463).

king who emerged in the picture as capable of “debrāhmaṇizing” those who believed their privileges to be immutable. But the king apparently could restore the caste status, too. This, however, translated into a transaction in economic terms. The temple as public space, economic centre and medium of translating prestige into power played a pivotal role in these processes. The reverse hinged on the same medium too. After all, which power could ever survive without prestige?

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