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The amplified sacrifice: sound, technology, and participation in modern Vedic ritual

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ABSTRACT

The amplification of religious sound in public spaces has become a key medium for negotiating identity, difference, and pluralism in societies worldwide. This paper explores the religious soundscape of Hindu traditions in Kerala, India by examining the role of sonic amplification in the sacrifices of Nambudiri Brahmins. While Brahmanical praxis is based on ancient liturgies from the first millennium BCE, the modern performance now incorporates microphones and loudspeakers that amplify recitations well beyond the power of the human voice. This technological shift coincides with significant changes in patronage and participation, as people from outside the Nambudiri community take a more active role in the funding, organization, and celebration of such rituals. In contrast to the private sacrifices of previous generations, the 'amplified sacrifice' is now carried out as a public Hindu festival with thousands of attendees and a full suite of marketing and media coverage. In this way, the local, sonic amplification of performance tracks with a regional, cultural 'amplification' of Vedic ritual and Nambudiri identity.

KEYWORDS

Amplification; Hinduism; Kerala; *mantra*; Nambudiri; pluralism; sound; Vedic ritual

Speakers in the Paddy

A pair of loudspeaker cabinets, each one about a metre square, soaks up the noonday sun in a rice paddy in the south Indian state of Kerala. Mounted on four metal legs, the apparatus stands at the height of a person. The speaker cones crackle and pop as they transduce an electric signal into amplified sound. Or rather, amplified *silence*: the only signal is the harsh buzz of an ungrounded power source and the ambient murmur of muffled voices. Speaker wire runs from the back of the cabinets, snakes across the parched dirt and first green shoots of the summer rice crop, then disappears into a white plastic tent about 100 m away. Walkways of raised earth span the paddy, supporting makeshift power lines and crisscrossing the expanse in a grid. There is refuse here and there – paper plates and water bottles, a blue tarp, a crumpled sheet of metal, the felled trunk of a palm tree. On the horizon, the small figures of hundreds of people process around several large, peaked-roof enclosures made of tree trunks and dried palm fronds (see [Figure 1](#)). A crane with a video camera attached rises over the structures and the crowd. Steel scaffolding frames other structures on the periphery, one with a flat roof of corrugated aluminium, the other with a vaulted roof of plastic.

Suddenly, a man's voice cuts through the buzz and the static. At once sharp and sonorous, the voice chants a series of verses with a strict rhythm and a melodic gamut of only a few notes:

tena narā vartir asmabhyam yāto-o-o-o-o-o
rṣim narāv aṁhasaḥ pāñcājanyam-m-m-m
r̥bisād atrim muñcatho gaṇeno-o-o-o-o-o
minantā dasyor aśvasya māyā-ā-ā¹



Figure 1. Speaker cabinets in the rice paddy, with ritual enclosure in the background. (Photo by and courtesy of the author.)

The source of this amplified sound is a man chanting into a microphone in the central enclosure. Wiry and muscular with thick grey hair and glasses, he sits with his hands clasped in front of his chest, his spine erect and his legs folded in lotus position beneath him. Barefoot and bare chested, he wears only a sheet of cloth wrapped around his waist and a string stretched over his shoulder, the sacred thread that marks him as an initiated upper-caste male – in this case, a Brahmin.² Naras Itti Ravi Nambudiri, known more familiarly as Ravindran, is one of several dozen practitioners who have been performing a ritual for the last 12 days and nights without interruption. He is now nearing the end of a gargantuan thousand-versed recital of Sanskrit formulas, or *mantras*. As he concludes, his fellow practitioners move around the ritual space, making offerings of ghee and milk into fires on brick altars and reciting shorter sequences of mantras. A giant altar in the shape of a bird, constructed from five layers of piled bricks and with a wingspan of over 10 m, dominates the space.

Advisers stand nearby to oversee every detail, making sure that every recitation and movement is performed according to the codifications of oral texts committed to memory. Most practitioners recite their mantras into microphones, which are everywhere: clipped to garments; dangled by cords from overhanging beams; set up on portable stands; held in hands thrust under the reciter's lips. Sound engineers process the audio signal at a central mixing board, and then send it on to multiple loudspeakers set up around the paddy and in the tents and pavilions. The signal runs hot and distorts; the sound of the mantras is extremely loud, echoing off of concrete houses and hillsides. Approaching the sacrifice from a distance by auto rickshaw, you can hear the mantras ringing out, even over the growl of the engine. Standing in the vicinity, you have to shout to make yourself heard. This is the *amplified sacrifice*.

A buffer zone of bare dirt several metres wide rings the space where Ravindran and his fellow practitioners perform the ritual. Along the outer perimeter of this buffer, long spans of waist-high bamboo fencing physically separate devotees and visitors from the consecrated activities within. The devotees walk on a path of synthetic carpet in the direction known in Hindu worship by the Sanskrit term *pradakṣiṇam* (to the right), that is, keeping the ritual enclosure on their right side. (Unless noted otherwise, all non-English words that follow are from the Sanskrit.) Individuals, couples, and entire families move about serenely in this soundscape, absorbing the ear-splitting mantras. Most are Malayalam-speaking Hindus: women in handsome sarees with gold necklaces, girls in colourful dresses, men in dhotis and starched shirts, boys in jeans. Some rest in adjacent pavilions on platforms and chairs, unruffled as they carry on conversations or recite their own mantras or eat or sleep. They are not permitted to enter the sacred space where Ravindran and his colleagues perform the rites – as in the shrine of a Hindu temple, only Brahmin practitioners are

allowed inside. Cameramen stand at intervals within the buffer zone, filming the practitioners. A camera-crane operated by remote control provides overhead shots and tight zooms on the fire altars. Technicians in a nearby control room edit the video feed live and send it to closed-circuit television monitors set up all around the area. Although these monitors make it possible to glimpse the manoeuvres going on inside, people pay them little mind. Standing, sitting, or bowing low around the edge of the fenced enclosure, hands clasped in devotional gestures, foreheads pressed to the ground, they direct their attention towards the live performance within.

Agni 2011

The place is Panjal, a small village in central Kerala, South India. The time is April 2011, the peak of the hot, dry season, with the monsoon still several weeks away. The practitioners are Nambudiri Brahmins, high-caste Hindus known across the region for their orthodoxy and dedication to the Vedas, an ancient corpus of mantras, myths, interpretive prose, and codifications that constitute Hinduism's oldest sacred texts and rituals.³ Vedic rituals are an elaborate form of sacrificial worship (*yajña*) in which a group of Brahmin officiants recite mantras and make offerings into fire altars for the spiritual and social benefit of a participating patron (*yajamāna*). Dubbed *śrauta* for its connection to the 'auditory revelation' (*śruti*) contained in the mantras, this ritual institution was patronized from the Vedic period (ca. 1500–500 BCE) up through the early centuries of the Common Era by chiefs, kings, and other elites who saw it as an opportunity to gain status and influence.⁴ Even as *śrauta* practices waned across most of India in the medieval and colonial periods, certain conservative Brahmin communities like the Nambudiris have continued to transmit and perform them.⁵

The Nambudiris, who refer to Vedic sacrifice by the Malayalam term *yāgaṁ* (Sanskrit *yāga*), perform two different iterations of *śrauta* rituals. We are concerned with the most elaborate form, which the Nambudiris call *Agni* after the Vedic god of fire who is the focus of worship. The Vedic codifications of the ritual call it *atirātra*, since it goes on 'overnight' – actually, over 12 nights without interruption – as well as *agnicayana*, since it revolves around the 'piling' of a massive brick fire altar.⁶ Organizers bill this 2011 performance as 'Athirathram,' a vernacularized transliteration of the Sanskrit term. After 12 days of continuous chanting and offerings, on the final evening the god 'Agni' will manifest himself in the form of a bonfire for all to see. People from the village and across the region gather in large numbers for this climax, eager to behold the effects of what they call *mantrikaṁ*, the local Malayalam word for the supernatural power of Vedic mantras – there is a widespread belief that a successful sacrifice will make it rain. The sun sinks and the sky is dark and clear, with no sign of precipitation. As dusk falls, the Nambudiri practitioners kindle torches in their altars and ignite the wooden posts and brittle palm thatch of the ritual enclosure. Then a stiff breeze whips up and clouds gather suddenly overhead. Rain breaks from the sky. As the rain falls over the next 5 min, the massive fire gathers strength, driving the practitioners to the sidelines where they merge into the throng. Flames intensify and plumes of smoke billow; the heat of the blaze surges outward and people fall back into the surrounding darkness. Smartphones held aloft form a constellation of screens and flashes; crowds cheer Agni's arrival (see Figure 2). As cold drops of rain pelt the crowd, people raise umbrellas, embrace one another, and shout out loud. The sacrifice seems to have brought the rain from nowhere; water flows now in runnels across the paddy, turning the dry red earth to mud. Agni heralds the arrival of an early monsoon.⁷

A ritual and a festival

I am there as one of a group of researchers from foreign universities. Trained in Indology – the study of premodern Indian religions and cultures through their texts – most of us have years of experience studying the Vedic textual sources on which the Nambudiri performance of Agni is based.⁸ Some of us have seen modern performances of Vedic sacrifice, while for others – like me –



Figure 2. Agni's arrival: fire, rain, and celebrations on the final night. (Photo by Derin Thorpe and courtesy of the author.)

this is the first time. For my part, I am excited, exhausted, and overwhelmed. I have stood on the sidelines now every day for 18–20 hours at a stretch, jockeying with my colleagues and the crowd to get the best spot to shoot my digital camera, moving my portable audio recorder from one place to another to get the best sound. What do I hope to see and hear? At first, I want to observe the ancient texts come alive, reenacted down to the last mantra with the vaunted 'fidelity of oral tradition' for which the Nambudiris have become so famous.⁹ In this, I am not disappointed, for every mantra, offering, and movement codified in Vedic liturgies from the first millennium BCE finds expression in the modern performance. The Nambudiri practitioners in 2011, with a strong oral tradition and decades of practical, hands-on experience, perform the praxis with great punctiliousness and scarcely deviate from the authoritative liturgical paradigms.

Soon enough, however, my attention strays from the virtuosic sacrificial display within the enclosure to the unscripted movements and moments all around me. I notice the old woman bowing down in homage to the sacrifice; the axe-wielding labourer who splits the wood that feeds the fires; the Delhi blogger who has come to report on the event for his cosmopolitan readership. I visit the caterers with their giant cauldrons of rice and sambar, churning out plate after plate of free food for all who attend¹⁰; the nurses in the first-aid tent and the firemen standing by; the vendors selling pamphlets on the esoteric meanings of the Vedas, how-to guides on kirlian photography, and scarves, posters, and flags emblazoned with the logo of the bird-shaped fire altar. I interview scientists from Indian universities as they train a spectrometer on the sacrificial fire to analyse its wavelength and energy, and line up seedlings in pots to measure the effects of mantras on plant growth.¹¹ I am hypnotized by the Spielbergian camera-crane and the technicians who operate it; and by the microphones, speakers, and soundmen who amplify the sacrifice. In short, Nambudiri liturgical praxis, for all its rarefied perfection, is swallowed up in the festival atmosphere that swirls around it. The enthusiastic participation in the event from all sides prompts questions: Why are these people here? Where did they hear about the sacrifice? Who pays for it? Who benefits? What does it all mean?

Religious sound and amplification

Let me now hone in on one phenomenon of the 2011 Agni that I think is especially relevant to these questions: the sonic amplification of mantras. The best way to appreciate this phenomenon is through the senses; accordingly, I draw the reader's attention to a short video I have made that conveys the intense sensory experience of attending the event.¹² My aim in the argument that

follows is to examine the ways in which this amplification of Nambudiri voices using microphones and loudspeakers correlates with an increased level of participation in the event as a whole. In the most elemental way, amplified sound makes the experience of Agni accessible to thousands of people at once, transforming the fenced-in, private practices of an elite group of Brahmins into a performance for public consumption. 24 hours a day, ebbing and flowing according to the pace of the liturgy, mantras blare from the loudspeakers. Even if participants turn their backs on the Nambudiri practitioners, or close their eyes as they pray on the sidelines, or ignore the closed-circuit television monitors – as long as they are in or around the village of Panjal, they cannot help but hear the amplified mantras. From this perspective, the realm of sacred space extends far beyond the ritual enclosure and the festival, outward as far as the amplified signal carries. For this reason, I would argue that the primary medium through which most visitors and neighbours participate in the sacrifice – whether up close or at a distance – is sound.

The recent 'sensory turn' in cultural studies has inspired a boom in sound studies, that is, examinations of sound and listening in societies past and present.¹³ Such studies attend to sonic and auditory cultures on their own terms, aiming to understand how soundscapes are constructed and experienced, as well as how they transform (and are transformed by) the societies of which they form a part. In this realm, the interactions of sound, listening, and religiosity – what Isaac Weiner calls 'religion out loud'¹⁴ – constitute a fertile area of inquiry. As Weiner and others have shown, sound and hearing are key sites for 'constructing identity and difference' in religious contexts past and present.¹⁵ Some studies have focused on the use of amplification in religious practice – from the Muslim call to prayer in the Netherlands¹⁶ to ensemble singing in charismatic churches in Kinshasa¹⁷ – and how such 'out loud' projections of identity are integrated into local soundscapes. To the extent that the amplification of religious sound by diverse groups in public spaces is permitted, promoted, or protected, this phenomenon would seem to be an indicator of a given society's pluralistic values.¹⁸ By this measure, Indian soundscapes bespeak a relatively pluralistic society: mantras from Hindu temple loudspeakers intermingle with Muslim calls to prayer, and devotional music blasting from auto rickshaws merges with crackling speeches at political rallies. While local authorities sometimes tamp down on amplification practices, and conflict between religious groups over the amplification of religious sound is not unknown,¹⁹ the prevailing attitude seems to one of general tolerance for the religious 'noise' of one's neighbour.²⁰ In the case of the amplified sacrifice in Kerala, participants have moved well 'beyond toleration'²¹ to embrace a version of religious pluralism²² that entails substantive engagement across lines of faith. At the same time, however, it is a pluralism that carries forward certain aspects of the state's long history of social stratification.

Mantras and Hindu sacred sound

In Kerala, the amplification of religious sound in public spaces intersects with another widespread phenomenon that is much older than microphones, loudspeakers, or electricity: chanting mantras as an expression of Hindu sacred sound. While 'mantra' as a general category within Indian religions has proven difficult to define or circumscribe,²³ the term has a Vedic provenance and often refers to canonical, fixed formulas (verse, prose, songs, syllables) drawn from the Vedic corpus and used in ritual.²⁴ Regarded as divinely revealed scripture, Vedic mantras constitute the supreme religious authority for orthodox Hindu traditions. However, they are conceived not as written 'scripture' but as *śruti*, which literally means 'what has been heard' and encodes a religiosity situated in the sonic and auditory realms. Although the recitation of Vedic mantras is reserved for male members of the Brahmin caste, the act of *listening* – 'acoustic piety,' in the formulation of Annette Wilke – makes the Vedas' divinity, auspiciousness, purity, and power accessible to a much wider group of devotees. In this way, Vedic mantras are central to a broad-based paradigm of Hindu sacred sound.²⁵

Before going any further, I should say a few words about the polyvalent categories ‘Vedic’ and ‘Hindu’ and their mutual relation in Kerala and at Agni 2011. As a community, Nambudiris identify themselves as Hindus at the top the state’s religious hierarchy: through their custodianship of Vedic heritage and supervision of major temple complexes throughout Kerala, they have shaped orthodox Hindu traditions in the region going back many centuries. Their stance parallels that of other Brahmanical Hindu traditions across India, which – although constructed from a diverse array of sources and materials – have tended to carry forward Vedic heritage by assimilating Vedic gods to Hindu gods, and Vedic practices to Hindu ones. Accordingly, at Agni 2011 practitioners and devotees alike describe ‘Vedic’ traditions in ‘Hindu’ terms. A clear instance of this is the worship of the brick altar with a litany of mantras in praise of the Vedic deity Rudra, who is regarded by many present as a form of the Hindu god Shiva.²⁶ In keeping with this stance, the organizers of Agni 2011 frame the entire event as a Hindu ritual, making use of Hindu iconography and terminology in their brochures, posters, websites, and marketing.

Amplification, spectacle, and participation

Against this background, the amplification of Vedic mantras at Agni 2011 can be regarded as a phenomenon of Hindu piety and aesthetics. The amplified sacrifice is fairly new in Kerala; before the 1990s, the sound of Vedic mantras in performance was only as loud as the strength of human voices. Before amplification, visitors came in much smaller numbers if they came at all; often, outsiders were even discouraged from attending. **With this in mind, I want to frame the phenomenon of amplification not only in terms of sound and technology, but also in terms of history and culture. Increased participation at these amplified sacrifices parallels a regional ‘amplification’ of Vedic ritual and Nambudiri identity in Kerala society. If the standard paradigm of Hindu sacred sound is, as Wilke has it, ‘acoustic piety,’ then its transformation in the context of Agni 2011 might be termed *amplified piety*.** With amplification, Nambudiri mantras and the sacrifice as a whole reach a much larger and more diverse audience than was the case in previous generations.

These transformations in the soundscapes of Nambudiri Vedic ritual also invite us to consider the growing participation of non-Nambudiris in an institution that, for most of the twentieth century, has consisted of private ceremonies conducted by Nambudiris alone. In this respect, **the amplified sacrifice has the hallmarks of what Timothy Lubin has termed, in the context of public Vedic rituals in Maharashtra, a ‘spectacle.’**

A spectacle [is] a form of public, ceremonial action that frames the ritual actions and thus endows these fixed, “classical” elements with a local and contemporary significance. The spectacle, besides arousing public interest, makes explicit the ideology implied in the present ritual performance and dramatizes the social alignments between the ritual agents and other participants.²⁷

Bracketing the ideology of amplified sacrifice for further discussion below, let me touch on the social alignments between Nambudiri and non-Nambudiri participants. In terms of caste hierarchy, Nambudiri Brahmins are the highest social class in the state; historically, they have shaped Kerala society from the aloof stance Brahmanical privilege. For many centuries, Nambudiris exercised this privilege through religious control over the administration and liturgies of major Hindu temple complexes; through economic control over the vast land-holdings of their agricultural estates (*mana*); and through social control based on purity codes that prohibited members of the lowest castes from approaching Brahmins.²⁸ Over the past 50 years, however, this privilege and segregation have diminished, thanks to political and economic reforms in Kerala; while remaining social elites, Nambudiris as a group are not as wealthy or powerful as they once were.

In keeping with the notion of ritual as ‘spectacle,’ Nambudiri social status is on display at Agni 2011, most notably in the highlighting of Nambudiris as a group of elite practitioners and in the

accommodation of Brahmanical status and separateness by various means. The ritual activities of the Brahmin officiants take place within a delimited sacred space; although these activities are visible to everyone from the perimeter – and cameramen and technicians are permitted somewhat closer access in the buffer zone – only Nambudiris and select guests may enter all the way inside. A pre-fabricated hallway, cordoned off from the crowds and marked ‘No entry’ – that is, Nambudiris only – connects the interior ritual space to an offsite area in an adjacent temple where Nambudiri families gather privately to socialize and eat.

The spectacle of the amplified sacrifice both reinforces and breaks down these patterns of segregation. Through amplification, a collective Nambudiri ‘voice’ (constituted by mantra recitation) is projected at top volume, drowning out everyone and everything else; in this way, amplification singles out and elevates Nambudiri identity. But at the same time, the material sound of amplified mantras diffuses in all directions, mingling indiscriminately with people of all castes and backgrounds and gesturing towards a new dynamic of inclusion and pluralism. In this way, amplification provides a bridge between Nambudiri ritual performance and thousands of visitors, many of whom are Hindu devotees who have come to immerse themselves in the sound of the mantras and to have a vision (*darśana*) of the main altar. In this respect, the set-up calls to mind the paradigm of Hindu temple worship, where the participation of devotees extends only to the boundaries of the deity’s inner sanctum, past which point only officiating Brahmins may enter.

The social dynamic on display at Agni 2011 – wherein non-Nambudiris may penetrate quite closely (if not all the way) to the heart of elite sacrificial practice and participate as spectators or devotees at the event – entails significant changes in how the sacrifice is consumed, arranged, performed, and paid for. To take stock of these shifts in technology and culture, we have to step back and briefly survey the history of Nambudiri Vedic ritual in Kerala. How was sacrifice performed in the old days? What has changed over the decades, and why?

Nambudiri identity and the private sacrifice

For Nambudiris, the *yāgam* has been a defining feature of identity and culture since they arrived in Kerala well over a thousand years ago.²⁹ Legends recount how their culture hero, Mezhatol Agnihotri, performed a herculean sequence of 99 sacrifices, prompting Indra, the king of the gods, to intervene. Wary of being upstaged, Indra extracted a promise from Mezhatol to retire from sacrificial activity and to restrict future performances to a small circle of authorized families.³⁰ Leaving the historicity of such claims aside, it is safe to assume continuity in Vedic ritual practice going back many centuries in Kerala.³¹ Over the last 150 years, more than 100 *yāgam*s have been performed.³² The sacrifice generated not only social capital, improving a patron’s standing among fellow Nambudiris and earning him an honorific title,³³ but also economic capital: the tally of completed rituals determined the allocation of rice harvest and stipends from the collective resources of an ancestral temple.³⁴ In this way, ritual accomplishment translated into higher status and prosperity within the Nambudiri social hierarchy.

Up through the 1960s, the sacrifice was private, both in patronage and in performance. The sacrificial patron would draw on resources derived from the management of his agricultural landholdings to pay for the necessary materials and expertise. Then, within the walls of his family estate, he and his officiants would conduct the *yāgam* in seclusion. Such is the traditional model of Nambudiri *śrauta* ritualism: privately financed and performed, with the social and spiritual benefits accruing to the patron and his family alone.³⁵

How did these sacrifices of yesteryear *sound*? Although the privacy surrounding them meant that they were seldom observed or documented by outsiders, it is still possible to get an idea by visiting old sacrificial sites and speaking to former participants. A few 100 m from the site of Agni 2011, the relic of a fire altar from a 1956 sacrifice in the precincts of one of Panjal’s leading Nambudiri families attests to a tradition of cloistered performance.³⁶ I stand at this quiet, leafy site

in the company of two brothers whose father was patron of the 1956 sacrifice and several others besides. Both men, now in their eighties, attended and officiated at numerous *yāgams* during this period. As we talk, I imagine the vanished soundscape of this ritual conducted more than 50 years ago, without microphones or speakers; in my mind, the contrast with today's amplified sacrifice is stark. The steady murmur of mantras, hushed exchanges, offerings, and crackling flames would have mingled with birdsongs, the barking of dogs, and the lowing of livestock. There would have been no generators, engines, or industrial noises; electricity came to this rural section of Kerala only in the early 1960s.³⁷

Brahmanical privacy and access

The early research experience of Frits Staal, a pioneering scholar who first visited South India in search of Vedic oral traditions in the late 1950s, elucidates Brahmanical concerns about privacy and access during this period. Although in the course of his travels Staal managed to record the teaching of the Vedas – resulting in an influential set of recordings³⁸ and a classic monograph on recitation³⁹ – his initial efforts to attend Vedic sacrifices were rebuffed. A sense of privacy verging on secretiveness seemed to characterize living traditions of Vedic ritual across the region. In an anecdote related to me by Staal's close friend Thennilapuram Mahadevan, the eminent Sanskrit scholar Venkataraman Raghavan⁴⁰ took a young Staal under his wing and made arrangements for him to attend a sacrifice in Nannilam, a Brahmin village with a strong *śrauta* tradition on the banks of the Cauvery River in Tamil Nadu. Although the practitioners welcomed him, they insisted – to Staal's great frustration – that he observe from a spot some 100 m away, where he could see and hear very little. Staal acknowledged this experience years later in a published assessment of the state of *śrauta* traditions in South India:

In 1957, when I was making tape-recordings of Veda recitation in South India, it was brought to my notice that there are a few villages where traditional performances of the *soma* sacrifices continue to take place. Such rituals are generally performed in secret and in secluded and inaccessible places, for the prevalent contemporary public opinion does not favour such expensive ceremonies; moreover, there has been legislation against animal sacrifices in some states...⁴¹

This offers a rationale for the circumspection of the Tamil ritualists Staal encountered as a young man: the desire to avoid public controversy over lavish expenditures and animal sacrifices in mid-twentieth century Tamil Nadu.⁴² When Staal finally did get a chance to witness a Vedic sacrifice – by Nambudiris in 1970s Kerala, as will be shown below – just such a controversy over animal sacrifice attended the proceedings.

The sacrifice goes silent

During his South Indian travels, Staal stopped in Kerala and embarked upon what would turn out to be a half-century's exploration and appreciation of Nambudiri culture. Staal's arrival on the scene happened to coincide with a crisis in the Nambudiri social fabric that would have lasting implications for Vedic traditions. The newly elected communist government, led by the reformer E.M.S. Namboodiripad, implemented land reforms that transferred ownership to the low-caste families who worked the land, thereby reducing the wealth of Nambudiri landed gentry.⁴³ The reforms were in many ways the culmination of several decades of social change, during which time many Nambudiri young men (including the politically ascendant E.M.S. Namboodiripad himself) had rejected Vedic traditions in favour of secular education and pursuits. These political, economic, and cultural shifts threatened the continuity of Vedic traditions: with the decline in private patronage to underwrite the costs of sacrifice, and fewer young men able to supply the requisite expertise, the scope for performing rituals narrowed.⁴⁴ For most of the 1960s, the sacrifice went silent.⁴⁵ This tradition with an ancient pedigree seemed close to extinction.

Agni 1975: the public sacrifice

A revival of sorts came in the early 1970s, when Staal convinced an inner circle of Nambudiri ritualists to collaborate on the performance of an *atirātra-agnicayana*.⁴⁶ There was a sense that this was perhaps the final chance to perform the ritual of Agni for posterity; it would also fulfil Staal's long-held ambition to personally observe a *śrauta* sacrifice and document it in every detail.⁴⁷ Every effort was made to perform the sacrifice in accordance with tradition, with the cadre of officiants drawn from the most esteemed and experienced Nambudiri *vaidikan* ('Vedic') families. To pay for it, Staal raised funds from foreign universities and foundations. After several years of planning and delays, the performance took place in April 1975. Staal led a coterie of foreign scholars to carry out the recording and documentation. Robert Gardner – the eminent visual anthropologist and founder of Harvard's Film Study Center – filmed all 12 days of the performance. To overcome the proscription on non-Nambudiris entering the sacred space, Gardner trained Nambudiri teenagers to use 16 mm film cameras and take sound with boom mics: these Brahmin cameramen had entrée into the sacrificial enclosure and could record the action up close. Two high-profile publications emerged from Agni 1975: first, Gardner and Staal's film, *Altar of Fire* (1976); and then, almost a decade later, Staal's exhaustive *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar* (1983). While both works focus chiefly on the idealized 'ritual competence' displayed by the Nambudiri practitioners in reenacting the archaic praxis according to Vedic texts,⁴⁸ Staal's work also contains valuable information on the logistics, budget, local reaction, and publicity around the performance.⁴⁹

In terms of ritual personnel and praxis, the 1975 Agni was very much like the *yāgam*s of the 1950s and earlier decades; on the other hand, it also heralded significant transformations in technology, participation, and media attention. 'In the recent past, performances of Vedic rituals have taken place quietly, within Nambudiri compounds, and without being noticed by the outside world. In 1975 the situation was very different. . . .⁵⁰ While there was no sonic amplification per se at Agni 1975 – no microphones, no loudspeakers – the performance was nevertheless *amplified* in a cultural sense by other means. The Kerala press picked up the story and highlighted the 'foreign participation' angle. Most of this media attention crystallized around the issue of animal sacrifice, with editorials and articles debating whether or not the traditional immolation of goats in Vedic sacrifice should be permitted; a coalition of political and religious activists also staged protests. As the atmosphere got more and more heated in the days leading up to the performance, Nambudiri elders convened a meeting with Staal and a number of Indian scholars (including the noted Vedicist C.G. Kashikar, who had witnessed the substitution of ghee offerings for animals at a Vedic sacrifice in Maharashtra in 1955) to discuss precedents and possibilities. After some deliberation, the Nambudiris authorized the substitution of vegetal offerings (rice flour wrapped in banana leaves) for the animal victims; this vegetarian substitution has become the norm in Nambudiri sacrifices ever since.⁵¹ When the ritual got underway, hundreds of curious onlookers came everyday to watch from the sidelines. By the final days, the crowds had gotten so thick as to sometimes impede the performance; on the last day, a crowd 10,000 strong gathered to witness the bonfire that signalled Agni's arrival. In 1975, as in 2011, a sudden rain marked the end of the *yāgam*. As reported in *The Hindu* newspaper: '...A heavy downpour fell over the area which the sponsors claimed was true to tradition and marked the "success" of the [sacrifice].'⁵²

A lasting revival

In this way, what was intended as the swan song of Nambudiri Vedic culture ended up amplifying the institution of sacrifice among Nambudiris, across Kerala, and beyond, bringing Vedic ritual to international attention. Agni 1975 may have been the first Nambudiri 'spectacle,' in Lubin's sense of the term.⁵³ Outside of Kerala, it was mostly academics who took notice: over the next decade, anthropologists and others fiercely criticized what they characterized as Staal's artificial staging of

the sacrifice, lack of reflexivity about his role as impresario, and overall disinterest in the social, economic, and performative contexts in which Agni 1975 took place.⁵⁴ For a generation of Nambudiris in Kerala, however, the legacy of the sacrifice was more positive. The performance and its cultural impact – exemplified by scholarly articles, newspaper and magazine accounts, television reports, Staal's monograph, and Gardner and Staal's film – brought new prestige to what many had come to view as an old-fashioned tradition, and even inspired some young men to recover the expertise of their family lines. Vedic traditions in Kerala thus effectively skipped a generation: boys whose fathers who had previously dropped the Vedas to embrace other opportunities now reversed this trend by taking up Vedic study on their own initiative. The seeds of new revivals were sown. After another decade of quiet, Agni was again performed in 1990, 1993, 1994, 2003, and 2007; since 2011, at least one *yāgam* has taken place annually. With such momentum, this pattern seems likely to endure for the foreseeable future.⁵⁵

My informants are doubtful about when sonic amplification became part of this new pattern: certainly by 2003, microphones and loudspeakers were the norm.⁵⁶ The fact that memories are fuzzy about the advent of sonic amplification suggests that the adoption of this technology was nowhere near as momentous as other innovations, such as the highly fraught substitution of rice-flour for animal victims. Unlike the issue of animal sacrifice, it seems, sonic amplification did not provoke any theological debates among Nambudiri elders or outcry among members of the public. (Nor, it seems, did the introduction of microphones and amplification spur any significant change in the recitation style of the performers themselves.⁵⁷) The amplified sacrifice came on the scene with little fanfare.

Changing patterns of patronage

Among the most significant features of the revival has been the change in patronage patterns. Whereas in previous generations, the patron himself personally bore most of the costs of sacrifice, since 1975 outside sources of funding have paid the lion's share of sacrificial budgets. These funds are raised in different ways: in 1975, foreign scholars secured grants from international research organizations⁵⁸; in 1990 and 1993, wealthy individuals made large gifts and solicited private donations⁵⁹; in 2003, devotees and visitors made thousands of small cash donations on the spot, with profits from merchandise and souvenirs also playing a significant part.⁶⁰ Since 2011, the trend in patronage has been to draw from all of the above sources in hybrid fashion. Whatever the mechanism, the formerly private ritual has effectively become public, exposed to scrutiny, criticism, and praise. The old model of Nambudiri sacrifice has given way to a new one: the Nambudiri *yajamāna* is now a patron only in name; the new *yajamāna* is 'the public at large.'⁶¹

But what is this 'public,' exactly?⁶² Who are its members and how is it composed? From the perspective of the Nambudiri practitioners, the public is made up of anyone from outside the Nambudiri community who may now consume or benefit from the sacrifice in one form or another; in this regard, one practitioner at Agni 2003 described the new paradigm of sacrifice as 'publicity' (Malayalam *parasyam*).⁶³ More broadly, it seems warranted to conceive of Agni's public in terms of commodification and consumption: the members of the public are those who have invested in the sacrifice in some fashion and hope to gain some share of its auspiciousness, blessings, or prestige. Such investments could take the form of financial patronage; however, they could also encompass non-financial participation of various kinds: being present at the sacrifice as a devotee or visitor, living and working around Panjal during the event, consuming media reports from a distance. In sum, Agni's public is a fluid network of patronage and participation, taking different forms in any given hour, day, and year.

And here we find ourselves at the nexus between the amplification of sound and the amplification of culture. Public patronage entails public participation; and this collective experience is fulfilled through amplified sound. Amplification invites a growing public into close proximity with what used to be a staunchly private institution. At the same time, broadcasting the mantras with microphones and loudspeakers lets Nambudiri practitioners maintain the privacy and purity of sacrifice in a public setting, transmitting sound across the boundaries of the ritual enclosure.

Nambudiri sacrifice thus rebrands itself – that is, amplifies its cultural and religious influence – without giving up its separateness, aloofness, and insistence on purity. And not only that: through amplification, Nambudiri sacrifice *pays* for itself and fosters its continuity in the years to come.⁶⁴

Return to Agni 2011

Let us return now to where we began, the 2011 Agni in Panjal. As in recent years, devotees and visitors make a steady stream of cash offerings in the receptacles arrayed around the sacrificial enclosure. But the scale of this event – from the high-tech recording and amplification to the sophisticated marketing efforts to the 20,000 free meals distributed each day – dwarfs that of all previous Nambudiri *yāgam*s. The primary funder and organizer of this sacrifice is Varthathe Trust,⁶⁵ a group led by an advertising executive and consultant named Madhu Kattat. Kattat is not a Nambudiri by birth but a Nayar (Malayalam *nāyar*), a label denoting a large, heterogeneous group of non-Brahmanical social classes in Kerala.⁶⁶ Raised less than 20 km away in Ottappalam, Kattat has been quite successful in business in the Gulf States and now lives in Dubai. His combination of local ties and international savvy has been essential to the logistics of Agni 2011, from gaining the backing of village officials to arranging for technicians and equipment to overseeing the marketing campaign.

Kattat's patronage and participation are emblematic of the ways that the trend of 'out-migration' to the Gulf States has transformed Kerala society (including ritual cultures) since the 1970s. Remittances and profits from lower-caste Keralans working in the Gulf have had a significant economic, social, and cultural impact back home. As Filippo and Caroline Osella have argued, the 'Hindu ritual arena' is one important site for taking stock of the consequences of Gulf migration. Their observations about changes in public sacrifices performed for the goddess Bhadrakali, usually patronized by Nayars and other non-Brahmanical castes, ring true in the context of Agni 2011 and the Nambudiris:

[During the 1990s]...we have observed an expansion of the ritual outside its original catchment area; the participation of new sponsors...; a dramatic rise in the ritual's costs; and the introduction of different ritual styles by new groups of performers, with resulting controversy.⁶⁷

Osella & Osella's conclusion that Gulf migration is a primary driver of these changes in ritual culture would likewise seem to apply to revivals of Agni. Not only big donors like Kattat but also the thousands of small donors who leave rupee-notes and coins in donation baskets derive a significant portion of their expendable income from Gulf-based businesses and remittances. In this way, although Nambudiris themselves have not played a large part in Gulf migration, their signature ritual institution has not been immune from its effects.

What do Kattat and the members of Varthathe Trust hope to gain by their investment and participation?⁶⁸ When I put this question to him, he professes altruistic motives: he explains that the *yāgam* is for the benefit of all mankind, that it purifies the atmosphere, and that it brings peace and universal harmony. This response is in line with the event's promotional and press materials; as one Nambudiri officiant tells a reporter from *The Hindu* in the weeks leading up to the event: 'The *yāgam* hopes to achieve two goals – propitiate world peace, and energise and protect the environment by destroying undesirable elements. Fire is believed to cleanse, and that is what this ritual is all about.'⁶⁹

The meaning of the amplified sacrifice

Alongside these big private donors, members of the visiting public are likewise invested in this performance, as much through their collective presence as through their small donations. This public side of patronage brings us back to the issue of consumption: if the tens of thousands of devotees and visitors play the role of de facto patron, what do they ask in return? As I rove around the area for 12 days and nights, I ask everyone I meet the same question: 'What's the purpose of the sacrifice? What does this sacrifice mean to you?'⁷⁰ Their replies are remarkably consistent from person to person: 'The *yāgam* saves the environment. It purifies the atmosphere with sacred

fires and mantras. It promotes world peace and harmony.’ Often, they quote me a popular Sanskrit mantra in lieu of an explanation: *lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu*, ‘Let everyone, everywhere be happy.’⁷¹ While this seems to suggest a widely held belief that the sacrifice purifies and brings universal welfare, it also speaks to the effectiveness of Varthathe Trust’s marketing of this belief, which has been disseminated for weeks leading up to the sacrifice in brochures, posters, souvenirs, and mass media; and at the performance itself through announcements over the loudspeakers. In this way participants at every level – from the wealthy organizers in the V.I.P. tent on down to the labourer who visits the site with his family at the end of the workday – partake in the ideology encoded by the amplified sacrifice. Organizers, practitioners, devotees, and visitors alike are virtually unanimous in their conviction that Agni 2011 is a global offering in the name of all humanity.⁷²

Space, participation, and technology

Let me conclude by saying a few more words about space, participation, technology, and what all of this suggests about the amplified sacrifice in the cultural landscape of Kerala. By returning once again to the issue of who attends the sacrifice and the spaces they occupy, we can appreciate how the amplification of mantras at Agni 2011 serves to integrate many distinct spheres of activity into a coherent event.

The spatial arrangement of Agni 2011 is something like the small village of Panjal in which it is sited, with amenities and services arrayed along a central thoroughfare. But there is one crucial difference: Agni’s boundaries are delineated by sacred sound and speaker cabinets. At the main entrance, a set of speakers stands next to a tall orange archway. This opens onto a broad avenue through the paddy, with another set of speakers at the halfway point; there are bathrooms and a makeshift fire station on one side of this strip, and a pressroom and first-aid facilities in trailers on the other. Further on, beyond yet another stack of speakers, there is a vendors’ tent, and behind that, a palatial pavilion where food is served in long buffets. At the back end along a canal is a large tent for storing food and supplies, cooking, and cleaning dishes; this rear boundary is also marked by a set of loudspeakers. Adjacent to this entire strip of tents and amenities is the ritual enclosure, with its fire altars, crowded walkway along the perimeter, and extensive seating on raised pavilions. Functioning as a sort of nerve centre, the control room – where the sound of mantras is processed at a mixing board and sent out to the far-flung speakers – is situated at one end of the ritual enclosure. As elsewhere, stacks of speakers rise up at corners and interstitial points, marking internal divisions between one sphere of activity and another, as well as delimiting the external boundaries of the event as a whole.

The participants who occupy these spaces are diverse – from different backgrounds, faiths, and vocations – and so, too, is their mode of participation. Socially and vocationally determined access to certain spaces is a crucial factor: depending on their role at Agni 2011, participants move within and between areas with varying degrees of fluidity. At the centre of the ritual enclosure, a select group of male Nambudiri practitioners performs the sacrifice, tending fires, making offerings, chanting mantras. As several experts supervise these active ritualists, other Nambudiri men and boys stand nearby, looking and listening intently. Nambudiri wives and family sometimes enter the enclosed space for short periods to observe and talk in whispers. Although the Nambudiri practitioners and their families have access to every corner of the event, in practice they either stand within the fenced enclosure or else withdraw into the private space of the adjacent temple. It is clear that a collective Nambudiri identity is at stake here: a sense of distinction predicated on the exclusivity of the Nambudiris as a group and on their intimate engagement with the sacrifice.

Outside the fenced area is everyone else – and yet the composition of this massive group and the nature of their participation are far from uniform. Many of the thousands upon thousands of daily visitors are Hindus from Kerala who prostrate themselves, circumambulate the enclosure

along the carpeted path, take *darśana* as they would at a temple shrine, eat a meal, and soak up the mantras – all patterns of behaviour that present this ‘Nambudiri’ sacrifice as a form of Hindu worship. Joining these local Hindus are others who have travelled long distances from other regions of India; their presence marks Agni 2011 as a site of Hindu pilgrimage. Mingling with these devotees are the many non-Hindus in attendance – chiefly Christians and Muslims from Kerala, with more than a few non-Indian foreigners mixed in – for whom Agni 2011 is a festival of community. At any given moment during the 12-day sacrifice, auxiliary events occur on the pavilions: whether formal (a speech by a politician or a distribution of sanctified, leftover offerings) or informal (an impromptu lecture by a charismatic *guru*), these transform the sacrifice into a sort of public meeting and draw people in across the lines of faith and culture. Largely invisible, and yet indispensable to the operation of this pop-up holy city in the rice paddy, are scores of cooks, cleaners, and workers, for whom Agni 2011 represents two weeks of employment.

For all this diversity, there is a remarkable cohesion among those present: day in and day out, people tell me that they did not want to miss this opportunity to be present at such an auspicious event and to take part in some capacity. With such clear demarcations of space and participation, how is the coherence of Agni 2011 achieved? How do the ritual agents at the heart of the sacrifice relate to devotees and visitors surrounding them? How does the private come into contact with public? No doubt there are many factors that contribute to the transformation of this multifarious, teeming series of rites, events, and gatherings into an integrated, inclusive ‘spectacle.’ But I would argue that technology – cameras, monitors, microphones, speakers – has a decisive role to play. While Nambudiris keep to themselves in cloistered spaces, and non-Nambudiris worship, watch, and work in peripheral zones, the agents of media and technology – cameramen, soundmen, reporters – move in the buffer zone about 3 m wide that rings the ritual space on all sides. From this vantage, they can get clear visual shots of all the ritual actions inside; direct the installation and manipulation of microphones around the altars; and interact with devotees, visitors and practitioners alike. In this way, media and technology occupy a liminal space, flowing freely inside and outside, bridging divides, effacing boundaries. These digital alchemists transform the private sacrifice into a public event for all to see and hear. Through this mediation, the celebration of Agni becomes a locally meaningful spectacle with a global reach.

Pluralism at the amplified sacrifice

The amplified sacrifice exemplifies the special brand of religious pluralism that characterizes modern Kerala society. It is pluralistic insofar as those present engage one another across lines of faith and difference; there is a genuine sense of good will and camaraderie in the celebration of the sacrifice, especially at the distribution of free meals or on the climactic final evening of fire and rain. And yet it is a qualified, ‘hierarchical pluralism,’⁷³ wherein one form of religiosity rooted in high social status and wealth – the Brahmanical Hinduism of the Nambudiris as patronized by a successful Nayar businessman and his associates – sets the agenda. In this regard the amplified sacrifice partakes in the power, respect, and privilege that have been accorded to Nambudiris for centuries in Kerala’s stratified society. Even as the speakers amplify the mantras across the rice paddy for everyone present to hear, they simultaneously amplify Nambudiri identity and culture for a growing regional, national, and international audience, carrying the mantras much further than any loudspeaker ever could.

Culture heroes?

By way of an epilogue, I note that Agni 2011 is a reunion of sorts: Nambudiris perform the sacrifice in the exact same paddy where they had revived it with Staal’s collaboration some 35 years earlier. Staal himself is here, given a seat of honour on the sidelines, mobbed by old friends, well-wishers, and journalists. His contribution to the on-going tradition can be measured by the remarkable fact that his 1983 book has become an important authority for the practitioners

themselves, who consult it frequently on the sidelines. He had cemented his status as the leading foreign impresario of Nambudiri sacrifice through a return visit to Kerala to watch a previous revival, Agni 1990 at Kundoor.⁷⁴ Now, back here in Panjal once again, his reputation precedes him: teenagers, shopkeepers, toddy-tappers, rickshaw drivers, police officers – all know his name. Although I am more than 40 years his junior, as a non-Indian male I am greeted everywhere I walk by cries of ‘Staal! Staal! Staal!’ So if Mezathol Agnihotri, performer of 99 *yāgams*, is the culture hero of premodern sacrifice in Kerala, then surely Frits Staal, reviver of Agni, is the culture hero of the modern sacrifice. After several days, Staal gets a sore throat and loses his voice. He is unable to hold interviews or preside over panels organized in his name. In the presence of the amplified sacrifice, its most vociferous promoter falls silent.

Notes

1. These stanzas, composed in an archaic form of Sanskrit ca. 1200 BCE (see Witzel, “Development of the Vedic Canon”), are drawn from the oldest Indic collection of poetry, the *Rgveda Saṃhitā* (1.117.2–3): ‘Your chariot, o Aśvins, swifter than mind, drawn by good horses, comes to the clans. By which (chariot) you go to the home of the good ritual performer, by that, o men, travel your course to us. You free Atri, the seer of the five peoples, from narrow straits, from the earth cleft along with his band, o men – confounding the wives of the merciless Dasyu, driving them out, one after another, o bulls.’ Jamison and Brereton, *The Rigveda*, 273.
2. In this article, I follow the Indological convention of transliterating the Sanskrit term *brāhmaṇa*, which refers to the uppermost stratum of society as codified by classical Hindu legal texts, as ‘Brahmin.’ This spelling also helps to differentiate the Brahmin social group from ‘Brahman,’ a name for the Absolute (from the cognate Sanskrit term *brāhman*).
3. Jamison and Witzel, “Vedic Hinduism.”
4. Witzel, “Development of the Vedic Canon,” 267.
5. Staal, “The Nambudiri Tradition.” For modern *śrauta* traditions in other regions of India, see, e.g., Knipe, *Vedic Voices*; Smith, “The Recent History”; and Lubin, “Veda on Parade.”
6. Staal, *Agni*, remains the indispensable scholarly reference for the *agnicayana* ritual and Nambudiri traditions. The other iteration performed by the Nambudiris is the ‘Soma sacrifice’ (*somayāga*; *agniṣṭoma*), named for the botanical sacrament *soma* that is pressed and consumed at both types of ritual. Although the botanical identification of the historical *soma* remains controversial, the Nambudiris use a local creeper, *Sarcostemma brevistigma*; see Staal, “The Nambudiri Tradition,” 186, n.1.
7. Staff Reporter, “12 Day ‘Athirathram’ Comes.”
8. This group included Michael Witzel of Harvard University, Masato Fujii of Kyoto University, and Thennilapuram Mahadevan of Howard University.
9. Staal, *The Fidelity of Oral Tradition*.
10. The cooks hired for Agni 2011 are Tamil Brahmins who hail from communities on the Kerala side of the Palakkad gap near the border of Tamil Nadu, whence they migrated several centuries ago. Earning their livelihoods as restaurateurs, they are renowned for their cuisine and frequently cater large Hindu festivals in the region. Tamil Brahmins in Kerala recite the Veda but lack their own tradition of *śrauta* sacrifices; in the hierarchy of Kerala society, they have a lower status than Nambudiri Brahmins.
11. Press Trust of India. “Ancient Fire Ritual has Positive.” For earlier efforts to conduct scientific research on Nambudiri sacrifices in Kerala, including many of the same techniques on view in 2011, see Staal, “Agni 1990,” 650–2. On the scientific effects ascribed to Vedic rituals in Maharashtra, see Lubin, “Science, Patriotism, and Mother Veda,” “Veda on Parade.”
12. Gerety, *Mantras 2 the Max*; <https://vimeo.com/36395650>.
13. See Bull and Back, “Into Sound”; and Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations.”
14. Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*.
15. Weiner, “Sound and American Religions,” 897.
16. Tamimi Arab, “Amplifying Islam.”
17. Aubry, “The Amplification of Souls.”
18. On the other hand, one must acknowledge the Orwellian overtones of the phenomenon of certain cultural practices – religious or otherwise – being favoured, amplified, and imposed by the powerful on the powerless.
19. Indo-Asian News Service, “Tension in Jammu Village.”
20. Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, examines the construction of religious sound in America as ‘noise.’
21. Such is the memorable phrase invoked by Chris Beneke to describe the religious pluralism of 18th-century America; see Beneke, *Beyond Toleration*.

22. For a critical engagement with the concept of religious pluralism in Asia, see the essays collected in Formichi, *Religious Pluralism, State*; for a broad consideration of pluralism in the history of Indian religions, see Madan, "Religions of India."
23. For definitions and discussions of the category of *mantra*, see, e.g., Gonda, "The Indian Mantra"; and Alper, *Understanding Mantras*.
24. Staal, "Vedic Mantras," 48, defines Vedic mantras as 'bits and pieces of the Veda put to ritual use.'
25. See Wilke and Moebus, *Sound and Communication*; and Wilke, "Sonic Perception and Acoustic Communication."
26. See Staal, "Episode 18: Rudra."
27. Lubin, "Veda on Parade," 377.
28. On the history, social organization, and situation of the Nambudiris in relation to modern Kerala society, see Mencher, "Namboodiri Brahmins"; Staal, "The Nambudiri Tradition"; Narayanan and Veluthat, "A History of the Nambudiri Community"; and Parpola, *Kerala Brahmins in Transition*.
29. Veluthat, *Brahman Settlements in Kerala*, 4–16, 77–8.
30. My sources for this lore are Nambudiri oral traditions as recounted in Mahadevan and Staal, "The Turning Point," 382; Mahadevan, "Akṣarasamkhyā"; and Bhattathiripad, "Vararuchi and Mezhatol Agnihothri." Also according to tradition, the families descended directly from Agnihotri form the higher-ranking *ādhyān* division of Nambudiris; in light of their descent from him, they no longer need to perform sacrifices. The majority of Nambudiris constitute the lower *āsyān* division, and of these, only a further subgroup has the right to conduct and participate in sacrifices (*yāgādhikāra*); see Parpola, *Kerala Brahmins in Transition*, 75, n.25; and Bhattathiripad, "Classification."
31. Staal, "The Nambudiri Tradition," 169–72; and Varier, "The Nambudiri Ritual Tradition."
32. Kashikar and Parpola, "Śrauta Traditions in Recent Times"; and Somayajipad, Nambudiri, and Nambudiri, "Recent Nambudiri Performances."
33. Nambudiri, "Karmamārga"; and Parpola, *Kerala Brahmins in Transition*, 150, 161.
34. Staal, "The Nambudiri Tradition," 183; and Varier, "The Nambudiri Ritual Tradition," 291–2.
35. Mahadevan and Staal, "Turning Point in a Living Tradition," 384.
36. For a discussion and photograph of this altar, see Staal, "The Nambudiri Tradition," 188–9.
37. This according to Nellikat Vasudevan Nambudiri (personal communication); on the adoption of gas-powered and electric appliances in Panjal in the 1980s, see Parpola, *Kerala Brahmins in Transition*, 140–1.
38. Levy and Staal, *The Four Vedas*.
39. Staal, *Nambudiri Veda Recitation*.
40. Under the auspices of the National Sanskrit Commission, Raghavan undertook a wide-ranging cultural survey of Sanskrit culture including Vedic chanting in post-Independence India; see Raghavan, *The Present Position*. For an instance of Raghavan's activities beyond Vedic traditions, see Lowthorp's discussion of *kūṭiyāṭṭam* in this publication.
41. Staal, "The Twelve Ritual Chants," 409.
42. Analysing the performance of a *śrauta* sacrifice some 40 years later by Tamil ritualists in Kerala, Fred Smith highlights a similar 'secretiveness, even stealth' attending the distribution of fees and the immolation of animals; see Smith, "A Brief History," 171.
43. On the Kerala land reforms, see Paulini, *Agrarian Movements and Reforms*; and Franke and Barbara, *Kerala*.
44. Staal, "The Nambudiri Tradition," 183; and Fujii, "Jaiminīya Sāmaveda Traditions," 111.
45. 1965, when the Nambudiris performed numerous *śrauta* sacrifices, was an exceptional year within this otherwise quiet decade; see Somayajipad, Nambudiri, and Nambudiri, "Recent Nambudiri Performances." It seems likely that this spate of performances was an effort by members of the older generation to take advantage of declining resources and expertise by performing a last round of rituals before it was too late.
46. For an emic account of how this collaboration developed, see Nambudiri, "Agni and the Foreign Savants."
47. Up to that point, the only precedents for a foreign scholar documenting a *śrauta* sacrifice were Martin Haug's observations of Vedic rituals in the late-nineteenth century; and J.A.B. van Buitenen's documentation of the 1955 performance of a *vājapeya* ritual at Pune. See Haug, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇam*; Buitenen, "Vājapeya: English Commentary"; and Buitenen, *Vājapeya Sacrifice*.
48. Thus Staal, "Introductory Note," 274.
49. Staal, "The Agnicayana Project."
50. *Ibid.*, 464.
51. Recounted in Staal, "The Agnicayana Project," 465. On the use of such substitutes in Maharashtra, see Smith, "The Recent History." On the other hand, Brahmin ritualists in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh disdain such substitutions, insisting that the true power of the sacrifice stems from the use of animal victims; see Knipe, *Vedic Voices*, 215; and Smith, "A Brief History," 171–2.
52. Quoted in Staal, "The Agnicayana Project," 474.
53. Lubin, "Veda on Parade."

54. For a sampling of these critiques, along with Staal's responses, see Paul, "Review: *Altar of Fire*"; Schechner, "Wrestling Against Time," "A 'Vedic Ritual' in Quotation Marks"; and Staal, "Comment: *Altar of Fire*," "Professor Schechner's Passion for Goats."
55. On the revival of *śrauta* sacrifices among the Nambudiris, see Staal, "Agni 1990"; and Mahadevan and Staal, "Turning Point in a Living Tradition." On the revival of the transmission of the Vedas in Kerala, see Gerety, "Survivals & Revivals," "Digital Guru."
56. T.P. Mahadevan, personal communication.
57. The basic continuity of the Nambudiri style of recitation over the last half-century can be corroborated by comparing the performances at Agni 2011 to those from the days before sonic amplification, e.g., the recordings in Levy and Staal, *The Four Vedas*, or the soundtrack of Gardner and Staal, *Altar of Fire*.
58. For a breakdown of the grants secured for Agni 1975 (including modest donations from a few individuals), see Staal, "Preface," xi.
59. For details about the organization and funding of Agni 1990, see Staal, "Agni 1990," 650.
60. On the changing patterns of patronage and the funding sources for Agni 2003 and other performances, see Mahadevan and Staal, "Turning Point in a Living Tradition," 368–9, 384.
61. Mahadevan and Staal, "Turning Point in a Living Tradition," 383.
62. For a recent critical discussion of the concept of 'a public' in modern South Asia, see Barton and Ingram, "What is a Public?"
63. Mahadevan and Staal, "Turning Point in a Living Tradition," 383, n.6. In a subsequent personal communication, Mahadevan clarified for me the context and substance of the practitioner's observation.
64. Fred Smith's extensive experience with Vedic rituals in modern Maharashtra and Karnataka corroborates this scenario. In a personal communication, he observes: 'What is primarily responsible for this shift to public performance is the change in patronage patterns. The loudspeakers are there in order to draw crowds, and therefore donations.'
65. Lakshmi, "Wealthy Indians Revive."
66. For more on the Nayars, see Fuller, *The Nayars Today*.
67. Osella and Osella, "Migration and the Commoditisation of Ritual," 110.
68. Although Varthathe Trust has not made the budget public, according to T.P. Mahadevan the final price tag may have exceeded \$200000.00 USD.
69. Gautam, "Vedic Ritual for World Peace."
70. My personal motivation for formulating the question in terms of meaning was to explore the possibility of a counter-narrative to Staal's theory of the 'meaninglessness' of mantras and ritual; see Staal, *Rules Without Meaning*.
71. This mantra, which does not occur in the Vedas, is often described as a *maṅgala* ('welfare, happiness') *mantra*. It circulates widely as a blessing to conclude worship and other special occasions in pan-Indian, diasporic, and globalized cultures of Hinduism. So far I have not been able to trace its earliest textual source.
72. There may be good reasons to interrogate this perspective and to wonder about privately held goals and motivations. For example, rumours swirled on the sidelines of Agni 2011 about the lavish fees paid to the Nambudiri officiants; and about the prospect of Varthathe Trust partially recouping their contributions from the generous donations of the visiting public and from the sale of Agni-related merchandise.
73. For refractions, in other Asian contexts, of the idea that pluralism can accommodate and even perpetuate social hierarchies, see Yongjia "Hierarchical Plurality"; and Sapitula, "Overcoming 'Hierarchized Conviviality'."
74. See Staal, "Agni 1990."

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