



Yogakshema Sabha, Kozhikode
Dr. Frits Staal Memorial Lecture
1st March, 2012

Note: This is the full text the Dr. J. F. Staal Memorial Lecture delivered by Dr. P. Vinod Bhattathiripad, Chief Co-ordinator, www.namboothiri.com, in a program organized by the Kozhikode district Yogakshema Sabha, Kerala, India, on 1st March, 2012. The text has been rearticulated from Malayalam by Dr. Pichirikkat Bhaskaran Nayar of Lincoln University, UK, who knew Dr. J. F. Staal during early 1980s.

Frits Staal (1930-2012) – A Requiem from Kerala

It was towards the close of the last century. Software personnel like me were all taken over by and totally immersed in the ‘Year 2000 Problem’. But there was something else that was of special concern for me at that time - something quite different and personal – the development and constant updating of the excitingly new web site of www.namboothiri.com, where a lot of new and interesting information on Namboothiri community was continually pouring in. It was in connection with that that I got in touch with an expert in Indian history, Dr. M. G. S. Narayanan, who lent me a copy of a work called AGNI by Dr. Frits Staal. That incredibly great piece of writing, the contents of which I devoured ravenously in a matter of days, not only contributed a lot of new and extremely useful information for my incipient web site, but also introduced me to this Indologist scholar Staal and the tremendous possibilities of further input from him. It was to corroborate and confirm some pieces of information which I had taken from AGNI and included on the web site in direct quotes, that I first contacted Dr. Staal. His response

was amazingly and overwhelmingly gratifying - “I found on the namboothiri.com web site everything that is in perfect consonance with my own conceptions about the traditions and heritage of the Namboothiri community and also expressed in words that I would have used myself. The web site will certainly help the present generation understand and interpret my own intuitions very well. Please let me know if there is anything more I can do to further assist you.”

That septuagenarian scholar’s patronage and support produced a powerful attestation for the web site. The great scholar thus became a willing agency for the acceptance and publicity of the web site among Indologists globally, thereby lending it absolute credibility as a research resource. His recent demise has deprived the world of a great Indologist and www.namboothiri.com has lost one of its most eminent patrons.

For Keralites and in particular for my Kerala priestly community, Frits Staal was a lot more than just an eminent Indologist. He was the one person who almost single handedly renewed and whetted the research interest in and hence the knowledge about Somayaagam, the ancient Vedic ritual, the practice and knowhow about which have actively survived in Kerala more than anywhere else in India.

One wonders what exactly it was regarding Somayaagam that enticed him: Was it the Vedic element? The language and the nature of its encoding? The *usus loquendi* of vedic diction? The literary element? The ritualism? The historicity? The algorithmic element? The bio-rhythmic element? Or was it the timeless universality of its spiritual heritage? Or could it be, like in the case of most Indians, an inherent sense of reverentiality?

Whatever it was, his approach was certainly much more intellectual than devotional, rooted as it was in scientificity and disinterested objectivity, imbued with an ‘outside-in’ perspective. I believe what he was interested in primarily was the praxis of Somayaagam much more than its theoretical orientation: the praxis of vedic principles, vedic phonics, vedic syntax, vedic ritualism and the diverse vedic formalisms manifest in and through the Yaga. By closely studying its practical, operational and procedural aspects as well as features, he tried to reconcile them with the latent theoretical principles leading on to as well as underpinning the overt ritualistic practices. By adopting such an approach where theory and practice are both intertwined, but where an intellectual objectivity eschewed devotional subjectivity, this

sagacious Guru cut out a new and innovative path in Indological research. He also found a permanent place for Somayaagam in the field of Indology. Above all, he ensured that Kerala culture, in particular the traditions of the Namboothiri community became essentially a valuable fountainhead of relevant information for Indologists. The fact that Kerala is being considered as a likely venue for the next international Vedic Workshop itself is attributable in part at least to this great Indologist's association with the place.

Born in 1930 to Jewish parents in the Netherlands, Johan Frederik (Frits) Staal studied mathematics, physics and philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He came to India first to study Indian philosophy and Sanskrit at Benares and Madras Universities. Although in reality, it was one of his mates, a Kerala Brahmin, who first brought him down to Kerala, many of his fans in Kerala would like to think that it may well have been some sort of hidden inner urge, or some unseen fortuitous force, or some propitiously providential predestiny that brought him here. He came again to Kerala in 1961 during his tenure in London to do some research in Indology and from then onwards kept in close touch with his local cultural mediator Maammunnu Ittiravi Namboothiri, a noted scholar and guru in the field of Sama Veda. The close association between the two resulted in the audio recording of the ritual recital of not only the whole of the Sama Veda text and its subsidiary scriptural texts like Ooham, Ooshaani, Brahmanas etc. but also of the various mantras of the Rik and Yagur Vedas that appear in the Somayaagam. Out of all this came out the work 'Namboothiri Veda Recitation' that gave Staal immediate global acclaim among Indologists. His intense desire to be a part of the performance of some great Vedic ritual had to wait until 1975, when it was decided to perform the fire ritual of Atiratram in a village namely Panjaal near the town of Trissur in Kerala. Frits Staal was then professor of Philosophy at UC, Berkely.

The Atiratram of 1975, normally an exclusive Kerala Namboothiri affair, turned into a universally acclaimed event sponsored, patronized and attended by a number of globally known institutions and academics in several countries of Asia Europe and North America, mostly owing to the efforts of Frits Staal. The loudest and greatest outcome of Staal's presence and patronage of that Atiratram was his historic work (co-authored with C. V. Somayajipad and Ittiravi Nambudiri) on the ritual entitled AGNI - The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar, Vols. I-II (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), which instantly turned him into one of the greatest

authorities on Indology, specifically on vedic rituals. No other work of such authenticity of detail and philosophical credibility about Vedic fire rituals had appeared before or has possibly appeared since then in any language anywhere in the world.

From the mid fifties to the mid eighties of the last century Professor Staal wrote and published countless research articles and quite a few books like 'Agni' (see above) 'Namboothiri Veda Recitation' and 'exploring mysticism' (Penguin 1975), and established his name and fame in the field as a leading authority on Hindu Vedic rituals. Since his retirement from active academia in the early nineties, he moved his research interests (with the exception of the one publication jointly with Prof. Mahadevan on 2003 Somayaagam at Trissur) away from the Vedas and Vedic rituals on to Buddhism. Upon an invitation from the royal family of Thailand, he moved on to Thailand in the beginning of this century and lived there almost like a recluse in the town of Chiang Mai in Thailand, and appeared to be pulling back from active involvements even to the extent of declining to be interviewed by a reporter of the Washington Post. However, he did retain email contact with www.namboothiri.com and also with Prof. T. P. Mahadevan of Howard University. Most recently in April, 2011, he succumbed to the persuasive entreaties of www.namboothiri.com and enriched the Atiratram ritual (a repetition of the performance he had documented more than three and half decades ago) at the same venue (Panjaal) near Trissur, Though excited initially by old memories and also by his company with a team of Indologists led by Prof. Michael Witzel of Harvard and Dr. T. P. Mahadevan, his declining health forced him to go back before the ritual ceremoniously ended. But just before returning, he officially handed over the copies of most of his audio and video recordings (of Kerala vedic rituals) to Olappamanna Mana in a simple function at the Mana and, sadly, this turned out to be his last function in Kerala. The email he had sent subsequently to www.namboothiri.com clearly echoed his sense of fulfillment and gratification on being able to attend the ritual.

During his last visit to Kerala, it seems he had sensed the positive changes in the public interest on preserving the rituals like Somayaagam and also on the celebrity status accorded by the public to such vedic practices. This was clear in his last email to www.namboothiri.com, a couple of weeks before his demise. The email read thus: "Atiratrams cannot be stopped now so let us celebrate that as well"

To Indian (and specifically) Malayalee (Kerala) intellectuals, academics and cognoscenti of Hindu traditions, Frits Staal will always be the leading champion of Somayaagam and the Hindu Vedic rituals as well as a leading spokesperson who loudly acquainted the Western world with the rich linguistic, cultural and spiritual heritage of ancient India. Kerala Vedic traditions enriched and empowered and in turn were enriched and empowered by the great guru Johan Frederik Staal. By some odd quirk of fate it was two Keralites who, having been informed of the fact by his niece within a few minutes of the sad event, spread the word of his demise around the world by email. His death is an irreplaceable loss to Indology and to Keralites and all Keralites will undoubtedly chime in with the correspondent of the Washington post when she wrote on his death: "Sad, but his contributions will live on".