



## Orality, literacy and memorisation : priestly education in contemporary south India

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## *Orality, Literacy and Memorization: Priestly Education in Contemporary South India*

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For the debate on orality, literacy and memorization, India provides some striking evidence. In his comparative analysis of ‘oral aspects of scripture’, Graham gives the Hindu tradition a special place, for the ‘ancient Vedic tradition represents the paradigmatic instance of scripture as spoken, recited word’ (Graham 1987: 68). The Vedas, the oldest texts of Hinduism, have been transmitted orally for three thousand years or more, despite the very early implementation of writing, and it is the Vedas as recited from memory by Brahmans that are alone authoritative. A corollary of the spoken word’s primacy is that in teaching the Vedas and other texts, although ‘written texts have been used’, ‘a text without a teacher to teach it directly and orally to a pupil is only so many useless leaves or pages’ (*ibid.*: 74).

Much of the debate about orality and ‘the consequences of literacy’ has been dominated by Goody and the critics who have responded to his work. Goody actually says little about India, except where he challenges the consensus that the Vedas are orally composed works transmitted by purely oral means (1987: 110–22), but he scarcely scratches the surface of the Sanskritists’ technical evidence and arguments about the Vedas’ early history. Elsewhere he recognizes the importance of the guru, who ‘adds personal charisma to book-learning, in a combination of oral and literate modes of communication’ (1968: 13), but this misleadingly implies priority for book-learning, and to describe the Indian case as partly a matter of ‘oral residues in a literate culture’ (*ibid.*: 14) greatly underestimates the significance of orality in the Hindu tradition. Similarly, despite

Most of the data reported in this article were collected during four months’ research in Madurai in 1994–95, supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. I am grateful to Véronique Bénéï, David Knipe and Johnny Parry for encouraging and helpful criticisms of an earlier draft, and to Gérard Colas, Paul Dundas, Christopher Minkowski and Sheldon Pollock for valuable information used in my discussion of Vedic education. To simplify the text of the article, only unfamiliar names and terms (mostly Sanskrit) are transliterated with diacritical marks.

remarking in a later work that in an Indian village he heard his Brahman neighbour reciting his Vedic prayers daily, Goody quickly insists that 'writing is surely critical in the fact that Hinduism . . . exists in recognizably similar forms throughout the sub-continent' (1986: 7), and in the rest of his discussion the references are always to written texts and the literati.

This article will not add yet more to the bulky criticism already directed at Goody, for he is, I shall suggest shortly, partly right about the importance of a literate culture, at least for contemporary India. Nonetheless, as Parry (1985) has convincingly shown, Goody's boldest propositions are unconfirmed by Indian data, which do not support the claim that a sharp antithesis exists between oral and literate cultures, or that literacy has determinant social or intellectual consequences (see also Chakrabarti 1994). There is little in Parry's article that I would dispute or qualify, and an important strand in his argument is that although 'in theory oral transmission has ideological pre-eminence', written texts may now be regarded as more reliable, because human memory has supposedly become so fallible and Brahman learning so corrupted that 'the authenticity of knowledge transmitted by purely oral means can no longer be automatically accepted as axiomatic' (1985: 207). Parry gives several examples of the Banaras Brahmans' defective learning, which means that many Brahmans purportedly reciting sacred texts—especially priests during rituals—actually have no idea what their utterances mean 'and are often reduced to inaudible mumbling or brazening it out with gobbledygook in the confident expectation that their patrons will never know the difference' (*ibid.*: 204). What Parry says about priests in Banaras is true of many temple priests in the south Indian city of Madurai, in the state of Tamilnadu, whom I have studied; they, too, admit that they brazen it out before devotees and very rarely indeed are they challenged. This situation is undoubtedly widespread in India, so that for every Brahman who knows his texts accurately, there are many others who are just winging it.

Yet there are also men in contemporary India who can recite texts from memory properly, having learnt them at the feet of a guru, and it would be wrong to infer from Parry's article that oral transmission never works effectively. Although we have accounts of ancient Hindu education based on textual evidence (e.g., Altekar 1934; Gonda 1965; Kane 1974: 321–70) and a few highly technical analyses of Vedic recitation (Howard 1986; Staal 1961), very little (except for Knipe 1997) has been published on the oral transmission

of texts and their memorization in India today. This article is mainly about the education of temple priests in modern Tamilnadu. The priestly schools which I discuss are not, strictly speaking, ones that teach the Vedas to Brahmans in the classical way (although these will be briefly mentioned). As I shall show, for priestly students—who are ordinarily intelligent people, not miraculous prodigies of memory and learning—the extensive memorization of texts in a language that they have not learnt properly is a fairly straightforward process.

The process, however, comprises two analytically separable components: the verbatim memorization of texts which exist in a written and usually printed form, and the memorization of the sound of those texts as heard from the guru. Notwithstanding the guru's importance, the transmission of texts from teacher to students is not the product of a 'primary oral culture'. Instead, to paraphrase Ong (1982: 57), it is a process in a literate culture in which verbatim memorization, in significant part, is done from a text to which the student repeatedly returns in order to perfect and test his verbatim mastery. To that important extent, Goody's characterization of the Indian case is correct, so that the emphasis placed by Graham and other latter-day scholars of Hinduism (e.g. Coburn 1991: 3–6, 88–90) on the primacy of utterance understates the role of printed or written texts in guaranteeing exact memorization and recitation in contemporary India.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, from books alone it is impossible to learn how to vocalize the texts with the correct stress, pitch and rhythm; that can be achieved only by listening to the guru's sound and retaining it, first by repeating after him and then reinforcing memorization of his sound through further practice. Hence the guru is indispensable and priestly education does depend on oral transmission, but despite the ideological priority accorded to the guru and the spoken word, in the priestly schools (although not to the same extent in all Vedic teaching) books are in practice necessary as well for phonetically accurate memorization of his utterances. The schools for priests, which are a distinctive example of the mixture of oral and literate modes of communication that Street (1984: 4–5 and *passim*) identifies as normal in all contemporary societies, provide a case-study of how the memorization of texts is actually

<sup>1</sup> Cases of purely oral transmission do exist in India, such as the Rajasthani epic of Pābūjī studied by Smith (1991), which contrasts with the Sanskrit texts discussed here.

accomplished and also, more generally, of how orality is sustained within the literate print culture of modern India.

### **The Agamas in their Contemporary Context**

My data on the Agamic religious schools attended by priests and their sons were collected in the course of fieldwork among the priests of the great temple in Madurai, which is dedicated to the goddess Minakshi and her husband Sundareshwara, a form of the great god Shiva. The priests who serve in the Minakshi temple are Adishavayas (or Shivacaryas), members of an endogamous subcaste which is generally regarded as Brahman, but is ranked below other non-priestly Brahman subcastes. In the Minakshi temple, as in all other temples dedicated to Shiva in Tamilnadu, the rituals should in theory be performed according to the prescriptions of the Agamas (*āgama*), the Sanskrit texts believed to contain Shiva's own directions for his proper worship. Throughout much of the twentieth century, reformist critics of the temple priests in Tamilnadu have insisted that the low standard of ritual performance can be improved by providing Agamic education for the priests, and since the late 1970s, when I first worked in Madurai, there has been a small but significant rise in the number of Minakshi temple priests who have studied in Agamic schools, or attended one-year part-time courses providing elementary Agamic training (Fuller 1997: 5–6).

In reality, compliance with Agamic rules is highly problematic, as I have previously shown in some detail (Fuller 1984: ch. 6; 1993; 1997). Nonetheless, reformist criticisms have been largely internalized, so that for temple priests in general, as well as the Agamic schools' gurus and their students, the fundamental purpose of Agamic education is to produce educated priests, who can put into practice the axiomatic principle that Shiva's worship should be performed in accordance with his own Agamic directions. Although this may look like a very traditional aim, in many respects it is actually a modern product of reformism and Agamic education is increasingly described by priests as a 'professional' training. Thus, they say, to become a professionally qualified priest, a man must attend a religious school, just as a qualified doctor or lawyer must have graduated from a medical or law college. Furthermore, the pursuit of Agamic education has an economic rationale, because educated priests, especially if they gain a reputation for learning and skill (like the gurus

themselves), can command high fees for a range of special rituals. Graduates of the schools are also the priests most likely to obtain more lucrative posts in Hindu temples overseas (Fuller 1996: 5–7, 13–15).

The reformist pressure which has given rise to the demand for properly trained priests significantly depends upon assumptions made about the Agamas as texts, which are distinctively modern in some though not all respects. In particular, as explained elsewhere (Fuller 1999), the printing and publication of Agamic works from the early twentieth century onwards modified ideological attitudes to the Agamas, which increasingly came to be conceptualized as canonical ‘holy books’. Within this literate, textualist paradigm—which has developed as part of a transformation from a scribal, oral culture to a typographic culture of the book—it appears entirely logical to educate priests in the Agamas, so that they acquire the knowledge needed to perform rituals correctly. Yet Agamic school students do not in fact study texts as sources of discursive knowledge; they primarily memorize them in order to recite them, and an educated priest’s ability to recite is itself an index of his superior competence. Nevertheless, albeit paradoxically, it is clear that the commitment of contemporary priests to ‘traditional’ Agamic education, defined in principle by orality and rote-memorization, has been significantly stimulated by the modern development of a book-centred conceptualization of knowledge.

### **Agamic Religious Schools for Priests in Tamilnadu**

The full Sanskrit title of an Agamic religious school is *veda śivāgama pāthaśālā*, because they teach the Vedas as well as the Agamas. Both Vedic and Agamic texts are recited in temple rituals; except for a small amount of Tamil devotional literature, all texts taught in the schools are in Sanskrit. The schools’ Adishaiva gurus always teach the Agamic texts and sometimes the Vedic texts as well, but the latter are often taught by ordinary Brahmans (not Adishaivas), who have studied in Vedic schools (*veda pāthaśālā*). Like most graduates of Vedic schools, some of these teachers are also sastris, who work as domestic priests or chanters in the temples. The Tamil texts are taught by non-Brahmans, normally devotional singers who also sing Tamil hymns in the temples.

Admission to Agamic schools is restricted to male Adishaivas who have had their *upanayana*, the ‘sacred-thread’ ceremony which makes them *brahmacāris*, Brahman students. In all schools, the students are resident boarders whose meals and basic living expenses are found for them. At school, students go to bed early and rise before dawn, and they have to perform the Brahmans’ daily prayers and observances (*sandhyā*), as well as the daily personal worship of Shiva required of Adishaivas. When classes are in progress, a lamp burns before a small shrine of Dakshinamurti (Shiva as the guru), Saraswati (goddess of learning) or both, and worship and prayers are an essential part of a school’s daily routine. The school year begins on Vijayadashami, which is also the day of Saraswati Puja, the goddess’s festival in September–October. Teachers and students, invariably barefoot, are always dressed in traditional Brahmanical style, in a white loin-cloth without a shirt; in addition to their sacred threads, they all wear necklaces of one or more *rudrākṣa* beads (which are emblems of Shiva), and on their forehead, arms and chests are smeared the three stripes of white ash that are the mark of Shiva and his devotees. Even if a student wears a shirt outside the school, he normally removes it inside and always takes it off when reciting texts. Food served in the schools is, of course, strictly vegetarian and orthodox rules of purity for its preparation and consumption are rigorously observed. All in all, the school environment is thoroughly imbued with traditional Brahmanical religiosity and much of the daily routine—especially teaching itself—takes a highly ritualized form.

In July 1995, eight Minakshi temple priests and four young men not yet consecrated as priests had completed at least four years’ study in an Agamic school; two other priests and eight young men or boys had studied for less than four years or were then students in a school. Of these 22, six were students at Allur, twelve at Pillaiyarpatti, two at Tirupparankundram and two at Palani. My own data have been collected in the first three schools and I do not have much information about the school at Palani, in western Tamilnadu, which is attached to the famous temple there. Palani, unlike the other three, is one of five Agamic schools financially supported by the Tamilnadu government. Following a government order opening the school to non-Brahmans in the late 1980s, Palani’s guru resigned and the school closed from 1988 to 1991.<sup>2</sup> It then re-opened, but for

<sup>2</sup> Information about Palani and the other four schools was provided in a letter from the government’s Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department

most Adishaiivas the presence of non-Brahmans means that it is no longer a proper Agamic school and they are unwilling to use it.

The school at Allur, a Brahman village on the banks of the river Kaveri near Tiruchirappalli, was founded in 1963 by its guru, A. Viswanatha Sivacharyar, a priest in the local temple who was himself taught Agamic texts by his father and grandfather. The guru enjoys a high reputation in Tamilnadu for his Agamic learning and in 1995, after many years' work, he had almost completed editing a primary Agamic text for publication. He has also edited a selection of Agamic material used as a textbook in his school, and published the text of the Vedic mantras for the worship of Shiva and a collection of basic texts for the one-year part-time courses.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, the guru also enjoyed considerable influence as a member of the Tamilnadu government's Temple Administration Board, and he has forthright views about the measures that should be taken to deal with uneducated and incompetent temple priests.

The Allur school is in a house in the village's Brahman street, and the guru lives nearby. Funds to run the school and provide the students with their subsistence needs mainly come from the monastery of the Kanchipuram Shankaracharya, the most powerful religious figure in contemporary Tamilnadu. The total number of students is consistently maintained at around thirty and all of them enter the school when they are 12 or 13. If they are any younger, says the guru, they cannot look after themselves properly at school, and if they are any older, it is too late to teach them self-discipline. Prospective entrants are interviewed by the guru, who also asks them to recite some Sanskrit verses, so that he can evaluate their pronunciation; only about one quarter of applicants are admitted. The guru does most of the teaching in the school, although he is assisted by a Brahman who mainly teaches elementary Sanskrit and a non-Brahman teacher responsible for the small amount of Tamil devotional material. The full course lasts six years; there are annual oral

in March 1995. I have no accurate data on the total number of functioning Agamic schools in Tamilnadu, but it may be no more than twenty. The Indian Institute of Indology, however, has ambitious plans to reinvigorate Agamic education and reverse its perceived decline (Fuller 1996: 20-1). The Institute, founded in Madras in 1995, is the brainchild of C. Nachiappan, a wealthy and enterprising benefactor who is now the head of a Hindu monastery in Tamilnadu. In January 1997, Nachiappan told me that the Institute had started five new Agamic schools with around 500 students altogether; in December 1998, he confirmed plans for further expansion, which will raise the total number of educated priests very considerably.

<sup>3</sup> For details of these publications and others mentioned below, see Fuller (1997: 12-13, nn. 8-10).



and written examinations, with a final examination to confer the title of ‘Shivagama Sironmani’, which describes a graduate as a ‘jewel’ of the Agamas.

All Agamic schools are based on the ancient, traditional *gurukula* system in which the pupil (*śiṣya*) lives in his spiritual father’s house as his absolutely obedient disciple and servant (cf. Altekar 1934: 92–5), treating him ‘as if he were a god’ (Gonda 1965: 230). Of the three schools described here, Allur most completely conforms to the classical model. Viswanatha Sivacharyar is a severe, though paternalistic, disciplinarian, who places enormous emphasis on his students’ good conduct. All students have to take part in running the school on a day-to-day basis, and they are also subject to strict rules: for example, they are not permitted to go home unless there are very pressing reasons, and to preserve their Brahman purity they are forbidden to eat outside the school. All students must have long hair tied in a knot at the back, which is significant because the knot has become a critical symbolic marker distinguishing ‘traditional’ from ‘modern’ priests with short hair; the guru is totally opposed to priests cutting their hair. In the guru’s presence—as is equally true in all schools—students display total obedience; for example, at the beginning and end of lessons they prostrate themselves before him, they never speak unless spoken to, they never sit down until told to do so, and they never demur for a second if asked to run an errand for him. Former students of Allur have told me that they were always aware that if they misbehaved anywhere in the village, the guru would find out very quickly. At first, most of them were terrified of him as well, but they later came to admire and respect him, and nobody ever doubts the quality of his teaching. It is noteworthy that all students from the Minakshi temple who went to Allur completed the course of study, and the school has a low drop-out rate.

Even an untrained ear can hear that the standard of recitation achieved by senior students at Allur is exceptionally high, and this is undoubtedly related to the guru’s insistence that accurate memorization of texts is the overriding priority. He does provide some explanation of the meaning and importance of texts they learn, and says that he encourages students to ask questions. However, he firmly believes that memorization must precede understanding, and admits that even when students actually are reciting well, he may still criticize them and force them to repeat the text to try to ensure that they get it absolutely right. Unlike students at Pillaiyarpatti and Tirupparankundram, who receive quite extensive ‘practical’ training

in ritual from an early stage, Allur students only take part in worship inside the school until they near the end of their studies, when they may assist the guru in the local temple or at special rituals held elsewhere, such as temple renovation and consecration rituals (*kumbhābhiṣeka*) and Ganapati *homams*. The latter is a ritual for Ganapati (Ganesha), including a fire-sacrifice, which is increasingly popular in Tamilnadu; it is held in temples, as well as homes and business premises, usually to inaugurate a new venture.

Pillaiyarpatti is a village near Karaikkudi and is the site of an important Vinayaka (Ganesha) temple, one of the clan temples of the prosperous merchant community of Nagarattars (Nattukkottai Chettiyars). The school's guru, K. Pitchai Gurukkal, is a priest in the temple and his own teacher was his father. He started his school in 1978 with five students and by December 1998 it had over 200, which makes it by far the biggest Agamic school in Tamilnadu today. The school, on a large plot of land close to the temple, is built around an old row of priests' houses, but now has new halls for classrooms and a dormitory block as well. The land and money for the buildings have mostly come from wealthy Nagarattars and other Hindus, but the school's running expenses are mainly met from the income earned by the guru and his students through performing special rituals in the Vinayaka temple (famous as a site for Ganapati *homams*) and the local area, as well as throughout Tamilnadu and further afield. Many students come when about 13, but many others arrive after completing their ordinary schooling (when they may be about 16) or even after finishing a university degree. In 1995, as well as students from Tamilnadu, the school also had ten students from Malaysia and two from Sri Lanka. The school has no age limits for admission, but the guru insists that all entrants have completed eighth standard at school;<sup>4</sup> in his experience the most scholastically able students are also the quickest learners and the best behaved. The guru, assisted by two other teachers who graduated from his school, teaches the Agamic texts; one of the assistant teachers and a Brahman satri teach the Vedic material, and a non-Brahman teaches Tamil scriptures. A textbook containing some basic Agamic texts has been published by the school. The full course is completed in four years; annual examinations are followed by a final one, which

<sup>4</sup> In the Indian school system from primary level onwards, there is an annual examination which must be passed to reach each standard up to tenth standard; this is nowadays followed by the examination for the Secondary School Leaving Certificate.

confers the title of 'Shivagama Ratnam', also describing a graduate as a 'jewel'.

Pitchai Gurukkal is a paternalistic disciplinarian as well, but he is less severe than Viswanatha Sivacharyar and has a more relaxed relationship with his students. Pillaiyarpatti students have to take part in the daily running of the school, but in comparison with Allur they are subject to a more liberal regime. They are allowed to go to the village nearby where they can visit the small restaurants, so that they are not forced to comply with strict Brahman rules about food, and they can choose whether or not to cut their hair. They can get permission to go home fairly easily; they are also much less confined than Allur students because the school is on an open site, and they can go to the temple nearby. Young students are also allowed to play games every evening. The guru has become concerned that his school now has too many students and he would like to reduce the number, partly because he says that some of them (and their families) do not display much sense of responsibility. Approximately one-third of students leave before the end of the four-year course, and several of those who have gone to Pillaiyarpatti from the Minakshi temple have left early or interrupted their studies for extended periods.

As already mentioned, Pillaiyarpatti students receive practical training in ritual from early on. Second- and third-year students work regularly in the Vinayaka temple and more senior students frequently assist the guru in performing special rituals. Because the school depends on its guru's earnings, there are economic reasons for this emphasis on training. Some of its graduates compare Pillaiyarpatti unfavourably with Allur, saying that they did not learn texts very well and were not taught enough about the meaning of rituals. Nonetheless, in addition to its freer atmosphere, the practical training—together with the four-year course—has made Pillaiyarpatti the more attractive school for many students, who prefer a 'hands-on' training which fairly quickly equips them for temple service. This means that even students who stay only a year or two learn enough to do a priest's routine work, and many who do not finish the course leave because they decide to go to work in a temple instead.

The school at Tirupparankundram, a village near Madurai, was founded in 1992 by K. Raja Bhattar, a graduate of Allur; he is a priest in the large Subrahmanya temple in Tirupparankundram, who also has the right to work in the Minakshi temple. The students live in houses near the temple and lessons are held in halls within the temple complex. The guru's initial capital came from a bank loan

and donations from wealthy devotees, but as in Pillaiyarpatti running expenses are mainly met from the guru's earnings. By 1998, the school already had a total of 134 students in its six years, and is expected to expand further. Raja Bhattar says that he is concerned solely about potential students' interest in learning, and that age and educational qualifications do not matter; in 1995 his youngest pupil was only 9 and his oldest was 20, but the majority were between 14 and 16. The guru, who mainly teaches Agamic texts, is assisted by another Agamic teacher and two Brahman Vedic teachers, as well as a non-Brahman teaching Tamil material. The school's curriculum and examination system follow the Allur model.

In some respects, Raja Bhattar is an extremely strict disciplinarian, who uses a cane in his classes, and in his opinion Pitchai Gurukkal is too lenient. As in Allur, students at Tirupparankundram are not allowed to eat outside the school; on the other hand, they are allowed to cut their hair and in practice, even though they should have the guru's permission, they can more freely move around and do what they want than students in Allur. Partly because Raja Bhattar is only in his thirties, whereas the other two gurus are twice as old, his students are less in awe of him, and even though his strictness sometimes frightens them, some of them can and do joke with him quite freely as well. Like Pillaiyarpatti, and partly for the same economic reasons, students at Tirupparankundram receive practical training from the beginning, by assisting in the temple and accompanying the guru to special rituals, so that although the teaching system is in principle modelled after Allur, it is actually more like Pillaiyarpatti's in many respects.

In each of the three schools, the daily timetable is similar; Pillaiyarpatti's is presented in Table 1.<sup>5</sup> On six to eight days per month, no teaching normally takes place and there are also three ten-day holidays each year. Although the school day is very long, the teaching routine is not as intensive as the timetable suggests in any of the schools. Classes often start late and are shorter than the scheduled hours, and quite frequently, because their teachers are otherwise occupied, classes are postponed or cancelled. Senior students regularly teach junior ones when the teachers are absent, however, and in all schools senior students have acknowledged authority over their juniors. As a matter of course, though, all students spend a lot of

<sup>5</sup> Table 1 reproduced from Fuller (1997: 9), with a corrected entry for evening prayer.

TABLE 1  
*Pillaiyarpatti School Daily Timetable*

5.00–5.30 am	Rising
5.30–6.30	<i>Tiruvai</i> (repetition of texts by students)
6.30–8.00	Bathing, morning prayer ( <i>sandhyā</i> ) and personal worship of Shiva
8.00–8.15	Prayers in school
8.15–8.30	Guru announces day's programme of study
8.30–9.30	Breakfast
9.30–11.30	<i>Cantai</i> (teaching of texts by guru), usually from Vedas
11.30–1.00 pm	Midday prayer and free time for personal study
1.00–2.00	Lunch
2.00–4.00	<i>Cantai</i> , usually from Agamas
4.00–6.00	Bathing, free time for senior students and games for junior students
6.00–8.00	Evening prayer, followed by <i>tiruvai</i> or <i>cantai</i>
8.00–8.30	Discussion with guru
8.30–9.30	Evening meal and free time for personal study
9.30	Bedtime

time waiting for their teachers or listening to them while they are talking to visitors to the schools, but in a sense this is part of their tuition, because it is important that students learn absolute obedience to their guru, even if this means that they must just sit and wait until he tells them what to do. All in all, it is hard to estimate the average amount of time actually spent in lessons, but is certainly less than the seven or eight hours scheduled in each school.

When I made unannounced visits to Tirupparankundram (which I could not do to Allur and Pillaiyarpatti), I often found the students messing around when they were supposed to be practising recitation; no doubt the same happens at the other two schools, though probably less at Allur. No doubt, too, there is 'everyday resistance' by students in Agamic schools, as there is in schools everywhere. Nevertheless, as far as I can judge, the Agamic schools do effectively socialize their students into the values of the *gurukula* system, and I have never heard any student or ex-student referring to his guru except with profound deferential respect. Temple priests' children are of course brought up within a social environment characterized by hierarchical inequality, Brahmanical norms and devotion to god, but the schools undoubtedly reinforce these values. They also instil in their students an unusual combination of self-confidence and deference which I found very striking; thus, for example, students are almost always neatly dressed and groomed, and carry themselves with dignity, and

to all adults (including myself), they are effortlessly polite and respectful without ever grovelling or giggling in embarrassment, as is common among many other young males in Tamilnadu. Most students, indeed, appear to take genuine pride in their status as Brahman temple priests in the making. In the Minakshi temple, too, Agamic school graduates are, on the whole, more self-confident about their role than other priests, and although the latter tend to complain about their arrogance, my impressionistic evidence is that the formative influence of the schools is discernible in all educated priests.

Before turning to the teaching system itself, let me mention that there is also an Agamic school inside the Minakshi temple, which was established in 1977 and occupies a room in the temple's outer precincts. This school, however, has no stable institutional structure and in practice it is only a designated space where classes can be held. For several years until the mid-1980s, classes held in the school at weekends were attended by some of the priests' sons. More recently, the school was used for the one-year, part-time courses run for serving priests in 1992-93 and 1993-94.

### **The Teaching System in the Agamic Schools**

Each school has a set curriculum itemizing the material to be learnt in each year, which is described in more detail elsewhere (Fuller 1997: 11-13). The curriculum's most vital sections comprise Agamic and Vedic texts, supplemented by a Puranic section, which includes the lists of deities' names (*nāmāvali*) recited during various rituals. Other sections of the curriculum cover elementary Sanskrit, the Hindu calendar and astrology, and Tamil devotional literature. Only the Agamic, Vedic and Puranic sections, however, are directly relevant to the performance of temple worship by priests, so that the rest of the curriculum is in a sense secondary. As I explain below, students have to learn to read Sanskrit in a restricted sense, but learning the language is not a primary aim and the majority acquire no real competence in it. Further, although many names and terms are familiar to them because they belong to the temple vocabulary, at least in the early years at school, students only roughly understand the content or meaning of texts they are learning.

Two methods known in Tamil as *cantai* and *tiruvai* are used for learning all types of text. *Cantai* is teaching by the guru, in which he

speaks a passage (varying in length from a few syllables to a whole verse) and the students as a group recite it after him twice. *Tiruvai* is the repetition of texts by students, who repeat together in a group what they have been taught in the *cantai* the day before or on earlier occasions. Although students may supplement them by private study, *cantai* and *tiruvai* together are the sum total of the teaching system used to learn texts by heart. Repeated enquiry convinced me that no special mnemonic techniques for facilitating memorization are employed (except for Vedic texts which are sometimes learnt in variant word orders), and teachers and students always insist that sheer prolonged repetition is the true key to success.

To illustrate how teaching is carried out, I shall describe a class held in the Tirupparankundram school one day in December 1994. The class was taken by Raja Bhattar, who mainly teaches Agamic texts in the afternoon. After lunch, at about two o'clock, all the students walked from their house to the school premises inside the temple. On that day, 23 first-year students and 12 second-year students were present. The first-year students sat down in the open air in two lines facing each other and began their *tiruvai*. They all had their books open and to begin with each student in turn read one line from the text being practised; they were unfamiliar with it and although some students read their lines well, others stumbled or failed altogether, partly because they could not yet read the Sanskrit letters properly. The class was supervised by a second-year student who periodically interrupted and corrected his juniors, although he was actually younger than many of them. After some time, the students started to recite in unison. About half an hour later, the second-year students started their *tiruvai* inside a hall, also seated in two facing rows; they recited as a group following the text with their books.

At three o'clock, Raja Bhattar entered the hall and sat down on a low wooden stool, with a small desk in front of him. Beside him was his cane. The guru listened to the second-year students, who were reciting the *Śrīrudra*, a famous litany from the Taittirīya Saṁhitā of the Kṛṣṇa (Black) Yajur Veda that is one of the most important ritual texts in the cult of Shiva.<sup>6</sup> He watched each student in turn, gesturing to one to hold his head up properly; although some stu-

<sup>6</sup> The *Śrīrudra* (Tamil *Rudram*) is the famous *Śatarudrīya* hymn, Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda 4.5. Peterson (1989: 26–7) comments on the hymn's importance in Tamil worship of Shiva; for further details, see works cited by Peterson and Fuller (1997: 12, n. 9).

dents slouch when the guru is absent, in his presence they all normally sit up very straight. After about twenty minutes, the guru stopped the students and told them to repeat one verse ten times because they had not done it correctly. Repetition of the same verse five or ten times is common practice in the *tiruvai*, whether students are being heard by a teacher or not, and they usually keep count by twisting their sacred threads around their fingers.

At this point, the first-year students came into the hall. All the students stood up to face the guru and recited the prayer to the guru (*gurudhyāna*) which opens every class before prostrating themselves before him. They then sat down, with their books closed, in semi-circular rows facing their teacher, and almost all of them focused their gaze attentively on him, as he began the *cantai*. The text being taught was the *Lalitā trīṣatī* (300 names of the goddess Lalita); the guru started near the middle, at the 165th name, and although he had the text in front of him he was not reading from it, except to check the words occasionally.<sup>7</sup> (During the *cantai*, students at the back sometimes sneak a look at their books, but they should not do so.) Each name was recited in turn, though sometimes the guru split the longer ones into two or more segments; thus, the first five names were uttered as follows, with the fourth and fifth split in the middle:

hārahārikucābhogāyai  
hākinyai  
halyavarjitāyai  
haritpati/samārādhyāyai  
haṭhātkāra/hatāsurāyai

After each of the guru's utterances, the students repeated it twice in unison, and in this way the *cantai* continued for about thirty minutes. Even though the students often mispronounced what they had heard, the guru let them continue so that the rhythm of their recitation was not repeatedly interrupted. Suddenly, however, when he was 25 names from the end of the text, the guru stopped, pointed his cane at one of the older boys at the back, told him he was asleep and ordered him to stand up until the end of the class. Then he picked out individual students who were told to repeat the last name he had spoken; some managed to do this, others failed dismally, and one just remained silent, but all of them looked frightened at being

<sup>7</sup> As far as I know, the *Lalitā trīṣatī* is not in print in Grantha. The French Institute of Pondicherry has a copy published in Kumbakonam in 1923, which was kindly supplied to me in a transliterated form.



singled out. The guru then completed the *cantai* for Lalita's names and, gesturing to the students to find their books, he immediately continued with another text which they had already been learning. After a few lines, he stopped speaking and the students continued the text as *tiruvai* for about ten minutes. One small boy sitting close to the front was caned for not keeping his head up, another was poked in the chest for the same reason, and the guru got angry with the students for spoiling their recitation by rushing it. At the end, he spent a few minutes telling them about one of the texts they had been learning, and then he and the students amused themselves listening to my tape-recording. The class closed as it opened with the guru's prayer and prostration.

We now need to look in more detail at how the teaching system actually works. As already noted, during the *cantai* the guru may split long and complicated words. Indeed, it is normal practice when the *cantai* for a new text is done for the first time to break each line into as many segments as are appropriate, depending on the length of the line. On subsequent occasions, the guru lengthens the segments until, probably on about the sixth occasion, he enunciates each line in its entirety. He continues to do the *cantai* in this manner until he has completed it about ten times, and it is conventionally said that when the *cantai* and *tiruvai* for a text have each been completed ten times, it is retained in the mind for ever. In practice, however, there is considerable variation. If lines are short, as they often are in lists of deities' names, the guru may never break the lines, but if they are long and difficult, he may continue to do so many times and repeat the *cantai* more than ten times.

An example may be given from a series of informal classes organized by five priests in early 1995, which were taught by a Minakshi temple sastrī in his own house. I attended these classes several times and recorded them; the teaching method was the same as in the Agamic schools. The priests were learning two Vedic hymns and each class began with the *cantai* of the first hymn, the Durga *sūkta*.<sup>8</sup> Its first four lines are:

jātavedasesunavāma somamarātīyato nidahāti vedaḥ |  
sanaḥparṣadati durgāṇi viśvā nāveva sindhunduritātvaṅniḥ ||

<sup>8</sup> The Durga *sūkta* derives from the tenth book of the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka, which is also separately known as the Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad. The class was using the version published in Grantha in *Śrīrutrapracnam* (Madras, 1976), to which the sastrī appended the invocation to Durga, respectively verses 164-77 and 82 of the Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad (Varenne 1960: 32-3, 50-1).

tāmagnivārṇāntapasā jvalantīm vairocānīṅkarmaphaleṣu juṣṭām |  
durgāndevīgum śaraṇamaham prapadyesutarasitarase namaḥ ||

At the first class, the sastri broke each line into segments as follows:

jātavedase/sunavāma/ somamarātī/yato nidahāti/ vedaḥ |  
sanaḥparśadati/ durgāṇi viśvā/ nāveva sindhun/duritātv/agniḥ ||  
tāmagnivārṇān/tapasā/ jvalantīm/ vairocānīṅ/karmaphaleṣu/ juṣṭām |  
durgāndevīgum/ śaraṇamaham/ prapadye/sutarasitarase namaḥ ||

Even at the sixth class, there were almost as many breaks, but by the eighth, the sastri had reduced them:

jātavedasesunavāma/ somamarātīyato/ nidahāti vedaḥ |  
sanaḥparśadati/ durgāṇi viśvā/ nāveva sindhun/duritātvagniḥ ||  
tāmagnivārṇāntapasā/ jvalantīm vairocānīṅ/ karmaphaleṣu juṣṭām |  
durgāndevīgum śaraṇamaham/ prapadye/sutarasitarase namaḥ ||

Finally, after further reduction, the sastri recited each whole line completely and by then he had done the *cantai* more than ten times.

Although the students in these classes were all adults, they had the same problems as boys in the schools in accurately repeating their teacher's utterances. Because Tamil does not have the breathy final 'h' (*h*) and aspirated consonants (*kh*, *gh*, etc.), all students find it particularly hard to sound them, and because the two sibilants pronounced 'sha' (ś, ṣ) are normally sounded as 'sa' in colloquial Tamil, many students persistently do the same in Sanskrit. When he interviews applicants for his school, the guru at Allur is trying to select boys who do not 'Tamilize' Sanskrit in these ways. Not surprisingly, the innumerable words that can readily turn into tongue-twisters, like *śaraṇamaham* on the fourth line above, tend to become garbled, and in really difficult cases the guru's string of syllables can be totally distorted on repetition. Even when individual syllables and words are pronounced correctly—which could in theory be learnt from books alone—most students find it hard to reproduce the elongated vowels, stress pattern and pitch of the guru's recitation, and at least initially hardly any of them can utter lines in the correct rhythm. Only by hearing and repeating them over and over again do they learn to reproduce the guru's sound correctly, so that they can not only pronounce all the words accurately, but also have some control over the stress, pitch and rhythm. It is thus the vocalization of texts, rather than recitation of the words themselves, that is hardest to learn. For Agamic texts, recitation is actually quite flat, but for Vedic ones it should have a distinctive 'musical accent' (Staal 1961: 23).

The texts learnt in the Agamic schools vary considerably in length and hence in the amount of time needed to learn them. Some are very short, like the prayer for the guru and many similar verses that are only four lines long. At the other extreme are the *Śrīrudra*, about 60 verses of variable length in the version learnt by the priests; a series of Yajur Veda mantras for Shiva's worship, which consists of 176 verses of very variable length; and the lists of 1000 names for different deities. Long texts are always taught by splitting them into manageable sections whose *cantai* lasts no more than about half an hour; by learning each section in turn, the whole text is eventually memorized. To avoid confusion, students are usually being taught only one Agamic and one Vedic text at any one time. Some texts, too, are just harder than others and most priests say that they find Vedic texts harder than Agamic ones. Irrespective of length or complexity, however, teaching is always carried out in the same way and the *tiruvai* is indispensable to complete the learning begun in the *cantai*. For this reason, before and after the *cantai*, the guru often asks the students to recite texts which they have already learnt, and to check that they know them properly, he may ask them to start at any point in a passage, not just at the beginning.

### The Use of Books in Agamic Schools

Every teaching session in the Agamic schools is an enactment of the hierarchical *gurukula* relationship between the guru and his pupil-disciples, which also displays the guru's authority as the 'possessor' of scriptural knowledge. During the *cantai*, students are normally not allowed to look at their books, so that they can concentrate fully on listening to their teacher and repeating his utterances. Hence the *cantai* exemplifies the traditional Hindu system of oral transmission in which students strive to memorize the guru's sound, so that they can reproduce it when reciting texts. Later, after briefly comparing Agamic and Vedic teaching, I shall return to the question of the guru's sound and its internalization. First, though, I need to consider the use of printed and written texts, which also constitute a significant element in the teaching system.

It is noteworthy that Viswanatha Sivacharyar, the most learned of the three schools' gurus, has edited and published several textbooks for the schools and has spent many years working on an edition of a primary Agamic text. He thus exemplifies in himself the values of a

literate print culture, in which an authoritative text takes the form of a published book, even though none of his students can learn to recite directly from a book. In all contemporary Agamic schools, not just Allur, the same values plainly prevail, so that teachers and students alike take it for granted that the texts they must memorize accurately are to be found in printed materials, or sometimes handwritten copies of them, but rarely if ever today in manuscripts alone.

Even the youngest pupils in the Agamic schools have all completed several years' ordinary schooling and some older students have even finished college education. All students are therefore literate in Tamil to a level corresponding to their age and years of education. When teachers in the Agamic schools discuss the meaning of texts or describe the performance of rituals, they do of course speak in Tamil and students take their notes in Tamil. Compared with pupils in ordinary schools, these students write down relatively little, but self-evidently they cannot manage unless they can read and write Tamil; in Pillaiyarpatti, young students also receive some formal instruction in Tamil. Many students, incidentally, have basic literacy in English as well and a few, especially college graduates, know the language fairly well. I do not have data on the secular education of all students, but among Minakshi temple priests and their sons who have attended Agamic schools, four (who all went to Pillaiyarpatti) have degrees, and all the others had reached at least the sixth standard in school, although most had completed eighth standard or higher.

The more important consideration, however, is the students' competence in Sanskrit. Although learning the Sanskrit language and its grammar is not a primary aim in the Agamic schools, all students have to be able to read and write Sanskrit, in the restricted sense that they know the Grantha (or Devanagari) script and can follow and copy material set out in it. The books used in the schools, especially in the earlier years of the course, are in Grantha, traditionally employed in Tamilnadu for writing Sanskrit, although in Allur Devanagari is used more. Modern Tamil script derives from Grantha, and literate Tamils can learn it more easily than the dissimilar Devanagari. The Allur guru says that he expects students to know the two scripts before they come to his school, but in fact they are taught at the start of the course; in Pillaiyarpatti and Tirupparankundram, Grantha is taught at the start and Devanagari later. In the one-year courses held in the Minakshi temple school, only Grantha was used. For use in the *tiruvai* (and for private study), all

students own, borrow or photocopy books containing the main texts, and they also copy texts by hand into their own notebooks. Teachers sometimes write passages on a blackboard for students to copy as well.

Tamils, as already implied, face particular problems in pronouncing Sanskrit. The Tamil alphabet also lacks various letters corresponding to Sanskrit ones (such as the vocalic *r̥*) and it does not distinguish voiced from unvoiced consonants. Hence, for example, the different consonant letters *k*, *kh*, *g* and *gh* are all represented by the one Tamil letter *k* when Sanskrit is transliterated into Tamil, and Tamil—unlike Sanskrit—does not have a fully phonetic alphabet. Tamil transliterations of Sanskrit are sometime printed with special modifying marks to overcome these difficulties, but such transliterations are never used in Agamic schools. Instead, students must learn to read Sanskrit in Grantha (or Devanagari), and until they can do so, they cannot perform their *tiruvai* properly because they cannot accurately distinguish the full range of Sanskrit letters and their corresponding sounds. Conversely, their ability to read Sanskrit is vital in ensuring that they pronounce each word and syllable correctly—not mispronouncing ‘ka’ as ‘ga’, for example—and the letters on the page are the most crucial mnemonic of all for accurate verbatim memorization of the texts heard from the guru’s lips in the *cantai*, but also set down in print or writing for use in the *tiruvai*. Thus priestly students—rather like actors learning their lines—systematically refer to the words on paper to help them memorize them. Once they are memorized verbatim, of course, the books should not be needed any more, just as they are not by actors who know their parts properly. In sum, Agamic schools in contemporary Tamilnadu exist within a literate print culture, in which books contain authoritative texts whose accurate memorization in practice depends on the students’ (restricted) literacy in Sanskrit. Thus if the *cantai* exemplifies purely oral transmission, the *tiruvai* which complements it heavily relies on the use of books.

### **Vedic Education: A Brief Comparison**

The only ethnographic study of Vedic schools in Tamilnadu was carried out in the 1960s by Subramaniam, whose description shows that

their organization fairly closely resembles that of the Agamic schools (1974: 30, 44-5, 59-67). Vedic schools admit only male Brahmans, who are almost all intending to become sastris, working as domestic priests or chanters in temples. The schools teach different Vedas, although the commonest by far is the Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda. The basic teaching consists of learning the text by memorizing each word in order (*padapāṭha*); the text is then learnt in a series of three modifications (*vikṛti*) in which the words are rearranged in variant sequences (*ibid.*: 57-9). (In Agamic schools, some advanced students also learn the three modifications for their Vedic texts.) Part of the purpose of learning these modifications is mnemonic reinforcement of accurate memorization.

Subramaniam reports that the Vedic texts are memorized by listening to the guru and repeating his utterances without the aid of books (*ibid.*: 53-4). In her sample of 50 domestic priests who studied in Vedic schools, 36 had had less than five years' ordinary schooling and the rest between five and eight years, although her data clearly imply that all were literate in Tamil. Pupils entering Vedic schools today have probably had more schooling than was so thirty years ago, so that their average standard of education may now be closer to that of Agamic school students. Significantly, though, only 17 priests in Subramaniam's sample had some familiarity with Sanskrit (Devanagari); they, together with three others, all knew the Grantha script as well. These priests had acquired their Sanskrit competence outside their Vedic schools, which generally pay little attention to any language learning (*ibid.*: 142-3). Compared with their Agamic counterparts, therefore, these Vedic schools were closer to the classical norm of purely oral learning accomplished without books.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the priests in Subramaniam's study who could read Sanskrit took advantage of it when learning texts. In the Agamic schools, the Brahman teachers who graduated from Vedic schools have the same attitude to books as their Adishaiva counterparts, and sastris reciting in the temples commonly consult books if they are not confident about the texts. Moreover, in at least some Vedic schools in modern India, printed and written materials are certainly used to aid verbatim memorization much as they are in Agamic schools. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that the emphasis on learning from the guru, and a correspondingly greater reticence about reliance on books, remain more prevalent in Vedic than Agamic teaching. Exactly what role books

typically take in Vedic schools and how much variability exists are not, however, entirely clear from available evidence.

Yet in at least one well-documented case, the Vedas are still taught entirely orally, or were until very recently. Knipe has studied a small and extremely unusual Vaidika Brahman community in Andhra Pradesh, in which some boys (though few today) are taught the Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda by their fathers or grandfathers through a rigorous instructional process that begins in childhood and lasts for eight to twelve years.<sup>9</sup> Among these Andhra Brahmans, books were definitely not used. Although it might eventually ‘supplement the many years of oral teachings’, book-learning began late, so that ‘for traditional families, until the current generation of school attendance, this meant approximately the age of 16 for a first acquaintance with an alphabet’ (Knipe 1997: 313). Today the old traditions, including purely oral learning, are threatened by ‘barbarian practice’, including the English-medium schools now preferred for the children (*ibid.*: 324). Nonetheless, despite the invasion of the Andhra Brahmans’ world by literate print culture, the comparison between their Vedic instruction and Agamic schooling for Tamil temple priests clearly illustrates the contrast between types of education which superficially appear to belong together in one category defined by oral transmission. In fact, only the Andhra case closely conforms to the classical, traditional model of Vedic education, whereas at least some modern Vedic schools deviate from it and come nearer in type to the Agamic schools, where—in addition to oral teaching by the guru—verbatim memorization relies on using printed or written texts as well.

### **Memorization, Incorporation and Bodily Technique**

To most people who have had a ‘modern’ education, to spend several hours a day, year after year, memorizing texts in a language that one does not really understand probably sounds extremely difficult. Certainly, it is arduous, but it is actually not so difficult—or at least it is not difficult in quite the way one might assume. First, some readers, like myself, who can recall memorizing poorly understood

<sup>9</sup> In this time, the boys are expected to learn the 82 ‘chapters’ (*praśna*) of the Taittirīya Saṃhitā, Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad. The *Śrīrudra*, incidentally, is but one of these chapters, which illustrates the relative brevity of even the longest texts memorized in the Agamic schools.

texts in Latin at school, will know from personal experience that memorization is not dependent on comprehension; this is amply confirmed, too, by the obvious examples of Muslims memorizing the Quran in classical Arabic or Buddhists memorizing Pali texts. It is therefore not surprising that teachers and students in Agamic schools always insist that memorization is not impeded by inability to understand Sanskrit.

Secondly, and more importantly, the real difficulty that the students face is not so much verbatim memorization of the words of each text, which is largely accomplished just by prolonged practice, as acquisition of the ability to vocalize texts both accurately and fluently. As we have seen, it is stress, pitch and rhythm—rather than the words themselves—which can be learnt only by listening to a guru and repeating his utterances in the *cantai* and then again in the *tiruvai*. Ideally, as has always been so in the Vedic and later Hindu traditions, what is being transmitted orally is the guru's sound, rather than a mere string of words to be copied. It is a refined, sonant cantillation—especially in the more musical Vedic recitation—which students find very difficult to reproduce when reciting, and only a minority of them, even among those who complete the full course at a school, acquire such a cantillation, whereas all those who work reasonably hard do successfully memorize the words of verse after verse of many different texts. Thus many educated priests can recite numerous texts by heart, but the majority (and some gurus too) do so without much aesthetic skill.

Pertinent here is Malamoud's observation that a (Vedic) text memorized by heart—or 'in the throat' in the Sanskrit expression—is 'truly incorporated in the person', where it becomes timelessly fixed (1989: 305). Malamoud's remark is well-illustrated by Knipe's study of the Vaidika Brahman community in Andhra Pradesh referred to above. Especially for Brahmans of the senior generation who mastered the Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda and other texts, the oral transmission of the Vedas is itself a ritual process of internalization whereby each man 'in a distinctive and entirely personal way, felt himself becoming a veda, becoming the veda' (Knipe 1997: 313; cf. Knipe n.d.). A somewhat comparable case is discussed in Lutgendorf's study of the Hindi epic *Rāmcaritmānas* in Banaras. When the epic is learnt, he says, 'the text is internalized . . . to such an extent that it is not only memorized but its language, structure, and images come to permeate the mental processes', so that some expounders are eventually able to think through or by means of its words (1991: 176).



In considering incorporation and internalization for Agamic school students, we may first distinguish between the bodily aspects of memorization and mental internalization. As Ong (1982: 67) observes, ‘oral memory has a high somatic component’ compared with purely textual memory, and bodily movement is frequently a significant kinaesthetic technique for memorization, just as it consistently accompanies recitation. Sometimes, too, in ‘oral verbalization . . . absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture’ (*ibid.*: 68). In Agamic schools, kinaesthetic techniques are not used when learning texts and there is no equivalent, for instance, of the deliberate head movements made by Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala to aid memorization of Vedic accents (Staal 1961: 40–1; cf. Malamoud 1989: 305). The special hand gestures (*mudrā*) to be made in ritual are also taught separately during practical training, not while students are learning texts. In part at least, the absence of kinaesthetic techniques may be related to the very use of printed or written texts as the main mnemonic device.

Yet the *cantai*, and to a less pronounced degree the *tiruvai* as well, are always carried out with the body in a particular condition and disposition within a ritualized environment. Students, as already described, wear traditional Brahmanical dress and they must sit up straight with their heads erect. During the *cantai*, they focus their gaze on the guru, and although they are not necessarily motionless, they should sit as still as possible. If their posture slips, the guru may admonish them—like the unfortunate boys caned by Raja Bhattar. In the *tiruvai*, students are less careful about posture, but they typically arrange themselves in two rows facing each other, so that a linear arrangement of equals replaces the focused orientation towards the superior guru in the *cantai*. Thus the guru teaches his students—who prostrate before him at the start and end of each lesson—when they are seated in a particular posture gazing attentively at him, and they therefore hear his sound and reproduce it in intimate coordination with a specific bodily disposition and alignment. During the *cantai*, of course, students rarely have their books open, and in listening to and copying the guru’s utterances, the somatic component is consistently more marked than it is in the *tiruvai*. As opposed to verbatim memorization of the words themselves, for memorizing and reproducing the guru’s sound in order to vocalize the texts, bodily technique (in its broad Maussian sense) therefore plays a much greater role.

On the other hand, although mental orientation is difficult to assess, it seems unlikely that for most priestly students the texts

become as fully incorporated into the person, in Malamoud's sense, as they do for the Andhra Brahmans or Banarasi expounders described by Knipe and Lutgendorf. Priestly students, after all, never try to memorize an entire Veda or epic; instead, they learn a series of shorter texts with the mainly practical objective of being able to recite them when performing temple ritual. They are not so extremely immersed in their vocational task as the Andhra Brahmans whose whole life was devoted to Vedic learning and rituals, and unlike the *Rāmcaritmānas* expounders they can never think through a text whose language they hardly know. For the minority of students in the Agamic schools who learn to cantillate with a quality of sound readily recognized and appreciated by others, it may be right to say that the memorized texts have been incorporated into their person, inasmuch as their virtuosity in recitation has become part of how they are esteemed by themselves and others. For the majority, however, the transformation is probably less complete and their performative skill, even though it is intimately linked with bodily technique, is qualitatively less than incorporation into the person or internalization in the mind.

### **Hindu and Muslim Education Compared**

To set Agamic (and Vedic) education in a wider context, it is useful to compare it with its Muslim equivalent. The first vital step in Muslim children's socialization and education is memorizing the Quran, and although most pupils normally leave their Quranic schools before learning the whole text, 'there are few sounds more constant in diverse parts of the Islamic world . . . than the mesmerizing singsong chant of tiny children as they recite the Quran for their teacher' (Graham 1987: 104). More advanced education takes place in *madrasas* and other mosque-based institutions and lesson circles.

There are clear similarities between Hindu and Muslim educational institutions. In both types, a primary objective is rote memorization of religious texts, which are transmitted orally from teacher to student in an unfamiliar classical language, and, especially at the elementary level, far more attention is paid to accurate memorization than understanding and explanation. Yet there are also significant differences among and between Hindu and Muslim institutions, which are worthy of notice.

Quranic schools normally admit very young children, who have had no previous educational experience. (They are also open to all Muslim children, whereas Agamic and Vedic schools are restricted to male Brahmans, but that difference is not very salient here.) Writing about Quranic schools in a Yemeni town—although his comment surely applies more generally—Messick (1993: 77) observes that one of their important objectives ‘was to instill *adab*, a complex of valued intellectual dispositions and appropriate behaviors’, which is the distinctively Islamic construction of civilized behaviour and refinement that comes from discipline and training. On the more specific matter of instruction in reading and writing, however, there is some variability among Quranic schools.

In rural Morocco, at least in the past, pupils could spend several years memorizing and reciting the Quran and ‘only at later stages did more advanced students learn to read and write, and then usually outside the context of the mosque school’ (Eickelman 1985: 59). Most of them, though, left the schools without acquiring literacy (*ibid.*: 61), and no printed or manuscript copies of the Quran were used to aid memorization (*ibid.*: 62). In Quranic schools in a Yemeni town (especially before the 1962 Revolution), the emphasis was on reciting and memorizing the Quran, but pupils were taught the Arabic alphabet, first by memorizing the letters and then by writing them on their lesson-boards. Every pupil had such a board and writing on it was instrumental to the process of memorization, so that teachers often told a pupil to ‘Recite your lesson-board’. Many pupils, however, dropped out early so that three or four years in a Quranic school ‘would be the extent of many children’s (and virtually all girls’) exposure to the literate skills’ (Messick 1993: 76, 81, 82, 85, 88). In the schools of the Mende in Sierra Leone, students learn the Quran, verse by verse, by repeating after the teacher and practising on their own, but they also ‘learn writing by repeatedly copying on wooden slates what the teacher writes’, although many teachers do not let students see the text of the Quran or write anything until they have memorized several sections of it (Bledsoe and Robey 1993: 122). Moreover, teachers initially teach only ‘the pronunciation and graphic representation of Arabic words, withholding their meaning until the student has memorised the entire Quran’ (*ibid.*: 123). In an Iranian village in the 1970s, Street reports, students still went to religious schools (*maktab*) to learn the Quran in the traditional way and some did little more than memorize a few passages from it. Nevertheless, even those students became familiar with the appear-

ance of books seen in the schools, which gave them a 'minimal encounter with literacy'; they could also see how their teachers and advanced students 'were employing more elaborate literacy skills for powerful purposes' (1984: 133). Restricted 'maktab literacy', as Street terms it, could therefore form the basis for more advanced literacy. At the very least, 'maktab literacy' ensured that most former students knew something about literate modes of communication; some built on it to develop an ability to read Farsi (*ibid.*: 134) and for some, it could also lead to the cultivation of wider intellectual skills (*ibid.*: 139-40).

In Quranic schools, therefore, new pupils begin to memorize their teachers' utterances before they can read or write at all. Some of them, though, eventually acquire literacy, more or less fully, in Arabic or indirectly in a vernacular like Farsi. Hence for Muslims, exposure to oral education can be, and in principle always is, the first step towards literacy. At the more advanced level, for instance in the Yemeni lesson circles, instruction was provided in Islamic law, Quranic exegesis and related subjects, and meanings and interpretations were explicitly addressed. Reading and writing were important activities, and many students wrote out their own manuscript copies of texts. Nonetheless, the literate skills were consistently devalued in relation to oral communication and transmission of knowledge. Significantly, a final stage of study called 'heard texts'—in which no dictation, note-taking or writing was used—most fully exemplified the ideal oral mode for the legitimate transmission of knowledge (Messick 1993: 84-92). In Moroccan lesson circles, where discussion of meaning and interpretation was more restricted, the same emphasis on the pre-eminence of oral transmission was found (Eickelman 1985: 94-5).

To return to India; in contemporary Tamilnadu, students entering Agamic or Vedic schools have already attended ordinary schools (or colleges) first and can read and write in the vernacular. (There are, of course, no Hindu equivalents of elementary Quranic schools.) For these students—although not for boys in the Vaidika Brahman community described by Knipe—literacy therefore precedes oral education, as it never does for Muslim children who begin in Quranic schools, and the acquisition of restricted literacy in Sanskrit follows full literacy in the vernacular, whereas for Muslims restricted literacy in Arabic is the first (and often uncompleted) stage in learning to read and write. In contemporary Agamic schools—and also, but probably to a lesser extent, in Vedic ones—it seems entirely natural,

too, within a literate print culture, to employ books to aid verbatim memorization. It would be inaccurate to say, following Messick on Yemeni lesson circles, that reading (and writing) 'were systematically kept in the background' (1993: 90), because in Agamic schools there is never any attempt to disguise the role of books, despite the ideological primacy of oral transmission common to both cases. Eickelman (1985: 95–6), in discussing Islamic education at the more advanced level, notes the variation between the Moroccan stress on mnemonic possession of accurately memorized texts and the greater weight given to discussion and interpretation in other Muslim countries. Looking at Hindu and Muslim education more broadly, notwithstanding the vital role and ideological pre-eminence of oral transmission, we can see that there is also diversity among and between them in how oral and literate modes of communication are mutually related. Notable are variations in the sequential pattern for acquiring literacy in vernacular or classical languages, in the practical role that printed and written materials play in memorization, and in the extent to which verbatim memorization of texts set down in books complements memorization and internalization of the teacher's spoken words. It is tempting to speculate on how these variations may affect the accuracy and quality of recitation of Hindu or Quranic texts, but I know of no evidence permitting a sound judgment. What is clear is that within the broad category defined by oral transmission, memorization and recitation, there is, in the literate Hindu and Muslim cultures, significant variability which is too easily obscured by the dichotomy of orality and literacy.

### **Orality and Literacy: A Concluding Comment**

The inadequacy of this dichotomy has also been revealed by much anthropological research on the impact of literacy in pre-literate societies, which shows that literacy is not a uniform phenomenon with the same consequences everywhere. Thus, for example, in a predominantly pre-literate society, literacy and literacy-based schooling are shaped by the social practices and cultural meanings of orality, which are also variable.<sup>10</sup> For this article, however, how orality is

<sup>10</sup> Among many studies demonstrating this clearly are Bloch's explanation of how, in a Zafimaniry village in Madagascar, literacy and schooling 'have been put to use to reinforce previously existing patterns' of evaluation of knowledge, rather than to undermine them (1993: 106), and Kulick and Stroud's exploration of how, in a

shaped by literacy and ordinary schooling is the more salient issue, and in conclusion I shall comment on it briefly.

It is notable that Minakshi temple priests and their sons attend Agamic schools with an outlook and motivation which are much the same as they are towards ordinary education. Thus priestly students, even college graduates in science or commerce, commonly insist that there is not much difference between religious and ordinary education. In their own eyes, learning orally with extensive rote-memorization, in a language not properly understood, does not radically distinguish Agamic education from secular education based on the literate mode of communication and ideally oriented towards intellectual understanding. Education, after all, is primarily about acquiring knowledge largely stored in books—even though the means to do so varies—and one of its main purposes is to train people for professional employment in a modern society that demands qualifications. This may be an instrumental attitude to education, religious or secular, but it is hardly one confined to the priests, even if it causes disquiet in modern academics and traditional gurus alike.

The priests' outlook, as already explained, is a product of a literate print culture in which, among other factors, the Agamas are now conceptualized as authoritative books. More specifically, it is obviously relevant too that virtually all members of the priestly community, male and female, are literate, and that when students enter the Agamic schools, they have already been socialized into a literate print culture and its pedagogical values. Yet the perceived similarity between the two types of education probably has much to do with the nature of Indian instruction, in which students spend so much time learning by rote, not only in elementary schools when first learning grammar or arithmetical tables, but even in degree-level colleges, where they commonly write down material delivered in lectures so that they can memorize it for examinations. This practice is prevalent, for instance, in the quite prestigious English-medium college in Madurai favoured by Brahman families. In his discussion of the fate of Sanskrit education in modern India, Gerow (1973) emphasizes the disruptive effect of secular educational influence, but equally notable is the continuity between traditional and modern education that is still widely prevalent. Thus for the majority of Indians, education remains highly dependent on the oral transmission

Papua New Guinean village, 'the villagers have not been transformed by "literacy". If anything, they themselves have "transformed" it' (1993: 56).

and memorization of knowledge, with unfortunate consequences that have often been discussed by critics in India, who correctly observe that its educational system is strongly marked by traditional pedagogic styles.

On the other hand, the influence is mutual, for Āgamic schools have developed and now operate in Tamilnadu within a society permeated by the norms and objectives of literacy-based education and professional training. Certainly, the teaching system crucially depends on and extols oral transmission from the guru. Nonetheless, the attitude towards books and their use, as well as the orientation towards learning of both teachers and priestly students, are the products of a latter-day, literate print culture. The Āgamic schools of Tamilnadu, when placed in comparative perspective, illustrate well how complex the relationship between orality, literacy and memorization can be in the modern world.

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