On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar*

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I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years research of the highest quality and interest has been carried out by social anthropologists in different parts and among various castes in India. This rich material has, as yet, hardly been tapped for comparative theoretical purposes. Much of the research has naturally been limited in scope and has been directed to the analysis of particular systems treated in relative isolation. However, it seems clear that all workers in this field implicitly recognize that there exists an underlying unity and form to certain aspects of Indian society. Hence Dumont (1961) in a recent essay vigorously affirms the cultural uniformity of India and analyses the Nayar situation in the context of wider Indian patterns. Srinivas (1952) too has written of all-India concepts which impinge upon local communities.1 There is nothing surprising in this underlying unity from a structural point of view. For one basic, powerful and striking feature, ‘caste’, is common to all Hindu India. Such variations in kinship and other aspects of social life exist within this single framework. (See Srinivas 1952, chap. 8.) Thus Stevenson has been able to subsume the fundamental and general principles of ritual status evaluation in a remarkable fashion (1954) and has indicated the overall unity in the apparent confusion.

But perhaps because of this very generality of ‘caste’ in India, its structural significance in forming a common background for kinship systems or in setting limits to their variations has not been sufficiently realized. There is a tendency to analyse and describe Hindu kinship systems in isolation, without taking this general unifying structural framework into account. Whereas, in fact, it is precisely this condition, the existence of limited variations against a common cultural (or structural) background which lends itself most readily to accurate comparative analysis. Hence, following this line of reasoning, I hope to demonstrate in this essay how the structural implications of caste illuminate some features of apparently diverse kinship systems which otherwise remain inexplicable.

My immediate purpose is to examine the rites concerning female puberty and sexuality and relate them by comparative analysis, first, to the general structure of caste and, second, to the local and limited variations in certain kinship systems. The main issue is the concern centering around female sexuality when male sexuality is not necessarily ritualized. I hope to show that filiation through the mother, and the protection of female purity is fundamental to the caste system of Ceylon and Malabar and that these principles may have structural implications in other Hindu castes.

The specific problem of female sexuality has been the subject of a notable essay by
Gough (1955). However, after analysing certain female initiation rites on the Malabar coast she reaches the conclusion that structural analysis does not lead very far and that it is imperative to turn to psycho-analytical explanations which involve the analysis of unconscious psychological motivations.

I think that it is possible to pursue the structural analysis of the phenomena much further, and with a comparison of published sources as well as my experiences in the field (Kandyan Sinhalese and East Coast Tamils of Ceylon), to provide a more general explanation for the ritualization of female sexuality.

A different aspect of the study concerns the relation between structural and psycho-analytical explanations, and the problem is examined in its context.

The essay is in seven parts. In the following two parts, unpublished material about Sinhalese kinship and puberty ceremonies is presented. These are then related to the general scheme which Gough has presented for the Malabar Coast. The structural implications of caste are discussed in Part V and further comparative evidence from Brahmans, Nambudivis (who are rather neglected by Gough), and Ceylon Veddas is presented to support the argument.

II

SINHALESE PUBERTY CEREMONIES: I. CASTE AND KINSHIP

The Sinhalese we are concerned with are peasants of the dry zone and the central highlands of Ceylon. They live in compact villages and are divided into various castes. The majority belong to the Cultivator caste, but there are attendant castes such as the Washermen, Tom-tom Beaters as well as others who are very low and very polluting.

A considerable amount has already been published on Sinhalese castes (Ryan 1953; Yalman 1960). For our purposes the essential point is that although the Sinhalese are Buddhists, their castes bear very close resemblance to Hindu systems. Moreover, there may be an intrinsic connexion between Hinduism and the Sinhalese castes, for Sinhalese Buddhism exists over and above a powerful complex of temples, beliefs, rituals, and priests directly associated with Hindu deities who do, however, have Sinhalese names (Yalman 1963). The main distinction between the Sinhalese and the Hindu systems is that the Brahman have no place in the former. Instead the Buddhist priests and nuns, who form clerical orders and not castes, are regarded as the most sacred and pure people in Sinhalese society.

The kinship system of the Kandyan Sinhalese is bilateral. Kinship is traced through all or any known links and for this purpose links through the mother, the father, the sister's husband or the wife's brother are equally significant. The basic pattern is manifest in their inheritance arrangements.

Rights in paddy land (their most valued property) are conveyed equally to sons and daughters. Hence a man may have land from (a) his father, (b) his mother, (c) he may manage his wife's lands, and (d) he may buy land of his own. But this is only a simplified version of an extremely complex problem. In wealthy families daughters may not be allowed to press inheritance claims, but, alternatively, they may receive large dowries.

Marriage is regulated by a Dravidian kinship terminology. In other words, cross-cousins are distinguished from parallel cousins in every generation, and the marriage
rule is that only those men and women in the category of cross-cousin may have sexual relations or enter into matrimony (Yalman 1962b).

People have choices about residence and both virilocal and uxorilocal forms of marriage are practised. Polygyny is permitted, and polyandry, though rare, is considered to be respectable.

The ideology of descent illuminates the impact of caste notions on kinship. There are no exogamous named descent groups among the Kandyan Sinhalese. Actual genealogies do not penetrate far into the past: what matters is present matrimonial or de facto kinship connexions. On the other hand, there is lively interest in 'pedigrees'. I use this term in contrast to 'genealogy', for the main function of these 'pedigrees' appears to be to connect the living with the illustrious and high ranking dead; whereas I prefer to speak of a 'genealogy' in connexion with a charter which connects the living with other such groups around them, and forms the basis for some form of corporate activity. The pedigrees which are used (aristocratic titles and house names) indicate relative status within the caste (see Yalman 1960, p. 108).

The kindred is the most important kin group. It has an identity and very considerable solidarity. Kandyans would consider it to be 'one people' and 'one blood'. Hence it is directly associated with caste ideology. 'Blood' is never a neutral category: it always carries ritual-qualities. In this case, those of 'one blood' would assert that, ipso facto, they are of special ritual status. This idea is at the root of a preference to make the kindred a closed circle and to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it. Although its boundaries are not quite clearly defined the Kandyan Sinhalese kindred appears in many respects as the microcosm of the castes. It has most of the ritual attributes of caste and preserves its special qualities by vigilantly restricting the marriages of its members. This anxious attitude toward ritual status in the context of the family should be noted, for it is of importance to our analysis of female puberty ceremonies.

CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE AND ENDOGAMY

The kindred is analogous to a small caste-community. And it is part of this idea that marriages preferably take place within it. Cross-cousin marriage has an important role in such circumstances. As Dumont (1953, 1957b) has demonstrated, it perpetuates the 'alliance' from generation to generation. Only classificatory cross-cousins are allowed to have sexual relations or to marry. And Pieris remarks: 'The term for crossed relations, āvāśa (from Sanscrit avashya) meaning “necessary”, signifies the fact that one is not only permitted, but even enjoined to marry one’s cross-cousin. . . There are no in-laws in such a régime, since everybody is related before marriage' (Pieris 1956, p. 216).

Even if actual cross-cousins do not marry, classificatory ones do, and the entire customary manifestations of the 'rights' of cross-cousins emphasize this idea, that those who marry are those who are already closely related and expected to marry. These 'claims' of cross-cousins upon one another as sexual and marital partners are suggested in many notable customs. It is said that they may sleep with each other without permission from anyone; when a girl marries she must leave with the 'permission' of the cross-cousins, symbolized by the gift of one hundred betel leaves given by the bride to her male cross-cousin at the marriage ceremony. Similarly, these claims are represented.
by the cross-cousin (or his father, the mother's brother) at puberty ceremonies. The underlying assumption is that marriage is nothing new, and that it is only a pre-existing relation which is being reaffirmed. It is part of the attitude that no doubtful strangers are to be allowed into the circle to pollute the family. Looked at from the outside the community is closed. This pattern is of obvious importance in a caste system. But from the inside, as Dumont (1953) has shown, the particular terminology which the Kandyans share with many groups in South India, systematically divides the common kin into those who must, as well as those who must not, marry. The complex of cross-cousin claims must be seen in this light. There is separation as well as unification at the same time.

For this reason, when very close cross-cousins do marry, no wedding is called for. The man may present a cloth and a blouse (redi and hetti) to his cross-cousin and take her away. In such instances all that the marriage ‘creates’ is, it would appear, already in existence. Weddings are celebrated when a new alliance is finalized between distant or new kinsmen. Then the celebration is a public manifestation of changed circumstances.

We may summarize the Sinhalese pattern as follows:

1. A village may contain two or more castes which remain strictly endogamous.
2. There is no recognition of unilineal descent; but there is bilateral inheritance (sometimes modified by dowries).
3. Kinship is reckoned through both the father and the mother as well as affines.
4. There is a kindred with solidarity and cohesion which includes the kinsmen of the parents and affines.
5. There is a lively notion of ritual status, and certain kindreds consider themselves to be ‘purer’ than others.

With this brief outline of Sinhalese kinship ideology we may turn to the analysis of puberty ceremonies.

2. PUBERTY AND CEREMONIES

Several occasions in the life of an ordinary Sinhalese are marked by ritual. The most notable of these are the following:

1. Birth is ritualized. The child is given milk which has been brought into contact with gold (ran kiri kata gahanava).
2. The first time the babe eats solid food is ritualized. Food is spread on the floor. The child crawls on and eats what it likes. The food it chooses augurs for the future.
3. There is a hair-cutting ceremony. A single lock is cut when the child is one or two years old.
4. The first time children go to school, the first time they learn the script, the first time they cross rivers—all are slightly ritualized.
5. There are two more important rites. The girls have their ears pierced usually before puberty. The boys have a ceremony when they first begin work in the paddy fields.
None of these personal ceremonies is very essential and they may be disregarded. But the puberty ceremonies of girls are in a special category altogether and must not be neglected.

Two measures are taken as soon as it is known that the girl has menstruated. The exact time of the first beginning of the periods is noted, and the girl is secluded in a chamber. The father, or some other reliable person (the brother or brother-in-law of the girl) repairs to a specialist astrologer who draws up a horoscope of the girl. The horoscope is a very valuable object to a Sinhalese. It is designed by noting the positions and influences of the planets at the instant of birth. As such the horoscope is a detailed chart of a man's entire future and character, and is vital in marriage negotiations and in the diagnosis of disease.

The interest in the puberty ceremony is that the new horoscope, drawn upon the beginning of menstruation supersedes the birth-horoscope of women. It is, as it were, a new life that they are beginning. Men have only one horoscope.

THE SINHALESE POLLUTION CONCEPT

The menstruating girl should be secluded in a small hut in the compound, but in ordinary households she is merely placed in a room without openings. The door is shut. When possible the place is tied around with a white thread.

The girl is said to be in great danger. The segregation is partly to protect her from hostile powers (vas-dos) and demons (yakkuwa) who are attracted to her at this time, and partly to prevent her 'pollution' from spreading. As we shall see, Gough makes much of the fact that the girl should be in danger of attack precisely at the time when her sexuality appears (1955, p. 63; also Iyer 1912, vol. ii: 86) but in this context we must dwell on her 'pollution'.

The concept is killa (adj. kilutu or kili) and is associated in particular with bodily dirt, but may be used in a general sense as well. Most rites de passage: birth, puberty, menstruation and death (but not marriage) do spread killa. On all these occasions 'dirty' and 'decayed' stuff is said to be ejected from the body. Births and menstruation are matters of blood, which is very polluting. Moreover, at birth, the placenta and faeces are also involved. At all these times the house and all who live in it are polluted. At death, it is true, no blood comes out; but in that case, it is said that the stomach and the intestines begin to rot and smell, for the faeces cannot be excreted and pollution spreads. Specific relatives are not polluted; killa involves only those who live in the house. And this is notable since in a bilateral kinship system it is difficult to define the limits of the 'family' very precisely.

Those who live in kili-gedera (pollution house) have certain disabilities. Firstly, they are in a negative state and must avoid auspicious objects and acts. Hence, they may not hold Buddhist chanting (pirit) and preaching (bana) ceremonies in the home. They may not enter dévalés: the temples dedicated to Hindu deities. The sacred place would get defiled and one would be killed or disabled by the deity (for further elaborations see Yalman 1963). There are food-taboos on members of the pollution house. Thus no flesh, eggs and dried fish must be eaten.

In these ideas impurity and purity are, as usual, closely related. I have been
emphasizing the inauspicious, dirty, negative powers of killa. I have said that it is related
to bodily dirt and, in particular, blood and faeces. But it also has an auspicious aspect.

Consider the implications of ‘blood’:

Semen (kere or dhatu) is eighty drops of blood. The blood is heated in the testicles
and turns into semen. In one sense semen is concentrated pollution. In another sense, it
is power and life. I cannot delve into these remarkable connotations, but one aspect
may be illustrated.

The sacred dagobas of Ceylon are well known. They are vast and impressive monu-
ments built upon the relics of the Buddha. They are among the most holy shrines of
Buddhism. In Ceylon, the dagoba is also known as dhatu-garbhaya. The first word (dhatu)
has the following associated meanings: (a) semen, (b) seed, (c) sacred relics of the
Buddha. garbhaya means simply ‘womb’.

What are these relics? They are: (1) the bones (e.g., hakku dhatu), (2) the tooth
(danta dhatu), (3) the hair (khesa dhatu), (4) the nails (nyepata dhatu) of the Buddha.
These are the parts of the body which apparently remained behind after the cre-
mation.

In this sense the dagoba is a memorial ‘tomb’ built upon the sacred relics of the
Buddha. In the second sense, it is the seed in the earth, or the semen in the womb. In
one sense it is death, in another birth, life, and fertility. And all this is parallel to the idea
of rebirth. Yet the objects which are relics (e.g. nail and hair) are related to bodily dirt.
This association between concepts of pollution and fertility is significant from the point
of view of puberty ceremonies.

Let me take another instance. Blood also gets ‘heated’ and turns into milk at the
breast. Blood is polluting, but milk in all its forms (i.e. kiri, coconut milk, women’s and
cow’s milk, the sap of milk-exuding trees) is particularly pure and sacred. The great
Bo tree, for instance, worshipped as the symbol of the Buddha, is a milk-sap tree
(kirigaha). Certain foods prepared with ‘milk’ are particularly potent (e.g. kiribat).
Boiling milk is a ritual offering to the deities. Hence the auspicious and the inauspicious,
fecundity and death, fertility and barrenness, purity and pollution appear associated
with blood. I would suggest that menstrual blood is bad-sacred but if converted into
good-sacred, it can be particularly ‘pure’ and ‘fertile’.

THE PURIFICATION

So much for the bare outlines of the pollution concept. The girl remains in her dark
chamber either alone or with an old grandmother (i.e. someone who has lost her
fecundity and is beyond danger). The period of her seclusion depends upon her horo-
scope and is decided by the astrologer. He also decides on an auspicious time for her to
leave her seclusion for a ritual bath.

During her seclusion, all her polluted clothes are put into a ‘cooking’ pot. Urine,
faeces, and menstrual blood also go into it. She is given special food and is not allowed
to use plates, but banana leaves, which also go into the pot. This cooking pot, in other
words becomes the repository of all impurity. It becomes highly charged and very
dangerous. While the girl is secluded, she has a rice pounder (molgaha) in the room with
her. This is an almost overt phallic symbol. At this stage in the proceedings members
of the washermen caste make their appearance. A male and female washerman are called for. One bathes the girl, and the other decorates the house.

The ritual work of washermen is to purify polluted clothes. Unlike the other castes, they are intimately associated with the family and have functions in all rites de passage. The washermen are sometimes addressed by pseudo-kinship terms by young people. The women of the caste are referred to as redi nenda and the men as redi mama: nenda means 'mother-in-law', 'father's sister', 'mother's brother's wife', and mama means 'father-in-law', 'mother's brother', 'father's sister's husband'. Redi means cloth, but is often pronounced as ridi, which is a pun on the point that these pseudo relations charge money for their favours.

At the 'auspicious time' for the girl to be brought forth from her dark chamber, the washerwoman covers the head, face, and most of the body of the girl with white clothes and conducts her to a place where she can be bathed in secret. Especially, members of her family must not see her. The cooking pot, filled with the 'pollution', is also taken along.

As soon as she leaves the house for her bath, the washerman comes in to decorate and purify the place and prepare for the final ceremonies. The polluted house is cleansed either by smearing cow-dung, or by sprinkling saffron or turmeric water. The association of cow-dung (good-sacred) with faeces (bad-sacred) is obvious. The house is then decorated with long white cloths, in preparation for the family feast which will shortly be held.

After the house has been purified, the washerman prepares certain ritual objects on the floor. This is intended for the 'rite of the first glance' (pretama darsanaya). A pure cloth is spread on the ground; uncooked rice is sprinkled on it (hal). On the rice are placed special foods: (a) milk rice (kiribat), (b) bananas, (sometimes also the banana flower, which again is an overt phallic symbol, is included), (c) oil cakes (kavum) of three kinds which are associated with female genitals and breasts. A basin is prepared and filled with water. A coin is placed in it. An oil lamp is prepared. A coconut and a large knife are held ready.

While the house is thus prepared, the girl is bathed three times with water by the washerwoman. She mixes special medicines in the water. It is best, however, to wash her with milk. For reasons which I have made clear, milk is the most direct antidote to pollution by menstrual blood.

After the bath, the washerwoman takes the pot filled with pollution and breaks it against a milk-exuding tree. She dresses the girl in fresh clothes, and all the spoiled clothes, any jewelry the girl might have been wearing, belong to her.

THE RE-ENTRY INTO THE COMMUNITY

The girl is still felt to be in a dangerous state, but she has now become very pure and auspicious. She is again covered up against the demons whose appetites are now particularly whetted and who will renew their attacks, and is led back to the house. As she comes in and crosses the threshold, someone in the kinship category of mama (mother's brother or father-in-law) breaks the coconut into two. From the way each half falls to the ground a new observation about her future may be made, but this does not replace her recent horoscope.
If a real *mama* is not present, the coconut may be broken by a washerman (i.e. a *redi mama*). But some *mama* must be there.

She walks into the house completely shrouded. She looks at the ritual objects on the floor. She gazes into the water and extinguishes the oil lamps. Then the *mama* uncovers her face and head. I interpret this act, for reasons which will become clear, as *(a)* the *mama* claiming her, not personally, but as someone in the right category (*leli*) as a spouse for his son, her cross-cousin, and *(b)* the entry of the girl as an adult woman of the community. The pattern fits in with the entire ideology of cross-cousin marriage and this is how the presence of the *mama* is explained by the villagers. She then walks over the rice (*hål udayanava*), an auspicious act which ritually enhances her fecundity. This is the end of her ritual. She kneels down and ‘worships’ (ceremonially salutes) her assembled kinsmen in order of seniority, and fades into the background.

The objects on the floor are now slightly dangerous. Hence, they belong to the washerwoman who takes them away. The money in the basin also is hers.

The symbolic structure of the ceremony is simple: *(a)* The infertile child is polluted by menstrual blood. *(b)* She is segregated in a dark room where she becomes fertile but impure. *(c)* She is reborn out of the dark room with a new horoscope as a fertile but still impure woman. *(d)* She is cleaned but positively charged. *(e)* Her re-entry over the threshold into the ‘community’ as a fertile and pure woman is marked by the breaking of the coconut. *(f)* The positive charge goes into the water basin and other objects on the floor. *(g)* The washerwoman takes them away.

The gazing into the water (or better milk) is also done by priests (*kapurala*) after having been through very special ritual actions, like handling the god’s ‘weapons’ (*ayuda*) and getting possessed in annual rituals.

The rest of the ceremony consists of the kinsmen of the girl—members of her kindred—congregating in her home for a feast. This feast, like a wedding, is referred to as *magul gedera*. But a birth too can be known as a *magul gedera* and only death is *avāmagul* (anti-*magul*).

The future marriage of the girl will often be arranged at this time. The ceremony is a public statement that a girl has reached the marriage market. The statement is made even more unmistakable by the use of deafening fire-crackers which mark step by step the auspicious astrological moments of the rite.

From another point of view, as I have noted, the ritual ‘rebirth’ of the girl, returns her to the world with new status. After the event she ceases being a mere *kelle* (female child) but is referred to as *tamissi* (*lama-issi* = ‘raised breast’). Henceforth, unlike children, she normally wears (in well-to-do families) a wide collar (like an Elizabethan collar) which covers her shoulders and breasts. This is said to ‘protect’ her breasts but seems to draw attention to her nubility. Henceforth, it is said that ‘she is a woman’. Thus the puberty ceremony is an unmistakable *rite de passage*.

But is this all we can say about the ceremony? Why is it that the puberty of women should be of such absorbing interest to make it a festive public occasion, feasts, etc., when there is almost nothing for boys, certainly nothing connected with their sexuality? When I put the question to my Sinhalese villagers, they were surprised at my naïveté. Obviously, the girl starts bleeding and is polluted; how can you know what happens to a boy? When further pressed, they would say that the rite has two related purposes:
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(1) It protects the fecundity of the womb of the woman. (2) This is necessary since 'the honour and respectability of men is protected and preserved through their women'. I will return in particular to this cryptic latter statement.

III

FEMALE INITIATION ON THE MALABAR COAST: I. 'THE TĀLĪ-TYING MARRIAGE'

We must now consider how Gough deals with the problems of female initiation rites on the Malabar coast. It should be noted before we proceed, however, that the Malabar rites which are described below have never been observed by Gough and that her analysis depends upon a reconstruction of the state of affairs referred to as 'traditional' and presumed to have existed in the early part of the nineteenth century. Her observations however are supported by historical evidence. The question as to whether such historical material may legitimately be compared with recent evidence from Ceylon does not seriously arise. We are comparing systems and for these purposes it is irrelevant that the Malabar and the Sinhalese materials refer to different dates.

The rites described by Gough differ, then, from the Sinhalese rites described above in two respects. First, they take place before the onset of puberty and there may be another puberty rite of lesser emphasis later when the girl menstruates. There is, none the less, a simulation of puberty and the girl is secluded as if she had menstruated and become mature. Second, the ceremonies are symbolic marriages. They are known as tālī-kettu kalyanam (tālī-tying marriage) and the central rite in all of them is the tying of a tālī which in most of South India (Coorg excepted) is indicative of the married state.

It is clear, however, that there were great variations in the emphasis given to the symbolic wedding. In some castes, as among the Nayar of Southern Malabar, the girl went through the marriage ceremony with a chosen 'bridegroom' of high status, preferably a Nambudiri Brahman. Although their cohabitation did not necessarily last longer than the duration of the ceremony and although it was possible for the girl never to see the ritual 'bridegroom' again, she and her children observed death pollution at his funeral. In other castes, it was possible for the mother of the girl simply to tie the tālī herself without any other ceremony.

There has been much speculation about the meaning of this curious rite. Thurston writes as follows:

'Of those who gave evidence before the Malabar Commission, some thought the tālī-kettu was a marriage, some not. Others called it a mock marriage, a formal marriage, a sham marriage, a fictitious marriage, a marriage sacrament, the preliminary part of a marriage, a meaningless ceremony, an empty form, a ridiculous farce, an incongruous custom, a waste of money, a device for becoming involved in debt' (1909, V, p. 326).

The immense majority called it a fictitious marriage the origin of which they were at a loss to explain. The question raised by Gough is that while there are satisfactory 'sociological explanations' for these rites in the case of the typical Southern Nayar (see below) in some of the other cases such explanations are not forthcoming. Her arguments fall into two distinct sections. In the first, she examines the possible 'structural' explanations and finds them wanting. She decides then to seek 'unconscious motivations' and the second section is psycho-analytically oriented. I am here concerned only with her
discussion of the ‘structure’ and question whether she is justified in concluding that no
significant explanations in terms of the social structure can be discovered. Her four
groups have briefly the following organization:

Southern Nayar. These are the well-known, classically matrilineal, Nayar castes. In
their villages there are a number of matrilineages called taravad which are corporate
groups. They separate out into certain property holding groups of three to five genera-
tions in depth (reckoned from the children) each with a ‘lineage’ head (karanavan)
(Gough 1955, p. 47). Membership is reckoned by strict matrilineal descent.

It appears that formerly each property group was also a dwelling group and that
men resided with their sisters and sisters’ children. The women of the taravad were
visited at night by men of other lineages who left in the morning. A man could have a
number of such women (with reservations) and the same was true of women. (Gough
1955, p. 73; 1952b, passim). This relationship—pseudo-marriage—was called sam-
bandham and was somewhat unstable.

Another important aspect of the Nayar system was that men of higher sub-castes or
even of other castes could enter into such unions with Nayar women (Iyer 1912, vol. ii;
Gough 1952a; 1952b; 1955; Thurston 1909). The children became members of their
maternal taravad, whoever their genitors may have been. The women, however, could
emphatically not have such relations with men of lower rank, or lower sub-castes, or
lesser castes. Thus sambandham was either between equals or ‘hypergamous’.

Let me turn to the initiation ceremonies. It appears that all the girls of the taravad
came out together. There was an elaborate ritual whereby men of a certain linked
taravad (called enangar) performed parts of the rite for the girls of the host taravad. A tāli
(necklace) was tied; she was confined to a chamber as if she had menstruated, and then,
after the ‘ritual defloration’, the men of the other lineage departed. This established a
link between the two lineages, as lineages, whereas there were almost no rights and
obligations between the girl and the ritual bridegroom except that, significantly, she
and her children observed death-pollution at his funeral.

So much for the outlines of the Southern Nayars. What stands out is the corporate
matrilineage, the weak sambandham ties and institutionalized hypergamous connexion.
In matrilineal systems there is always an uneasy balance of rights of women between
their brothers and their husbands. In this extreme case, as among the Menangkabau of
Sumatra, the husband’s rights have been reduced to their very minimum.

Northern Nayar. These are again matrilineal castes, but in this area the residence
pattern is patrilocal. In other words, there is a Trobriand type organization.

The tāli-tying marriage is celebrated before puberty. The ‘necklace’ is again tied by
a respectable person, a Nambudiri Brahman or someone from a high ranking lineage.
The couple are secluded for three days; but unlike South Nayar, this man has nothing
further to do with her. No death-pollution is observed for him: and he is not regarded as
the ritual father of her children.

These features are in accordance with the rest of the pattern. Unlike the South
Nayar sambandham, the woman leaves her natal household at her marriage, which is
celebrated, and goes to live with her husband. There is no polyandry. But the children
return to their maternal kin when they grow up, and the woman too may return if she
falls out with her husband.
Northern Tiyyar. In North Malabar the customs of the Tiyyar (also known as Irava) resemble those of the Nayar. There are still dispersed matrilineages, but residence is patrilocal and the local group is often a patrilineal extended family. Paternal kin are well known and kinship terms are extended laterally. They have the same Dravidian terminology as the Sinhalese with the same cross-cousin marriage rules.

The marriage ceremony is elaborate. The woman is taken from her home by the kinsmen of the groom and there are gift exchanges between the kin groups and obviously a relation of affinity is established.

The tāli ‘marriage’ fits in very well with the cross-cousin marriage pattern: (1) The girl is secluded as if she had menstruated; (2) the tāli is tied by the mother’s brother’s wife, though alternatively it could be tied by a low caste washerwoman or (among barbers and washermen) by a respected elder of the community.13

We should observe that among these castes, the tāli-rite does not appear to be as obviously a ‘marriage’ as the Nayar instances. There are no ‘ritual bridegrooms’ with whom the girl is secluded and there is no sexual intercourse. On the other hand, the role of the mother’s brother’s wife (as well as the washerwoman) is comparable to that of the mama (mother’s brother) or redi mama (washerman) among the Sinhalese. In both communities cross-cousin marriage is the rule and among the Tiyyar cross-cousins have claims upon each other. The marriage rituals of the Northern Tiyyar and the Sinhalese are also quite similar (compare e.g. the role of cross-cousin at a Tiyyar marriage (Gough 1955, p. 59) with the betel ceremony of the Sinhalese above).

Southern Tiyyar. The Tiyyar in South Malabar are notable for the combination of matrilineal and patrilineal features. The matrilineages are dispersed but the local descent group is patrilineal and patrilocal. Woman are transferred at marriage to their husband’s household. They live there and their children, in contrast to the Nayar and to some extent the Northern Tiyyar, belong to the local descent group of the father.

In this community the tāli is tied by a boy of a lineage into which the girl might marry. She is still secluded as if she had menstruated but the rite among the South Tiyyar, unlike their northern brethren, is more of a ‘mock marriage’. There is, however, one crucial difference here from the South Nayar: the woman has no lasting ritual bonds with the tāli-tier and, significantly, does not observe ritual pollution at his death.

I should like to draw attention to these ritual bonds between the girl and the temporary ‘bridegroom’. They are among the most significant features of the rites and the variations in this respect are highly illuminating. Note in this context that the South Tiyyar woman will later be married (and transferred) to a patrilineal group and will have a permanent pater for her children. It would therefore be contradictory for herself and her children to observe death-pollution for the initiator, the ‘boy-husband’.

To summarize the main features of the rite and to indicate its connexions with Sinhalese puberty rites let us note the following aspects of tāli-kettu kalyanam:

(a) The rite is definitely associated with menstruation: the girl is secluded in a separate chamber or hut in all cases. Her release is marked by purification rites.

(b) In all ceremonies she becomes socially mature after the event. Among the Nayar she may have a lover before she is physically mature.

(c) Symbolic phalli or ritual deflorations are part of the rites.
Where cross-cousin marriage is the rule, the ‘claims’ of the category of cross-cousins are made public in some way.

The differences are in the timing and emphasis on the symbolic wedding. The Sinhalese observances are proper puberty rites and their only connexion with ‘marriage’, apart from the reference to the ‘wedding home’ (magul gedara), is the presence of the mother’s brother; Gough may also consider the rice-pounder in the hut and the unveiling to be significant. The Malabar rites take place before puberty and emphasize the tāli-marriage. In all of them the ‘category’ of the ‘husband’ with whom the girl later ought to cohabit is specified and made public.

2. ‘Sociological Explanations’

Gough then turns to a discussion of the social functions of these rites. She finds that while there may be some ‘sociological’ explanation in the case of the South Nayar, there are no convincing explanations in the case of the other three communities. Her ‘explanation’ in the South Nayar is as follows (Gough 1955, p. 53–4):

‘A Nayar taravad is perpetuated by its women. . . . The tāli rite dramatizes the need of the lineage for male sexual partners who (“like breeding bulls”, as a Calicut prince remarked) will fulfill the one role denied to men of the lineage in respect of their sisters and nieces. . . . In this rite, through a chosen representative, the local caste group as a whole, “married” the lineage as a whole, and ritually set free the procreative powers of its girls to perpetuate their lineage.’ (But see Dumont 1961, p. 19 seq.)

In other words, Gough relates the rite quite directly to the nature of the matrilineal taravad, the rules of exogamy, and the prohibition on sexual relations within the lineage:

‘The separation of the tāli rite (the ritual marriage) from the later sambandham unions (initiated without rites) thus underlines the necessity to the lineage of husbands and fathers, while denying to the individual husband and father a legally and socially significant role in relation to his wife and children’ (Gough 1955, p. 53).

It is clear that if one considers this explanation to be the only sociological reason for the rites no such explanation is possible in the case of the other communities where the so-called ‘husband’ does have more extensive legal and social rights.

With the North Nayar, the women actually settles with her husband; there is a full marriage ceremony and the union is quite ‘real’. Among the North Tiyyar the situation is even more so: marriage is a bond that is emphasized. There is a full wedding including some token bride-price. For these clear reasons we cannot argue with conviction that a mock puberty-marriage rite is sociologically essential to ‘give away’ the sexuality of the woman while retaining the rights over her procreative capacity. The later ceremony of marriage does precisely that. And thus, Gough writes about the North Nayar: ‘Since the sambandham union was permanent, the husband’s sexual rights exclusive, and the father accorded legal ritual and social rights, it is difficult to explain this rite in terms of social function’ (Gough 1955, p. 56). The same thoughts are expressed about the North Tiyyar (Gough 1955, p. 59).

Further, about the South Tiyyar (patrilineal-patrilocal), whose tāli rites are more elaborate than the matrilineal Tiyyar of the North, Gough writes as follows:

‘. . . It seems extraordinary that in this group where the marriage bond is strong,
fatherhood known within a group of brothers, inheritance patrilineal and the wife at least partly incorporated into the lineage of her husband, such a rite should be performed at all. . . . Since they themselves have no answer to this question, except that it was part of ancient custom, we are driven to look for an explanation in terms of unconscious motivations' (Gough 1955, p. 62).

Of course, even these patrilineal Tiyyar do not provide a watertight case. For just as the Northern groups have matrilineages, they too have dispersed matrilineal clan names. A radical structuralist still has an 'explanation' ('legitimizing the girl’s future offspring as members of the matrilineal clan') to fall back on. It will be noted that we do have a good test-case with the Sinhalese, where no explanation in terms of unilineal descent groups is possible.

Apart from the rite itself there is also the question of hypergamy. In all these castes, it is significant that the ritual ‘bridegrooms’ are often persons of superior status—Nambudiri Brahmans, Chiefs and their like are called upon to tie the tāli. Gough draws attention, in the case of the South Nayar, to the political and economic circumstances within which such ‘hypergamy’ occurs. Thus the superiority of the ‘bridegroom’ gives ‘ceremonial recognition’ to the feudal overlordship of various castes above each other ‘and in religious matters, of Nambudiri’s Brahmans over all’ (Gough 1955, pp. 53–4).

Again, with such an explanation as a starting point it is natural to conclude in the case of the North Nayars, for instance, that hypergamy was not ‘closely in keeping with the political and economic systems, either in the kingdom or the village’ (Gough 1955, p. 56). It will be seen below that I consider the whole institution of hypergamy from an entirely different point of view, as a structural concomitant of caste principles, and not as the result of particular economic and political circumstances or, as Gough later attempts to make out, the manifestation of extraordinary psychological problems.

3. ‘UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATIONS’

Having thus successfully shaken, if not entirely demolished, the standard ‘sociological explanations’ which are really men of straw, Gough is ‘driven to look for an explanation in terms of unconscious motivations’ (Gough 1955, p. 62). I do not intend to go into the details of her argument but only wish to indicate the outlines of this psycho-analytic approach.

‘Why is it deemed necessary for a girl to “menstruate” and be deflowered (both symbolically) before she has attained puberty and is likely to enter into real sex relations? The first part of my hypothesis is that this rite issues out of the marked horror of incest in these castes, which makes it necessary for the natal kinsmen of the woman to renounce the rights in her mature sexuality before she is in fact mature’ (Gough 1955, p. 64). She then deals with the interpretation of certain rites to indicate that the desire of incest is very great and that hence the fear is even greater (Gough 1955, pp. 64–6).

The argument is that even in these matrilineal people the Oedipus Complex is strongly developed and that this gives greater emphasis to the fear of incest: the rites—according to this view—show ‘the reluctant renunciation’ of the woman by her natal kin (Gough 1955, p. 69).

‘My hypothesis is that this is so because the virgin is unconsciously associated with the mother, as a woman whom it is desirable to approach sexually but who may not be
approached because of the threat of castration or murder by a male parental figure. . . .

I think that this is so because the virgin is still in possession of her own jealous natal
kinsmen, who own, though they may not use, her sexuality. She is, therefore, feared by
men of her own age-group, who feel that it is the place of some father figure . . . to take
her virginity. A father figure . . . is therefore summoned, symbolically . . . to deflower
the girl and release her, in respect of her sexuality, from the ownership of her natal
kinsmen, and leave her . . . as a normal mature woman who may now do what she
pleases’ (Gough 1955, p. 71). These fears of the forbidden mother are exacerbated since
in all these communities there is developed a cult of a terrible, hostile virgin goddess:
Bhagavadi. This goddess is armed with many weapons, ‘snake ornaments . . . projecting
tongue, tusks, claws and lion and tiger vehicles’ (Gough 1955, p. 74 seq.).

‘The infant’s fear of approaching her (the mother) sexually, thus becomes a fear of
being attached and castrated by the angry penis of the father which the mother has
taken as her weapon’ (Gough 1955, p. 75).

Moreover, there is an ‘association of the menstruous woman with the phallic, blood-
dripping divine mother’ goddess (Gough 1955, p. 75); hence, ‘a virgin who had men-
struated but was still in the possession of her lineage kinsmen would be too terrifying a
creature to deflower’ (Gough 1955, p. 75). For this reason she must undergo this cere-
mony whereby she is symbolically deflowered by a ‘father’ (hence hypergamy) before
or during her first menstruation.

Such is the nature of this remarkable argument. Even though I am sympathetic
towards these attempts to bridge the gaps between two disciplines, I do not find it
convincing. The Oedipus Complex, as described by psycho-analysts, appears as a
universal phenomenon and, therefore, loses its force in the ‘explanation’ of local and
particular ceremonies. It is clear that in many societies female puberty is neither highly
ritualized nor always associated with ritual defloration. and ‘symbolic’ defloration is a
slippery concept.

4. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY MARRIAGES

Gough’s arguments have recently been the subject of an incisive examination by
Dumont (1961). He, in turn, argues that the Nayar can be understood only in the
context of the usual patrilineal ideals of India, and that the South Nayar have evolved a
special system in categorical contrast to the patrilineal people who surround them.

The outlines of his argument which are relevant to our discussion are as follows:
He draws a fundamental distinction between primary and secondary marriages in
India. He suggests that the primary marriage is for the ‘law’ which in South India,
except for the Nayar, is always ‘endogamous’ and that secondary marriages may be
more liberal (Dumont 1961, p. 13 seq.).

He then draws attention to the practices of the Basavi, where a girl is given in mar-
riage to a God, and becomes a temple servant. Other men may have intercourse with
her, but her children become members of her own patrilineal family. In other words,
since her primary marriage is to a God, the children from her secondary unions are
released from the constraints of strict patrilineal descent, and return to the family
which dedicated their mother to the temple (Dumont 1961, p. 29 seq.).
On this analogy Dumont suggests that the Nayar also distinguish between primary and secondary marriages. Hence their primary ṭāḷī-tying marriage is to a Nambudiri in order that the offspring from the woman's secondary unions may belong to her matri-lineage.

The argument is clever, and the juxtaposition of the Basavi and the Nayar revealing but, as Dumont notes, his conclusions simply do not apply to the three other groups in which the children do not belong exclusively to matrilineages. He is therefore obliged to dismiss their ṭāḷī-tying rituals as mere 'imitation' (Dumont 1961, p. 33 seq.).

But even with this reservation, certain areas of Dumont's analysis are very valuable. First he points out that with the ṭāḷī rite the Nayar do give recognition to paternity. Second, he notes that the 'primary marriage' is always according to 'law' and rigorously 'endogamous'. It will be seen below that I also consider the ṭāḷī-tying marriage as a public recognition of paternity and suggest that this marriage makes public the ideal partners or the ideal state of affairs in the community. I do not agree with Dumont on his over simple 'imitation' argument. On the contrary, I hold that some of the features of the South Nayar he has drawn attention to help us to understand the ṭāḷī-rites and other related phenomena in the castes of Ceylon and Malabar.

To my mind Gough has overlooked the fundamental structural factor (i.e. caste) in all these communities, and Dumont, who has indicated this point, has not drawn all the logical conclusions that one can draw from this factor. I would argue that there is a specific and important relationship between female purity and the purity of castes. The preoccupation with caste purity narrows and focuses attention on a profound 'danger' situation—the appearance of female sexuality—in a formal manner; it marks the timing of the rites and gives form to the ceremony.

I will substantiate these statements in the light of my field work. Let me note, however, that my 'explanation' subsumes under one theory not only the puberty ceremonies, and the complex of hypergamy, but also the powerful and enigmatic institution of Brahman pre-puberty marriage. This latter institution which lays down that all orthodox Hindus must marry off their daughters before puberty is part of a very general customary pattern. It has constantly been reiterated by ancient writers, and is very widely practised among Brahman. It is perfectly obvious that ṭāḷī-kettu kalyanam is a particular form of pre-puberty marriage and any explanation of one must cover the other—as, indeed, Gough herself implies in passing (Gough 1955, p. 77).

**IV**

**THE STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF CASTE PRINCIPLES:**

**I. A MODEL FOR ENDOGAMY AND HYPERGAMY**

This brings me to the analytic core of this essay. Why is there such interest in the sexuality of women rather than men? Also two further questions related to this: Why must the ṭāḷī rites be performed before puberty? and why are they 'symbolic marriages'? I have suggested that the key to all these queries lies in the principles of caste membership, and we must now turn to this issue.

It is remarkable, when we write about 'descent' in South India and Ceylon, that
we should overlook the most vital substance which the individual receives from his parents. This is blood, and I mean ‘caste blood’.

In this sense caste is always bilateral. This ritual quality is always received from both parents in all the communities we have mentioned. In the same way caste affiliation is also bilateral. A single parent can never ‘place’ (or ‘fix’) the position of a child in the caste hierarchy independently: the child’s position is always critically dependent upon the status of the other parent. We must distinguish therefore between affiliation to caste and affiliation to corporate lineages or local descent groups inside the caste. For even though the Nayar have matrilineages, it is clear that the position of the individual is dependent upon the ‘blood’ or ritual quality conveyed by the father. This analytic distinction between caste membership and lineage membership is not usually made, and yet it is vital to our analysis of the social systems in this area.

The statement that caste membership is derived from both parents may appear tautological. The idea of an endogamous caste carried the implication that the special quality resides in all members. Yet simply to speak of endogamy gives caste a false element of concreteness. In fact, the informants tend to think of caste as a ritual quality that one has received from past generations, and the degree of purity in one’s ancestry permits considerable differentiation to be made in status gradations inside the castes. The proof of individual purity in this respect is not simply a badge of caste membership: it must be demonstrated by the purity of ‘unadulterated’ pedigrees on both the maternal and the paternal side.

This way of formulating caste affiliation may allow us to construct a model for the perpetuation of status differences within given groups. We may argue first, that caste endogamy must always be associated with systems in which the person is affiliated to both parents. Second, we may note that as more emphasis is given to affiliation through one parent, ‘endogamy’ may become less important. Third, in the limiting case, where affiliation is through one parent only, status differences can be kept up by unilineal pedigrees without recourse to endogamy rules.

Consider, that if caste membership was transferred only through men, there would be no reason to refuse women from any or all castes. Similarly, if membership was transferred only by women, then women could have men of any caste, and the position of the children would not be prejudiced. In the South Indian and Ceylon groups we have been considering it is clear that caste membership depends upon both parents, and hence, even among the ‘matrilineal Nayar’ the children can only be full members of the caste if both parents are either members, or acceptable as ‘pure persons’.

Alternatively we can also argue that in those systems where the emphasis is placed upon the transfer of ritual status through only males, or only females, there is no reason to restrict the marriages within the status-bearing group. Since children can be affiliated to the status of, e.g. the father, the mother can be of any group in the hierarchy. Thus the Pathans of Swat are a case of this kind (Barth 1960). The same may be said about the Ottoman Turks, where men could have ‘legitimate’ children from women of slave or ‘odalisque’ status.

Our model then draws attention, first, to those cases in north India where it is said that children belong to the caste of the father even though the mother is of a lower caste. This is sometimes claimed for the Rajput castes and, if correct, would obviously be a
function of the role played by unilineal descent groups in that context. Second, the
model throws into relief the role of ‘patrilineal pedigrees’ in south India and Ceylon.
The perpetuation of patrilineal ‘clans’, ‘lineages’, which in certain cases do not serve
corporate functions in this area, is clearly related to the desire to claim to superior
status within the endogamous group.

I have claimed that in south India and Ceylon both parents are involved in the
placement of any individual in society. But let us examine the matter more closely.
There are celebrated cases, such as the Nayar and Nambudiri, where sex relations are
accepted across the caste lines. We must consider how intercaste connexions affect my
bilateral model of caste endogamy.

Let us look at the matter from the point of view of the low-caste. As far as they are
concerned, it matters less for the position of the children if one parent is of a higher caste
or status. As long as the children are to remain members of the low-caste, this may even
enhance their ritual status within this caste, for half their ‘blood’, so to say, comes from
purer stocks.

Thus, in general, caste-membership can be acquired through one parent if, and only
if, the other parent is of a superior caste and accepted as such. It will be seen below that
this parent through whom one acquires membership in a caste is normally the mother.

The issue is not quite so straightforward from the point of view of the high-caste. If
one of the parents is of a lower caste, then the high-caste parent will have to be excom-
municated: temporarily if the ‘taint’ is superficial, permanently if it is ineradicable. The
overall concern will be not to allow ‘polluted’ persons or ‘polluted’ children into the
caste community (Yalman 1958; 1960).

It is most remarkable that in all these communities, such intercaste copulation can
be tolerated only if it takes the form of hypergamy (i.e. superior man with an inferior
woman) and never hypogamy. The Sinhalese always used to say, ‘it does not matter
where a man goes; he may sleep with anyone, but the woman must be protected.’ Men,
in other words, can have sexual commerce with women high or low, but women’s
pleasures are curtailed.

Why are men allowed such freedom? Firstly, as Stevenson points out in his brilliant
analysis of the Hindu Pollution Concept, men are only ‘externally’ polluted by sexual
intercourse. They can have a ritual bath and they are as good as new (Stevenson 1954,
p. 57). Secondly, what Stevenson does not point out, the bond between the genitor and
the child is tenuous; it can always be denied or minimized; the children can always be
repudiated by the father. This cannot be done by the ‘mother’. In any case it would be
impossible to separate the child from her early enough without killing both of them.

These basic attitudes are brought out with special cogency by the material from
the Nayar and the Sinhalese. Among the Sinhalese, high-caste men frequently kept
women of lower castes. These were mere concubines. No affinity between the kin-groups
was established and the man would not treat his children in the way he would those of
his ‘legal’ wife in his own caste. But a high-caste woman could never keep a low-caste
man without encountering severe trouble.

The Nambudiri Brahman in Malabar are in the same position. They freely sleep
with Nayar women but cannot have legal Brahman children from them. The children
belong to the mother’s caste. But Brahman women are never allowed to sleep with
Nayar men and if caught the most severe and sadistic measures are taken against them. Moreover in both systems what the men cannot do, is to 'eat' (interdine) with their low-caste women. The women cannot cook for them, for (a) this would make them into wives, and (b) they would then pollute the men 'internally' through their stomachs. Hence, Sinhalese men always visited their low-caste women ostentatiously after meal times: it was a public gesture that they did not 'eat' with the women. Nambudiri Brahman case is even more obvious. The men, again, could not eat with their Nayar women, and, what is more, after their ritual bath could neither touch the woman nor her children (Gough 1955, p. 48).

Thus the sexuality of men receives a generous carte blanche. But it always matters what the women do: (a) They may have sexual relations with superior and 'pure' men. No harm comes to them in terms of purity. (b) They may have children from 'pure' men; or from men of their own caste.

But, if they engage in sexual relations with men lower than themselves, then they get 'internally' polluted. Moreover, they bear 'polluted' children. In such cases the woman is usually 'excommunicated' by the family. In the past, the Sinhalese used to drown both the woman and her children, for this was the most effective method to prevent the entry of 'polluted' blood into the caste or family.

These ideas which allow women to have contact with pure men, and never, on pain of severe retaliation, to enter into sexual commerce with men of lower ritual status, are very deeply rooted in Indian thought. One may recall the well-known and significant distinction between pratiloma ('against the hair' or grain-high woman, low man) and anuloma ('with the hair' or grain—high man, low woman) unions made in the Laws of Manu.

It is clear that these rules of hypergamy are directly associated with systems in which membership in the group is acquired through both parents, but where the purity of the group is protected through women, and in the limiting cases (Nayar-Nambudiri) enhanced through men. Hence, even though caste membership derives through both parents, there is a built-in asymmetry in all these systems.

In south India and Ceylon at least it makes sense to speak of matrilateral filiation. In the last resort the child belongs to the social group of the mother, unless, of course, the mother herself has been excommunicated because of her contact with low-caste men. But we should certainly not overlook the role of the father whose status may enhance the position of his offspring.

What sort of connexion is established between high-caste genitor and his low-caste offspring? It would appear that there are cases where such children may inherit from the genitor without becoming members of the high-caste.

Pieris notes this point very cogently for the Sinhalese: such 'children did not succeed to their father's caste, but were considered legitimate [sic] and entitled to inherit their father's praveni (ancestral) property, even if he should have other children by a wife of his own caste in this country' (Pieris 1956, pp. 202–3).

What about the low-caste genitor and his high-caste mistress who has been expelled from her caste? Do the children then become members of the father's caste? Is this paternal filiation? I suggest not. In many cases, the woman goes all the way down the caste-hierarchy. In Ceylon it is often said that she should be given to Rodiyas, the lowest
of Sinhalese castes. Thus an outcast woman does not directly join the community of the low paramour. Of course, once a woman is outcast, there is nothing to prevent her past low-caste paramour, or anyone else, from sleeping with her, but whether her children can claim membership in his caste is another matter. My impression, in the Sinhalese case, is that the children are in a highly ambiguous position. They cannot claim membership, but may become more closely associated with the ‘father’s’ kin group if and when affinal connexions can be progressively established with this community (Yalman 1960, passim). The children of a pure caste-woman from a higher genitor, however, can, I think, claim membership in her caste.

**THE FEMALE AND MALE PRINCIPLES**

This analysis and this way of formulating the ideology of caste throw light upon certain attitudes concerning the male and female sexuality, or, what we may, in a more abstract sense, call the female and male principles. We are now in a position to understand the overwhelming interest in the sexuality of women rather than men. It is through women (and not men) that the ‘purity’ of the caste-community is ensured and preserved. It is mainly through the women of the group (for the men may be of higher castes) that blood and purity is perpetuated. There is great preoccupation with female purity for this reason in all Hindu caste communities in south India and these remarks apply to the Tamils and the Buddhist Sinhalese of Ceylon. And, again, it is most appropriate that the ‘cow’, the supreme symbol of the Hindu mother, should also be the most potent symbol (as well as the main source) of purity. The cow is sacred. Its five ‘gifts’—the milk, the ghee, the curd, the urine, the faeces (cow-dung)—are all sacred. They are referred to as *panchagavyam* (or *panchagavya*) and are the most directly effective purifying agents (Iyer 1909, vol. I, p. 57; Hutton 1946, p. 79; Stevenson 1954, p. 50). Small doses of this substance are often taken internally to purify internal pollution (Stevenson 1954, p. 58; Gough 1955, p. 71; Iyer 1912, vol. II, p. 87 and passim). It may be recalled that the sacred ash which Hindus put on themselves is made from burnt cow dung. Thus, ‘the cow is *Kamadhenu*, the giver of all things, and hence whenever a cow is approached, it is touched with the hand which is, in token of veneration, then raised to the head’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, pp. 86–7).

The association between the cow and women (especially the mother) is, of course, freely made (Gough 1955, p. 71). Sinhalese villagers, who also hold similar opinions, would often remark that the cow is sacred because it is like the mother. It can, they would say, be substituted for the mother: it provides milk for babies left motherless. The symbolic identity between the cow and pure women is particularly evident in the marriage ritual of Tamil Brahmin in Malabar, where ‘the gift is of a virgin’ is associated with ‘the gift of a cow’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, p. 295 seq.).

But it is not only the cow which embodies the values attaching to feminine purity. It is surely most striking that the holy of holies in Indian temples, the purest place into which only the cleanest and most holy Brahman priests and the Gods may penetrate, is known as the *Garbhagriha*: this is the ‘womb’ where union with the deities may take place. And again it is this part of the Hindu temple which, just as the high-caste woman, is protected from the approach of lesser castes of polluted beings. Here only the
purest may enter, the rest must remain at varying distances from the sacred place. It is appropriate, indeed, that the cult object most often found in this holy of holies, the purest 'womb', is the lingam (phallus) of the God Siva. It rests 'on a base which, with its shallow channels, receives the oil poured over the upright and carries it away' (Zimmer 1955, p. 288).

I would suggest that this is the place where 'sacredness' or 'purity' is created by the union of the Gods (i.e., the purest male and female principles). And the Brahman priests may also partake of this 'purity'.

The union of the two procreative principles is often mentioned in the literature on Hinduism; it has a highly abstract aspect which leads in the direction of mysticism, but there is also another directly and most literally sexual aspect. This latter forms the basis of Shakti cults in which it is claimed that the Goddess, who may take many forms, is worshipped and propitiated by the devotees indulging in sexual intercourse (Carstairs 1957; Iyer 1909, vol. I, p. 315 seq.; Eliot 1921, vol. II, chapter on Shaktism). Sir Charles Eliot mentions that in some of these temples, the principal object is not the lingam in the 'germ-cell', but a yoni (vagina) of the Goddess represented as a crack in the rock wall against which the temple is built (Eliot 1921, vol. II). The actual rites he considers unmentionable.

I have suggested that the symbolism of the temples agrees with my analysis of female purity in the caste-system. But men convey ritual-quality as well. While caste purity must be protected in women and men may be allowed much greater freedom, it is, of course, better even for men not to waste the sacred quality contained in their semen. It is well known that they are exhorted not merely to avoid low-caste women, but all women (Carstairs 1956; Carstairs 1957; Gough 1956, p. 841). For the loss of semen is the loss of this potent stuff. This, again, is the metaphysical dimension of the prevalent dread of spermatorrhoea which has been the subject of a notable psychological study by Carstairs (1956). It is best never to sleep with women at all and thus accumulate rich stores of high-quality semen in the head. Such is the ideal of the Hindu sannyasi. But even if ordinary men do not achieve such high purpose, there is at least no danger of low-quality blood entering their caste (or family) by their exploits.

Such danger only exists with women. The male seed they receive should be the best available. And, indeed, the attempt to secure high-grade genitors is quite clear in many rituals. Thus Dumont (1957, pp. 225–6) draws attention to the extraordinary way in which the bridegroom is treated in marriage ceremonies. In weddings he is looked up to and worshipped as if he were of very superior standing. I suggest that the Kallar liken the bridegroom to a God or Brahman because they too desire to have superior seed to enhance their ritual status.

Such interest in pure male-semen becomes quite obvious in the pregnancy rites of the Nambudiris. In the first of these (Garbhadhanam) the husband recites the following prayers:

‘Let all-pervading Vishnu prepare her womb; let the Creator shape its forms, let Prajapathi be the impregnator [sic]; let the Creator give the embryo’ (my italics). And Iyer remarks, ‘this ceremony secures the unborn child from dangers’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, p. 199). I would say that the ‘dangers’ here are the same as the ‘dangers’ during puberty rites: the low-caste men. A similar preoccupation with getting the gods to impregnate
the wife is crystal clear in the next of these pregnancy rites described by Iyer (vol. II, p. 200); and in the third, when delivery is close, the parting of the hair takes place. The woman sits on a bull’s hide, with the hair on the outside and repeats: ‘Prajapathi generates these offspring. Let Dharar ... bestow them, harmonious, like-minded, of like origin’—after which the husband parts her hair three times with a branch containing an even number of unripe fruits, a porcupine’s quill, and some sacred grass (Iyer, vol. II, p. 200). (For a similar rite, see also p. 312.)

Hence, I would suggest that the customs whereby the groom is ceremonially saluted, treated like a god, the complex of hypergamy, the fact that non-Brahmans of Tanjore required a Brahman priest to deflower their women at their marriages (Gough 1955, p. 78), are associated with the interest of securing superior ‘blood’ on the male side, for on the female side in south India and Ceylon one’s position is invariable and fixed. The unions of Nayar women with Nambudiris are highly desirable for the same reason: they ‘purify the blood’ and raise the esteem of the woman as well as her progeny (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 302).

Having pointed out these connexions between caste-purity and the sexual purity of women, the rituals concerning female puberty also fall into perspective. The anxiety about preserving the purity of their procreative powers is real. It arises directly from a régime of castes; although its manifestations in terms of anxiety are psychological, the occasions are dealt with by institutional means.

Hence, the Sinhalese used to say, ‘the honour of men is preserved through their women.’24 The puberty ceremonies ‘safeguard the gotraya (lineage, progeny, status) of women’. Consider, furthermore, the punishment meted out if the ceremonies are not carried out. ‘The rite must be performed before puberty on pain of disgrace to the girl’s family, and, in ancient times, excommunication from the caste’ (Gough 1955, p. 57; my italics).

2. THE EXPLANATION OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE RITES

There remains the considerable difference between the South Indian and Sinhalese rites. The Sinhalese rites are put into motion by the onset of the first menstruation. Gough is concerned with rites which should take place before menstruation. It is clear, however, that in the tāli-kettu kalyanam the girl is treated as if she had menstruated (Gough 1955, pp. 59, 75, passim). It is also clear that the rite conveys the impression of ‘marriage’. Thus Gough writes about the Tiyyar: ‘To what end must a girl observe mock menstrual seclusion before she has menstruated? To what end must she go through a form of marriage ... before she is of age to marry?’ (1955, p. 59).

These differences between the Sinhalese, Tiyyar and Nayar rites are very revealing. The timing, emphasis, and elaboration of the rites appear to be directly related to the nature of the later marriage tie in the various groups. In those cases where the relationship between the woman and her spouse is made clear by her marriage, where the responsibility for her sexuality is transferred to her ‘spouse’, or where a definite relationship of alliance is established between two families, then there is less reason to hold very elaborate puberty or pre-puberty rites. This is the case among the Sinhalese. In those other cases, however, where the woman may remain in her natal household, where she
may have somewhat loose connexions with a number of men, as among the South Nayar, then an elaborate ceremony is called for to render her caste position at least ritually secure.  

Among the South Nayar therefore, the tāli rite reaches an elaboration which makes it a complete substitute marriage. Indeed the bond created by this ‘mock’ marriage was so important that in the past both the woman and her children observed death pollution for tāli tier. He was the ritual ‘impregnator’ who provided the blood for all her future offspring. Gough writes thus,

‘The tāli tier of a woman was regarded . . . as the ritual father of her children. If they knew him, the children called this appan (the Tamil word for “father”, used for the genitor by Tiyyars and Christians) as distinct from accham . . . the Malayalam word used by Nayars for the genitor and all lovers of the mother. The appan had no obligation except that, at his death, the child observed pollution. Nevertheless (my) . . . informants stressed that the appan was a child’s “real father”, as the tāli rite was a woman’s “real marriage”’ (Gough 1955, pp. 50–1).

The differences between the various Nayar and Tiyyar groups are also explicable on these lines. Neither the rites of the North Nayar, nor those of the South Tiyyar are as elaborate as those of the South Nayar. In those cases such as the Tiyyar where there will be a ‘permanent’ marriage, the rite only specifies the ‘correct’ category of the future ‘husband’. Where, as in South Nayar, there is no permanent marriage the tāli tier becomes a ritual pater and death pollution is observed for him. Moreover, the change in Southern Nayar customs, the dying-out of tāli-kettu kalyanam may also be attributed to the growing emphasis on the elementary family, based, as it must be, on the marriage bond between the spouses. And indeed this is directly suggested by the fact that a three days’ death pollution is observed for the sambandham husband now, whereas he had no such recognition previously (Gough 1955, p. 50).

**Lesser Castes of Malabar**

These conclusions regarding the association between the nature of the marriage-tie and the elaboration of the tāli rite are supported by the state of affairs in the smaller castes of Kerala as well. Consider the case of the Mukkuvans. This is a fishing caste which appears to follow ‘matrilineal descent’ in North Malabar and ‘patrilineal descent’ in South Malabar (Iyer 1912, p. 269 seq.). Among the ‘matrilineal’ Mukkuvans where inheritance and succession is in the female line, there are three forms of marriage with varying bride price: 1. Mangalam (virilocal); 2. ‘joining the house’; 3. concubinage. The last one is significant, for there are indications that the rights and obligations of the ‘man’ are very restricted. At the death of the woman only her son mourns for her.

In this community, accordingly, the tāli rite is elaborate. Indeed Iyer writes of it as ‘marriage’:

‘The marriage consists of two ceremonies, namely (1) thalikettukalyanam . . . [or] pandalkalyanam [marriage in the shed] or vettilikalyanam [betel leaf ceremony] and (2) nuptials. The performance of the former ceremony is compulsory for girls before puberty, as the negligence of it will place her and others in the family under a ban’ (1912, p. 269; my italics).
In South Malabar, in contrast, inheritance and succession is in the male line. Marriage is virilocal and ‘the bride...is formally declared to be a member of the [groom’s] family’ (Iyer 1912, p. 268). And significantly enough ‘the caste men are not very particular about the tāli-tying ceremony, and the tāli is tied...by the maternal aunt of the girl. [However,]...a girl who comes of age is under seclusion for four days’ (Iyer 1912, p. 267).

And consider the Valans who ‘follow a system which partakes of the character of succession from father to son and from maternal uncle to nephew’ (!) (Iyer 1912, p. 236). ‘The girls of the Valans are married both before and after puberty; but the thalikettukalyanam...for girls is indispensable before they come of age, as otherwise they and their parents are put out of caste’ (Iyer 1912, p. 233).

Since the tāli-rite is a substitute pre-puberty marriage, there is no reason to perform it if an actual pre-puberty marriage takes place.

‘Among Kadupattans, the girls are generally married both before and after puberty; but in cases where suitable husbands are not procurable, what is called Vēettu kettu is performed before maturity. It is only a tāli-tying by the mother. In no case is a girl allowed to remain without a tāli or marriage badge until she becomes of age. Should a case occur the fact that the girl has attained puberty is concealed; but such instances are very rare’ (Iyer 1912, p. 105).

**MIDDLE INDIA**

This situation is similar to that in Middle India. One of the few authors to deal directly with mock pre-puberty marriage, S. C. Dube, gives a detailed and important account of such ceremonies. He points out that in these castes adult marriage is the rule and child marriage rare. But the ceremony of pre-puberty marriage is of the essence. ‘Any sexual act or serious social lapse (before the ceremony)...would permanently defile (the girl). Commencement of menstruation...would expose her parents to serious social disapproval and impair her own prestige’ (Dube 1953, p. 18). She would become an abheda and suffer considerable disabilities forever. She would be ‘permanently unfit for a regular marriage’; she would be unable to participate in worship or go near brides and grooms in weddings; she would suffer ‘social stigma’ and ‘never enjoy the benefit of full and unqualified membership in the community’ (Dube, p. 19). In other words she would be outcaste as in the case of most Malabar castes if she avoided the pre-puberty rite.

It is important to note that Dube too speaks of ‘dangers’ to the sexuality of the girl; he does not, however, press his analysis further.

‘Most girls are married after puberty. But as they begin “to understand the ways of the world” long before they approach puberty, there is always some risk of their committing a sexual offence, and the menstruation of an “unmarried” girl is regarded as highly undesirable. To protect her from any such danger...recourse is taken to a token marriage’ (Dube, p. 19; my italics). In this token marriage the girl is ritually married to an arrow. In other communities the arrow is replaced by another phallic object which has been mentioned, and Dube writes, ‘among the Hindu castes a girl is invariably married to a wooden pounder used for husking paddy,’ which is also true of the Sinhalese.
Dube claims that this is no substitute for marriage. Certainly no affinity is established at this juncture, but he himself points out that it is a ‘marriage’ in a very important sense: ‘This token pre-puberty marriage is also known as “the first marriage”. Once this ceremony is performed... her offences and lapses may be treated by the tribal or caste authorities as are those of a married woman’ (Dube, p. 19; my italics).

To conclude this section, the argument may be summed up as follows: Female puberty ceremonies are related to the concern with female sexuality and caste-purity. The purity of caste must be maintained especially by the purity of its women. Rather than attributing the rites partly to ‘a general, unconscious fear of deflowering women on the part of the men of the society’ (Gough 1955, p. 70) I would emphasize the desire to maintain caste-purity and fear of women’s pollution. This is why there are in these communities, public rites associated with the appearance of female sexuality, and why in kinship structures where the material bond is weak or easily broken, there are these mock marriage-cum-menstruation ceremonies which connect the women to clean, pure, appropriate men, or, at least, to objects symbolizing the ritual purity of the male principle.

V

BRAHMAN EXCEPTIONS WHICH PROVE THE RULE. 1. THE ORTHODOXY OF PRE-PUBERTY MARRIAGE

Although we have related tālī-kettu kalyānam to the structural necessity to safeguard the women in a caste system, it is essential to draw attention to the historical and cultural perspective in which these mock pre-puberty marriages are found. It is well known that the concept of pre-puberty marriages is by no means peculiar to the Nayar but is an orthodox Hindu custom. It is part of the drastic measures which are taken particularly by the Brahman castes, who are understandably most anxious about purity, to preserve the sexual purity of their women.

According to orthodox Brahmans girls must be actually married before they reach puberty. 27 This aspect of the matter has not been taken into consideration by Gough, though it is very relevant to the analysis of tālī-kettu kalyānam. I do not suggest that the Malabar castes simply imitate the Brahmans. On the contrary my point is simply that the same anxiety about women is also present in the Brahman perhaps (being purer) in a more acute fashion. And this anxiety has its origin, I suggest, in the same structural principles at work in the Nayar. It is this common structural factor which provides the necessity to take measures to guard the women. The actual similarity of the weddings and the use of the tālī symbol are, of course, examples of a further common articulation of the two systems under the influence of the same culture.

The historical development of the custom of pre-puberty marriage has received attention from Indian scholars (Indra 1955, chap. 3; Altekar 1938, p. 58 seq.; Iyer 1912, p. 196 seq.). Altekar claims that ‘marriages at a lower age began to be advocated from about the 4th century B.C.’ (1938, p. 63). ‘Soon after 100 A.D. . . . society definitely decided in favour of pre-puberty marriages’ (1938, p. 66) and, from ‘about 200 A.D. pre-puberty marriages became the order of the day’ (1938, p. 67) at least among the Brahmans, with the exception of the Nambudiri Brahmans of Malabar (famous for their connexions with the Nayar) who are considered below.
ON THE PURITY OF WOMEN IN THE CASTES OF CEYLON AND MALABAR 49

Later, apparently, ‘Smriti writers ... began to encourage marriages much before the time of puberty’ (Altekar 1938, p. 68). The insistence was quite remarkable: a father who had failed to marry his daughter before her puberty was said to drink her menses every month (Indra 1955, p. 46). It is hardly surprising that Altekar should refer to the age of puberty as the ‘fatal’ or the ‘fateful’ line. Indian writers give two main reasons for the custom of pre-pubertal marriage and both concern the idea of purity. In the first place there is the preoccupation with death-pollution. ‘Yājnavalkya ... insists that girls should be married before the age of puberty; otherwise every month their guardians will be guilty of the destruction of an embryo’ (Altekar 1938, p. 67). Such ‘embryo-murder’ pollutes the parents and hence traditional writers showered curses upon the delinquent parents for their negligence and proclaimed all of them to be out-castes’ (Iyer 1912, p. 197). Secondly, and, for our purpose more significantly, there is the acute anxiety surrounding sexual purity.

Iyer mentions the fear of the ‘defilement’ of the women (1912, p. 196) and Altekar says that ‘an undue premium came to be placed upon absolute chastity; in order to prevent the theoretical possibility of unchastity in any bride whatsoever, (Society) decreed that marriages should always be performed before puberty. (There was anxiety) that there should be no room ... even for the possibility of any reports arising reflecting upon the character of its maidens’ (1938, p. 66; also Mrs Stevenson 1920, p. 53). Thus one could select a bride, who had not ‘even dreamt of sexual love’ (1938, p. 64). The same opinions are noted by Indra, who does suggest that such interest in chastity arises from the development of the closed caste system (1955, p. 50). And Iyer, with unconscious perspicacity, notes the importance of female purity in a system of castes:

‘The religious idea of the time, such as the importance of purity of birth, and the chastity of the mother, grandmother and the great grandmother, whose names a Brahman has to produce on the Sratha day, favoured pre-pubertal marriages’ (1912, p. 197).

And he continues: ‘These facts are not obscurely hinted at in the literature on the subject, and girls were, as at present, married before puberty in order to avoid the possibility of causing scandal later on’ (1912, p. 197).

These observations directly illuminate the nature of the tāli-tying and other puberty ceremonies. No extra tāli rites are called for if the marital position of women is made certain in their childhood. As for instance among the Tamil Brahmans of Malabar who are in the same cultural milieu as the Nayar (Iyer 1912, vol. II: chap. XII). And all this considered, it is most significant, therefore, that in India where marriage is a sacrament, it ‘was made obligatory for women and not for men’ (Altekar 1938, p. 41).28 If, however marriage is never quite certain, as among the Southern Nayar, or if marriage is postponed after girls are sexually mature, their purity must be ritually safeguarded. And this is why the Nayar rites have been referred to as ‘substitute marriages’ which indeed they are.

2. THE NAMBUDIRI BRAHMAN

The Nambudiri Brahmans of Malabar, who present one of the exceptions to the Brahmanical ideal of pre-puberty marriage, remain to be considered. They do not hold public puberty rites for their women and unlike the Nayar, who live near them, do not
go in for tāli-kettu kalyanam; neither do they favour pre-pubertal marriage. If these Brahmans, whom we may expect to be extremely vigilant in preserving caste-purity, can dispense with all these precautions for women, what happens to our arguments? Or, do they have yet another method of dealing with women? It is true that if any community could be more anxious about the purity of women than those we have already mentioned, it would be the Nambudiris, and the solution they have found for their dilemma must be considered an extreme answer to forestall all anxiety regarding the virtues of their women.

The Nambudiri Brahmans are an extremely conservative caste of priestly landlords who own a great deal of land in Malabar (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 157). Their very name carries the connotation of purity (from nambo, ‘sacred or trustworthy’, Thurston, p. 152).29 They are often referred to as Bhudevan, Gods of the Earth. In caste status, they are the most superior in Malabar, ranking even higher than the royal lineages of the Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut whose females they were allowed to deflower.30 The orthodox view of the Nambudiri is thus described in an official document of Travancore. ‘His person is holy; his directions are commands; his movements are a procession; his meal is nectar; he is the holiest of human beings; he is the representative of God on earth’ (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 160).

The purity of the Nambudiri is preserved by rules which lay down the nearest distance to which the other castes are allowed to approach these Gods on earth. These have been frequently described (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 196 seq.; Srinivas 1952; Hutton 1946).

In view of these attributes and the necessity to preserve their ritual superiority, it is not very surprising that the Nambudiri should be very preoccupied with the idea of purity (Thurston 1909, p. 184 seq.). But the lengths to which they are prepared to go may be thought somewhat excessive. Thurston, quoting from Aiyar, writes: ‘A Nambudiri only wants an excuse for bathing. . . . The fastidious sense of bath purity occasionally takes the form of a regular mania, and receives the not inept description of . . . possession by a water devil.’

Before concluding the bath the clothes are changed; the worn ones are washed and wrung out. ‘From this practice a patch of indurated skin between the thumb and the first finger of the right hand, where the cloth is held while wringing it, is commonly to be seen. Almost every Nambudiri examined in North Malabar was marked in this way’ (Thurston 1909, p. 185).

The extreme sensitivity of the Nambudiri to purity and pollution is evident in everything that has been written about them. Much of it is to be seen in the sixty-four anachoram, or irregular customs peculiar to their community (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 185 seq.). Before turning to those which apply to women, we must draw the outlines of the kinship system.

The basis of their family organization which provides the clue to their methods and attitudes regarding women, is the joint impartible estate. Recruitment to the corporate group is patrilineal (makkattayam) though when heirs in the male line are lacking, a daughter’s son may be allowed to perpetuate the line. This is the accepted rule among the Nambudiri, though in one section filiation is in the female line like the Nayar (maru makkattayam) and this section is regarded to be of lower status by the rest of the people.
The traditional pattern of the Nambudiri family appears to be particularly suited to
a community of priestly landlords; for, as we shall see, it kept the numbers small
therefore exclusive) and the estates large and undivided (therefore wealthy). The
Malabar Marriage Commission sums it up as follows:

‘To keep the family property impartible and to avoid having a large number of
members in their families, the Nambudiris, Bhudavans (Earth Gods) set up a rule that
the eldest son alone should marry in their own caste, while the junior members should
solace themselves by forming fugitive connections with the Sudra (i.e. Nayar, N.Y.)
women. The ingenious arrangement exempts the younger brothers from the responsibility
of supporting the children of their fugitive alliance, for these are looked after by . . . the
women’s families. The consequence is that, while a large number of Nambudiri juniors
satisfy themselves with their alliances with Sudra women, an equally large number of
Nambudiri women, must live and die unmarried, vigilantly guarded in the privacy of
their houses.

‘Owing to the prevalence of the latter custom, Nambudiri women enter into conjugal
relationship at a very advanced age, or die in a state of celibacy, but so tenacious are they
of observances that the corpse undergoes all the ceremonies of a marriage. Many Nam-
budiri women never get a chance of marriage, but many of them unlike their Brahman
sisters of the East Coast remained unmarried and there are many who die as virgins at an
advanced age. . . . The custom which forbids the junior members from marrying in their
own caste but encourages them in their fleeting alliances with the women of other castes,
and which dooms most of the female members of their own caste to a life-long and en-
forced celibacy, is one which justice will not hesitate to condemn’ (quoted by Iyer 1912,
pp. 198–9).

In other words, in accordance with the rule that only the eldest son marries, all
Nambudiri women are kept in a sort of ‘harem’ in the seclusion of their houses. This is
true of both married and unmarried women.

It must not be forgotten that the Nambudiris are priests, and as such do consider
the ascetic ideal to be the highest form of existence in this life. Women are distracting to
them. They are necessary only to bring a single son into existence. ‘That son alone . . . is
begotten [for the fulfilment of] the law. All the rest they consider the offspring of desire’ (Thurston 1909, p. 175). But, of course, this attitude towards Brahman women is
difficult to reconcile with their acceptance of Nayar concubines. In any case, the code
to which Nambudiri women must strictly conform is severe and remarkable.

‘Brahman women must not look at any other persons besides their own husbands.’
‘Brahman women must not go out, unless accompanied by woman servants.’
‘They should wear only white clothing.’
‘Noses should not be pierced.’
‘Brahmans should forfeit their caste, if they have intercourse with other Brahman
women besides their wives.’ (Intercourse between low caste men and Brahman women
needs hardly to be mentioned.) (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 188.)

It is notable also that Nayar women, symbolic perhaps of their relative freedom, go
about with their breasts quite naked.

‘The Nambudiri woman . . . is called Antharjanam (‘interior-being’, N.Y.) or
Akatamma, i.e., one who is inside (strictly gosha) (‘in purdah’, N.Y.) . . . at home, inside
the house. They do not cover the breast; but when going out, they cover themselves up
with a long piece of cloth, leaving only the head and feet exposed. One end of the cloth is
so held up in the hand, which holds also the marakada or the covering umbrella . . . as to
cover the face and the body. They are accompanied by a Dasi or Vishali, i.e., a Nayar maid servant, who walks in front and calls out to the wayfarers to move out of the lady’s way’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, p. 282).

The strictness of their seclusion is marked in the ceremonies of marriage (Thurston 1909, p. 196 seq.). The groom is met by Nayar women ‘dressed as Nambudiri women who being unable to come out and welcome the Bridegroom, do so by proxy’ (Thurston 1909, pp. 198–9). It is clear that in the initial phases of the ceremony two simultaneous rites take place, one for the bride which is performed in seclusion and during which the tāli is tied by her father, and one for the groom outside in the public part of the house. They are brought together with slow deliberation while the rest of the Nambudiri women of the household, well hidden behind a screen, watch ‘the scene in the hall through holes’ (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 200).

Even though the Nambudiri women are thus secluded, the slightest suspicion can have disastrous results (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 220 seq.; Iyer 1912, p. 210 seq.). The violation of chastity ‘entails the loss of caste, social status and total segregation from the family’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, pp. 210–11).

A special caste court (Smartha vicharam) which appears to deal particularly with such cases, is called. If the likelihood of her ‘guilt’ is strong, the judges ‘direct the suspected woman to be lodged separately (in a small hut) for they consider her to be impure’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, pp. 210–11). Here she must remain to be questioned, not directly, but through the intermediary of a Nayar or Dasi woman; for she is still respectable and her guilt unproven. The enquiry may go on for months, even years.

If found guilty she is severely handled. The servants at once deprive her of the cloth covering her breasts and the umbrella with which she hides her face. ‘No longer is she a chaste woman (kula-stri).’ She is thenceforward called a sadhanam (“thing”) . . . [Her] guardian bathes and performs all the funeral ceremonies for her, who from that moment is counted as dead for all social family purposes’ (Iyer 1912, vol. II, p. 213).

Here then is an extreme instance of the control over women carried to sadistic lengths. It is all the more striking since the affairs of the Nayar, who live in close propinquity to these priests, are so free from even ordinary taboos though perhaps the closeness of the Nayar provides a clue to the worries of the Brahmans. The solution of their problems is so extraordinary that it seems an act of blindness to refuse to investigate the psychological and possibly neurotic roots of this attitude to women. This indeed would prove valuable. But as a social anthropologist, the structure, however odd, should be clearly examined.

Structurally, the picture is as follows: In order to keep the priesthood small, exclusive, and wealthy, only the eldest son is married. The women are completely secluded. If and when they marry their age may be anything. Pre-puberty marriage of the orthodox Brahmans (Iyer 1912, chap. XII) or the symbolic tāli-kettu kalyanam of the Nayar and other castes which practise post-puberty marriage is unnecessary. The purpose of these pre-puberty marriages in ensuring the sexual purity of women is much more effectively served (indeed, the problem entirely eliminated) by the vigilant seclusion of all women.

Thus, in terms of the caste structure Brahman women are the purest and those most exposed to pollution. In Malabar the Tamil Brahmans and the Nambudiri Brahmans
show the two methods of dealing with the danger: the former hide all women, the latter

NAMBU迪RI MENSTRUATION

When describing the orthodox Brahman attitude, we pointed out that all who comment
on the singular custom of pre-puberty marriage were united in one respect. All claimed
that pre-puberty marriage was necessary to safeguard the purity of women, and to
secure their positions in the caste before any conceivable threat to their sexuality could
be contemplated. The Nambudiris were interesting for this reason, that they did not
have symbolic or actual marriages for many of their women. We cannot pretend that
the seclusion of women and the inordinate taboos are simply an alternative method of
dealing with the problem. Yet, whatever the reasons for treating the women as gosha
('in purdah')—and they are complex—the end-result is that in this case the symbolic
marriage is rendered unnecessary. It is consistent also that these virgins should undergo
a ceremony of marriage at death (or even that there should be such a myth) for, at
death these virgins at long last do escape from the guarding hands of the men.

Moreover, it would appear that these remarks do not only apply to tāli-kettu
kalyanam, but to other puberty ceremonies as well. The matter is not entirely certain;
Thurston and Iyer agree as follows about Nambudiris:

‘Bathing is all that women should observe if she touches another in her menses. . . . A
man should change his thread, and undergo sacred ablution. Women, during their periods,
are not required to keep aloof, as is the custom among non-Malabar Brahmans’ (Thurston

This sounds odd coming from Brahmans; we should expect quite the contrary. But we
may remark that the women already appear to be secluded: it is as if they are in a
permanent state of relative ‘pollution’ (being a danger and temptation to Brahman
men) and are permanently segregated. If so, obviously no further seclusion is called for.

3. TRIBES OUTSIDE THE CASTE SYSTEM

The central argument of this essay has been that there is a close connexion between the
anxiety concerning female sexual purity, puberty rites and pre-puberty marriage on the
one hand, and caste as a bilateral structural principle on the other. Here one would like
to know more about those tribes which can justifiably be considered outside the caste-

system. Where there is no notion of bilateral caste affiliation, and where there are no
other reasons emphasizing female sexuality, we may not expect to find puberty or pre-
puberty rites.

The material is limited, but this does seem to be so in the case of the Chenchus.
Professor von Führer-Haimendorf writes that they do not ritualize the puberty of
women. And in the case of the Veddas, Seligman’s notes provide strong support for our
arguments. They point out that the wilder Veddas live a life in the jungle almost
entirely isolated from outside influences and without caste divisions. Among these,

‘There are no puberty ceremonies for either sex, except among certain Veddas who have

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been much influenced by Tamils or Sinhalese. Thus although [a] ... ceremony is ob-
served at puberty by the Uniche Veddas, there is no doubt that it has been borrowed from
the local Sinhalese. ... Among the wilder Veddas no special measures are taken when a
woman menstruates, she is allowed to eat the ordinary food, and to sleep in the cave as
usual. But among village Veddas, and most of those who have mixed at all with the Sin-
halese, the menstruous women are strictly isolated, a little shelter being built for them a
few paces from the family hut' (Seligman 1911, p. 94).

VI

CONCLUSION: STRUCTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
EXPLANATIONS

I proceeded in this essay on the assumption that 'collective' rituals are related to col-
clective facts. I accordingly examined the association between the sacralization of female
sexuality and the structure of social groups in south India and Ceylon. Clearly, signifi-
cant conclusions could be drawn from the principles of caste and the religious ideas of
purity-pollution associated with this institution. I tried to indicate that the bilaterality
of caste, narrows and focuses attention on the purity of women. I certainly do not claim
that customs concerning female purity must always be traced to caste. There may be
many reasons why certain societies single out the purity of women for attention. But I
do claim that wherever we find the caste phenomenon, we may also expect to find
preoccupations with 'dangers' to pure women. They may not take the same form as in
south India and Ceylon, but the problem is there to be solved.

Let me also emphasize that we are not dealing with a simple 'legal' problem here.
The problem facing the various castes in south India and Ceylon is not merely how to
make certain that only 'legitimate children' (i.e. with acceptable genitors), with 'legiti-
mate' mothers, become members of a caste. If so, they could have developed legal
safeguards to caste membership: they could have insisted that all marriages be registered
with a caste-council and that only offspring of legal unions are 'members'.

But, of course, the problem is not simply 'legal'. We are writing about feelings of
danger, risk, fear about 'purity' and 'pollution'. The subject is religious: it is the concept
of the 'sacred' that is at the centre of the problem. The idea of the 'sacredness' is felt to
be at stake. And this, however much it may be 'linked' to the caste structure, social
distance between castes, etc. is a religious problem. In so far as the problem is religious
—the preservation of 'purity'—it must be handled in a religious way. In other words, it
calls for ritual. Ritual purity cannot be safeguarded by legal rules.

Where does the individual fit into this picture? How do we assess the arguments of
Gough? It seems clear that the free associations, the unconscious thought patterns of the
individual are one dimension of the facts. They may be an important dimension, but
they do not help us to understand the raison d'être of collective rituals.

Unconscious processes are clearly vital to our understanding of individual or private
rituals. They may give us insight into the emotional participation of the individuals in
the rites. They may illuminate the reasons why some Sinhalese turn to the Buddha and
others to fierce demons to deal with illness or other personal difficulties. But highly
formalized collective rituals always do reflect the structure of the collectivity.
We are sometimes told that individuals may 'project' a great deal on ritual, and that
many aspects of the ritual involve the collective aspects of these projections. But the
very fact that in public rituals the projections are collective makes them into sociological
facts, and the itinerary takes us back to the structured aspects of the society.

I do not wish to minimize the psychological implications of ritual. We have been
writing about 'fear' and 'anxiety' regarding 'purity', and it is obvious that these are
problems which psycho-analysts and psychiatrists frequently meet. Furthermore, the
exuberant symbolism of the rituals obviously makes sense in Freudian terms. It is not
for nothing that purity is so closely associated with the mother, with the cow, with milk,
with milk exuding trees, with cowdung, with white, in contrast to faeces, blood, black,
etc. But these aspects of the ritual do not answer our sociological queries.

I would suggest that the rites can be analysed from a variety of theoretical stand-
points. If we ask psychological questions we receive psychological answers. My intention
in writing this essay was to take the structural analysis a few steps further than Gough
and Dumont.34

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NOTES

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1 Also see Dumont 1957b where similarities in South Indian kinship systems are analysed.
2 Sinh: "vediyiya peminima, loku vima, mal vara vima.
4 The ordinary word for semen is kere with 'filthy' connotations; dhatu is a very 'high' word and carries
the implication of life-force. Hence, the two aspects of semen are also reflected in linguistic terms.

5 Better known as Dalada (apparently the 'giver of rain'). It is significant that after the annual celebra-
tions in the famous Temple of the Tooth (Dalada Maligawa) 'rain' is always expected.
6 'The central bulk (of the Stupa) ... is called the "egg" (anda) or the "womb" (garbha); for it contains
the "seed" (bijā), namely the relic' (Zimmer 1955, pp. 233-4).
7 Note that the opposition between 'milk' and 'pollution' is expressed simply in the difference be-
tween a single phoneme: kili (pollution), kiri (milk).
8 Also see below, p. 43.
9 The Sinhalese have usually no explanation for this frequent act. The Tamils do. (a) The coconut has
a male and a female side marked by a tuft at one end and some holes on the other. The split coconut
separates the male from the female. The act is a repetition of another male-female separation on a
grander scale (See Ankeliya, Yalman 1962a). (b) The coconut is 'split' with a knife for a 'goddess', but
'broken' for a 'god'.
In marriage rituals the couple stand on a sheet with rice sprinkled on it.

I am indebted to E. R. Leach for many suggestive discussions regarding the structure of Sinhalese puberty ceremonies. The responsibility regarding the ideas expressed here belongs to me.

In this context Gough writes 'it is difficult to find a sociological explanation of why these three persons should be regarded as comparable, i.e. capable of fulfilling the role of initiating girls into womanhood' (Gough 1955, p. 59). But see their role among the Sinhalese above.

The difference between the Sinhalese and Nayar is that the former regard hypergamy as wrong in the same way (and to the same somewhat limited extent) that they regard extra-marital sex relations as wrong. The Nayar accept it. These differences are obviously related to the diverse nature of the institution of 'marriage' in the two communities. (See below.)

The Nambudiri Brahman appear to have had a most effective system of dealing with such women. A Tiyan was granted land, rank, and privileges by the Raja of Cherakkal 'on condition of his taking under his protection all excommunicated females, if they choose to go with him'. In former times, she was left at a junction of two roads to the house of this man: if she entered by the eastern gate she became his wife, and if she went in by the northern, his sister by adoption. She could, none-the-less, be sold into slavery by the Tiyan if he so pleased (Thurston 1909, vol. V, p. 225; Iyer 1912, vol. II, p. 213).

Sinhalese villagers would often remark that one can only be sure of the mother: she is certain, "but who knows about the father? how can you be sure of that?"

In the south the interest in caste-purity transcends religious boundaries: similar attitudes (as well as castes) are found both among Christians and Muslims in Ceylon (see Ryan 1953).

It is linguistically interesting that gotraya (signifying descent, and purity and often used as pedigrees with ritual status) carries the Sanscrit meaning of 'cow-pen' (Altekar 1938, p. 87; see also Sanscrit-English Dictionary 1956).

In the ceremonies the gift of the maiden is accompanied by certain other gifts. Among these is a gift of a cow. Just as the virgin is being released by her father, the cow is addressed thus: 'Release the cow from the fetters of Varuna. . . . Dismiss the cow, that she may eat grass, and drink water . . . kill not the innocent, harmless cow who is the mother of Rudra daughter of Vasus, sister of Adityas and the source of ambrosia [sic]. . . . May she expiate my sins and his [i.e., the expiation of sin by the gift of a virgin—N.Y.]' After the cow, the virgin is given to the groom, but not before a 'yoke containing two holes at one end' is placed on the head of the bride (Iyer 1912, vol. II, pp. 298-9). This likening of the bride to the symbol of purity, the cow, is the obverse of the association of the groom with the Gods (see below).

Zimmer writes as follows: 'The principal elements in the construction of an Indian Temple are (1) the nucleus, womb [sic], or "germ cell" (garbha-grha) which is the holy of holies or chief sanctuary, where the image or object of worship is located' (1955, p. 269).

In the evolution of the universe as consciousness proceeds are coming down through spheres of subtle mind-stuff to the compact realm of visible tangible forms. In the holy of holies the devotee communicates with this divine essence . . . so that he may be temporarily absorbed into its pure bindu state. The function of the structure is to facilitate this union between the living being (jiva) and the universal spiritual ground (brahman), the latter being personified in the anthropomorphic god whose dwelling is in the temple.'

The closeness in attitude between mystical and sexual union has often been noted in the case of great European mystics. The worship of Krishna with its great intensity of devotion, the consuming, all-pervading love, is described with great understanding by Archer (1957). In Hinduism, the union with the Deity leads to release (moksha). According to Zimmer, such 'release' can be 'gained not only through the world-negating methods of asceticism (yoga), but equally through a performance of real love and its sensual enjoyment (bhoga) [which is the ideology of Shakti cults—N.Y.] . . . there is intrinsically no antagonism between yoga and bhoga.' (Zimmer 1955, p. 129). Zimmer also mentions the worship of the Goddess Ganges who is a symbol of the mother. The devotees bathe in the river to achieve union with her. She is the source of fertility and secures sukha (happiness and prosperity) as well as moksha (release) (p. 127).

Hence women and the vagina are felt to be dangerous—they make men lose their life-force (see Iyer 1912, pp. 903-4, 906; also Gough 1955, pp. 74-5).

See above for the full text.
ON THE PURITY OF WOMEN IN THE CASTES OF CEYLON AND MALABAR

25 It should be noted that ‘marriage’, ‘symbolic defloration’, are also true of Sinhalese puberty rites if one looks for the details as Gough does for the Northern Nayar and the Tiyyar. There is the prominent role of the mama (classificatory father-in-law) and the washerman and washerwoman (called ridi mama ridi nenda, see above). The girl is secluded with a rice-pounder, certainly as ‘phallic’ as an arrow (Gough 1955, pp. 62–4), her veil is lifted by her ‘father-in-law’ so, on Gough’s analysis, the Sinhalese puberty rite is a symbolic ‘marriage’ or symbolic ‘defloration’. But it obviously is nothing like a ‘marriage’ as Southern Nayar tali-marriage, and the differences are significant as well as the similarities.

26 Among Sinhalese, pre-puberty intercourse is regarded to be beastly, a moral defect. I relate this disapproval to the fact that the puberty-rite is not performed until menstruation and the young girl is particularly exposed to ritual dangers by such untimely intercourse.

27 Working on the data of the census of 1921, the Age of Consent Committee of 1929 computed that about thirty-nine per cent of the girls were married before the age of ten. . . . The passing of the Serda Act of 1929 penalized the marriage of girls before the age of fourteen, produced a reaction in the orthodox section of Hindu society (Altekar 1938, p. 74).

28 Altekar repeats, ‘the real reason for this differential treatment [is] . . . the recognition by society of the simple fact that an unmarried woman has to face greater risks in society than an unmarried man’ (1938, p. 41; also 1938, p. 39).

29 But cf. also Iyer 1912, p. 170.

30 Hamilton, writing about Malabar at the beginning of the eighteenth century says that ‘when the Zamorin marries he must not cohabit with his bride till the Nambudiri or chief priest has enjoyed her, and if he pleases, may have three nights of her company, because the first fruit of her nuptials must be a holy oblation to the god he worships . . . but the common people cannot have that compliment paid to them, but are forced to supply the priest’s place themselves’ (quoted by Thurston 1909, vol. V, pp. 210–11).

31 Iyer notes that the Nambudiri deny this statement; it is, however, reported by Thurston as well (1909, p. 197).

32 For a psycho-analytic approach to the problem of concubines in this cultural context, see Carstairs (1957).

33 Iyer writes ‘chaste-women’ but the phrase means ‘caste-women’. The terms really express the same idea: a woman is either ‘pure’ in which case she is a member of the caste, or ‘impure’ in which case she is outside the caste, no longer a ‘person’ but a ‘thing’.

34 This paper was written before I saw Gough (1959). In this latter article she gives greater emphasis to Nayar paternity and, I believe, corroborates the point of view expressed here.

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