THE PAST AS A SCARCE RESOURCE

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The assumption that the past is an infinite and plastic symbolic resource, wholly susceptible to contemporary purposes, is widespread in contemporary anthropology. It is partly rooted in Malinowski’s conception of myth as social charter and partly in Durkheim’s formulation concerning the cross-cultural relativity of fundamental categories of human thought. This article is a critique of this assumption, and suggests the existence of culturally variable sets of norms whose function is to regulate the inherent debatability of the past. Such norms, which vary substantively from culture to culture, are nevertheless from a formal point of view subject to certain universal constraints. An example from south India is the basis for this argument, which also has implications for the theoretical analysis of social change.

There exists a widespread though tacit assumption that the past is a limitless and plastic symbolic resource, infinitely susceptible to the whims of contemporary interest and the distortions of contemporary ideology. The principal thesis of this article is that this assumption is false, and that to correct it entails a new view of the cultural limits of the past as a symbolic resource.

The anthropological assumption that the past is a boundless canvas for contemporary embroidery represents the confluence of two historically distinct lines of argument. The first, inspired by Malinowski, simply derives from observation of the rhetorical invocation of the past (as ‘charter’) in contemporary social organisation, and the tacit conclusion that such charters have no inherent limits, except those of expediency. The second, inspired by Durkheim (1954), carried through by Evans-Pritchard (1940), Hallowell (1937) and Lee (1959) and most recently revived by Geertz (1966), makes a subtler and further-reaching relativist case. In this latter view, concepts of time (and indeed the perception of duration itself) are fundamental cultural variables. The joint consequence of these two arguments is to render the past a boundless resource in particular cultures, as well as infinitely variable cross-culturally. My argument is principally directed at the first view, derived from Malinowski. The second view cannot be falsified in principle, but I shall argue that there do appear to be some general constraints which limit any collective use of the past.

Cross-cultural limits
In a recent Malinowski lecture, Maurice Bloch (1977) has criticised Clifford Geertz for exaggerating the extent to which particular cultures might perceive

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duration itself in drastically different ways. The problem of whether duration is a universally recognised aspect of temporal processes is not my central concern. My concern is rather with ‘pasts’ in Malinowski’s sense of charters: collectively held, publicly expressed and ideologically charged versions of the past, which are likely to vary within the groups that form a society. Yet there is an important point of agreement between Bloch and Geertz which impinges on my argument.

Bloch concedes that Geertz is right in arguing that the Balinese have two kinds of past: a ‘ritualised’ past which denies duration, and a non-ritual, mundane past, concerned with such pragmatic activities as agriculture and politics, in which duration is universally recognised. Bloch’s quarrel with Geertz concerns only the weight to be given to these two kinds of past. The trouble with this dichotomy is that both are conceived as being beyond debate. The ritual past is entirely shared and the non-ritual past is a brute pragmatic given. There is, however, a third kind of past whose essential purpose is to debate other pasts. It generally partakes of both ritual and everyday kinds of discourse and indeed makes it possible for people to pass from one to the other. It too has a cultural form, in each society, even if duration is a universally recognised datum of socio-biological reality. Nor, like Geertz’s version of the Balinese view of time, is it wholly a culture-relative phenomenon. It comprises antagonistic pasts that are themselves subject to a shared normative framework, and in an Indian example I describe one such set of norms. That such pasts are subject to disagreement and debate, of course, hardly a novel point. As Leach (1965) has pointed out, Malinowski himself observed that even in stable and well-balanced societies, opposing factions would be likely to generate different myths, a point that was later forcefully made by Fortes (1945) and Firth (1930–31). In his own classic analysis of politics in highland Burma, Leach makes this argument with a striking series of examples of variations on myths which supported varying political interests. In his famous phrase, myth and ritual is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony. The main significance of this insight, from Leach’s point of view, was its further proof that the then reigning assumptions of integration, equilibrium and consistency in relation to small-scale societies were in drastic need of revision. My own argument, following Leach, takes for granted that discourse concerning the past between social groups is an aspect of politics, involving competition, opposition and debate. But the central question with which I am concerned is: how is such debate culturally organised? This latter question has not so far received explicit attention from anthropologists.

To treat debate concerning the past as an aspect of politics is, of course, not the same as to explain the sociology of competition and dominance in any given political context. The ethnographic portion of this article deals largely with antagonisms between organised interests in a south Indian temple, but its purpose is not to account for the sociology of factionalism in the standard sense. The argument is, rather, concerned with what Cohen and Comaroff (1976) have recently called ‘the management of meaning’. By this they mean the competitive process by which values are defined, images of transactions contrived, and interpretations of a situation successfully imposed by one party...
on others. Cohen and Comaroff make a forceful argument that analysis of those transactions that involve competition over the management of meanings should precede analysis of those substantive and intrinsic values over which the competition is apparently taking place. My own concern with the past in the politics of a south Indian temple extends Cohen and Comaroff’s insight in one important regard. Rather than taking for granted that political competition over the meaning of transactions is constrained only by its social context, I propose that there is a definable cultural framework with which such debates concerning meaning must take place. The bulk of this article is concerned with the ethnographic description of one such framework. But the prior question is: are such sets of norms (whose function is to regulate the inherent debatability of the past) entirely culture-relative or do they operate within universal constraints?

I propose that although there might be infinite substantive variation concerning such norms about the past, there is a minimal set of formal constraints on all such sets of norms. These formal constraints can be seen as four minimal dimensions concerning which all cultures must make some substantive provision.

1. Authority: this dimension involves some cultural consensus as to the kinds of source, origin or guarantor of ‘pasts’ which are required for their credibility.
2. Continuity: involves some cultural consensus as to the nature of the linkage with the source of authority which is required for the minimal credibility of a ‘past.’
3. Depth: involves cultural consensus as to the relative values of different time-depths in the mutual evaluation of ‘pasts’ in a given society.
4. Interdependence: implies the necessity of some convention about how closely any past must be interdependent with other ‘pasts’ to ensure minimal credibility.

Substantive conventions concerning each of these dimensions can, of course, vary both cross-culturally and intra-culturally. Thus, while prophetic dreams can be a source for the authority of charters in north America, they do not have this status in Hindu India. Similarly, the substantive norms concerning continuity in African cultural systems can be very different for aetiological myths (in which significant breaks in the link between past and present are permissible) and for political genealogies (where such breaks might severely impair the credibility of a charter). But the point is that no culture can manage the on-going collective debate among ‘pasts’ without some substantive provisions concerning these four dimensions. These dimensions may therefore be taken as constituting a minimal universal structure for the cultural construction of pasts. Such a structure represents only a formal set of constraints, with no necessary substantive implications. The formal constraints neither limit nor predetermine the variation of substantive norms from culture to culture, and the minimal recipe can, needless to say, be varied and expanded; the Indian case is one such variation.

Let me briefly address the problem of generalisation from this case. Treatments of the role of the past in contemporary politics have generally been made in the context of small-scale, kin-based polities, where ‘myth’ (in the
classic sense of tales of the sacred and semi-sacred) are the basic currency of such discourse. The principal differences between these contexts and the one I describe are the product of the fact that south Asia has known a literate civilisation for over two millennia, and for a good part of this period social groups have created written historical charters. In addition, of course, the modern colonial impact on south Asia was longer and culturally more intense than in most other areas. As a result, the politics of discourse concerning the past have become almost completely severed from the language of myth and ritual, in the traditional sense. Rather, they turn on linear accounts of events organised around historically dateable written texts of a variety of sorts, including colonial legal and administrative documents. But this is a difference in the mode and currency of such discourse, and not a difference in principle. There seems to be every reason to suppose that even in those societies in which the past is largely organised in terms of orally transmitted, mythic narratives, there should exist cultural norms that regulate debate concerning the past, though their substantive nature might be quite different: While it is outside the scope of this article to analyse the nature of these differences and similarities, it might be noted that this problem is another aspect of the cross-cultural and historical analysis of the consequences of literacy (Goody 1977).

The Indian case

The case of Hindu India is interesting partly because (like Islamic, Buddhist and pre-modern European societies) it combines features of small-scale societies (in matters of rank, ritual and kinship) with others that assume large-scale organisation, temporal depth, literacy and civilisational complexity. As Bloch has wittily put it, India is an excellent case of 'too much' social structure, infinite hierarchy and a superabundance of the past in the present. The construction of the past in the south Indian temple discussed below is not necessarily paradigmatic of Indian society as a whole, but it may certainly be taken as an important example.

In the particular south Indian temple which I studied, five norms serve to provide the cultural framework within which the charters of specific subgroups are constructed, defended and mutually evaluated: 1. that *textual evidence* for the authority of any charter is superior to any other kind; 2. that the evidence for a charter ought to involve the ratification of a credible *external authoritative figure* (whether sacred or secular) in the past; 3. that the charter should be based on an authoritative document that encodes (in addition to the claims of the group in question) the privileges of a maximum number of *other relevant groups*; 4. that the evidence for the charter in question should be reflected, as far as possible, *continuously* in the documented past, and 5. that the greater the *antiquity* of the referents of the charter in question, the better the case for the rights in question. It appears as well that the above five norms are indigenously conceived such that they stand in an order of decreasing power: thus the first is the least dispensable and the last, the most.

When one describes norms such as these, it is especially important to relate how they are accessible to the ethnographer. They are by no means explicit.
They are revealed, however, in conversations about temple-politics, in the actual prosecution of conflicts, and in reflections on the evolution of the management of the Temple. I have formalised them not because they are explicitly codified, but because they are shared assumptions repeatedly borne out by ethnographic experience. In the continuing conversation that is life in the Temple, they constitute one part of the grammar of discourse, reflected in many particular formulations.

The ethnohistorical basis for my argument comes from a year of fieldwork and archival research centered on the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple, in Madras City. I have elsewhere described this context in detail (Appadurai 1981). The following discussion is therefore a skeletal statement whose sole purpose is to set the stage for the rest of this essay.

The Sri Partasarati Svami Temple is by its long urban history, its Vaisnava sectarian affiliation and its Tenkali sub-sectarian control, in many respects peculiar. But its social role and cultural form are much the same as most south Indian temples since at least the Chola period (c. A.D. 1000). This shared paradigm has already been discussed elsewhere (Appadurai & Breckenridge: 1976), and can briefly be summarised as follows.

The deity is the centre of the south Indian temple. This deity is not a mere image or icon for the expression of abstract religious sentiments and principles. In its capacity to command and redistribute economic resources, and in its capacity to rank individuals and groups, by the unequal redistribution of these resources, the deity is founded on the south Indian understanding of sovereignty. The deity is a paradigmatic sovereign, and thus the south Indian temple is a polity, in which all relationships with the royal figure are privileged. All contributions to the temple, whether endowments or services, are privileged. So also the output of the deity, in whatever form, is privileged. The food he has eaten, the water in which he has bathed or has drunk, the vestments he wears, are quintessential objects of value. In the divine court of the deity, rank and status are expressed by the amount of these divine ‘leavings’ one receives, on what occasions, and in what order. Access to these divine remnants is systematically related to the services or substances one offers to the deity. Thus, endowing the deity and serving him in various capacities are also privileges constitutive of rank.

For those who constitute the following of the deity (temple-staff, worshippers, managers, donors) these sumptuary privileges are not mere denotative emblems of rank and privilege. They are seen as constitutive features of shares (panku) in the redistributive process of the temple, composed of both ritual and economic entitlements. Conflict between groups and individuals in the Temple often erupts in the form of tension surrounding these sumptuary privileges, which are referred to as ‘honours’ (mariyatam). Such conflicts are endemic for a variety of reasons: because there is no overarching bureaucratic principle of temple-control; because there is no ecclesiastical hierarchy in India that governs temples; because the State is in a delicate
position in regard to the control of temples; and because the boundaries of the Temple as an institution are poorly drawn.

Thus there is tension between groups that have an enduring corporate interest in temple-control. In the expression and resolution of these conflicts, the 'pasts' of these groups play a direct and important role. When these pasts have a high degree of mutual credibility, conflict can be muted or reduced. When this is not the case, specific contemporary battles are more likely to rise. In the latter eventuality, these charters are likely to be reformulated, refined, sometimes expanded. The current situation is one such, and in these circumstances it is especially vital to understand the politics of the past in the present. In such conflicts, the norms that govern the debate come frequently into view. I now discuss three groups that play central roles in the politics of worship today at the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple: the State, the Tenkalai Brahmins of Triplicane and the non-Brahmin worshippers.

The state

In 1973–74, when I conducted fieldwork, the Government of the State of Tamil Nadu (previously Madras State) was the dominant force in temple politics. Representatives of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Administration) Department (hereafter the HRCE Department) controlled the bureaucratic apparatus of the Temple: the supervision of temple finances, the payment of temple-servants, the logistical operation of the ritual calendar. They consisted of an Executive Officer, a Superintendent and a small clerical staff. This bureaucratic phalanx occupied a small set of offices within the Temple precincts from which they conducted operations vital to the management of the Temple.

The position of these representatives of the State was neither comfortable nor unanimously approved. The HRCE Department had come to exercise administrative and legal control over the Temple only after 1948, and in the subsequent decades they had been vigorously opposed (in Court) by local members of the Tenkalai community. This protracted legal battle ended in favour of the State in 1968, but even in 1973 there were a number of local Tenkalai Brahmins who were planning a renewed legal battle against the State. At the same time, the local representatives of the State were hardly viewed with sympathy by the priests. The then government of the State had commenced a frontal assault on the ritual and economic privileges of temple-priests, a matter that had raised delicate legal and constitutional issues of 'religious freedom.' The local priests, therefore, were openly hostile to the representatives of the State. The three State-appointed trustees of the Temple represented the broad Tenkalai constituency of the city of Madras. Although they owed their appointments to State patronage, they nevertheless resented day-to-day interference by the officials of the State in the management of the affairs of the Temple. In fact by 1973 the trusteeship, once a position of considerable prestige and power, had become a purely decorative office, devoid of possibilities for patronage-distribution, because of the tight day-to-day supervision of the State. Nevertheless, as in all segmented polities, rep-
resentatives of the State were certainly capable of marshalling support among donors, temple-servants and influential worshippers, adequate to permit them to exercise significant managerial control. But they were nonetheless recententrants into the politics of temple-control, and, as such, were obliged to present arguments (both in Court and in everyday interactions) for the legitimacy of their position. Their ‘charter’ looked in key ways to the past.

In the most abstract and inclusive terms, it is clear that the bureaucracy of the HRCE Department, at the State level, viewed itself as following the pre-British cultural mandate of Hindu rulers to afford protection (raksai) to Hindu temples. In this respect, the contemporary State clearly identified itself with the model of traditional Hindu royalty. This model, though rarely argued in terms of specific textual sources, is so diffuse and widely accepted that it allows contemporary bureaucrats to do two things at once: to claim a diffuse pre-British textual basis for their claims; and to identify their position with the dominant traditional model of external authority, that is the Hindu king. This vague, though powerful, aspect of their charter was considerably strengthened by the further claim for the continuity of this royal role. It was argued, in the course of the legislative proceedings that led to the formation of this department in 1951, that many instances in the past, under Hindu rulers, under the English East India Company and under the rule of the English Crown, provided ample justification for the interference of Government in the affairs of Hindu temples (Mudaliar 1974: 149).

But in their legal battle with the Tenkalai community of Triplicane, over the control of the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple, this general mandate was inadequate. The Tenkalai case, as we shall see shortly, was formulated largely on the basis of legal and administrative precedents from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They had to be beaten on these narrow grounds. Essentially, the State asserted its right, through the HRCE Department, to appoint trustees for this Temple, starting in 1951. Trustees had previously been elected by the Tenkalai residents of Triplicane. This electoral process, begun in the 1880’s, had finally come to be formalised in a scheme for the management of the Temple which was part of the judgement in an election suit at the High Court of Madras in 1924. This ‘scheme’ (hereafter referred to as the High Court Scheme of 1924) was the fundamental constitutional document for those members of the Tenkalai community of Triplicane who were opposed to the managerial incursions of the State.

In nullifying the provisions of the 1924 scheme, which were clearly opposed to their interests, the representatives of the HRCE Department rested on the legislative fiat of an Act passed in 1951, which simply permitted them to appoint trustees to all temples except those which had had ‘hereditary’ trustees. But the 1924 scheme had precisely opposed the electoral principle to the hereditary principle. Most importantly, it was part of the argument of the State that such legal schemes superseded any usages on which they might have been based, and were thus subject to legislative modification or veto. Essentially, however, it came to this: a later piece of statutory law (Act XX of 1951) was held to invalidate an earlier legal judgement (the one of 1924). The argument of the State in one stroke opposed a larger external authority—the
legislature—to a more limited one—the bench of judges who had passed the High Court scheme of 1924. Furthermore, they advanced the superiority of explicit legal texts to the vague antiquity of 'custom and usage', which was the cornerstone of the Tenkalai case. On the other hand, the Tenkalai case, though based on legal texts that were intrinsically modifiable, had continuity of documentation on their side after 1843. To this, the State simply responded that the Government of the East India Company had 'appointed' trustees prior to 1843.

In exercising routine control over the affairs of the Temple today, the Executive Officer and the Superintendent consistently have recourse to all of these arguments rooted in the past to justify their own share of control. Their credibility rests principally on one subtle but significant transformation of the past. Whereas the role of the State, in both pre-British and British times, had been relatively distant, intermittent and uneven, it was reformulated as a natural basis for the State's present detailed supervision of virtually all aspects of temple life. The present delicate position of the State in the Temple in part reflects their ambiguous and uneven conformity with the cultural norms in terms of which such charters are evaluated. The pre-British textual basis for the current position of the State's officers—namely, the mandate of Hindu rulers to 'protect' Hindu temples—is too abstract to encode their specific powers and actions in the Temple today. Their strong textual strength is based on recent legislation, which has given the State increasing powers over Hindu temples in Tamil Natu. But the difficulty with these legislative texts, precisely because of their State-wide applicability, is that they do not embed the privileges of the State in a set of specific privileges attached to those of other enfranchised groups in the Temple today. These texts serve to isolate the local representatives of the State, while simply giving them the credibility of the highest 'external authority', a properly elected legislative assembly. Lastly, the role of the State is highly discontinuous over time, and the antiquity of participation is insufficiently evident to compensate for this lack of continuity. The State has thus far, for numerous reasons having to do with the macro-politics of Tamil Natu, been successful in the courts of law. But its opponents in the locality of the Temple have by no means allowed this de facto victory to be transformed into genuine local legitimacy. The State's representatives have failed either to defuse or to suppress the arguments of their principal opponents, the Tenkalai Brahmin community of Triplicane, to which we shall now turn.

The Tenkalai Brahmin community of Triplicane

The Tenkalai Brahmins of Triplicane are a large and highly differentiated community, with multiple and diverse interests in the Sri Partasarathi Svami Temple, including those of regular worship, donation of endowments, participation in temple-management, and monopoly of certain ritual services in the Temple. Within this large and relatively loose-knit community, there is a smaller community of between thirty and forty families, linked by marriage ties, friendship, shared ritual expertise, enduring political alliances, and residential propinquity, since they live by and large in the residential streets that
surround the Temple. This smaller group, although itself subject to internal factionalism, does share a common identity, a common set of interests in Temple management and ritual, and thus a common ideology. By extension, this group of Tenkalai Brahmans shares a common past, which in part frames their rights and privileges against real or perceived threats from the State, from the Vatakalai community of Triplicane (members of an antagonistic sub-sect of South Indian Sri Vaisnavas), and from other interested groups, principally the Vaikhanasa priests of the Temple.

In general, these Tenkalai Brahmans are members of families that have resided in Triplicane for several generations, whose male heads are in modern white-collar professions (often lawyers), but who preserve a powerful commitment to the local religious traditions as they perceive them. As an identifiable interest group in the politics of the Temple, they are viewed with some trepidation by other groups, for they combine a fierce jealousy of their rights and privileges with a strong penchant for litigation. This penchant for litigation is strengthened and exacerbated by their many ties to members, at various levels, of the legal profession in Madras City.

The primary ritual interest of this group of Tenkalai Brahmans in the Temple is their organisational monopoly of the daily recitation of certain devotional hymns to the deity. These hymns, written by twelve saint-poets of the medieval period, have been for some centuries part of the codified ‘canon’ of Sri Vaisnava theology, as their recitation has come to be part of the fixed ritual of many Sri Vaisnava temples. In virtue of their command of this poetic and religious corpus, known as the Prabandham, and their established monopoly over its recitation in daily and calendrical ritual, this group sees itself as the repositories and guardians of the essence of Tenkalai Sri Vaisnava tradition at this Temple. Of all the groups interested in the Temple today, these Tenkalai Brahmans have the most highly developed picture of the link between their specific privileges in the present and the social history of Sri Vaisnavism in south India since the early medieval period.

Today, south Indian Hindus who see themselves as Sri Vaisnavas (followers of the twelfth-century religious leader, Ramanuja), are divided into sub-sects, known respectively as the Tenkalai (Southern school) and Vatakalai (Northern school). Although there are a number of ritual, dietary and marital distinctions in the lifestyles of these two sub-sects, the dominant antagonism between them pertains to temple-ritual and temple-management. These issues of temple-control have been matters of dispute between local members of the two sub-sects for the last two centuries, at the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple and at many other South Indian Vaisnava temples. Both indigenous historiography and my own investigations concur in placing the origins of this schism in the centuries following the death of Ramanuja (c. A.D. 1137). The contemporary Tenkalai Brahmin version of this medieval schism is the basic charter of their religious identity, even if it does not relate specifically to their control of the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple.

These Tenkalai Brahmans have a highly articulated historical view of their contemporary sectarian position. Central to their view of the development of the schism between themselves and the Vatakalai is the importance of the
Prabandham corpus. The medieval saint-poets who composed these poems, the Alvars, are today also enshrined as divine figures in the Temple. Portions of this large poetic corpus are recited both as part of the daily worship in the inner sanctum and during the processional festivals when the various deities are borne, with all their royal paraphernalia, through the neighbourhood.

Tenkalai Brahmins today view these poems as providing a kind of mystical guide to the classical religious literature of Hindu India, principally to the foundation texts of Hindu religion, the Vedas. In fact this corpus of poems is often referred to as the Tamil Vedas. For the Tamil-speaking Tenkalai Brahmins of Triplicane, the most important fact about this poetic corpus is its equality with, and complementarity to, the classical Sanskrit Vedic corpus of the North, the ultimate referent of all religious authority in Hindu India. It is also of importance that these poems were composed by a multi-caste group of poet-saints, in a vernacular language (Tamil), and in the affective mode of devotional poetry rather than in the esoteric language of Sanskrit religious texts. Tenkalai Brahmins hold that, in so far as the Alvar poet-saints are concerned, caste is an irrelevant category, for those individuals were manifestations of the divine. But, as we shall see later, these Tenkalai Brahmins do not see the Alvar poetry as necessarily a charter for the full and equal participation of non-Brahmins in temple worship.

The Tenkalai Brahmins do, however, contrast themselves with the Vatakai, at least in part because they see themselves as descendants of a sub-tradition always dedicated to the celebration and transmission of the Tamil Prabandham. But they also see another historical implication of devotion to this corpus of religious poetry. They argue that their leader, Ramanuja, institutionalised the recitation of these hymns in temple-worship. As a result, they believe, a genuinely congregational element was added to temple-worship, and non-Brahmins were thus more fully incorporated into the temple. In this view, the medieval forebears of the contemporary Tenkalai Brahmins were equally dedicated to the Prabandham corpus and to its role in temple-worship.

In this medieval phase, according to the contemporary Tenkalai view, the Vatakai Brahmins remained orientated to the Sanskrit texts of the north, to domestic (as opposed to temple) worship, and by implication were more concerned with their own salvation as Brahmins, than with their congregational identity as Sri Vaisnavas. The Tenkalai, and here is the critical argument, thus came to dominate Sri Vaisnava temples in the early medieval period not by chicanery or force, but simply due to the indifference of the Vatakai. This constitutes the broad historiographical basis of the Tenkalai Brahmin claim that they had been interested in temples long before the Vatakai. The modern (colonial and post-colonial) extension of this historiography is that in the last two centuries, members of the Vatakai sect, fanned by envy, supported by royal patronage and subsequently encouraged by British administrative and judicial mechanisms, made a sustained and 'conspiratorial' onslaught on temples previously controlled by Tenkalai with some degree of success. In short, for the Tenkalai Brahmins of contemporary Triplicane, their presumptive right to the control of Sri Vaisnava temples in general, and the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple in particular, is rooted in their
special relationship, both ancient and continuous, to a body of texts—the Tamil Prabandham—which stands on a par with the religious authority of the Vedas.

However, in recent attempts to resist Vatakali incursions into the management of the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple, and in their contemporary struggles with the State, local Tenkalai Brahmins refer to a more modern textual tradition: the dicta of British administrators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the judgements of the Anglo-Indian judicial system in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These modern texts, to which this group makes frequent and astute recourse, are seen to be mere ratifications of 'immemorial usage.' In a sense, the fact that these administrative and legal texts are specific in terms of Tenkalai control of the SriPartasarati Svami Temple, and concrete in terms of the rights they grant to various members of the Tenkalai community of Triplicane, makes them even more valuable than the more abstract medieval devotional texts. It is important to note, also, that the British preoccupation with the preservation of 'custom and usage' in native religious affairs makes these texts inherently continuous and progressively self-fulfilling, in their language if not in their effects. Thus the authority and continuity of these British legal and administrative documents, as social and political charters, tends to spiral in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Today, Tenkalai Brahmins tend to be remarkably aware, particularly when contemplating litigation, of this extended series of colonial textual resources. It is a principal source in their claims against the State and sectarian opponents. In particular, they tend to justify their claims by reference to two specific High Court judgments: the judgment and scheme of 1924 (already referred to) and a closely related case, in which the rights of a closed group of Tenkali Brahmins to recite the Prabandham poems in this Temple were elaborately codified. Taken together these two High Court judgments have high value and considerable credibility in the eyes of the rest of the community, for they place the claims of the Tenkalai Brahmins in a wider constitutional/legal framework which links the legitimacy of their claims to those of other groups. This accords with the third cultural norm that, according to my argument, defines the status and credibility of particular charters: namely, for an authoritative past utterance to have the maximum value as a charter, it must encode the maximum number of features relevant to the charters of other groups.

This interdependence of charters can occur in one of two ways. Either a specific authoritative text in the past encodes the rights of a large number of groups in the Temple, namely a Hindu royal order, a British administrative ruling or a High Court judgment. Or it can occur when a group links its claim in a general way with a broad textual tradition or corpus, to which other groups must also necessarily have recourse. In this latter sense, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin Tenkalai in Triplicane anchor their self-perceptions in the Prabandham corpus of medieval devotional poetry; both Vatakali and Tenkalai revere the writings of Ramanuja as authoritative; both Tenkalai Brahmins as well as Vaikhanasa temple-priests, as well as virtually every organised interest group in the Temple today, have a vested interest in High Court judgments as valid charters of their rights—largely a product of the highly generative period between 1880 and 1925, when the Temple was almost
continuously in Court for one or another reason, and native litigants learned to conceive their claims in Anglo-Indian legal terminology.

The strength of the Tenkalai Brahmins in the Temple today, and the awe in which they are held by most other groups in the Temple, is not simply a function of caste superiority, legal skills, or ferocity in conflict. It is as much a function of the kind of past that they can credibly marshal in defence of their collective interests, a past that fulfils admirably all the five cultural norms that determine the differential credibility of such charters: textual evidence, external authority, interdependence with other pasts, continuity and antiquity.

Non-Brahmin worshippers

The non-Brahmin community interested in the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple, like its Brahmin counterpart, is large, spatially spread over Madras City, and socially highly segmented. It includes wealthy non-Brahmin donors to the Temple, powerful and politically well-connected non-Brahmin trustees, as well as a large body of poor and relatively disenfranchised non-Brahmin worshippers, resident in and around Triplicane. It is this last set of non-Brahmins, who have been explicitly concerned with their rights qua non-Brahmins, with which I am here concerned. This group provides the mass of worshippers (sevartikal) during daily and calendrical festivals.

Starting in the 1940's, and continuing up to the present, a loosely organised group of these non-Brahmin worshippers (consisting largely of lower middle-class Telugu migrants to Madras City) has conducted a vigorous campaign against what they perceive as discrimination against them in key public aspects of temple-ritual. In the process, they have antagonised numerous other groups in the Temple, but, most importantly, they have provoked the hostility of the Tenkalai Brahmins who monopolise the recitation of the Prabandham hymns in daily ritual. Further, these non-Brahmin protests in the early 1960's provided yet another pretext for the extension of State control over the temple, in the role of mediator.

In the last three decades, the protests of non-Brahmin worshippers to the temple-trustees and to the State, have focused on a series of practices having to do with the distribution of the sacred leavings of the deity (honours) to the congregation, at fixed moments during the daily ritual outside the sanctum. In these critical public aspects of the redistributive process, these non-Brahmins felt that they were systematically discriminated against and publicly dis-honoured. It is important to understand these complaints in their specific cultural context, for they suggest how powerful specific transactions with the deity can be, even when they are not explicitly linked to property, office or emoluments.

Just as shares in the divine leavings demarcate special rights and roles in the context of worship, so also they can serve to symbolise the unity, identity and essential equality of the entire congregation. It is this latter aspect of the daily distribution that these non-Brahmin worshippers felt was being deliberately subverted. They complained of three specific malpractices: 1) while the tirttam (holy water) was given to the assembled Brahmins in one vessel, it was then
deliberately withdrawn and this part of the divine leavings distributed to the non-Brahmin members of the congregation in another vessel; 2) while the entire congregation was obliged to remain standing while the Brahmins received the holy water and the Sri Satakopan (the metal representation of the feet of Visnu), the latter immediately sat down to receive the prasatam (sacred food), while the non-Brahmins were still standing to receive the holy water; 3) the non-Brahmins rarely received the Sri Satakopan honour at all, and certainly not, in the words of one non-Brahmin informant, ‘immediately after and in continuation with the Brahmin devotees’.

My own observations of daily ritual at the Temple in 1973–74, after this issue had allegedly been resolved, suggest that these complaints were neither incredible nor esoteric. The atmosphere of the daily redistributive ceremonial is one of considerable frenzy and crowding, on the surface. Closer observation (difficult in a crowd of two or three hundred people) suggests that perhaps the priests grow increasingly disrespectful when the ‘honours’ in question are distributed to the non-Brahmins. Whereas Brahmins stand close to the sanctum and are scrupulously served, non-Brahmins who form a crowded outer circle certainly do not merit the same care. For the mass of non-Brahmin devotees, who hold no office and subsidise few rituals as donors, the daily receipt of these divine leavings is the sole transaction that they publicly conduct with the deity. To them, it is both the symbol and substance of their participation in this divine polity. Crowded, impersonal and hurried as their contact with the deity might be, the manner of the transactions (about which they complain) is inextricably linked with their meaning. The deprivation they feel in this public ritual arena is, to the non-Brahmin worshippers, a sign of their dishonour and indeed their disenfranchisement from the redistributive domain of the deity. This is an unseemly intrusion, they claim, of the worst features of the caste system into the putatively egalitarian world of a Tenkalai Sri Vaisnava Temple. There is one kind of discrimination, however, which they do not challenge. They have no quarrel with the special privileges shown to the fixed number of Brahmin males (the attiyappaka) who legally monopolise the recitation of the Prabandham in daily ritual. It is the extension of this priority to any and all Brahmins (male and female, Tenkalai and Vatakalai, Vaisnava and Non-Vaisnava) to which they take exception. In their arguments, it is this latter extension which is discriminatory, and which they see as both ‘contrary to the law in force and to Sri Vaisnava tradition’. This kind of assertion pithily summarises their view of the inequities of the present, in relation to their conception of the past, a matter to which I shall now turn. The following account of the way in which this group of non-Brahmin worshippers uses the past to argue about the legitimacy of their present complaints is based partly on petitions and pamphlets produced by them, in the last three decades, and partly on a series of interviews with one of the leaders of this group, who spearheaded its activities in the 1960’s.

To some extent the non-Brahmin view of ‘the Sri Vaisnava tradition’ uses precisely the same arguments against their Brahmin co-sharers in this Temple that the Tenkalai Brahmins rally in support of their superiority to the Vatakalai sub-sect. In the first place, these non-Brahmins place considerable weight on
the sacredness of the Alvar poet-saints (several of whom were non-Brahmins) as a charter for their own importance in contemporary temple-ritual. But further, and here they diverge from most Brahmin interpretations, they cite specific verses from this devotional corpus of texts to argue the irrelevance of caste discriminations in the context of the worship of Visnu. These verses, they believe, emphasise the equality and identity of all worshippers, regardless of caste, in the presence of the deity.

It is this aspect of the non-Brahmin version of the Sri Vaisnava Tradition which is the most embarrassing for their Brahmin antagonists, for, as we have seen, the egalitarian, populist, and congregational aspects of the life and writings of the Alvars are also fundamental to the ideology of Tenkalai Brahmins in their struggles with Vatakai Brahmins. On the other hand, these texts are necessarily formulaic and universalistic in their language and do not bear directly on specific matters of rank and order in particular ritual contexts.

To achieve this specificity, these non-Brahmins rely on what is referred to as Ramanuja’s Code (Ramanuja Divyajna). This code, which they treat as if it were a text, is in fact believed by Sri Vaisnavas to be enshrined in the arrangements that Ramanuja made for temple-worship at the great Sri Vaisnava temple at Srirangam. They argue that this ‘code’ has historically been adhered to at all Sri Vaisnava temples, by loyal followers of Ramanuja, to the present day. In their view, the ‘custom’ at the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple is a ‘recent’ and illegitimate deviation from this widely accepted tradition enshrined in the Code of Ramanuja. While the non-Brahmins can invoke the unquestioned authority of Ramanuja, the shared tradition of all Sri Vaisnava temples, and the pseudo-textual Code of Ramanuja (all of which have wide credibility), these do not bear directly on their own protests. But certainly as elements of a charter that embed their own claims deeply in historic entities dear to the self-perception of other groups in the Temple, these are a strong foundation for their contemporary protests. The non-Brahmins loosely gloss all these components of their view of tradition as ‘the Vedas and the Shastras’, the highest symbols of Hindu textual authority.

They also refer, as best they can, to aspects of the recent legal and administrative context in support of their claims. One of their petitions refers to a High Court judgment of 1935, involving another temple, in which the judge established that the term ‘Sri Vaisnava’ was a comprehensive category, including all those who were born into the creed and observed its tenets, regardless of caste. They cite this judgment, drawn from another context, but carrying the authority of the Anglo-Indian law, in support of the justice of their claims. Much more powerful and to the point, they repeatedly cite the following provision of the Madras HRCE Act of 1959:

Notwithstanding anything in this Act or in any text, rule or interpretation of Hindu law, or any custom or usage as part of that Law or in any other Law or in any decree of Court, there shall be no discrimination in the distribution of any Pradadam or Theertham in any religious institution on grounds only of caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

There is little doubt that this legal provision provided fresh fuel to the long-standing non-Brahmin malaise, and it certainly was the strongest textual
charter for their claims. In general, however, the non-Brahmins had to argue the validity of general textual injunctions (whether ancient religious ones or recent legal ones) against the counter-arguments of local Tenkalai Brahmins. These counter-arguments, while denying some of the more shocking non-Brahmin accusations, in general defended current practice as having the validity of local usage (mamul). Under the influence of British administration and law, a great many issues were resolved by reference to what was perceived to be ‘customary.’ Thus Indian litigants rapidly learned to make even the most outrageous and innovative proposals in the language of ‘custom and usage’. The non-Brahmins recognised the double-edged nature of resorting to tradition in order to make their case. The following paragraph is taken from a letter written by one of the leaders of the non-Brahmin protestors in 1948 to the President of the Hindu Religious Endowments Board:

...The procedure mentioned in the foregoing paras and in vogue in this temple is improper and unjust and unbearably humiliating to the majority of the congregation; but this is resorted to by the cultured temple authorities sheerly under the pretext of ‘Mamul’. Mamul is of our own making to serve our interests. If a mamul serves its purpose it is allowed to live; otherwise it is put to death. Many a mamul died and now would-be mamuls have made their appearance. The recent installation of electric lights will become a mamul in course of time. In these circumstances the cruel mamul in question deserves to be rooted out without further loss of time.

Eventually, in 1967, the HRCE Department, in its quasi-judicial capacity, passed an administrative order banning the specific acts of discrimination complained about, while carefully protecting the specific rights of male Brahmin Prabandham reciters. In 1973, however, the feeling was widespread among the non-Brahmin worshippers that this was only a ‘paper’ victory, and that much had to be done before their notion of ‘tradition’ was restored at the Temple. To the extent that these non-Brahmins did receive a serious hearing and serious counter-arguments, this was because of their astute reliance on shared textual or pseudo-textual elements of the Sri Vaisnava tradition and a few recent administrative and legal dicta. But to the extent that they could not link these broadly authoritative texts to their specific grievances, they laid themselves open to a counter-argument based upon the moral force of local ‘custom and usage’.

The shared past
Naturally these three versions of the past, held by three distinct and important groups at the Sri Partasarati Svami Temple, do not exhaust the ‘pasts’ of the community as a whole. Limitations of space have prevented me from dealing with the special and fascinating case of the priests at the Temple, who constitute a distinct interest group in the politics of the Temple, and whose current isolation from power is closely linked to the peculiar and separate sources from which they derive their own textual mandate. They do, however, constitute the three most highly detailed, explicitly held and publicly discussed charters of the past in the Temple. Particular worshippers, donors, trustees and temple-servants, depending on the context, are likely to propose simpler, more
specific, more shallow and less inclusive versions of the past. Thus, a particular person vying for the office of trustee might promote his candidacy in terms of his own experience in temple-affairs, the donations he or his family have made to the Temple, or some specific misdeeds of his opponents in the past. Worshippers often complain about particular aspects of the current management of the Temple, in terms of vague, casually formulated models of ‘the way it was.’ A Temple-servant, about to get dismissed by the trustee, might cite his long record of dedicated service, the conditions and terms under which he was hired, past precedents for the dismissal of temple-servants, and so on. The temple-priests, in quarrels amongst themselves, tend to speak in very shallow historical terms, restricting their references to the past to those events most relevant to the very specific issue at hand. A particular donor, in contesting the way that temple-servants conduct the festival he sponsors, would generally recite the history of his endowment, recent litigation involving it, the facts of the case, and little else. Such examples could be multiplied, and they, taken together, form the bulk of the occasions in which the past is a conscious element of contemporary interactions. When, however, the conflict is more serious, and the stakes higher, those in conflict are likely to draw from one or other, or some combination, of the three ‘paradigmatic’ pasts that I have discussed.

Since these ‘pasts’ stand, by and large, in a segmented relationship to one another, does this imply that there is no generalised view of the past that is shared among those who have regular interests in the Temple, either as managers, servants, worshippers or donors? There is such a shared past, although it is largely composed of elements already contained in the divergent ‘pasts’ of particular groups.

Most individuals who have any on-going interests in this Temple share three sets of ideas concerning its past. The first is a belief in the mythic origins of the temple, described in a specific sthala-purana (local history), which is a genre of historical literature always found in sacred places. This work, following a set format, describes in a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil, a series of divine dialogues that pertain to the sacred origins of this Temple and the deity enshrined in it. Few persons know much of what is in this text, but most know some legend or story contained in it. Secondly, most of my informants knew that the earliest stone inscription in the Temple is dated to the eighth century A.D. and take pride in the fact that this makes it the oldest shrine in Madras city. There is also widespread knowledge of the links between this Temple and the devotional history of south Indian Sri Vaisnavism. Lastly, many individuals know the broad outlines of the administrative and political history of the Temple in the colonial period.

The past that is shared, however, always stands in a delicate relationship to the ‘pasts’ that are held dear by distinct groups today. The proposition uttered by many persons around the Temple, in many contexts, ‘this has been a Tenkalai Temple from time immemorial’, is an important component of the shared past of the Temple. Yet it means different things to different groups. To the representatives of the State, it means that in ritual terms the procedures followed in this Temple must conform to the tenets of the Tenkalai faith. To
Tenkalai Brahmans, it additionally encodes the legal right of the Tenkalai community of Triplicane to exclusively manage the Temple, without any State interference. To the non-Brahmin worshippers, it means that this Temple has always been controlled by a sect that has been especially responsive to their full participation in temple-worship, until recently. To the priests, one may further note, it simply defines an unalterable and received feature of the landscape, to be stoically endured but not especially to be encouraged or embroidered. Each group is aware of the construction that the others place upon this proposition, but simply emphasises its own preferred interpretation. It is precisely this self-consciously varied interpretation of core propositions that best characterises the political culture of the Temple.

In the south Indian temple, the past is an extremely important component of debate and division in the present. But it does not seem infinitely susceptible to contemporary invention. Indeed, there appear to be a set of norms, pertaining to authority, continuity and interdependence, which govern the terms of the debate concerning the past. These norms serve to provide a formal framework within which ‘charters’ are mutually evaluated and interpreted as part of political action in the present. Further, these norms permit a controlled accommodation of the structurally ‘new’ features of colonial rule with the core concepts of the cultural system of the temple. Such norms, therefore, have a dual function: on the one hand, they provide a set of rules within which the past may be debated; and, on the other, they provide an idiom for mediating the effects of structural change on cultural continuity. This latter point has some general implications.

Bloch has made an elegant and complex argument about the theoretical problem of the past and its consequences for the analysis of social change. He argues that neither structural-functionalist nor Marxist approaches can account adequately for social change, because the former approach sees ‘the social process in terms used by the actors and so is unable to explain how it is that actors can change those terms’, whereas the neo-marxian analysts ‘see the mechanisms as occurring in terms totally alien to the actors and so are unable to explain how these mechanisms can be transformed into meaningful action’ (1977: 278). Bloch sees the common root of these problems in a belief, derived from Durkheim, in the social determination of concepts, which leaves the actors ‘with no language to talk about their society and so change it, since they can only talk within it’ (1977: 281). His solution to this impasse is to propose that there exist in all human societies two kinds of cognition. One is universal in nature, with duration as its basis, and is oriented to pragmatic and everyday contexts, such as agriculture. The other is culture-relative, with variable (often non-durational) perceptions of time underlying it, is expressed in ritual and ritualised communication, and is what has generally been objectified as ‘social structure’. Bloch argues that social change can occur, because the pragmatic past can be a source of concepts for challenging the ritualised, often static past, that generally dominates the present.
The single defect of this imaginative solution to the problem of accounting for social change is that its mechanism remains fuzzy. We are not quite clear about how these two systems of cognition, these two forms of communication, these two notions of time, can come into meaningful interaction. My own argument has been that there is a third aspect of the past, which is culture-specific, and which consists of a set of norms whose sole purpose is to regulate the inherent debatability of the past in the present. Such a normative organisation of discourse concerning the past, I propose, is the ghost in Bloch’s otherwise elegant machine.

This normative framework permits an orderly symbolic negotiation between ‘ritual’ pasts and the contingencies of the present. The terms of this negotiation are, of course, culturally variable. The Indian example shows the ‘facts’ of colonial rule being accommodated to traditional concepts precisely through the set of norms which governs debate concerning the past. Elsewhere (Appadurai 1981) I have shown how this negotiation actually leads to structural change, and not only to revised terms of discourse.

Like all systems of norms, those concerning the past constitute a link between cultural concepts and social action. But unlike any other set of norms, this set is, necessarily, a code for societies to talk about themselves, and not only within themselves. This is so because the past is an intrinsically alternative mode of discourse to those other cultural modes of communication which can, and often do, assume an eternal present. Such norms, therefore, constitute an aspect of culture in which concessions to change are built in, and division and debate are recognised. As a result, such norms permit new forms of action, at the same time as they allow cultures to regulate social change.

Without this sort of normative framework for debating the past, we would be left with only two options, cultures that collapse in the face of social change, and those that are radically revitalised in response to such change. But much culture change is neither reluctant nor radical. It is this kind of undramatic accommodation that we can better understand if we grasp that the past is a rule-governed, therefore finite, cultural resource. As with other kinds of cultural rules, anything is possible but only some things are permissible. It may be possible for cultures to mask the bio-physical reality of duration but it is infinitely harder for them to deny the inherent debatability of the past. To the extent that such denial is successful, as Lévi-Strauss has observed, culture takes on the character of custom (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 236). To the extent that it fails, culture is open to revision, revitalisation or subversion. It is the function of norms governing the unavoidable debates about the past to ensure that when change does occur, it is not entirely at the cost of cultural continuity.

NOTES

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