Nayars: Tradition and Change in Marriage and Family

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Anthropologists and sociologists have often remarked on the unique features of marriage and family during the nineteenth century among the Nayars, a caste group who inhabit what is now the state of Kerala in southwestern India. Social scientists describe the Nayars of old as an “exception” to general definitions of marriage and family because sex was separated from economic relations in marriage. Among certain regional Nayar communities, a woman did not have a “regular” husband and a man usually did not help much to support his wife and children. In recent times, however, many changes have taken place that have blurred and even overturned those distinctive features of former domestic life.

In this reading, the Nayars as a group are described in historical, geographic, and cultural terms. The traditional and current forms of Nayar marriage, family, and household arrangements are discussed in detail so that changes that have taken place can be identified. Most of these changes occurred in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in a final section I discuss the factors that brought change about. I begin, however, with a personal note.

I am a Nayar, but I was born and brought up in Malaysia where my parents had migrated to before the Second World War. Other than the language we spoke at home (Malayalam, the language of Kerala) my childhood and family life in multi-ethnic Malaysia carried no trace of anything systematically different from that of other immigrant families from India (mainly from the states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh). On a visit to India as a ten-year-old, it appeared to me that my mother and I were spending more time at her family taravad (ancestral home based on descent group), which was described to me as “my home.” I preferred my father’s place where there were more children of my age but I remember suggestions from my mother’s family that I did not “really belong” to my father’s family. I thus recall wondering why my two brothers and I were encouraged to identify more with my mother’s family and my maternal uncles. At the time, I thought this was because there were more members of my mother’s family among those who had migrated to Malaysia.

My first perception of the uniqueness of my heritage came as a college student in other parts of India in the 1970s. Visiting Kerala for extended periods of vacation time, reading a series about the various communities of India (including the Nayars) carried by a leading magazine, The Illustrated Weekly of India, and discussing similarities and differences among various states and groups of India with students of anthropology (I was a criminology major)
formed my first exposure to the exceptional traditions of the Nayar. What I learned awoke a degree of curiosity that led me to read as much as possible about the Nayar, and to discuss these matters with other Nayar. This interest was sustained and enhanced after coming to the United States. My wife and I discovered we could attract the respectful and fascinated attention of any anthropologist around by merely stating that we were Nayar. However, as a criminologist/sociologist my own background has not been particularly relevant even in semi-autobiographical writing and this is the first time I have explored it professionally. Thus I hope that the combination of familiarity and distance (in both personal and professional senses) that I bring to these issues will help illuminate this fascinating topic.

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**KERALA AND THE Nayar**

Evans-Pritchard declares, “The people of Kerala in South Western India are amongst the most fascinating ethnic groups of the world. Their traditional claim to anthropological eminence rested on the once flourishing institution of matriliny among the Nayar and a special ritual bond of caste between the Nambudiri Brahmins and the martial Nayars.” Evans-Pritchard declares, “The people of Kerala in South Western India are amongst the most fascinating ethnic groups of the world. Their traditional claim to anthropological eminence rested on the once flourishing institution of matriliny among the Nayar and a special ritual bond of caste between the Nambudiri Brahmins and the martial Nayars.” The Indian state of Kerala where these groups have traditionally lived has a history and culture that “is one of the major streams that have enriched the composite culture of the country.”

Kerala is a state that was created in 1956 on the basis of a common language among its inhabitants following the linguistic reorganization of states in India. It immediately gained prominence when in 1957 the local Communist Party was elected to form the state government, the first time that this had happened anywhere in the non-Communist world. Besides for its scenic beauty, in recent times Kerala has attracted attention because of its performance on various indicators of “development.” Remarkably, for a state with significant levels of poverty and unemployment, it has achieved high rates of life expectancy and literacy combined with low rates of birth and infant mortality.

Geographically, Kerala consists of “a long fish-shaped land squeezed between” the thickly forested Western Ghats on the east and a 360-mile coastline on the Arabian Sea on the west. The result-
ing geographic isolation from the rest of the Indian sub-continent and extensive contact with other countries across the seas have facilitated the growth of a distinctive culture. For example, at various times, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have all found a home in Kerala; and trade with Greek, Roman, and Arab states has been historically documented.

Kerala’s geography also provided a religio-mythical rationale for the ritual bond between Nayars and Nambudiris that Evans-Pritchard commented on. Jeffrey describes the creation of Kerala according to Brahminical tradition as resulting from:

…the banishment from India of the god Parasurama. Having nowhere to live, he won the permission of Varuna, the god of the sea, to reclaim all the land within a throw of his axe. Parasurama threw his axe from Cape Comorin to Gokarnam, the sea receded and Kerala was formed. To populate the new area, Parasurama introduced a special race of Brahmins, the Nambudiris, and gave them ownership of all the land and unique customs which prevented their return to the India on the other side of the Western Ghats. Next, he brought Sudras—the Nayars—to act as servants and bodyguards of the Nambudiris. He bestowed on the Nayars the marumakkat-tayam or matrilineal system of family and inheritance, and decreed that Nayars should have no formal marriage and that their women should always be available to satisfy the desires of the Nambudiris.

Jeffrey considers this legend to be an attempt to justify the most important features of the seventeenth century social structure of certain areas of Kerala. Namboodiripad however, dismisses it as “obviously invented” by those who benefited from it. This legend illustrates the point that unlike the caste stratification system (based on birth/occupation) of the rest of India the traditional configuration in Kerala had different connotations and consequences. Traditionally, Hindu society has been divided into four major categories. The Brahmins were priests and pursued religious learning; the Kshatriyas were soldiers and kings; the Vaisyas were traders, and the Sudras performed various occupations of service to the castes above them. In Kerala, the Nayars, although Sudras, also carried out the functions of Vaisyas and Kshatriyas.

Before I describe the place of the Nayars in the traditional caste structure of Kerala, one further characteristic of various regions of Kerala needs to be pointed out. In the scholarly literature and
based on traditional descriptions, Kerala has been divided into three major geographic/cultural areas: North Kerala, Central Kerala, and South Kerala.\textsuperscript{15} Nayar marriage, family and kinship patterns have varied roughly along these regional lines. Politically, during the period of British domination of India, most of North Kerala was directly controlled by the British government in Madras, while Central and South Kerala operated as kingdoms that were (nominally independent) British protectorates.

The traditional Hindu caste system of Kerala, which Puthenkulam refers to as “the citadel of caste rigidity and orthodoxy,” came into being around the tenth century and is extremely complicated.\textsuperscript{16} Woodcock comments, “There were no less than five hundred castes and sub-castes, divided from each other by rigorous rules against inter-marriage and by an extraordinary pattern of pollution taboos.”\textsuperscript{17} He goes on to identify the nine principal categories, in descending order, in the caste hierarchy as follows:\textsuperscript{18}

1. Brahmins, the priestly caste (originally only Nambudiris, but by extension Brahmins who migrated from neighboring states);
2. Kshatriyas, the rulers (mainly members of a few kingly families of the smaller kingdoms from which Kerala was formed);
3. Ambalavasis, the temple attendants and musicians (believed to be a pre-Brahmin priesthood);
4. Samantans, the local chieftains;
5. Nayars, the traditional warriors and feudal landholders;
6. Kammalans, the artisans and craftsmen (believed to have migrated from the Tamil areas east of the Ghats);
7. Ezhavas, originally those who tapped toddy from palm trees, but subsequently agrarian tenants;
8. Mukkuvans, the fisherman castes; and
9. the “outcastes,” such as astrologers, washermen, and agricultural laborers (who toiled under conditions of servitude for the Nayars).

The historical and contemporary significance of Nayars in Kerala can be understood when we consider the following. The Nayars were “simultaneously the backbone of the military system,
stratum of the cultivating population and did service to the Brahmin and ruling families.” The nominal Kshatriyas and the Samantans identified above are also thought to have originally been Nayars. The Nayars dominated Kerala earlier through force as “a class of professional warriors who developed to a high level the art of swordsmanship, who formed themselves at time of battle into suicide squads” in the service of various kings and local chieftains. More recently, their importance is based on ownership of land and distribution all across Kerala. Historically, the Nambudiri Brahmins were “never more than a thin insecure top crust on society.”

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TRADITIONAL NAYAR MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND KINSHIP PATTERNS

Rules of descent connect individuals with particular sets of kin because of a presumed common ancestry. Traditionally, Nayars with minor exceptions were matrilineal (marumakkatayam or, literally descent traced through sister’s children). This meant that in terms of succession the females carried the family name and their children also had claims to family property. In contrast the Nambudiri Brahmins were patrilineal (makkatayam or, literally descent traced through own children); males carried the family name and their children were the ones who had claims to the family property.

Among the Nayars, two patterns of marriage and family life have been identified. In Central Kerala and the upper region of South Kerala, the first and (to social scientists) more well-known pattern was practiced. Here, every Nayar girl before puberty underwent a talikettu-kalyanam (literally, tali-tying ceremony) as part of an elaborate celebration, which Fuller indicates died out in the 1920s. Following a short period of seclusion (supposedly indicating menstruation) a tali (a small leaf-shaped locket worn on a string or gold chain) was tied around the girl’s neck by an “adult male who is a member of a superior caste, an unrelated member of the same caste, a cross-cousin, an aunt or the shaman of a local goddess.” Among Hindus in other parts of India the
tali indicated that a woman was married. This ceremony was followed by the girl and the man who tied the tali spending a short time (hours or days) together after which they separated. There were no sexual connotations to this event. A lively debate exists in the anthropological literature as to what the talikettu-kalyanam meant. Recent views appear to be that it should be considered an elaborate prepuberty rite of passage rather than (as previously thought) a form of sham marriage and divorce (between the girl and the man who tied the tali) or a full-dress marriage rehearsal.

Some time following the talikettu-kalyanam, when the female in question had attained maturity, she became eligible to form more or less permanent sexual relationships with other men each known as sambandham (literally, alliance). Puthenkulam defines it as “the socially recognized alliance constituting matrimony among matrilineals.” The sambandham was initiated without elaborate associated ritual. A proposal from either the parents or friends of either sambandham partner was followed by consultations with the karanavan (the eldest male who usually was the head) of each ancestral home (taravad). Males eligible to be considered had to be of equivalent or higher caste status. On an auspicious day, the man went in procession to the woman’s house followed by a brief ceremony with minimal religious connotations. The couple then spent the night together and the man left for his taravad in the morning. A gift of clothes for the woman was sent by the man’s family if this was not a part of the ceremony. A woman could consent to receive several men as sambandham partners with the approval of the head of her taravad although it is highly unlikely a separate ceremony was held each time. The various partners took turns visiting the Nayar woman at night. At the same time, men in that woman’s taravad would be visiting their own sambandham partners. The men were also permitted to have more than one sambandham partner but the children of such unions belonged in the mother’s taravad. The man and woman in a sambandham partnership did not live together and the man did not have any say in the upbringing of his biological children.

Ceremonial gifts such as clothes, betel-nut as well as hair and bath oil were given by the man to his sambandham partner during important festivals. The only other obligation of the man to his sambandham partner was to acknowledge paternity of his children.
and to assume a minimal portion of the expenses of the midwife during the delivery. The relationship could be broken off at any time by either partner without any formality.

In attempting to account for this rather unique form of marriage, anthropologists have observed that there is symmetry between the Nayar matrilineal and Nambudiri Brahmin patrilineal systems. In most Nambudiri illams (the equivalent of the Nayar taravads), only the oldest son was allowed to marry (sometimes, and particularly if no male heir was born, he could marry more than one wife) and inherit property so that ancestral land and wealth would not be sub-divided away. Thus, younger Nambudiri men were allowed to form sambandhams with Nayar women who were lower in caste status. At the same time, given the matrilineality of the Nayars, these Nambudiri men had no responsibility towards their biological children or their Nayar sambandham partners. The Nayar taravad in question gained some status in being associated with Brahmins (and by extension, Kshatriya upper castes) although the Nambudiri Brahmin community considered the relationship nothing more than concubinage. This explanation comes close to suggesting that matrilineality was a system imposed on the Nayars by the Nambudiris for the latter’s convenience. However, as the Nambudiris were historically a small minority, their ability to impose cultural patterns would have been limited. Further, such an imposition if true could have affected only a small proportion of Nayar families whose female members would be needed as sexual partners.

Fuller suggests that this form of marriage, “developed in response to the problems caused by their [Nayars’] military role.” Matrilineality and sambandhams can also be viewed as solving some of the problems of soldiers and mercenaries who had to be away from home for extended periods of time and who could die in battle. This form of marriage “inhibited the development of close attachments between Nayar men and women in their native villages and, at the same time, permitted them sexual access to Nayar women throughout the land.”

The second and less well-known pattern of marriage and family life was practiced mainly in North Kerala. Here the talikettukalyanam was not considered an important rite although it was carried out. The sambandham relationship was similar to Hindu marriages in other parts of India and was meant to be a stable one. Gough describes the ceremony as follows:
The giving of the cloth by the husband which marked the start of a sambandham was carried out with ceremony in the girl’s ancestral house and was the occasion for a large feast to relatives of both parties. After the marriage had been consummated in the girl’s house the couple were ceremonially conducted to the bridegroom’s taravad and the girl was formally received into it by her husband’s mother and his karanavan’s wife.

The man and woman lived together in his matrilineal taravad along with his brothers and all of their children or the woman would live in a separate house with her own children where she would be visited by her husband. In the latter case, the man split his time between both houses. Women who were divorced or widowed moved back to their own taravad where they (and their married sisters who may have been living elsewhere) retained property rights. Divorce and remarriage were permitted but rare.

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The two traditional patterns described above are somewhat simplified and not quite as clearcut in terms of regions. Apparently, many local or minor variations—such as preference for cross-cousin sambandham, and a few cases of brothers having a common wife—existed. What did not vary as far as Nayar families were concerned were three features. First, there was matrilineality of descent and inheritance, whereby female members and their (both male and female) children possessed property rights; the children of male members did not have such rights. Second, there was a professed identification with one’s own taravad whose members were considered blood relatives (this obviously excluded the father’s family who belonged to a different taravad) and were therefore ineligible to marry each other. Finally, a great deal of importance was attached to the whims and wishes of the eldest male karanavan who acted as head, manager as well as representative (in public) of the taravad.

In comparison to other Hindus, the traditional arrangements of Nayars provided relatively greater freedom and status for their female members. Women had a say in consenting to the initiation or termination of marriage relationships. Children, as long as their paternity had been acknowledged, had to be taken care of by their taravad. Property rights were guaranteed for females. A certain amount of respect for women and “intensity of concern for mothers and sisters” as carriers of the taravad name existed among Nayar men. At the same time, under most circumstances all of the
above depended on the responsible management of taravad affairs by the karanavan and the good graces of other older males.

CONTEMPORARY NAYAR MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND KINSHIP

A number of factors that affected Kerala and its people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (to be discussed in detail later) resulted in the dying out or extreme modification of the ceremonies, marriage patterns, and family relationships described above. In this section, I will describe the current versions of these practices so that a sharp contrast can be made with the traditional forms. The contemporary situation can be summarized as including a decline in identification with the taravad; the expansion and increased importance attached to the sambandham ceremony; and the second also signifying an almost absolute conversion by Nayars to the ideal of a "strong" or stable monogamous marriage.

The Decline of the Taravad

One of Puthenkulam’s respondents remarked that with regard to family relationships and descent, Nayars “had left the mother’s house but have not yet reached the father’s home.” This implies that while the transition to a more patrilineal system is ongoing, there continue to linger remnants of identification with matrilineality and the taravad. A number of manifestations of this state of transition can be identified.

The most remarkable of these is the changed nature of property ownership within the taravad. Property used to be held jointly by the taravad and administered by the eldest male in the matrilineal group (the karanavan). It was difficult, though not impossible, for the property to be divided against the wishes of the karanavan and older males in the matrilineal family. Historically, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of reports and court cases accusing karanavans of
financial mismanagement, extravagance, waste and transfer of property on the sly to their own children came up. This led to more legal equality among members of a taravad with regard to property. Now, such property is owned jointly by individual members who may ask for their share of it on attaining adulthood. Puthenkulam notes that given the legal bias towards individual property division, “it is not surprising that the vast majority of Nayar taravads have made use of it and partitioned their taravads.”35 Thus ancestral property that belonged to my own taravad through my maternal grandmother has been subdivided as follows: roughly equally among eleven people, her seven children (my mother, her sister and five brothers) and the four grandchildren of her two daughters (my two brothers, me, and a cousin-sister, who is my mother’s sister’s surviving daughter). Note that matrilineality continues with the children of female members receiving shares, while those of male members do not. Often even unborn babies of pregnant women are given shares in the property. This arrangement pertains only to taravad property. Obviously, after a few generations of division and sub-division and given the increasing role of the father in Nayar households, there is not likely to be any matrilineal property left. Individual property owned by a father is now divided equally among his sons and daughters, where previously it would have reverted back to the father’s matrilineal taravad.

A second measure of the decline of the taravad can be found in the increased influence of the father in the affairs of his children and the corresponding decrease in that of the karanavan. Or as Puthenkulam puts it, “The father has come to his own and the karanavan has been supplanted.”36 Previously, as noted, children had very little to do with their fathers. They may have not even seen much of him, particularly if he continued to live in his own taravad, and only visited at night. Given the changed pattern of residence and consequent economic arrangements, this is perhaps inevitable. Still, certain attachments to the karanavan and/or mother’s brother continue. For example, my older brother spent much of his childhood with one of my maternal uncles who also lived in Malaysia (because better educational facilities were available nearby). My uncle was accepting of his guardianship role, and this was accepted by others in the extended family as “proper.”
Finally, consider the current expectation regarding residence following marriage. It is assumed now that the wife will move permanently into her husband’s home and live there along with any children that may ensue. In terms of the transitional state of Nayar customs, ironically, the house she moves into may sometimes be his ancestral taravad. A married son may thus bring his wife to live with his parents if he cannot afford a separate home. With employment opportunities mainly in the more urbanized areas of Kerala, elsewhere in India or abroad, the couple is more likely to establish a new residence apart from kin (neolocal residence). Thus, the nuclear family I was a member of (my parents, brothers and myself) lived in Malaysia where my father found employment in rubber plantations in the 1930s. Similarly, my wife, our two children and I live together in the United States. Neither of these middle and late twentieth century living arrangements is looked upon as anything unusual among Nayars today.

However, the influence of the taravad does persist in some matters. First, it continues to be expected and followed that Nayars take their surnames from their mother’s side of the nuclear family and often also include their taravad name. Clearly, this is an expectation that I have violated. For purposes of convenience (having spent a large part of my life in patrilineal or bilateral descent societies and not being very good at snappy explanations of my matrilineal heritage) I have taken my father’s surname (Unnithan) rather than my mother’s (Nair); and I also do not use the name of my taravad (Payanimvilayil). This has led to rather bemused questioning among some of my relatives as to how and when I had turned into an Unnithan!

Second, although supplanted otherwise, the karanavan continues to command formal and deferential respect. For example, it is expected that his nephews and nieces stand, as a mark of respect, in his presence. His formal consent is sought on matters involving younger siblings, nephews and nieces. He is the first to be invited for weddings and often presides over family ceremonies. The honor accorded to the karanavan in contemporary times can be viewed as resulting from a combination of expectations: remnants of the Nayar past and traditional Indian respect for elders.
The Expansion and Importance of the Sambandham

Both Fuller and Puthenkulam suggest that the word sambandham is not in use anymore to describe Nayar marriage, because of what many reformers from within the community felt was its “immoral” connotations. I continue to hear it used, though less often than *vivaham* (originally, the Nambudiri Brahmin word for wedding) and *kalyanam* (literally, ceremony). While the talikettu-kalyanam and associated rituals have all but disappeared, those surrounding the sambandham have expanded. However, in comparison to marriage ceremonies of other Hindu groups, that of the present-day Nayars tends to be very short and simple.

The actual marriage ceremony is the culmination of a number of steps taken in advance that represent a close approximation of what social scientists have described as the “arranged” form of marriage. Marriages based on notions of romantic love do take place but are to a large extent subject to family approval. Marriages are mostly intra-caste, with marriages to upper (including Nambudiris) and lower castes rare. The preference for intra-caste marriage often causes middle-class Nayar families to look for potential partners in places far beyond the local village or district. Photographs of “eligible” young men and women are exchanged utilizing professional matchmakers or friends and relatives to see if there is any interest on either side in a potential sambandham. Horoscopes are matched to consider whether the couple is astrologically compatible. The young man may make a short visit to the woman’s home along with his relatives for what is referred to as a *pennukaanal* (literally, seeing the young woman). Based on the consent of both the young man and woman and their respective families, arrangements are made for the wedding ceremony itself. Often a ceremony that is meant to determine an astrologically auspicious date and time for the marriage ceremony is also held. Invitations are mailed out by both families, or personally handed to close relatives who live nearby. Among some Nayars, wedding invitations are issued in
the name of the karanavan, another vestige of the prestige that position once commanded.

Marriage ceremonies may be conducted at the bride’s home or in an area built and used for that purpose at a temple nearby. The bridegroom, who arrives in a procession of his family and friends, is greeted at the entrance by members of the bride’s family. His feet are washed and he is garlanded. The actual ceremony itself follows and consists of these rites: The couple sit next to each other facing (among other objects that signify auspiciousness and fertility) a pot full of rice and a lighted oil lamp. The couple exchange rings and garlands (previously blessed by placing in front of a temple idol). The bridegroom places and/or ties the tali around the neck of the bride. The bridegroom then gives the bride a piece of cloth (almost always a saree). The bride and groom clasp hands and walk around the lighted lamp three times. They are then blessed by elders of both families. The ceremony is followed by a vegetarian feast in which both families participate. As noted above, the bride accompanies the groom to live with his family or (perhaps, later) to a new residence.

Let me point out a few features of contemporary Nayar marriage that indicate continuity and change. In terms of continuity, although a marriage may be solemnized at a temple, religious connotations are still minimal and the ceremony is often conducted by a fellow Nayar in the community. The giving of clothing also survives from the traditional Nayar sambandham ceremony. Tremendous changes can also be detected. The tali-tying rite has been shifted from the talikettu-kalyanam to the sambandham ceremony. The sambandham ceremony itself and the process leading up to it has expanded and taken on features that serve to underline the desirability of monogamy and stability of marriage. In addition, there are now elements suggesting increasing male dominance. For example, the male’s family goes to view the bride-to-be and the bridegroom’s party is respectfully received at the wedding site. Increasingly, the groom’s family demands from the bride’s family a “groomprice” or “direct payments to the family of the groom” as a condition of marriage. This was previously unknown among Nayars. Finally, the expansion of rites associated with the sambandham and the receiving of blessings from elders signify the encouraging of stability in the marriage partnership being entered into.
Stable Monogamy as an Ideal

The importance of the sambandham relationship among contemporary Nayars is associated with the promotion of a family ideology based on stable monogamy. Three expressions of this ideal can be found in contemporary marriage and family patterns. The traditional pattern identified in Central Kerala and upper regions of South Kerala involving multiple visiting husbands and relationships with Nambudiri Brahmins is not operative any longer. In its place, Nayars have substituted endogamy (as in restricting the selection of marriage partners from within the caste and sub-caste group) and long-term monogamy. The practice of allowing Nambudiri sambandham partners has also died out. This can be attributed to the cessation of military service as the common occupation of Nayars; to changes within Nambudiri households that allowed all males (not just the oldest) to marry Nambudiri women; and to criticisms from Nayar reformers who berated Nambudiris harshly on their “religious” pretensions in separating sex and responsibility for its consequences (children).

The second aspect of this ideal can be found in the contemporary expectation that a husband and wife be sexually faithful to each other over the period of marriage. Not surprisingly, divorce is strongly discouraged. This focus on sexual exclusivity has also resulted in scrutiny of a potential bride’s “character” (premarital virginity) before moving forward with the steps towards an arranged marriage. There is some, though less intense, attention paid to a potential groom’s “character.”

A third expression of the stable, monogamous family ideal is the rise of essentially neolocal (living apart from kin) nuclear family living arrangements especially when work locations are far away. Biological parents and children live together over a long period of time with the former having responsibility and authority over the latter. In the twentieth century, Nayar men in search of employment (Kerala being a state with high levels of both education and unemployment) have migrated to and lived in other parts of India (e.g., my father-in-law), Southeast Asia (e.g., my father), the Middle East (e.g., my wife’s cousin, i.e., her mother’s sister’s son), and the West (e.g., me). It has become customary and accepted for their wives to live with them and raise their children in
nuclear family units. If the couple returns to Kerala, they continue to live together.

It is difficult to find remnants of the old order “weak” marriage ties among the Nayars. It is my observation that in comparison to other Hindu groups, Nayar women have greater degrees of freedom in consenting or turning down potential marriage proposals. Whether this is the result of Nayar traditions or because Nayar women possess relatively high levels of education and are more likely to work outside the home is open to question. Relative to other Hindu women, it also appears that Nayar women may also choose to remain unmarried for longer periods of time. Further, female children are not looked upon with disfavor even in the face of the creeping in of practices such as “groomprice.” Billig predicts that these practices “may actually enhance female autonomy and economic independence in Kerala by forcing women even further to pursue educational and career opportunities outside of marriage.” If so, given their traditionally higher status, such effects should be more pronounced for Nayar women.

**CHANGE FACTORS IN NAYAR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY PRACTICES**

Having identified the traditional and contemporary forms of Nayar marriage and family, let us turn our attention to accounting for some of the influences that have propelled the remarkable changes documented. It is possible to discern factors that can be subsumed under either materialist, ideological or other types of explanation for social change. It should be recognized that any categorization of change factors is somewhat artificial and that causal interactions may exist between them. It is possible to identify three sets of influences—economic, reform movements, and legal—that helped move Nayars away from their traditional patterns of marriage and family.
Economic Influences

Two major economic factors have been identified by observers. The first is the end of the traditional military occupational roles of Nayars. After the British established effective and actual control in the early nineteenth century over the regions that constitute the present Kerala, they demobilized the armies of the local kings and chieftains. The Nayar men who controlled lands that had been given to them earlier by these rulers turned their attention to agriculture and supervision of those who worked for them producing rice, coconuts, pepper, and so on. There was more stability in their lives and more contact of a permanent nature with their sambandham partners, relatives and their biological children. This may have led to greater identification with their family of procreation rather than their family of orientation. This may also be the reason why many men began to ignore traditional norms with regard to property accumulated on their own. Earlier, on a man’s death his property reverted to his matrilineal taravad. Instead, many Nayar men wished to transfer such property to their wives and children.

The second of these economic factors is the increasing role of manufacturing and service industry sectors in India, and Kerala in particular. Nayars, given their elite status, had greater opportunities to achieve the educational qualifications needed for these new jobs. At the same time, the last century saw population growth and tough competition from Ezhavas (a lower caste group) and Syrian Christians who were also rapidly “modernizing.” These groups also began to aggressively buy up land that Nayar taravads and Nambudiri illams had owned. This resulted in the migration of Nayars (as mentioned earlier) to more urban areas, elsewhere in India and other parts of the world. All this meant that the rural agricultural feudal economy that supported the caste structure and the place of Nayars in it was being dismembered. Puthenkulam observes, “Neither the taravad nor its kinship system or the sambandham could be imagined outside a village set-up. When the village economy crumbled, systems built on it had to follow suit.”

18 PORTRAITS OF CULTURE
Reform Movements

The economic changes should not obscure the importance of reform movements from among the Nayars themselves that agitated for an end to matrilineality and the regularization of sambandham unions. Groups such as the Malayali Sabha and, later, the Nayar Service Society and their leaders were instrumental in developing forceful arguments and agitating to end features of traditional Nayar life of which they disapproved. They disliked the grip of the karanavan on the property and affairs of the younger members of a taravad. The reformers wanted to end what they considered wasteful celebrations such as talikettu-kalyanam. They had nothing but bitter scorn for the “status” associated with sambandhams that involved Nayar women and Nambudiri men, particularly since the latter did not have any further responsibility towards the children they fathered. They also wished for sambandham relationships to be recognized as legal marriages whereby the husband could leave property accumulated by him during his lifetime to his children.

Fuller suggests that the scathing attacks these reformers launched on the old order through newspapers, books (the first Malayalam novel dealt with Nayars and matrilineality), and speeches, were “undoubtedly…due to the spread of Western ideas” most of it through education in English. To this we should also add that Kerala during this period was becoming less isolated from the rest of India. Contacts multiplied with other (mostly patrilineal) Hindu and non-Hindu groups through the migration patterns described above (assisted by the spread of rail travel). In addition, the work of Christian missionaries (who though they may have failed to convert the Nayars were able to instill Christian ideas regarding morality and monogamy) was also among the influences on these reformers. Some observers suggest that cumulatively Nayar reformers was ashamed of their traditional way of life and its implied “immorality” and wished to substitute for it one that had a higher moral tenor. As Aiyappan puts it, “We grew ashamed of our matriliney and this affected even the thinking of scholars....”
Legal Changes

The reformers, perhaps aided by changing economic and political circumstances, were successful in challenging almost every feature of traditional Nayar life that they disapproved of. These legal changes hastened the decline of taravad and matrilineality. In South Kerala, this took the form of two pieces of legislation called the Nair Acts of 1912 and 1925. Although there were significant differences between the two, taken together they had the effect of allowing for the division and bequeathing of individually acquired property to any individual’s children, and made the practice of multiple spouses illegal. Similar legislation in Central Kerala enacted in 1920 and 1938 severely curtailed the powers of the karanavan, legalized the sambandham relationship, prohibited multiple spouses, and declared the wife and children of a man as his heirs. Most of North Kerala, which was ruled directly by the British provincial government in Madras, enacted the legislation in 1933 with similar provisions. These laws resulted in the many court cases brought against karanavans alluded to earlier, charging them with mismanagement. It should also be noted that legislation was also brought forward that allowed all Nambudiris to inherit their joint family property and for all Nambudiri men (not just the eldest) to be able to marry. This was the result of efforts from within the Nambudiri community as well, and effectively ended the era of Nayar sambandhams with Nambudiris.

While these pieces of legislation were frontal attacks on the traditional structure, at the same time other laws subverting the economic basis that sustained it were coming into effect. Land reforms that allowed tenants (primarily of the lower castes) to become owners of the lands that they had cultivated for generations began to be enacted in the early twentieth century. As Nayars and to a lesser extent Nambudiris were the landholders, such legislation was clearly inimical to their interests. Related reforms protected tenants from arbitrary eviction and from being required to pay excessive rents. The pace of these reforms picked up considerably after India’s independence in 1947, and as a result of a string of communist and leftist governments that have ruled Kerala since 1957. More recent legislation has given existing tenants the right to buy the land they have tilled, banned the creation of new tenancies, and proposed limits on the amount of land that can be owned by any one family.
Political Factors

Although at one time the “dominant caste” of Kerala, Nayars do not occupy elite positions automatically anymore. “The traditional Kerala society in which the caste of a person and the extent of the landed property owned by him determined his standing in the social scale is now a thing of the past.” Instead, the disappearance of their patrons (rulers and local chieftains), democratization and preferential policies favoring lower castes (implemented all over India) have eroded the powerful position that Nayars once held. They now have to compete with other groups or form coalitions with them to achieve power, wealth and prestige. Caste, taravad, and matrilineality matter less in the public sphere than what can be gained or lost through interpersonal and intergroup transactions. Thus, while there exist political parties claiming to represent the interests of Nayars, Ezhavas and other caste groups, the major parties in Kerala are shifting coalitions of various castes, classes, and religious groups. The leadership of the government and these parties also varies among all of these groups. The structures that propped up Nayars and their particular way of life have been dismantled, making them, at least politically, not very different from other groups around them.

CONCLUSION

Under attack from the outside through economic, legal, and political changes and from within through the efforts of Nayar reformers, it is not surprising that the traditional Nayar system of marriage and family that so captivated social scientists began to change. As we have seen, there are a few lingering remnants of their matrilineal past and it has not been replaced by a completely male-dominated system. For example, although matrilineal inheritance has all but disappeared, Nayar women have more to say about their lives than do other Hindu women. Currently, Nayars can best be described as possessing stable, monogamous marriages, with a tendency for families to live with the husband’s family or alone.
NOTES

1. I gratefully acknowledge the help of Robert Theodoratus with the anthropological literature on the Nayars as well as the comments and clarifications of Gopi Nair and Raman R. Nayar.


6. Edward Evans-Pritchard, “Foreword,” in K. E. Verghese, *Slow Flows the Pampa: Socio-Economic Changes in a Kuttanad Village in Kerala* (New Delhi, India: 1982), p. 5. The Nambudiri Brahmins, engaged in religious occupations were, as we will see, at the top of the caste ladder.


13. Ibid.


18. Ibid., pp. 5–69.


23. Fuller, *The Nayars Today*.


26. Ibid., p. 74.

27. Fuller, *The Nayars Today*, p. 121.

28. Ibid., p. 124.

29. Ibid., p. 100.


32. For a more conventional way of defining matrilineality, see Ember and Ember, *Cultural Anthropology*.


35. Ibid., p. 157.

36. Ibid., p. 162.


41. Puthenkulam, Marriage and the Family in Kerala, p. 245.
43. Fuller, The Nayars Today, p. 130.
44. Aiyappan, The Personality of Kerala, p. 222.

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


Woodcock, George. Kerala: A Portrait of the Malabar Coast. London: Faber and Faber, 1967. An impressionistic account of Kerala in the 1960s shortly after its three regions were reconstituted into one state.