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CHANGING CULTURES

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CHANGING CULTURES

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The Nayers Today

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Preface

Kerala is sometimes referred to by the people of the adjoining district of Coorg as the 'land of ignorance', a wrongheaded prejudice which is attributed by Srinivas (1952: 232) to the prevalence of matriliney there. Of the various matrilineal communities in Kerala, the Nayars are the most prominent; if they have not always been accused of ignorance, they have certainly been almost universally regarded as extraordinary and exotic by those who have visited them. The Nayars have been a perennial source of fascination, too, for Indian and foreign anthropologists who have, though, been able to show that they are certainly not the benighted and bizarre Orientals that they have so often been taken for.

The number of Nayars must now exceed three million. No-one, I trust, would presume that the culture of such a large community could be uniform. During the last few years, I have had many conversations with people who have a deep knowledge about the Nayars in different parts of Kerala. In virtually all these conversations, one or other, but more usually both of us, have been surprised to discover that some feature of Nayar life which we had always assumed to be ubiquitous was in fact not so. Indeed, the more I have learnt about the Nayars, the more I have realised the dangers inherent in generalising about them.

This book, however, contains a good deal of generalisation about the Nayars. In fact, my main aim has been to present a comparative survey of the community, and more especially of the kinship system, which is wider than any presently existing in the literature. But I should, I think, indicate to the reader the necessary limits to generalisation and simultaneously explain something about the structure of this book. As the reader will see, the majority of travellers only visited the central area of Kerala. Here, too, most of the modern anthropological field-work has been conducted. Further, it is only in this region that Nayar society diverged so far from the mundane norm. Thus the Nayars living in the central part of Kerala are those for whom we have the most information, as well as those who pose the most interesting anthropological problems.

My own field-work was carried out in the southern half of Kerala, a region visited by few travellers in the past and in which there has been very little research. I hope the data I collected, pertaining mainly to kinship and marriage, and presented in chapters 2, 3 and 4, will not be found uninteresting. It is, though, the case that the Nayars in the area where I worked did not have a kinship system which could parallel in

Preface

exoticism that of the Nayars to their north. Thus they do not raise such complicated theoretical conundrums for an anthropologist and this, together with the relative paucity of information on them, means that in my discussion of the 'traditional' marriage system (chapter 5), the Nayars of the central area return to the forefront. However, in looking at the disintegration of the matrilineal joint-family system (chapter 6), I have tried to focus attention on Nayars in both halves of Kerala, for it is my firm belief that previous discussion has paid insufficient attention to regional diversity within Kerala. I apologise to the reader who, in spite of this explanation, feels irritated by any discontinuity he detects between different sections of the book.

One of my principal aims throughout this book has been to set the material firmly within its historical context. The extent to which I have succeeded in this is, of course, for the reader to judge. To my mind, however, there can be no dispute about the desirability of this aim. 'Timeless India' was always a myth. But 'timeless Kerala' would be an arrant absurdity. The evidence for this should be clear enough in the pages below.

The reader is entitled to some information about how I gathered my data in the field. I did in fact study two villages in Kerala. One of these, which I have called Ramankara in this book, is dominated by Nayars; the other, contiguous with it, is dominated by Syrian Christians (whom I have discussed in more detail elsewhere). I lived in the latter from August 1971 until July 1972, spending almost all of that period in and around the two villages. I did, I think, get to know many of the people in Ramankara fairly well, but I did not, of course, see quite as much of them as I did of some of the people in the village where I lived. I revisited the villages again for a few days in October 1972, and I was able to pay another flying visit, lasting only five days, in December 1975. In the latter part of my field-work I was able to understand, more or less, spoken Malayalam, but I never gained fluency in it, and most of my investigations in the village were done with the aid of an interpreter. Chapters 3 and 4, and parts of chapter 2, were included in slightly different form in my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (1974); the remainder of the book, based mostly on library research, has been written since I completed the dissertation.

The book contains an essential minimum of Indian words, most of them Malayalam. Names have been given their conventional English spellings; where alternative spellings exist, I have adopted the one which seemed to me most commonly used. All other Indian words have been transliterated accurately, but without diacritical marks, normally according to the spelling in Gundert's Malayalam dictionary. These words are all transliterated with diacritical marks in the glossary. With a few words such as *taravad*, which have virtually entered the anthropological vocabulary, I have however retained the conventional spelling, even though it is not an accurate transliteration. All Indian words have been pluralised by adding

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's'. The word *nayar* is an honorific plural used as a singular. I have preferred Nayar over Nair, and also the forms Nambudiri and Izhava. Ramankara, like the names of families and individuals in the village, is a pseudonym.

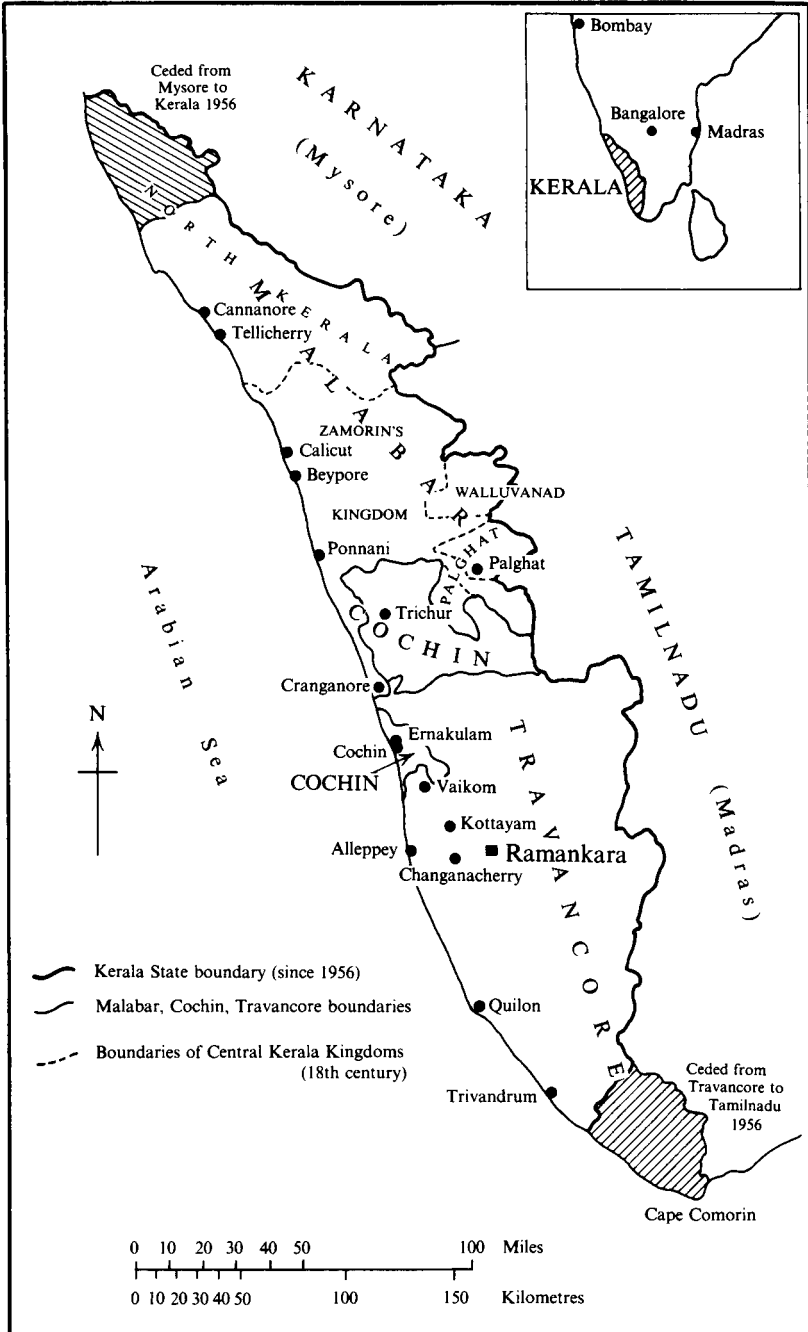
Like all anthropologists, I have incurred many debts to many people. First and foremost, I must thank the people of Ramankara, and also the village in which I lived, for their kindness and hospitality, especially my landlord Mr P. S. Job, his wife Mariamma, and their children Scaria, Solly, Kurian, Ousephachen, Somey and Soji. I should also like to express my thanks to N. M. Joseph, my interpreter, assistant and all-round trouble-shooter; Professors Sir Edmund Leach and S. J. Tambiah, who supervised my doctoral research and gave me endless encouragement; Professor Joan Mencher, who gave me the benefit of her extensive knowledge of Kerala and, with Professor Frank Southworth, much hospitality in India as well; Professor Kathleen Gough, who willingly provided me with information and copies of her papers; Professors André Bêteille, K. Raman Unni, T. N. Krishnan, C. Z. Scaria and Mr K. J. John, for much aid and hospitality in India; Christopher May, Jonathan Parry and Deborah Swallow, for their comments on various chapters of this book; my mother, Mrs Christine Fuller, who typed the manuscript; and my wife, Pauline.

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