

FRONTIER IN RUINS:
INTERNAL COLONIZATION AND THE MAKING OF AN
AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH INDIA

Daniel MÜNSTER

Among my favourite parts of Frank Heidemann's monograph *Akka Bakka* (2006) are his descriptions of Badaga landscapes in the Nilgiri mountains (e.g. 2006:301 ff.). The parts where Heidemann pays attention to the atmosphere of landscapes also resonate most with my socio-ecological perspective on agricultural transformations in Wayanad district, just some 150 kilometres west across the mountains, in Kerala's Western Ghats. By way of introducing the village of Jackanarai, Heidemann invites his readers on an imaginary tour – it feels like a bus ride – on the old road (inaugurated 1823) from the Mettupalayam train station to Kotagiri. The traveller passes through the Tamil Deccan plains and then ascends a windy road through a long stretch of forest, vegetation changing with altitude, before the road opens up, and finally, we enter the Nilgiri plateau with the agricultural landscape settled by the Badaga. In his own words:

Beim Aufstieg wird die Luft kühler, Vegetationsstufen gehen ineinander über, und der sich ändernde Naturraum zeigt dem Reisenden an, dass er eine Welt hinter sich gelassen hat und eine andere auf ihn wartet. Der Wald am Südrand der Berge erscheint aus der Ferne dicht, doch aus der Nähe sind die von Menschenhand verursachten Wunden sichtbar (Heidemann 2006:301).

In Heidemann's ethnography, we encounter the Badaga community as established and prosperous settlers, tea farmers and entrepreneurs, who maintain ritual and economic relationships with other endogamous groups and whose kin networks extend into South Indian metropolises. Theirs is a world in which the troubles and dynamics of migrating from the plains of present-day Karnataka and of settling here on the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats are in the distant past.

Since their migration, the Badaga have inscribed their presence into the landscape of the Blue Mountains by cultivating crops and building roads and villages. They have marked their territory with temples, stories and pilgrimage routes, described by Heidemann in rich ethnographic detail. Their myths narrate their migration, in the 16th century, as an escape from an unjust Muslim ruler (Heidemann 2006:65, 311). To these "ancient Hindu refugees" (Hockings 1980) the Nilgiri Mountains were thus a "flight zone" (Scott 2009:24), one of the hilly "zones of refuge" that, according to James Scott, were also important for communities across Southeast Asia to escape or evade state power.

Drawing on my own work in Wayanad, which, compared to the Nilgiri case, saw a more recent wave of agrarian migration, the purpose of this essay is to introduce the notion of agricultural frontiers to the anthropology of South India. Frontier dynamics have received little attention among anthropologists largely focused on caste societies of the valleys, coasts, and plains of South India. Paul Hockings, Heidemann's ethnographic predecessor among the Badaga, mentions once that the Badaga's onetime refuge was also a onetime agrarian frontier. He calls the historical Nilgiris "frontier lands" (Hockings 1980:62) that were settled through the usual measure of dispossessing other people and terraforming forests and grasslands into agricultural fields. Hockings provides some evidence of complex histories of Badaga settlers claiming land from the forest and its animals and of pushing subaltern groups to the lands below their fertile and malaria-free "ecological zone" from 1,200 to 2,200 metres above sea level (Hockings 1980). The Badaga world that comes to life in *Akka Bakka* is a vibrant tea production area, connected to Indian and global commodity chains, in which the political, economic, and ritual power of the Badaga is consolidated and whose prosperity has given the region – at least prior to the current tea crisis²⁹ – the nickname "Dollar Zone" (Heidemann 2006:303). By comparison, the prosperity and success of migration and agrarian transformation differs markedly from the settler experiences of Syrian Christians in Wayanad – a much more recent agrarian frontier that saw boom followed by bust. In what follows, I turn to the 20th-century history of the agricultural frontier of Wayanad. This district also once had a nickname – "Mini-Gulf" – flagging its prosperity based on cash-crop production. However, in contrast to the Nilgiris, it is now also known for its epidemic of suicides, primarily among the settler communities (Münster 2015a). Taking inspiration from environmental historian Don Worster, I call it a frontier in ruins.

My understanding of Wayanad's agricultural frontier is unabashedly presentist. I echo the one big question, which seems retrospectively to have been implicit in all my ethnographic conversation about today's situation: What went wrong? How did a landscape of hope and prosperity become a scene of toxicity, precarity, and ruin? George Stocking famously argued that the difference between histories written by historians and anthropological histories is that the former seek "to understand the past for the sake of the past" (1982:3), and are thus more "historicist" in orientation. Histories written by anthropologists, by contrast, tend to be more "presentist", thus studying "the past for the sake of the present"³⁰ (1982:3). While Stocking is concerned with disciplinary histories (Fachgeschichte) and argues, as a good historian, against the "vices of presentism" (1982:8) and for an "affective,

²⁹ Many thanks to Jens Zickgraf for clarifying this point. See also Zickgraf's blogpost "The Dollar Zone and the Moneybush", available at <http://moneyness.info/the-dollar-zone-and-the-money-bush/>, accessed 1 August 2017.

³⁰ This quote and the preceding one are actually from Herbert Butterfield, who famously denounced "whiggish" history, cited in Stocking.

historicist orientation” (1982:12), this distinction seems useful to me for recognizing (and appreciating) the presentism in my understanding of historical frontier dynamics in Wayanad. Most conversations I had about the environmental, social, and agricultural changes in the district, seemed like shared attempts to retrospectively make sense of today’s agrarian crisis and present-day rural precarity.

Thinking backward from contemporary socio-ecological dynamics also attracts me to the figure of the agricultural frontier. I understand agricultural frontiers as temporal-spatial-ecological conjunctures in which imaginaries and utopias of available lands, new beginnings, and “hopes of amassing a fortune” (Varghese 2006:228) fuel dynamics of land grabs, crop booms, and eventually, busts. Many of the settler farmers, who I visited all over Wayanad to talk about small-scale agriculture in crisis, related a perspective on their migration that compares well with other frontier constellations: their struggles for land; their gradual shift from food to cash crops; the windfalls from pepper in the 1980s; their collective frenzy for more monocultures, fertilizers, and pesticides; and, finally, the price crashes and the environmental experience of sudden drops in productivity and of the new diseases in plants, soils, and humans. Many interlocutors stressed the ignorance and greed involved in the settler’s ventures into increasingly speculative cash- and chemical-intensive agriculture in the past four decades.

The specific notion of frontier that I am interested in developing for Wayanad, draws on Don Worster’s (2004) seminal book, first published in 1979, about the environmental history of the Dust Bowl disaster in the American Great Plains. Worster introduces a critical notion of the frontier that is attentive to the workings of capitalist markets, ideologies of progress, and the “ecological insensitivity” of productivist agriculture: “The Dust Bowl [. . .] was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself the task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth” (2004:4). This constitutes an important revision of progressivist and ethno-nationalist frontier narratives, such as Frederik Jackson Turner’s thesis (1920) that the “Great Frontier” laid the foundation of American democracy, or the migrant discourses I heard so often in Wayanad, celebrating the Christians’ industrious, enterprising, hardworking, and progressive “attitude” (*manōbhāvaṃ* in Malayalam) compared to the traditional, caste-bound cultivators of Wayanad.

Worster’s perspective further resonates with the situation in Wayanad in the sense that both the migrant farmers in East Wayanad’s forests and the settlers in grasslands of the Oklahoma Pan Handle live in a “Frontier in Ruins” (Worster 2004:100–106). During fieldwork exploring farmers’ suicide and agrarian crisis, I experienced a frontier society caught in a moment of self-reflection, which may also have to do with the kind of conversations I was encouraging. It is worthwhile quoting Worster again for his perspective on farmers facing failure and defeat on the Great Plains:

Caught in that sudden reversal of fortune and reputation, the people of the region passed through as profound a challenge to all their beliefs as they would ever face. How did they confront that challenge – how did they come to grips with their sudden slide downward from promise to defeat? (Worster 2004:100–101)

Anthropologists and historians of agriculture in South Asia have used the notion of frontier much less frequently than their colleagues studying Southeast Asia have. There, frontiers appear in multiple specifications: as “resource frontiers” describing domestic migrants and companies moving into resource-rich forests (Tsing 2003, 2004); as “indigenous frontiers” (Li 2014), accounting for the cultural, economic, and ecological dynamics of settlers encroaching on “the loosely-administered spaces rich in resources” (Geiger 2009:10), inhabited by indigenous people (Geiger 2008); as “frontiers of land control” (Peluso and Lund 2011), focusing on new enclosures and property regimes in sites with weakened traditional authority over land; and, on a larger scale, as “frontiers of capitalism” (Tsing 2004:27), accounting for friction in encounters between capitalist relations and traditional (and colonial) ways of organizing human life in agrarian landscapes. Frontier zones are not the same as borders; they are not necessarily associated with state borders, but many agrarian frontiers are located along administrative borders, and the desire of the nation state to bring its fuzzy borders under control may add military components to frontier dynamics (Eilenberg 2014). Borders between political entities may, however, produce frontiers, understood as temporal-spatial conjunctures, even if the internal borders that spawn frontier dynamics run between provinces, as in the Indian case of Wayanad.

These and other contemporary uses of the frontier concept move beyond the original chauvinist American frontier thesis put forward by Frederick Turner in that they challenge the singularity³¹ of the American experience, consider indigenous perspectives, and focus on the environmental change associated with interactional frontier dynamics. When the migration of agricultural settlers coincides with the expansion of state control or development plans, it may be justified to call the migration to the frontier zone a form of “internal colonialism” with far reaching consequence for entire landscapes:

[Internal colonialism] involved a botanical colonization in which the landscape was transformed – by deforestation, drainage, irrigation, and levees – to accommodate crops, settlement patterns, and systems of administration familiar to the state and to the colonists (Scott 2009:12).

In calling the large-scale exodus of Syrian Christians from Travancore into the hills of Malabar from the 1920s to the 1970s a movement of internal colonization,

³¹ According to Scott, the frontier societies at the hilly edges of Southeast Asian agrarian states – he calls them Zomia – were relatively permanent and in a “dialectic” relationship with early states, which were based on settled agriculture in grain-producing valleys (Scott 2009:3-4).

I do not intend to make a moral judgement on the “greedy” disposition of entire communities. I fully acknowledge the hardships, achievements, and sacrifices of individual migrants, and see what sociologists of migration call push factors at work: the hundreds of thousands of migrants who arrived during the Great Depression and up to the end of World War II were fleeing persecution, poverty, landlessness, and hunger in Travancore.³² Ethnography among second- and third-generation settlers nevertheless confirmed that they were carriers – “Träger” in Max Weber’s (1972 [1902]) sense – of modernist discourses of progress, development, and the reclamation of putatively empty wastelands for agricultural expansion. In aggregate, settlers were fundamental agents of the “great transformation” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]) of land to property, work to labour, and food to cash crops. There are also no grounds for romanticizing the original pre-frontier society of Wayanad, which was known for its rigid caste system, ritualized slavery, and a variety of feudal landlordisms exercised by dominant families and castes.

Frontiers, as the Wayanad cases exemplifies, are not just “out there”, objectively given, but exist first of all in the eyes of developers, settlers, and fortune-seekers. Frontiers are also discursive projects. They depend on ideologies of wildness, emptiness, “wastelands” (in the Indian context), and fortunes to be found. Anna Tsing and other anthropologists stress the quality of frontiers as projects in the making.

A frontier is an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet – not yet mapped, ‘not yet’ regulated. It is a zone of unmapping: even in its planning, a frontier is imagined as unplanned. Frontiers are not just discovered at the edge; they are projects in making geographical and temporal experiences. Their ‘wildness’ is made of visions and vines and violence; it is both material and imaginative. Frontiers reach backward as well as forward in time energising old fantasies, even as they embody their impossibilities. (Tsing 2003:5100)

After this comparative groundwork, I now move to the Indian case and to Kerala in particular, to see what is at stake in calling Wayanad a former frontier. After all, it is a term not much used in the region and is neither part of vernacular English nor Malayalam. People, including the settlers themselves, are of course aware of the changes in the landscape due to the immigration of settlers from Travancore. They use a variety of terms for these cultivating newcomers. *Kuṭiyērrakkār* is the common term and means both “migrants” and “settlers”. Despite the large numbers of Hindu settlers, settlers are also frequently called *kristiyāni*, which means “Christians”; or *cēṭṭanmar*, which literally means “elder brother people” and refers to the exclusively Christian usage of the kin term *cēṭṭan* for their elder brothers and for every other male person accorded sympathy and respect. Another term

³² I do not have the space here to do justice to the historical work on Christian migration that I have consulted to make sense of idiosyncratic life histories. Some of the most important (incidentally all Christian) authors include K. V. Joseph, Joshy Mathew, P. K. Michael Tharakan, T. C. Varghese, and V. J. Varghese.

for settlers is *tālenāṭṭukar*, literally “people from the lowlands”, as opposed to “*wayanāṭṭukar*”, “people of Wayanad”. Not surprisingly, the latter distinction is not common among the settlers.

I became aware of Wayanad’s agrarian frontier and its settler population when I was travelling hundreds of kilometres through the district, following up on rural suicide cases that had brought national attention to the district as a “suicide hotspot” (Münster 2012, 2015b). Travelling by car, on the back of motorcycles, on local buses, and by foot, hiking to houses all over remote parts of Wayanad, I learned how to read the landscape as a recently settled frontier landscape. Old feudal houses of the big landowning castes of Chetties and Nayar were located at a distance from the road, on hilly dryland called *kāra*, and facing their paddy fields. Colonies of Paniyar tribals, the labourers of very low status, were located near the fields of their landlords. The migrant houses, by contrast, were smaller, more numerous, and were facing the roads and pathways that crisscross Wayanad district. Impressive and colourful churches and parishes, and the seemingly ubiquitous roadside towers featuring Syrian Christian saints, visually marked the settler landscape I was travelling through to find – predominantly among the Christians – the “suicide families”, as my guides often called them. In conversations with neighbours, priests, local officials, and family members of suicides, I recorded many accounts of the lives, farms, and struggles of recently deceased farmers. The stories and explanations I gathered included accounts of agricultural mishaps, of debt and moneylenders, of new diseases, of alcohol, of failed crops, and of dropping commodity prices, dynamics that affect a large part of agrarian India, exacerbated by the neoliberal reforms in India (Münster and Strümpell 2014).

However, the collective efforts to make sense of hopelessness, death, and precarity among farmers also invoked two additional keys to understanding today’s troubles: migration and the agro-ecological changes it brought. Both are interconnected and contribute to the “frontier in ruins”. Older and second-generation Syrian Christians recounted the hardship of coming to the hills; the dangerous wildness of climate, people, animals, and forests; the legal insecurities in occupying land at the forest frontier, through leases, encroachment, sale, and agitations for differentially classified lands; the death toll of malaria that filled the graveyards of the first churches; the hard work, hope, and energy put into making it work, at any cost. Meanwhile, my conversations about the current crisis did frequently touch on ecological matters: the promise of fertile forest soil; the allure of chemicals; the windfall harvests of pepper and other boom crops that made so many farmers rich; the destructive frenzy of engaging in risky, monocultural, and chemical ways of farming.

Most people in Wayanad seem to agree that it mattered for this specific frontier constellation, that the settlers were Syrian Christians. Many Christians consider their people to be more particularly industrious, egalitarian, “development-minded”, and hardworking (cf. Varghese 2006). The infrastructures of the fron-

tier, especially its roads, churches, and vehicles, are their pride. Many Christians are also self-reflective critics of their impact on the agrarian environment (Münster 2015a) and the old communities of Wayanad. An activist running an alternative school, herself a Christian, told me, “You know, the Bible is a great book if you want to take other people’s land.” In Wayanad, the majority of “Christian” settlers³³ belong to the Syro-Malabar Church. They call themselves “R. C.”, which is short for Roman Catholic. Syrian Christians comprise several different churches that follow Syrian rites and claim to be able to trace their origins to conversions made by Thomas the Apostle in the first century of the Common Era. Among them, Syrian Catholics, such as the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites, accept the pope in Rome as ecclesiastical head, whereas Jacobites and Syrian Orthodox Christians have kept entirely independent of the Roman Catholic Church. Central Travancore, the contemporary districts of Kottayam, Ernakulam, and Alappuzha, is the historical heartland of Syrian Christians in Kerala and it was here that they sold their properties and joined the trail for the 20th-century forest frontier in Malabar.

Wayanad’s contemporary Christian settler frontier emerged in a landscape of much older frontier histories. Historian David Arnold has argued for the existence of an “ecological frontier”, during the colonial *longue durée*, “from 1770 to the introduction of DDT in 1946-47” (2001:187), which, not unlike Scott’s Zomia, marks off “tribal/forest from plains/agrarian societies” on the Indian subcontinent.

Taken together, topography, vegetation, disease, climate, wild animals, and tribal inhabitants made up a kind of ecological package that helped over the centuries to preserve a degree of distinction between hills and plains, forests and cleared land, tribal and agrarian societies (Arnold 2001:189).

The Malabar region has been providing Europe with spices and other agricultural products for thousands of years and its hill tracks in the Western Ghats have for centuries been what Tsing calls a frontier of “salvage accumulation” (2005) for loggers, elephant catchers, planters, militaries, and gold diggers. Violence, topographical remoteness, local resistance, and malaria have arguably been central to creating Wayanad’s frontier as a later “zone of potential” (Li 2014:13) in which land was available as unprotected (private) forest and uncultivated Revenue Land. The enduring military contestations over Malabar in the late 18th and early 19th century – first between Mysore state and the East India Company and later between British forces and the insurgent Pazahassi Raja – put Wayanad at the centre of many armed conflicts and at the periphery of states. Its main road, now High-

³³ Some Christian groups lived in Wayanad prior to the waves of Syrian Christian immigration from Travancore. Latin Christian (non-Syrian) churches, who trace their lineage back to more recent conversions by Portuguese and French priests and the Church of South India (C.S.I.), an umbrella organization of Protestant Churches, both existed in western Wayanad prior to the waves of Syrian Christian immigration from Travancore.

way 212, has for centuries connected Calicut and Mysore via the Tamarasseri pass and has brought armies and traders to Wayanad. In 1805 Wayanad came under direct British rule as part of the new Malabar District of the Madras Presidency. Colonial rule literally created the grounds for the 20th-century internal colonization by converting some feudal rights to land into property rights and seizing other lands as Revenue Land for the state.

Some land at the post-World War II frontier was Reserved Forest, under the strict rule of the Forest Department, and off limits to the settlers. Wayanad was unique in southern India, however, for having huge stretches of forest under private ownership – forests owned by landlords with *janmam* ownership titles and those owned by temple trusts, *devasvam*, were both classified as private forests – and also large tracts of land under the ownership of the Department of Revenue, known as Revenue Land. The owners of private forests, whether *janmies* or temple trustees (*uralar*), had become increasingly uninterested in managing their vast forest holdings, and were ready to rent or sell land. The Department of Revenue was interested in “developing” (forested) land for the generation of revenue, and hence made it available for incoming settlers. On these (legal) spaces of private forests and Revenue Land, settlers successfully cleared the forest and established cash-crop agriculture. In the context of food shortages after World War II, agrarian expansion was an immediate developmental imperative for the young Indian state. Although the colonization of Wayanad was not a planned statist endeavour per se, the state supported the settlers with new agricultural research stations, a colonization scheme for ex-Servicemen of the British Indian Army, and the eradication of the malaria vector. Despite some resistance from the Forest Department and local police, state representatives did little to stop the agrarian pioneers from encroaching on thousands of hectares of “forested land”.

The dynamics of Wayanad’s frontier did not just involve changes in land control. An ecological perspective on the frontier’s opening, boom, and eventual ruin would need to take into account further human and nonhuman contributors, beyond David Arnold’s initial list of “topography, vegetation, disease, climate, wild animals, and tribal inhabitants” that made up the ecological frontier. DDT, the chemical, contributed significantly to the eradication of malaria and the further opening of this frontier. Cassava, locally known as tapioca or *kappa*, was significant as a pioneering food crop, as it grew quickly and on the dry lands (*kara*) most settlers occupied. Lemongrass was the pioneer’s cash crop of choice. For the distillation of its oil, settlers would use the trees they had cleared from their fields. Rumours of progressive land reforms further fuelled the land rush, which intensified from the 1940s to the 1960s. In the 1970s, most land occupations and partial dispossessions of *adivasis* were “regularized” in the land reforms initiated by communist-led state governments. The bus service from Calicut, the migrants’ alcohol, and the network of church institutions also contributed to the ecology of settler society.

Wayanad's frontier ended as a frontier in ruins. At first, years of grabbing and struggle were followed by boom years. The settler regions became known for their prosperity, settler agriculture permanently changed the landscape, and Wayanad's development found material expression in churches, good roads, and Christian schools and colleges. The boom years had their ecology, too. Chemical fertilizers, arriving in the 1960s, fuelled the soil to produce immediately visible "bumper harvests". The crops on the drylands shifted from lemongrass, to coffee, to pepper – and then to monocultures of pepper. Biotechnologically "improved" cultivars and powerful pesticides seemed to allow even small landholders to participate in the crop booms of pepper, vanilla, and ginger. Trouble came to the region when synthetic fertilizers began losing their effectiveness and novel pathogens started affecting the plantations. In conversations, many farmers blamed their insatiable use of chemicals and their monocropping of garden (*tōttam*) plants as contributing to plant diseases. Then the prices fell. At first, the increasingly speculative climate saw farmers spend more money on inputs, especially when going after the latest boom crops. Subsequently, however, failing harvests and significant drops in (now globalized) commodity prices pushed many planters into deep debt. During my study on suicide, everyone seemed to agree on the significance of debt as significant stressor for suicidal cultivators and on the contributions of both nature and the economy to their sense that agriculture is over (*pōyi*).

I conclude by returning to the questions asked in Worster's *Dust Bowl*: "how did they come to grips with their sudden slide downward from promise to defeat?" In Wayanad, coming to grips with crisis in agriculture has involved two practical answers located at opposite ends of a continuum. One section of the migrant communities has found a new agricultural frontier – the ginger frontier (Münster 2015c) in Karnataka and beyond, where groups of male growers cultivate ginger on a seasonal basis, on leased paddy fields. At the other end of the political-ecological spectrum, a significant minority of farmers has embraced organic and natural farming technologies. For these settlers, the orientation to the landscape has shifted from a focus on land to a care for the soil. Natural farmers, like the followers of Zero Budget Natural Farming (Münster 2016), "cultivate" new agro-environmental subjectivities and foster symbiotic relations with many species in the agricultural landscape. Hope for Wayanad will depend on how people manage to "come to grips" with their frontier in ruins.

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