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## Objectification and Social Aesthetics Memoranda and the Celebration of “Badaga Day”

On 15 May 1989, the Badaga, the dominant peasant community in the Nilgiri Hills, organized a huge rally and handed over a memorandum to the government. On the basis of their culture they demanded tribal status, a guaranteed price for their agricultural products, and other privileges. I shall argue that the medium of a memorandum with its textual and material form requires and fosters the process of cultural objectification. “Culture” is turned into an object and becomes a form of currency in the political process. Later, 15 May was named “Badaga Day,” an annual context for self-representation. Performative acts like hoisting the Badaga flag, singing the Badaga hymn, and worshipping the bust of H. B. Ari Gowder contribute to an overall social aesthetics. Sounds, colors, proximity, and other “culturally patterned sensory experience[s]” (MACDOUGALL 2006, 98) contribute to the feeling of “oneness” and underline the demand for cultural autonomy.

KEYWORDS: Objectification of culture—social aesthetics—Badaga—political performance—South India

**see also, in the same 2014 issue: Bird-David on Katunayaka, Coelho on Betta Kurumba, Demmer on Jenu Kurumba, Wolf on Kota, and both Hockings and Wolf & Heinemann on indigeneity**

**I**N INDIA, indigenous claims are expressed in the public sphere, usually in central locations in small towns or district headquarters. It is rather common for tribal people to walk in quite large groups to a government office and hand over a petition or a memorandum. Leaders address the gathering and the local press reports on the event—on such occasions, cultural forms are expressed to a larger audience. The activists select ritual forms, play music, perform dances, or worship their own gods. In doing so cultural practices are displayed, and performances are transformed to new contexts. This cultural display identifies groups, highlights cultural markers, and underlines political claims. Culture is externalized and becomes a thing that can be sensed.

In this process culture is experienced as a currency. Being recognized as “tribal” is more than a label; it is a material commodity. Like the currency of the state or possession of land, the ownership of a “tribal culture” becomes an object. The creation of indigenous polities is supported by this currency. Arjun Appadurai writes on this process in more general terms:

It is this sort of mobilization that I characterized ... as culturalist, which is to say, as involving ethnicities mobilized by or in relation to the practices of the modern nation-state. *Culturalism* suggests something more than either ethnicity or culture, both of which terms partake of the sense of the natural, the unconscious, and the tacit in-group identity. When identities are produced in a field of classification, mass mediation, mobilization, and entitlement dominated by politics at the level of the nation-state, however, they take cultural differences as their conscious object. (APPADURAI 1996, 146–47)

In the last twenty years there has been a shift in theoretical orientation, and the concept of objectification needs to be revised. David KERTZER (1988) argued a quarter of a century ago that politicians use a variety of media to create symbols and social facts that otherwise would not exist. He states that symbolic forms are essential to communicate complex messages. In addition, symbols relate to multiple semantic fields and have the capacity to unite antagonistic factions. Anthropological work on resistance from below, usually following James SCOTT (1987; for work in India see KARLSSON and SUBBA 2006) and on indigeneity has included symbolic forms but considered them as a means to an end or as a part of a strategy. In my opinion,

aesthetic forms exist in their own right and must be considered as fully social facts (MAUSS 1966). Aesthetic forms appear in a variety of contexts and media and offer meaning to people. To describe and discuss this broader theme I would like to refer to David MacDougall, who coined the term “social aesthetics” to refer to a “culturally patterned sensory experience” (MACDOUGALL 2006, 98), which is—like Bourdieu’s habitus—structured and structuring (BOURDIEU 1990, 52), “but also exists all around us concretely, in the disposition of time, space, material objects, and social activities” (MACDOUGALL 2006, 99). Social aesthetics is not about beauty in the Kantian sense but about everyday experience. The shift from the symbol, a material object loaded with meanings, to a shared sensory experience offers a wider spectrum, because immaterial objects, specific sensations, and emotions are explicitly included.

In the political arena, indigeneity is inseparable from the official policy of including social and cultural minorities on the list of scheduled tribes. This list is a political product; it creates opportunities and the self-perception of marginalized communities. Being labeled “backward” or “tribal” or referred to as a “most primitive tribe” has an impact on those affected groups. The creation of categories and named communities, the politics of ethnonyms, and the allocation of public resources is one side of the coin. In the past, the main protagonists were associated with the state: the creation of communities by means of census reports, district manuals, and compilations of “castes and tribes” in colonial times (DIRKS 2001) and the creation of tribal lists after Independence were based on decisions made at administrators’ desks. In contemporary India, cultural minorities approach the government, inform the media, and seek public attention.

In the following I shall introduce the Badaga community by describing their way of expressing claims as indigenous people. In the last quarter of a century they have appropriated the idea of indigeneity on their own terms. As they are a South Indian community, their leaders have not been among the representatives of central and North Indian indigenous groups who were invited to Geneva and who had direct access to political circles in the central government. Badaga leaders were familiar with politics in the state of Tamil Nadu and had a few indirect connections to administrative and political offices in New Delhi and in Calcutta. They had less knowledge about the claims of Aborigines, Maoris, or the First Nations of North America and more about the movements and demands of tribal groups in India. The struggle for recognition seems to be more informed by common Indian political practice and shows more parallels to the agitation of lobbyists from caste groups. Badaga indigeneity is a local move toward cultural roots or a cultural nucleus with political ends. This process creates awareness about themselves and communicates objectified messages to outsiders. A plurality of arenas such as teashops, football stadiums, and virtual space on the internet are used to claim indigenous rights.

The entry in Wikipedia reads: “The Badagas are an indigenous people inhabiting the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu, southern India.” There can be no doubt about the unique features of their culture. For centuries they have lived as peasants in the hills and worshipped their own gods, Hette and Hireodeya (HOCKINGS 2013). Their village festivals and their life-cycle ceremonies are celebrated in a grand man-

ner (HEIDEMANN 2006). They live in almost exclusively Badaga villages scattered over the Nilgiri Plateau, but many families have moved to local townships, have migrated to South Indian cities, or work overseas. The Badagas speak their own language; the introduction of a Badaga script was even discussed for some time. Badaga associations produce cassettes and CDs with Badaga songs and organize Badaga dance performances in Chennai and other South Indian cities. The Badaga language and their commitment to their culture are clear indicators of identity. There is hardly any doubt as to who is and is not a Badaga.

Together with the Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas, who are classified as scheduled tribes, the Badagas have lived on the plateau since pre-colonial times. The population of these groups combined totals less than five per cent of the Badaga population, and their economic and political positions are accordingly weak. Badagas are classified as “backward class”; they must be considered as the dominant group (as defined in SRINIVAS 1987, 96–97), and they form the single largest group. While the migration of the Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas cannot be traced by mythical origin or by linguistic evidence, there is no doubt that the origin of the Badagas is in the Kannada-speaking region north of the Nilgiri. Even the term “Badaga” means “northerner.” There is no doubt that they are one of at least four pre-colonial communities in the Nilgiris, that they lived exclusively on the plateau, and that they constitute a distinct community linguistically, culturally, and socially. Since Independence, their candidates have been successful in political elections. Their shift to tea cultivation brought considerable wealth, and later, following the 1990s price drop in the world markets, considerable hardship to many families. In spite of their local influence, they consider themselves a community with a minority status on a state level, since Tamil-speaking groups have questioned their local dominance recently.

Badaga leaders have a lot of experience in dealing with local and state governments. Like other minorities in India, the political praxis of the Badagas includes compiling petitions and memoranda with which to address the state. Delegations have visited ministries in New Delhi and the Tea Board in Kolkata to present their demands. On such occasions, two types of leader are present: “traditional” leaders who preside over a pre-colonial type of council, called *kuuntu*, and “modern” leaders who belong to political parties or are successful entrepreneurs. Traditional leaders have a hold in the village and modern leaders know the political terrain in the region and in the state. Decision making is a complex process. Traditional leaders usually invite the modern leaders to their *kuuntu*, the former describing local needs and the latter legal possibilities. In that way, both gain status and influence and are able to unite various sections of Badaga society. With regard to political claims, it seems that village councils—being relatively autonomous bodies for local affairs—have become instruments for new leaders to reach their audience.

#### POLITICAL DEMANDS AND THE BADAGA RALLY

On 15 May 1989, the largest gathering of the Badaga people in history took place in Ooty. On that morning, the majority of all Badaga people dressed in

traditional white dress and came to the town in buses and trucks. They gathered at the lake and formed a line, which was described by participants as being like a long snake moving through the city. They walked in an impressive procession to the collector’s office, where a memorandum addressed to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu was presented to the Collector of the Nilgiris. From there they went to the football ground for a public meeting, led by Badaga priests, headmen, and representatives of Badaga associations and of political parties. The entire event was considered an enormous success as most members of the Badaga community followed their leaders’ call for this rally. On that day, elders told me that the last great Badaga gathering was decades ago, when Mahatma Gandhi visited the Nilgiris in 1935. In times past, memorial ceremonies were celebrated for each generation, but that was stopped at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most likely, the last ritual took place in 1936 (and also according to THURSTON and RANGACHARI [1909, 121] in 1905). I was told that once in the lifetime of a Badaga, he or she should see and experience the size and strength of the entire community and demonstrate to others their inherent unity and peacefulness.

Who were the organizers and the supporters of these events? When I put this question to one of the key activists two weeks before the rally took place, he made it clear that it would be a great mistake to mention specific names. Every meeting must be conducted in the name of institutions, such as the “Young Badaga Association” (YBA) or the “Federation of Badaga Associations” (FBA), and include traditional leaders as representatives of villages or regions. Indeed, the entire coordination of around 370 Badaga villages on the Nilgiri plateau was achieved by the Badaga *kuutu* (local *pañchāyats*). In an ideal model, each village *kuutu* is linked to a council of a higher order, often called *uur kuutu* (*uur* meaning “head village”), located in a village with a specific type of ancestor temple (often for Hireodeya) and a ritual gate, *akka bakka*. All *uur kuutu* join in the *seemai kuutu*, and the Nilgiri is split into four *seemai* (regions). One of the four *seemai*, Thandanadu, takes the lead in administrative and political affairs. The Nakubetta Gowder (*naku* meaning “four” and *betta* meaning “mountain;” *Gowder* is a title or name suffix and stands here for “leader”) is considered the paramount chief of all the Badaga, at least in a traditional and formal sense.

When I began my fieldwork in the summer of 1988, local *kuutus* were quite active in many parts of the hills, but the Nakubetta *kuutu* was practically nonexistent. Nothing was heard about the Nakubetta Gowder. In the months before the May rally, his office was rediscovered; he presided over several functions and took center stage in the stadium at the rally. His role was more that of a representative than an organizer. The *kuutu* system, a network of local councils with focal points in four regions and links to each hamlet, was used by the organizers to reach each household. Those behind the rally were a few businessmen, professionals, and politicians holding offices in the YBA and in the FBA. They were “invited” to join local or regional *kuutu* and gained support from village entrepreneurs or factory owners.

On the day of the rally, all production units were closed and industrial vehicles commuted between the villages and Ooty. From a distance, the entire process of

planning and performing a huge rally appeared to be a smooth and consensual process, but there were tough negotiations up to the final hours before the event. A few villagers and an entire sub-region were reluctant to participate but were convinced to join the rally mere hours before the procession started. Almost all the Badagas left their homes, leaving behind just a few to care for the aged or ill. The participants in the rally had two key motives. First, the main and official cause was to hand over a memorandum claiming more rights, privileges, and administrative reforms. Second, most Badagas saw in the event a demonstration of their unity. The largest crowd in the history of the Nilgiri moved gently through the main bazaar, and it felt good to be a member of the Badaga community. No doubt they felt superior to other sections in the district. A year before, in 1988, recently immigrated day laborers, mostly Sri Lankan repatriates, had celebrated Gandhi's birthday with a great rally. Most of those laborers worked in the Badaga fields, and there had been small-scale conflicts in various regions. Besides these "labor problems," the idea of underlining the importance of the Badaga vote bank must have been on the minds of some organizers. In the late 1980s, the Badagas lost their strong position within the political parties. In the past, the candidates in MP and MLA elections were almost exclusively Badaga. No matter who won, it was a Badaga. This had now changed and candidates were also recruited from other communities. This experience formed part of the background to the 1989 rally.

The memorandum was addressed to the chief minister of Tamil Nadu and contained nine demands and issues: "the Hill Tribe Status of the Badaga," "to save Badaga Tribal Culture [...] from pollution due to unwanted exposure to too many outsiders," "to assert the tribal people's right to land and forests," "to declare the Nilgiri district a Tribal District," "to protect the environment," "Employment," "a separate parliamentary constitution," "to declare the entire Nilgiris District a drought-affected area," and "to get an economic minimum price for tea and potatoes." This was not the first memorandum claiming tribal status, special protection, and privileges for the Badaga people. The petitioner, the FBA, compiled a short booklet containing six memoranda or petitions, forty-six pages in total, including the memorandum of 15 May. In these texts the Badagas are presented as peace-loving ancient tribes, living alongside the Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas in the district. Such nineteenth-century authors as Brecks, Harkness, or Sullivan, as well as district manuals, are quoted to underline the tribal status of the Badagas prior to Independence. In the memorandum it is argued that the Badagas live exclusively in the Nilgiris, worship their own gods, and show distinct cultural features, among them elaborate funerals. Here the Badagas are described as "Hill Tribes," but they were not included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. The argument, not included in the memorandum but voiced at various meetings, goes that the Badagas were forgotten in the tribal list and prospered by way of their own efforts. This achievement should not be an obstacle for their inclusion in the list post-factum. "Once a tribe, always a tribe" is valid for those who prospered by way of government help and should apply to the Badaga too.

In May 1989, I spoke to a large number of Badaga villagers, leaders, administrators, businessmen, and politicians, and came across a wide spectrum of opinion

about the nine demands. The demand for tribal status, for example, was supported as a real and realistic aim only by a minority, but a relatively large group considered the claim a good move, which might lead to some other advantages. A minority considered the demand counterproductive for two reasons. First, tribal status would deprive the numerically small groups of Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas of their chance for education and a government job, which would disrupt the local harmony. Second, tribal status would downgrade the Badagas’ own status within the state of Tamil Nadu and lead to governmental paternalism. This minority argued that members of a scheduled tribe could not sell their fields, because the land was classified as “tribal.” There were various disagreements, and the memorandum was the result of a long, controversial debate. Some of my friends among the Badagas described the process as an open discussion following rules of democracy; others accused some leaders of imposing their opinions on the other members of the council. At any rate, there was hardly any public voice against the formal decisions of the Badaga *kuuntu*. Any opposition against holders of traditional offices would have been in serious violation of implicit community rules. An explicit Badaga norm demands the demonstration of harmony and unity in public.

Besides the explicit political dimension, there was a sensual dimension that obviously impressed most Badagas on the day of the rally. Even years later many of my counterparts expressed extreme happiness about the event, but it was hard to convey such emotions in words. When I tried to figure out what they remembered with joy, the answer was something like “the whole of it.” My attempts to find out their impressions suggested that it was a kind of unity and harmony that they had felt. The overall social aesthetics of the day was reached by the achievement of uniting (almost) all the Badagas in one large space and coordinating the gathering, forming a procession through the district capital, filling the roads with human forms dressed in white and appearing like a homogenous carpet, and chanting songs. “Being in a crowd of my own people” was a phrase often mentioned. Being close to each other, doing things in a coordinated way, and acting out closeness were the most positive experiences for Badaga men and women (HEIDEMANN 2013). There are other occasions—in most cases happy events such as temple festivals, weddings, or political gatherings—that evoke similar feelings. Among the sad occasions, funerals must be mentioned, but here the closeness of agnates comforts the mourning family. In general, a perfect crowd wears (“traditional”) white clothes, moves slowly but steadily on, and is accompanied by musicians playing Badaga rhythms. The internal order of a procession can be read like a sociogram. An ideal procession is headed by a group of dignitaries who constitute an appropriate representation of the social unit concerned. If the procession stands for a village, the headman, the priest, and a few honorable people should be present, or a man from the affinal group residing in the village. Their total number should be an uneven number, usually five or seven. In the case of the rally of 1989, elders decided to group the procession according to villages but not according to regions. Men and women were separated, elders “headed” each village, but young men still walked ahead and danced. The organizers secured open space around the

dignities, so they were visible and honored. In short, the procession was perceived as a most beautiful event, an incorporation of Badaga unity, solidarity, and community cooperation.

I shall argue that the central quality of this event is experienced through a value that can be called “oneness.” The phrase “All are one!” is often used and refers to ideas of unity and cooperation (HEIDEMANN 2010, 109). The imperative is that “all” should come and that they should physically join into one group, creating the visual sensation of an extensive, homogenous white field in which individuals merge into a large, pure entity (white stands for purity). To achieve this oneness, physical closeness is a precondition. Participants experience such *communitas* when they move in a procession and when they chant *a hau hau, a hau hau*, an exclamation used by ritual processions when reaching a village. The cultural form of the procession and this particular kind of chanting is a common feature of the pre-colonial groups on the plateau and part of the ritual practice of the Todas, Kotas, and Badagas. On the ideological level, the value of oneness appears to be shared among other groups, too. Richard Wolf has shown in great detail that white, which is also the color of Kotas dress, is seen as a symbol of unity and equal status (WOLF 1997, 2005).

The oneness of all the Badagas at the rally was realized by the use of color symbolism, proximity, and a particular quality of interaction. Representatives of social sub-divisions need to communicate, and office bearers have to head a procession and be visible on a stage. Reciprocal acts and other symbolic exchanges must be performed in the public sphere. A much-used term to paraphrase such acts is “respect” or *mariyadu*. In daily life and in ritual context, showing *mariyadu* is an explicit reaffirmation of a social order. The handing over of the memorandum should happen with mutual respect: representatives of the state and of the Badaga community must meet at eye level. When the Nakubetta Gowder is welcomed onto the stage by representatives of all four regions, the unity of the Badaga community is achieved. From this point of view, the instauration of the Nakubetta Gowder as the paramount Badaga chief was part of “the whole of it.” There is hardly any greater individual sign of the oneness of all Badaga than that of a paramount chief presiding over thousands of Badagas from all the traditional regions.

#### MEMORANDA AND THE OBJECTIFICATION OF CULTURE

The submission of a memorandum is a common feature in South Asian political practice. Petitions and memoranda by members of scheduled castes or tribes, or by distinct communities claiming a specific status, tend to include statements about their culture. I shall argue that the medium of a memorandum, that is, its textual form, and mode of communication with a political office, usually the chief minister, prime minister, or governor, requires and fosters the process of cultural objectification. My point of departure is Bernhard Cohn’s reflections on this concept. He writes,

The Indian intellectuals of Bengal in the nineteenth century and then the whole Western educated class of Indians in the twentieth century have objectified their culture. They in some sense have made it into a “thing”; they can stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity. What had previously been embedded in a whole matrix of custom, ritual and religion, a textually transmitted tradition, has now become something different. What had been unconscious now to some extent becomes conscious.

(COHN 1987, 228–29)

The term “objectification of culture” is an appropriate term to enter the discussion on memoranda. In these written texts, the formulation of political demands is linked to the rights of culturally defined groups. The claims need to be marked as clearly as the boundaries of the groups. Communities transform themselves into petitioners and vote banks. Symbolic markers allowing people to be identified in public appear as a precondition for a political bargain. Local history, historical monuments, myths, a specific language, a god or goddess, a traditional costume, and so on are symbolic forms that can be used for this kind of self-identification. The representation of the self is a matter in other contexts as well. The Badagas are engaged in inter-cultural communication in business, politics, and rituals. An annual village temple festival is planned and enacted with clear reference to what it might mean to others. Certain ritual forms that may appear backward are abandoned and the worship of village gods is enriched with a new interpretation as an avatar of a pan-Indian god. There are plans to celebrate a festival in a grand manner to demonstrate the economic strength of a village. Rituals are seen as performed sociograms. Therefore, individuals’ achievements are meant to be indicated by their position in the festival plan, their houses are meant to be visited, or they are meant to walk next to the village headman and the priest. All these strategic considerations come close to cultural objectification and are inscribed in major public performances.

Communication with a chief minister or other such high office requires a similar quality of objectification. There are, however, two major differences. First, the medium is different. Social performances in such ritualized contexts as festivals, political gatherings, or factory opening ceremonies are experienced with all the senses. The text of a memorandum is visible and can be read to an audience. In contrast, the social performance of a ritual allows (and requires) the active involvement of several participants at the same time at the same place. Their messages are embodied forms of communication—multivocal performances with many nuances and subtleties. A public performance always involves risks for the organizers. The participants must cooperate and display solidarity. The observer of the ritual is confronted with multilayered messages and has to decode them based on his own knowledge and experience.

The text, on the other hand, is a linear structure of words and sentences, with its own complexity, but without the simultaneous and active participation of others: the text offers the same sequence of letters to all readers; the ritual is perceived

differently from the perspective of each viewer; the form of coding the content of objectified culture differs; and words are lexical, performances indexical. The text is written to be de-contextualized for an anonymous readership, but the performance is enacted to convey a contextualized message. These differences, however, are not absolute, but instead exist to varying degrees.

Second, those addressed by a memorandum are representatives of a state or commission. If we assume that a state has rules and norms representing specific values—that the state enacts specific symbolized forms—and if we assume that there is something like a state culture, the relationship between state personnel and their culture differs from that of most spectators of ritual events. The strong and almost exclusive link between a person and his culture is not present in the case of a state and its representatives. The person addressed is a politician, elected to office, and the message needs to be equally comprehensible to his successor. Changes of personnel are part of the idea of the state and contrast with the permanent membership of a person in his culture. The petition of 15 May 1989 was addressed to the offices of the chief minister, the governor, the prime minister, and the president of India. Such texts are written as documents to be taken out of spatial and historical context. They are meant to be read in the capital and be reprinted years later. I would argue that a memorandum contains statements of cultural objectification. This essentialism is found in rituals as well, but these intentional texts are made for a de-contextualized use.

Furthermore, the handing over of the memorandum includes obvious aspects of objectification. It is a common political practice to form a procession to the government office where the document is presented. Visual and textual documentation capture this sensory experience and transform it into a narrative, that is, a further step of objectification. Reports and photographs in newspapers reaffirm the existence of the community. In the case of the May rally, the act of handing over the document was also covered in the daily papers. The scenario—traditional leaders inside the collector's office and supporters outside in front of the building—offers room for further interpretation. The community leaders constitute the link between government and petitioners. They carry the petition *into* the office: the objectification of cultural content represented in a textual form as an appropriation of a legal, governmental format. Leaders go legal. The spatial symbolism suggests that the lower status moves toward the higher status position. This point has two implications. First, the government is accepted as a high authority. Second, high leaders approach only high offices. The paramount chief of the Badaga representing four *seemai* needs to approach the district collector or the governor. The supporters outside the office act as witnesses. They make sure that their leaders are received by the commissioner and not by his personal assistant. The cultural form they use is not appropriated, but is considered traditional. The idea of the memorandum rests on traditional pillars and takes a modern form. The rally is an appropriation of state administration and of a democratic ideal. In the Nilgiris, as elsewhere in India, most citizens have adopted the basic values of the modern nation-state, but their desire to participate in public affairs is not satisfied by vot-

ing once in a while in a dark corner of a polling station. For South Asia in general, Jonathan Spencer (SPENCER 1997; 2007, 85) argues “that peasants were appropriating the machinery of the colonial state as a means to conduct their own local, ‘private’ arguments about standing and status.” This holds true in the Badaga case. Electoral campaigns constitute new stages for old village conflicts, past and present. The rally addresses the state and the communities of the district. The memorandum is a claim to others and a constitution of tradition.

Petitions and memoranda have their own genealogies and life histories. The Badaga petition of 15 May 1989 was printed and circulated to the press, to holders of political office, and to anthropologists as part of a booklet containing seven memoranda. The compilation shows a continuity of demands, including the improvement of economic conditions and “restoring” Hill Tribe Status on the basis of their cultural traits, following the characterization of “Hill Tribes” as “basically innocent, god-fearing, law-abiding” people with “rightful demands.” “The Badaga community has been from time immemorial a tribal community, along with other tribal communities like Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, and so on.” The harmony of this “ancient tribe” with neighboring groups and with the ecological environment is stressed. “The Badagas—especially the women folk—are a very hard-working tribe [...] Their culture, viz. (1) their dress, (2) ornaments, (3) hamlets and houses, (4) occupation pattern, (5) food habits, (6) festivals, (7) marriage ceremonies, (8) death ceremonies, (9) community panchayat, and (10) music are very unique, and entirely different from those of other communities living in South India” (quoted from a memorandum, FBA 1989). In further texts there are extensive quotations from nineteenth-century scholars and from THURSTON and RANGACHARI (1909) stressing the points mentioned above.

The rhetoric of the reprinted memoranda uses similar styles. The founders of the Indian nation, especially Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahral Nehru, are mentioned and quoted. There are several references to the Indian Constitution and to particular legal proceedings. The style of these texts indicates that the Badaga leadership is well informed and legally experienced, and argues on the basis of Indian law. The Badaga community is described as both culturally distinct and integrated in the Indian state, called the “Motherland” or “Free India.” The language used in the memorandum is a mixture of legal and highly polite forms; likewise, the head of the state is addressed as the “beloved president” of India. Both the Indian state and the Badaga community are objectified. The relationship between the Badagas and the state is declared to be positive and an expectation of reciprocity can be read between the lines. First, the Badagas recognize the conventions of the state, and second, they expect to be classified as a tribal people.

The memorandum has—unlike the rally—a relatively permanent material form. It is a highly-valued printed (or mechanically copied) document. Badaga representatives signed the originals. Copies were circulated at the time of the rally and each was taken as an important piece. When the original signed copies (one for each consignee) were carried to the collector’s office, they were treated like holy objects or crown jewels. The handing over became a public act of high importance. To

my great surprise, years later it proved most difficult to locate a single copy in the Nilgiris. Most Badaga leaders I talked to directed me to the Young Badaga Association or to the Federation of Badaga Associations, but no such documents could be found there. Except for one person who wrote up a new memorandum in 2011, none of the seven leaders I talked to owned a copy. It seems that the value of “The Memorandum”—unlike handed-down jewelry or holy objects in temples—is not linked to its physical form. The value rests in a quality connected to the specific (immaterial) rally. The text is the manifestation of a consensus (or compromise) of all Badaga regions and factions and therefore also represents the “oneness” mentioned above. But there are other qualities projected on the memorandum, too. The text is considered proof of certain skills connected to modernity; access to colonial records or books of historical importance prove scholarly qualities and the content and the precise form of political demand show administrative and political experience. In addition, the written form proves that things happened. For the Badagas, it is important to know that a copy of a memorandum is “out there.” In a similar way, the existence of a photograph (which someone had once seen somewhere) appears to prove that the moment fixed in the photograph happened. In my view the memorandum embodies two central ideas: first, the capability of modernity, and second, the idea of proof or validity. As a matter of fact, the Badagas need not prove that they are literate; most of them are well educated. But the skill needed to write a memorandum is considered to be a complex process and requires experience and specific (modern) knowledge. The second aspect seems to me to be of more importance. Qualities of Badaga society and culture mentioned in the text gain a higher ontological status from the fact that they were written down in an important document.

#### FROM A RALLY TO A PUBLIC HOLIDAY: BADAGA DAY

In the days after the rally, recordings of Badaga devotional songs praising their goddess Hette were played in the villages. Optimism was in the air. Badaga unity found many forms of expression and there was no doubt that the claims of the memorandum were rightful and that something would happen to benefit the entire community. A few voices suggested that this particular day, 15 May, should be remembered in the future and celebrated annually. However, it took a few years for the Badaga holiday to become part of public life. Ever since the early 1990s, Badaga Day has been celebrated at various locations. Customarily, the Young Badaga Association has been one of the main organizers. Public speeches, communal food, and processions form the framework of the ceremony. In my view, the rally and the performances of Badaga Day constitute an amalgam which can be called—in postcolonial terminology—hybrid. Hybridity, understood as “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization” (ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS, and TIFFIN 1988, 20), is found in postcolonial contexts, too. It is obvious that the Indian state uses colonial forms of law, administration, and symbols to run its daily affairs. Even colonial offices and

buildings—such as the collector’s office in Ooty—are focal points where Independent India represents itself. I shall argue that the cultural form of Badaga Day (and the rally of 1989) constitutes a complex and hybrid cultural form (see HEIDEMANN and DE TORO 2006). Looking back at what seems obvious today, the hybrid aspect of Badaga culture is informed by what could be referred to as the culture of the state. The symbolic hybrid form assembled aspects of party meetings, temple feedings, political speeches and Badaga songs, flag rising, men in dark suits, and elders in traditional dress. On my annual visits to the Nilgiris, I was informed about these events and saw photographs. Due to teaching obligations I could never visit the hills in the month of May. Therefore, in the following passage, I shall draw on narratives, on news reports, and on web presentations.

On 15 May 2010, Badaga Day was celebrated as a major event in a similar manner as in recent years. *The Hindu* reports from Ooty: “Badagas gathered at the Young Badaga Association (YBA) hall ... and exchanged traditional greetings. Representatives came from Chennai, Bangalore, Coimbatore, Tirupur, Mettupalayam and Hosur. The president, YBA, T. Gundan welcomed the gathering. [...] Prayers to Goddess Hette—the presiding deity of the Badaga community—for peace, prosperity and happiness, offerings of sweets and cultural programmes marked the celebration of the Badaga Day on Saturday” (*The Hindu*, 16 May 2010). My friends told me that the event was a great success and that Badagas and many non-Badaga guests enjoyed the cultural performances on stage. The uniqueness of Badaga culture was expressed in public speeches and Badaga leaders appeared in traditional white dress and wore white turbans. The news report from *The Hindu* ends with a reference to the multi-sited character of the event: “In Kotagiri, Porangadu Seemai Welfare Association and Porangadu Seemai Badaga Association held celebrations.” For this eastern part of the Nilgiri, a detailed account of Badaga Day is found on a personal website.

This personal website, “Bagdagas of the Blue Mountains” (<http://badaga.co/>), run by Wing Commander Bellie Jayaprakash, informs us in detail about Badaga society and Badaga culture (JAYAPRAKASH 2009). Badaga Day of 2010 is covered in much detail and also includes several photographs. I shall mention a few points of the ritual procedure from the “special correspondent’s report”: (1) the bust of the Badaga leader H. B. Ari Gowder is garlanded at Ooty; (2) the Badaga flag (completely white like the Badaga dress) is raised at Ooty; (3) a photograph of H. B. Ari Gowder is unveiled; (4) Ari Gowder’s daughter-in-law is honored with a *ponndai* shawl at the meeting point of Nattukal, where the regional councils take place; (5) another Badaga flag is raised at Nattakal; (6) scholarships to be awarded to Badaga students are announced; (7) Badaga activists report on their missions; (8) the media is present, and the correspondent of *The Hindu* reports.

On this website, Badaga Day is called Ari Gowder Day. This indicates a change of emphasis, from a political event in a post-Independence context, to the historical roots of a Badaga success story. H. B. Ari Gowder (1893–1971) was—according to the same website—“the first Badaga graduate, first Badaga MLC (Member of Legislative Council) and MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) for a long time who

had brought many reforms in/to Badaga community including ‘prohibition’ (no alcohol-*kudi*) to Nilgiris in British days itself. [...] Being a great philanthropist he had done a lot for the betterment of Badagas. He was the one who established Nilgiri Co-Op Marketing Society at Ooty, to save the small farmers—especially Badagas—from the exploits of middlemen and traders at Mandis in Mettupalayam. [...] His statue has been erected in the NCMS compound in appreciation of his great work.” When the question was raised by Arun Vishnu Kumar on 11 August 2008 at 1:31 p.m. as to why 15 May is the date of Ari Gowder Day, when it is neither his date of birth nor his date of death, Jayaprakash answered that he did not know the origin of the day. On the same website he expressed his disapproval of the function in Ooty, where the Young Badaga Association organized Badaga Day. I have no doubt that the organizers of the rally would remember the origin of the day. May is the peak tourist season with various cultural activities; politicians rest in the cool climate of the hills and media representatives follow them. One reason behind the dual celebration might be a political conflict between the Kotagiri area, traditionally called Poranganadu, and the Ooty area, known as Todanadu, over a family dispute, which turned into a communal split (*The Hindu*, 21 August 2009).

All in all, Badaga Day must be interpreted as a particular time-space of indigeneity. It echoes the rally of 1989 in various aspects and constitutes a hybrid form. The celebrations aim to unite the Badaga community. The uniqueness of Badaga culture is expressed internally and externally: Goddess Hette is worshipped, the white Badaga flag is raised, the bust of H. B. Ari Gowder is garlanded, cultural programs including dance are performed, and traditional leadership is displayed on stage. All these aspects of public identity are documented and are widely circulated. “Being Badaga” is expressed on stage and online. I would argue that this process finds its expression vis-à-vis the state culture. The crucial point of a memorandum is the handing-over of the document; Badaga leaders meet state representatives, men shake hands, and the document containing objectified descriptions of Badaga culture is incorporated into the collection of government files. On Badaga Day, state representatives are welcomed and honored. The presence of Badaga and non-Badaga politicians and administrators is seen as proof of the event’s success.

Public events are evaluated according to the status of the special and honored guests. It seems that the objectification of culture works best in the company of the cultural other. The currency of culture gains value in the presence of high office holders, whether they belong to the Badaga community or not. Badagas who work as public servants or hold party office represent both their own community and the state in a broad sense. On the one hand, they stand for the success of their own community; on the other hand, they speak and act as the cultural other. They are informed by outsiders’ views and speak about the government approach to local problems. An MP who arrives with a number of official vehicles and bodyguards represents an outside world, whether she or he is a Badaga or not and can act as a projection of objectified views. A similar quality is inherent to the objects of objectification. Stressing the semantic field, the bust of a Badaga leader and the Badaga flag stand for that specific culture, but in a symbolic form they represent

state culture. In my view, there is a twofold message: first, the Badagas constitute a distinct group with their own cultural values and infrastructure; second, they are integrated into the state, evidenced by their appropriation of state symbols and occupation of state offices.

This argument focusing on the role of the state in the process of self-identification, in the broadest sense, is supported by the “First Badaga” list, one of the tabs on Jayaprakash’s website. It names Badagas “who were/are ‘FIRST’ in any field.” Here is a selection: the first name mentioned is Rao Bahadur H. J. Bellie Gowder of Hubbathalai, who received the title “Rao Bahadur” from the British in the 1920s. Other names mentioned are Rao Bahadur H. B. Ari Gowder, son of H. J. Bellie Gowder, first MLA and MLC; Mr. Lingam as lawyer and first President of the local Bar Association; K. M. Sevannah Gowder as an engineer and first professor; and Mrs. Akkama Devi as the first woman graduate and MP. Other notables include the first medical doctor, first journalist, first state officer who retired as joint registrar, first dean, golf champion, High Court judge, colonel in the Indian army, novelist, hockey player, football player, industrialist, IAS officer, cabinet minister, IFS officer, IPS officer, fighter pilot, actor in a Tamil movie, female IFS officer, and young scientist award winner. Obviously, most of those listed achieved their status by way of the state or state institutions. The legitimizing force of “First Badaga” operates not within, but rather beyond the boundaries of the community.

The rally and Badaga Day are contexts of cultural objectification. The self-representation of the Badagas at these public events and on the Badaga website underlines several aspects which make up a state. The current internet presentations of various Badaga groups stress the points made above: dress and jewelry are captured in photographs, villages and ceremonies are described, and leaders are depicted and introduced. The community has its own territory with four divisions, more than three hundred villages, a myth of origin (the Badagas came from the north after a Muslim invasion), traditional leadership, its own (male and female) gods, its own language and a distinct visible culture (costumes, ornaments). Busts of leaders and a Badaga flag are central to Badaga Day. Taking all aspects together, there is no doubt that Badaga culture is a historical fact and a political force. Their self-description affirms that they possess all the ingredients needed to constitute a sovereign entity. The rally and the Memorandum were addressed to the government and to the state, but the stronger focus of Badaga Day was toward their own community. As one of the organizers told me in 2011, “After the rally we have to recover, secure strength and get firm, before addressing the government again.” The government representatives who spoke on Badaga Day were exclusively Badagas. The central events of the day were published in the daily papers. There is no doubt that it was meant to reach the public including politicians and administrators.

The objectifications I have discussed above are not just a material manifestation of a “culture” or a transformation of unconscious aspects to the conscious mind. In my view, the objects of importance stand indexically for aspects of Badaga society and at the same time for more general values. Objects such as a flag or a bust represent aspects of Badaga culture and at the same time ideas of a nation-state.

The objectifications on Badaga Day are a celebration both of the cultural self and of the concept of a state. Like the image of Wittgenstein's "duck-rabbit," two different concepts are objectified in a single form. Without doubt there are numerous messages expressed and several values incorporated in the complex event of Badaga Day. A common denominator of the Indian state and the Badaga community is the concept of sovereignty. The display of an internal (social and political) organization, holding programmatic speeches, singing identificatory songs, unveiling photographs and awarding scholarships are doubtless attributes of state performances adopted for the celebration of an ethnic identity. There is no doubt that the Badagas reenact ideas about themselves and about the state in the same space.

### CONCLUSION

Badaga indigeneity is deeply rooted in their own social and ritual setting and in a pan-Indian political practice. The most spectacular expression of their indigenous claims was a rally on 15 May 1989. The display of Badaga traditional dresses, the chanting of their songs, and the presentation of their leadership became a celebration of the social self. The organization, the logistics, the symbolic forms of a huge procession, the handing over of a memorandum, and a final gathering in a football stadium followed an established political procedure. The central claims addressed to the government are not unique in the Indian context but are rather a catalogue of items to improve the status of the entire community. On the day of the rally and in the weeks that followed, the Badagas felt that the event was a great success. The majority of all living Badagas were active participants in a shared spectacle; they gathered in their traditional white dress and celebrated their unity, they interacted with the government and with the public as witnesses to their celebration, and restructured their internal affairs. The Nakubetta Gowder occupied the central seat on stage at the final gathering in the stadium; to his left and right were the representatives of Badaga associations, and the huge crowd received his blessings. The amalgam of a timeless traditional culture and contemporary political strength, of old political offices and recently registered lobby groups, was experienced as a deeply moving moment for those who participated. The Badagas found themselves as demographically and politically the strongest group in the hills. After the rally there was a significant increase in Badaga cultural performances on stages in South Indian metropolitan cities and a growing presence on the internet.

A few years later the date of the rally was claimed as a Badaga holiday. This Badaga Day was created to celebrate their unique culture, their history, and their political unity. On these occasions they welcome government representatives and political leaders. The particular day, 15 May, is a memorial day for the Badaga rally and for presenting a memorandum to the Indian government, claiming a tribal district and tribal status. In these contexts the Badagas use symbolic forms of the nation-state such as flags and busts, they stage events, invite the press, and document events on their homepages. Similar to a nation-state claiming autonomy on the basis of history and as a result of a democratic practice, the Badagas claim

cultural autonomy. They appropriate the state forms and fill them with their own semantic content. By discussing the creation of a memorandum and the public events around the rally, I have tried to show that culture became a currency in claiming privileges for the region and for the community. The textual description of culture externalizes experience and de-contextualizes cultural ideas.

The sensory experience of the participants in the rally and on Badaga Day were informed by cultural forms known from Badaga festivities and from modern mass media. Rituals usually include processions with a specific internal order and are accompanied by Badaga music. Political events, the handing over of documents and the addressing of gatherings are known from television and from newspapers, and these events are considered to be of significance and to be happy occasions. Badaga values, such as social and physical proximity, communal harmony, or “oneness” are orchestrated at public events linked to indigenous politics. Local politicians succeeded in merging local interest and administrative requirements when they drafted a memorandum. The great majority of the Badaga people mentioned an emotional attachment to both a written document containing their demands and to the public gatherings meant to communicate indigenous claims. Elements forming ritual and religious contexts were incorporated in the rally and on Badaga Day and supported the emotional landscape of indigenous claims. Talking to Badagas from all walks of life several years after the rally it becomes obvious that the overall experience of the public event contributed to a kind of belonging, an attachment to their native villages, and to the landscape of the Nilgiri plateau. Even though the sensory experience differs among the participants—and changes in the memories of each individual over time—I consider the elements of whiteness, proximity, and mutual respect combined with the idea of oneness as central elements in the shared social aesthetics of this event.

Contrary to what David MACDOUGALL (2006) observed in his monumental documentation on the social aesthetics of an elite school in North India, the social aesthetics of the rally appear to be the result of an event planned and performed by local leaders and activists. Badaga people wanted to celebrate their oneness; they consciously utilized ritual elements and appropriated forms of political agitation. They externalized what they considered to be the nucleus of their cultural tradition. COHN’s observation (1987) of nineteenth-century Bengal about the objectification of culture, turning the invisible innermost into something external, appears to be part of the Badaga strategy a century later. By formulating a memorandum, the cultural essence was expressed in words and phrases. Culture became a thing and part of political negotiation. The process of objectification creates visible forms and numerous other sensory experiences and therefore a social aesthetics in its own right.

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