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The Social Life of an Ethnonym The “Kattu Nayaka” of South India

In this article I trace the ironic social life of the ethnic names used for a forest-dwelling people living in the Nilgiri-Wynaad in South India in various intersecting arenas: local, colonial, and postcolonial. They call themselves *sonta* (translatable as “own, relatives who live together”), usually prefixed by *nama* (our). Outsiders, such as the neighbors in their multi-ethnic region, and colonial and postcolonial administrators, have regarded them by various ethnonyms including Nayaka/Kattunayaka. I examine the meanings and politics of their appellations in this case study of the complex processes of making indigenous polities in India.

KEYWORDS: ethnic identity—ethnic names—indigenous polities—foraging people—Nilgiris—South India

see also, in the same 2014 issue: Coelho on Betta Kurumba, Demmer on Jenu Kurumba, Heidemann on Badaga, Wolf on Kota, and both Hockings and Wolf & Heidemann on indigeneity

IN THIS article I consider the social life of the ethnic category “Nayaka/Kattu Nayaka” during the past two hundred years as a case study of the complex processes of making indigenous polities in India. The forest-dwelling people I studied in the Nilgiri-Wynaad regard themselves primarily as *sonta* (translatable as “own, relatives who live together”), usually prefixed by *nama* (our). Their neighbors in their multi-ethnic region, as well as a host of colonial, academic, and postcolonial observers and administrators, have regarded them by various ethnonyms. I trace the ironic social life of their ethnic names in various intersecting arenas: local, colonial, and postcolonial. I focus on several significant points in the career of this ethnonym, and the perspectives and meanings attached to the name at each of these points. I begin from the indigenous practices regarding ethnonyms (based on my own fieldwork of 1978–1979, 1989, 2001, and the fieldwork of Daniel Naveh, conducted from 2003 to 2004, and Noa Lavi, conducted in 2010 and 2012). I then examine the ethnonyms used for this people locally by their neighbors, and in colonial and postcolonial administrative and academic frameworks. I end with the entry of the textual name into the national arena, where it plays an important part in legal claims for the rights of Scheduled Tribes (ST) living at the center of Tamil Nadu, far from the marginal areas where this forest-people community lives. Throughout the discussion I trace how through the contextual uses of these ethnonyms, shifting kinds of indigenities are evoked and mixed.

IS *SONTA* THE INDIGENOUS ETHNONYM?

I introduce my case by making an *a priori* choice from among the multiple possible ethnonyms (one that the use of the ethnonym “Nayaka” already reflects). The choice—and the fact that I had to make it—gives an initial sense of the diverse arenas in which the ethnonyms are played and struggle for their currency. When I arrived thirty years ago to the Nilgiri region in search of a study group suiting my interest in peoples who engage in gathering forest produce and who subsist to a significant extent on foraging wild resources (by gathering wild roots, fruits and berries, fishing, hunting wild animals, and collecting wild honey). I first paid a visit to a government office in Ootacamund, the capital of the Nilgiris district (Tamil Nadu). I was informed there that “Jenu Kurumbas” lived in the

Government Game Reserve of Mudumalai, about 50 kilometers away. The local official in this game reserve, which I next visited, did not know of “Jenu Kurumba.” He directed me to “Kattu Naikens” who lived in the reserve. A Malayali contractor who was working closely with these people said that their name was Naiken. I did not settle there for my intensive participant-observation study. Instead I went through a network of local connections, asking in each community that I visited whether they had relatives who lived further in the interior. Following their directions, I finally did my fieldwork with a community located in the Pandalur area that was relatively isolated both then and now. Their close neighbors called them Nayaka. They referred to themselves, among themselves, as *sonta* (often with the first person plural possessive prefix, *nama sonta*; henceforth, for simplicity I use only *sonta*).

This reflects another uneasy choice and a compromise. To say that “they referred to themselves, among themselves, as *sonta*” can easily be read as claiming that *sonta* is their own ethnonym for themselves, unknown to those who confusingly use other ethnonyms for them. In other words, *sonta* is their authentic ethnonym, or their auto-ethnonym (using VIVEIROS DE CASTRO’s gloss for the commonplace notions by which Amazonian peoples refer to themselves, translated as “real people” or something similar; 2012, 97).

Throughout my fieldwork, I was never urged to use *sonta* as an ethnonym, nor was I corrected when I used Nayaka. I heard *sonta* used when people referred to their relatives, which was not surprising because *sonta* is a common word in other local dialects and languages for relatives. I was surprised when I heard it used beyond blood relatives, for whom the term is reserved among Badaga. I heard it once used, for example, in a late evening chat with the man whose family I was living with during fieldwork. I told him that I had come from a faraway country. He corrected me, stating that I live with them and am thus *nama sonta* (“one of our own”). The pleasure I had at first in understanding this and similar utterances to mean I was adopted then gave way to wonderment as I gradually learned that various forest beings and the forest itself are referred to as *sonta* as well. For example, the explanation of why young forest creatures that are found deserted in the forest are brought home and taken care of, to the extent of feeding them with mother’s milk (on feeding children, see BIRD-DAVID 2008); or addressing the forefathers and animistic beings as *dod-appanu* (big parents; on these celebrations, see BIRD-DAVID 1999). In earlier work, I paid attention to this notion as a kinship concept (see, among others, BIRD-DAVID 1994), exploring its cultural meanings. To be a “relative” clearly hinged on living together in the local meaning (BIRD-DAVID 1994). I gradually realized, however, that cross-culturally many hunter-gatherers refer to themselves by resembling notions (though this is not exclusive to them).

Hunter-gatherers are often known by multiple, confusing, and derogatory ethnonyms that in many cases are introduced and used by others. The *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* (LEE AND DALLY 1999, 257–60) makes this point effectively, case by case. It further attests to a growing trend—considered politically correct and important within the general effort to make indigenous

modernities—to switch from the ethnonyms given to them by others to the self-referential terms they use. A striking example in studies on hunter-gatherers are the textbook examples of the South African hunter-gatherers known variously as San, Bushmen, and !Kung, but who now are renamed *zhu/twasi* (real people). Notwithstanding political advantages, shifting to the indigenous peoples' own terms of referring to themselves is problematic, *ad absurdum*. Imagine an ethnographer of English people who keeps hearing the natives refer to themselves as “we, our own” or “we, the people of this country,” or, “we, the real people,” and then writes an ethnography on the “We,” or the “People of this country,” or the “Real People.” Elsewhere (in a work in progress), I explore (*nama*) *sonta* as not an auto-ethnonym but as an expression reflecting alternative ontological senses of group and peoplehood, a variant of similarly used notions cross-culturally.

To say, then, that the people I chose to call Nayaka refer to themselves as *sonta* compromises a complex position. But it helps to disassociate the ethnonyms Nayaka and Kattu Nayaka from these people, enough to reconstitute these ethnonyms as objects of investigation in themselves. This I do in the rest of the article, exploring the social life of these ethnonyms.

NAYAKA IN THE LOCAL NILGIRI-WYNAAD AREA

Living among other tribal and non-tribal populations, this small community engaged daily with other people. They were involved with communities of different ethnicities living in their area far more than with their own relatives who had moved to other areas. The need to use an ethnonym for them arose in this local multi-ethnic context. The ethnonym used locally for this community by their immediate neighbors (between the 1950s and the 1980s) was Naicken. This was one of various spellings used locally that Nayaka later replaced with Kattu Nayaka, and it has come to be a popular official category in the region. (I henceforth use only Nayaka for clarity.) As elaborated below, Nayaka is an ethnonym that widely recurs in other regions in India, in this or another spelling, with one or another prefix. Its Sanskrit origin means leader or chief.

The ethnonym Nayaka was used only in certain contexts between the 1950s and the 1980s. Two separate records suggest that it was not used in small-scale, local, heterogeneous, bureaucratic, and commercial organizations, where close interpersonal engagement took place between the diverse members. The first records are those of over thirty years of casual workers' attendance at work and their wage payments in a plantation in the Pandalur area, where a number of the people I studied had been working on and off from the 1950s to the 1980s (see more on their employment and on these records which I recovered from a small shed in this plantation; BIRD-DAVID 1992). The workers were all registered by personal name, with no special registration of their “tribe” or other ethnic marker. The personal names used for individual workers from the forest community I studied were names generally used for diverse tribal people living in the Nilgiri-Wynaad, like Mathen and Chathen for males and Mathi and Chathi for females. The second set

of records consists of pupils' grades in a school that had been opened in the 1960s for the plantation's laborers' children, including a few children of the forest people with whom I worked. This school had operated for eight troubled years, after which it was closed down following the high turnover of teachers—ten during those eight years—and frequent inspectors' reports on the school's deplorable situation. The records, which I retrieved from a local government archive, list the pupils only by their personal names, also without distinguishing the pupils' tribal or ethnic affiliation. These personal names in all likelihood were endowed on the pupils by the teachers. Some of these personal names were used generally for tribal people (as above), and some were popular Indian names like Indira and Sandram. These names either way clearly stood out from the rest as the majority of the school's pupils were of Muslim origin and bore Muslim personal names. In both the school and the plantation record forms, there was not even one column specifically for entering an ethnic category.

At the same time, the name Nayaka was used during the same years in what may be called folk-anthropology, that is, in fellow plantation workers' and local neighbors' occasional accounts of the customs of the indigenous inhabitants. The migrant laborers, who had mostly migrated from villages in Kerala, had enlivened their dull days in the out-of-the-way small plantation by observing the lives of their new exotic neighbors. They offered these accounts in highly generalized and stereotypical terms, alongside their otherwise direct interpersonal engagement and friendship with one or the other of the same indigenous people, whether on the plantation or even at indigenous homes. The neighbors abstracted and reified as "Nayaka customs" what those who engaged in these actions themselves were reluctant to describe and frame in such terms. Consider this example: Mathi, a young woman living in the hamlet in which I lived, went into labor. The news spread in the area, and all her relatives came to be with her while she was in labor, some returning midday from work, some returning from their foraging pursuits, and some coming from their distant hamlets. Among the visitors was a Muslim woman who had befriended the mother-to-be in the plantation where they had been working side by side. This Muslim woman used the ethnonym Nayaka in explaining to me that it is the Nayaka custom to pay a visit during birthing, which is why she visited Mathi, her friend.

Since the 1980s, the Nilgiri-Wynaad has seen a massive influx of Tamil-speaking refugees from Sri Lanka and land-hungry immigrants from neighboring Kerala. NGOs started working in the region with the local indigenous people, referring to them—as in the rest of India generally—in the initial years as "tribal" and later as *ādivāsī*. The managerial positions in these local organizations were staffed by workers coming from large urban centers such as Mumbai. These workers distinguished and registered their indigenous beneficiaries by ethnonyms, not just personal names. For example, ACCORD (Action for Community Organization, Rehabilitation and Development) operated a school and a hospital for tribal people in Gudalur. Their beneficiaries were distinguished in terms of their ethnicity by their ethnonyms into Betta Kurumba, Paniya, and Kattu Nayaka. Most of the beneficiaries were of the first

two larger, local *ādivāsī* groups. But a few Kattu Nayaka children were registered each year in their school, and a few Kattu Nayaka patients were admitted and treated each year in the hospital. In 2000 ACCORD helped a group of twenty students who came from Madras to conduct a home-to-home survey among tribal people in the Gudalur-Wynaad, under the auspices of the IDA (Institute for Development Alternatives). Their census included the forest people described in their records as “Kattunayaka.” The name “Kattu Nayaka” increasingly gained a stronghold in the local arena, although the people concerned remained, until the turn of the twenty-first century, at the very far edge of the regional NGOs sphere of operation and influence.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, NGOs centered in Pandalur extended their reach to the local *ādivāsī* people. For example, the CTRD (Center for Tribal and Rural Development) built houses and community centers for *ādivāsī* people in the Pandalur area, including the very same small community with whom I lived in the late 1970s. The latter were occasionally distinguished by this NGO’s personnel as not generally *ādivāsī* but specifically “Kattu Nayaka,” especially in their dealings with foreign donors and anthropologists. Interestingly, the indigenous people I had studied in the late 1970s, who as described above had then mostly referred to themselves as *nama sonta*, now commonly referred to themselves as *ādivāsī* in dealing with this NGO and with other government and non-government organizations. The term *ādivāsī* has become for them the common one for asserting indigeneity. It seems—subject to closer inspection—that they use *ādivāsī* more frequently than Kattu Nayaka.

NAYAKA/KATTU NAYAKA IN THE INTERTEXTUAL ARENA

Ethnographic writing usually involves shifting from “we” and “us” to “they.” This “they” had to be named for the sake of clear disposition, if nothing else. When I began writing about the forest community with whom I lived I no longer could use their self-referential term, *nama sonta* (our own), so I shifted to the ethnonym used by their immediate neighbors, Nayaka.

Using an ethnonym, in turn, necessitates determining whom to consider “Nayaka” and whom not to. Nayaka lends itself to being read as an essentialist and inherently exclusive category: that is, one is or is not Nayaka by predetermined criteria such as one’s parents’ ethnicity. In predicating criteria of class membership, “Nayaka” (or any other ethnonym used in the ethnography), stands in sharp contrast with the local own we-notion described, (*nama*) *sonta*, which is inherently open and inclusive. Using Nayaka over-homogenized a community that in essentialist ethnic terms was more diversified than may be realized. Consider this particular example: the core of the small community with whom I worked included three siblings (two sisters and one brother) whose father was a Paniya, in the neighbors’ ethnic terms. This Paniya man had worked in the plantation for a few years and then left the area. Their mixed parentage did not affect how these three siblings were regarded. They were considered *nama sonta*, as was anybody else living in this hamlet, including myself. In fact, the brother happened to be the oldest living

man in the hamlet, the first-born in indigenous terms. This position entitled him to—and demanded from him—certain communal responsibilities, for example, to initiate the annual trance-gathering that is the main and almost the only Nayaka celebration. His mixed parentage was not an issue at all even for this position. For all purposes, he was a Nayaka no less than the others. In the local own understanding, “our own” included everyone living with us, overruling essentialist features cognized but considered less important. In an ironic twist, when I asked my informants who is a Nayaka, they told me that Nayaka are all those who live with us, like us, in our places. Nayaka by this local definition is a hybrid category of sorts, reflecting senses of local notions of *nama sonta*, but only up to certain limits for the latter as mention extends even beyond the human, and can include nonhumans.

To state the obvious, an ethnographic text builds on and has to relate to previous texts. An ethnographer, for this reason, has not only to use an ethnonym in his or her writing. He or she has to identify his or her study group with, or distinguish it from, other local groups living in the same area mentioned by their ethnonyms in previous texts. The Nilgiris have enjoyed—or, some would say, suffered from—an unusual amount of scholarly attention. It is one of the most-studied areas in Asia for its size (see HOCKINGS 1996 for an extensive bibliography). The steep Nilgiris hills and the belt of forests at its foothills (local folklore had it that it was enough for one to point towards these forested areas from afar to fall ill with malaria) had secured the relative isolation of its tribal population until the British arrived. The first British person known to be in the Nilgiri Wainad was none other than Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington. The “discovery” of the upper hills is related in some accounts to two British adventurers who had climbed up the six thousand feet of the hills and then published a letter in *The Madras Courier* (23 February 1819), in which they reported their surprise and delight at finding in the midst of the clouds a rolling countryside reminiscent of their cool English home countryside. After this “discovery,” a rapid British colonization of the hills began. Convalescent homes were built for military personnel and missionaries; the seat of the government of the presidency of Madras moved to the hills every year for six months; tea and coffee were planted on the sloping plateau and the hillsides; a principal hill station, Ootacamund, was built, and became the main health and recreational resort for Europeans in South India, and a major site for the administrative, military, and social headquarters of the British rule.

Since its so-called “discovery” by the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the various tribal inhabitants of the Nilgiris have been described in numerous ways again and again, at first by explorers, travelers, and British administrators, and later by anthropologists. Initially, there were volumes of cultural profiles, describing groups one by one, more or less in a uniform format, detailing their name, territory, territorial divisions, leadership, and so on. Such descriptions partly responded to colonial administrative needs, for example to assist tax collection. But this is surely not the only reason, especially in the case of such scattered and small groups of forest dwellers such as the Nayaka who subsisted on foraging. The desire to produce a neat map of the tribal groups living in the Nilgiris stemmed from,

and reflected, the observers' curiosity and nationalistic world view. The observers approached these fascinating and exotic tribal groups on their own contemporary European terms, assuming and looking for distinct ethnic traditions that had to be mapped and profiled. The colonial observers were concerned to categorize the Nilgiris tribal population in terms of its constituent distinct societies/tribes/cultures, or at least in terms of tribal sub-divisions in the face of apparent indigenous plurality and the local peoples' own seeming "confusion."

The encyclopedic project of describing tribal populations in a more or less uniform format, headed by their ethnonyms, continues. It responds to a genuine need for this sort of order in the large-scale and global national and international arena. Described in its internet site as "a unique institution in the world," the Anthropological Survey of India continues the colonial project: sorting out and profiling the wealth of diverse peoples living in India. Its purpose, however, has changed and is now seeing the similarities and linkages across four thousand or so communities.

The colonial and postcolonial pan-Indian project of ethno-naming and profiling the local inhabitants resonates with academic work. Once Nayaka or Kattu Nayaka was used in ethnographic writing, and in turn related, however vaguely, to other ethnonyms appearing in previous literature, it found its way to current encyclopedic cross-cultural texts in anthropology. For example, the *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* (LEVINSON and HOCKINGS 1992, 194–96), and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* (LEE and DALY 1999) both include entries on the Nayaka. Now, in such entries one cannot elaborate on the problematic nature of using this or that ethnonym: one writes about the people concerned by means of a chosen ethnonym, meanwhile, affixing the name to that people, adding to the growing intertextual confusion of names.

It is worth noting that an impression of the natives' own social sense of themselves appears more clearly in the early colonial literature than in the later anthropological scholarship (BIRD-DAVID 1987). Less constrained by the disciplinary frame of ethnographic studies, the early observers hinted at the indigenous ways of seeing themselves, if only between the lines of what these observers published. Take, for example, BREEKS (1873). He openly and disarmingly reports on the difficulties he experienced:

It is difficult to get a complete account of the tribal divisions recognized by them [Kurumbas]. One man will name you one (his own); another two divisions; another three, and so on. (BREEKS 1873, 48)

He nonetheless proposed four subdivisions "given to me by the headman of one village: Botta Kurumbas, Kambale Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas, and Anda Kurumbas" (BREEKS 1873, 48). As I have already noted (BIRD-DAVID 1987), the apparent vagueness and confusion in the early accounts of the Nilgiri tribal divisions and sub-divisions for which these accounts were subsequently criticized may actually reflect something authentic of the tribal social reality and of the problem not so much of their names but of our naming them.

The ontological gap between the diversity of locally-used ethnonyms and between the textual names used in the colonial literature is indicated by repeated attempts to match the two sets. For example, the locally-used Nayaka and increasingly Kattu Nayaka are associated with the textual name Kurumba, which is one of the ethnonyms appearing in the colonial literature of the Nilgiris and the Mysore plains, and in the anthropological scholarship on the Nilgiris. The textual name Kurumba attracted a great deal of discussion and debate about its sub-divisions. It generally described the scattered forest-dwelling tribal populations subsisting on foraging. Its usage for such populations consolidated alongside the detailed ethnographic studies of other tribal populations in the Nilgiris, the Toda, Badaga, and Kota that became classic works in anthropology, and not only in the Nilgiri scholarship.

Their Kurumba divisions were a main concern, and with each successive study their number seemed only to increase. In one of the earliest works by BUCHANAN (1807), two divisions were proposed (Cad- and Betta-Curubaru, cited in THURSTON 1909, iv: 163–64). In DUBOIS's masterly publication (1973) their number was increased to four (Botta-Kurumbas, Kambale-Kurumbas, Mullu-Kurumbas, and Anda-Kurumbas), and a few years later in GRIGG (1880) into six (Eda-Kurumbas, Karmadiya-Kurumbas, Kurumbas proper, Kurumbas Okkiliya, Male-Kurumbas, and Pal-Kurumbas; all of which are different from the names of the four divisions mentioned by Brecks). The concern over the division and their identification continued in the anthropology of the region. Closest to the time of my 1978–1979 fieldwork, the linguist D. B. KAPP (1978) suggested seven Kurumba tribes (Mudugas, Alu-Kurumbas, Palu-Kurumbas, Bette-Kurumbas, Jenu-Kurumbas, Mullu-Kurumbas, and Urali-Kurumbas). As mentioned, Jenu Kurumba is one of the ethnonyms used for the people I studied as well as Nayaka/Kattu Nayaka, confusing the two even today (for example, see GARDNER 2013).

The new generation of ethnographers now has to match their textual names not only with the names used in the colonial literature but also with the names used by preceding ethnographers. In the Wynaad area, various Indian scholars studied people they named Sholanaicken or Chollanaicken (*shola* or *cholla* means forest). Among them, for example, are MATHUR (1978) and BHANU (1982; 1989; see also VARGHESE 1993). To distinguish his study group from the Kattu Nayaka, BHANU (1989, 50–56) argued that the Kattu Nayaka are the "more advanced." The Cholla Nayaka, he maintained, received their name erroneously because they were wrongly identified with the Kattu Nayaka who, like themselves, are experts in honey collection. Studying the Nayaka twenty years after my own study, NAVEH (2007) worked with two communities some four hours walk away from one another, and each four hours walk away from my own study group. Naveh reports that one of these communities was described by their neighbors as comprising Kattu Nayaka and Shola Nayaka. But when these people themselves were asked by Naveh about their ethnic name and identity, Naveh states:

People from both (apparently distinct) groups often admitted to having no idea whether they are Kattu-Nayaka or Chola-Nayaka. Alternatively, people from the

same hamlet offered conflicting answers. Some of them argued that there is no difference; that “we are all Nayaka.” In some cases people took what was written in their ration card as a reference to their ethnicity. (NAVEH 2007, 31)

Naveh’s observation ironically resonates with BREEKS’s (1873) observation made more than a hundred years previously (cited earlier). Meanwhile, it doubly indicates the lasting sense when I try to describe a gap between the social life of the ethnonyms and the social life of those named by them. Thirty years later, then, these indigenous people—or *ādivāsī*, Nayaka, Kattu Nayaka, or Shola Nayaka—do not appear to decisively describe themselves by one ethnonym or another, except vis-à-vis the official machinery using these ethnonyms. The officially-used ethnonym (for example, that appearing in the ratio card) often decides the ethnicity as much as the other way around. Next, I turn from the Nilgiri-Wynad region to the national arena at large.

NAYAKA/KATTU NAYAKA IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Nayaka and Kattu Nayaka play a part in the national pan-Indian sphere. These names are included in the list of Scheduled Tribes and castes, going back to The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950. These ethnonyms are found not just in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu, not to mention Nilgiris district. These ethnonyms appear in the constitution lists of six different states in India: Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, with or without other names that appear in the colonial texts (mentioned partly above). The relevant lines in the constitution lists are reproduced below:

Part I—Andhra Pradesh:

13. Kattunayakan

Part IV—Karnataka:

15. Jenu Kuruba.

16. Kadu Kuruba.

20. Kattunayakan.

38. Naikda, Nayaka, Cholivala Nayaka, Kapadia Nayaka, Mota Nayaka, Nana Nayaka. [Naik, Nayak, Beda Bedar, and Valmiki]

Part VII—Kerala:

9. Kattunayakan

18. Kurumbas

Part IX—Maharashtra:

35. Naikda, Nayaka, Cholivala Nayaka, Kapadia Nayaka, Mota Nayaka, Nana Nayaka.

Part XIII—Rajasthan:

10. Naikda, Nayaka, Cholivala Nayaka, Kapadia Nayaka, Mota Nayaka, Nana Nayaka.

Part XIV—Tamil Nadu:

- 9. Kattunayakan
- 17. Kurumbas (in the Nilgiri district).

Notably, in the case of Tamil Nadu, Kurumbas are listed with specific reference to the Nilgiri district, whereas no regional specification is added in the case of "Kattunayakan." The latter appears in all six lists. FURER-HAIMENDORF suggested back in 1952 that "Kurumba is one of those tribal names which have done so much to obscure the ethnic pictures of many Indian regions" (1952, 19). Kattunayaka and Nayaka seem to be serious contenders for this distinction. These names seem to obscure the ethnic pictures of half a dozen states.

Far from being simply academic listings, the constitution lists of Scheduled Tribes are a highly important political stake and a strategic resource in India. The reservation of seats (in the form of special quotas in higher education institutes and workplaces) for the "depressed classes" (the loose term used at the time) was fiercely debated toward the end of the British Raj. It was entangled with the movement for self-government in India. Reservation of seats was included in the British Government of India Act 1935, whence the term "Scheduled Castes" came into use. In the 1950 Act, a further distinction was made between "Scheduled Castes" (SC) and "Scheduled Tribes" (ST).

The 1950 constitution lists of ST (and SC which I exclude from this discussion) provide the basis for affirmative action, known popularly as the "reservation." It constitutes positive, preferential treatment to SC in the allotment of jobs and access to higher education, according to constitutionally determined and binding proportions in each state. It hardly needs mentioning that reserved places in institutes of education and in the labor force are of great importance for applicants, certainly in India. A whole administrative system evolved around the implementation of the "reservation," for regulating and controlling the claims and the benefits given. Appeals to court which, in some cases, reached the Supreme Court in Delhi, have had their bearing on how a special terminology developed for these procedures and the political negotiation over claimed indigeneity. (Core terms in this discourse are written in italics in the following paragraph.)

Generally, there are "applicants" in this system. They apply for "community certificates," stating their tribal affiliation. Their submissions are approved (or not) by "competent authorities" whose rank in the administrative ladder has grown increasingly higher over the years. In Tamil Nadu, for example, following a change in the law in 2007, the authority was taken away from the District Collector, and previously from Tashildars and Revenue Divisional Officer/Sub Collectors. A special committee was authorized to deal with ST community certificates: a "State Level Scrutiny Committee." This committee comprises the Secretary to Government Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department as Chairman, a Director/Commissioner of Tribal Welfare as Member Secretary, and an anthropologist as Member, with appeals concerning its decisions possible only to the High Court and the Supreme Court. (Compare this with "District Level Vigilance Committee"

for SC applications which include the District Collector as Chairman, a District Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Officer as a Member Secretary, and an Anthropologist as a Member.) The function of the committee is described in terms such as “to scrutinize” and find out if the “claim for social status” is “not genuine” or “doubtful” or “spurious” or “falsely or wrongly” claimed/issued. In case the certificate obtained or social status claimed is found to be false, there follows a prosecution for making a false claim. Conviction is regarded “an offence involving moral turpitude, disqualification for elective posts or offices in any local body, legislature or the Parliament.”

The change effected through these procedures is immense in the case of the very small scale and scattered forest-dwelling indigenous tribal populations on which I focus here. The saga of their ethnonym continues to unfold in remarkable ways at this stage. As suggested, they perceived themselves to be relatives who live together. Living together counted more—in their terms—than ethnic origin. They were named by outsiders. Their ethnicity was reified and labeled again and again by ethnyonyms within the various arenas in which they participated as objects of study and/or participant actors. The increasing appellation politics hinged ethnic identity to exclusive criteria. Now, their ethnic affiliation is, in legal terms, completely divorced from where, with whom, and how they live; it is administratively decided by the state, in terms of “true” or “false”; it is regulated and censored bureaucratically; and it is credited and sanctioned by the state.

The means by which this scrutiny is carried out, and the status determined, is interesting in itself. Compared with actually sharing life together day-by-day in the same hamlet, applicants are instructed to submit in support of their application previously state-issued certificates in which the desired ST status already appears. These mostly include certificates of education (of their own or of close family members, such as their father and sister); birth certificates; revenue statements of a sale deed, and so on. In this way, the state not only appropriates the regulation and scrutiny of ST status recognition but begins to produce and reproduce it as well.

No less interesting is the role of the anthropologist in the administrative and legal processes leading to recognizing and establishing ST ethnicity. While the contributions of anthropologists in actual cases have yet to be studied, I know that my own publications on the Nayaka/Kattu Nayaka near Pandalur in the Nilgiris were drawn on in one particular case of a lengthy and complex appeal for a community certificate as genuine Kattunayaka. This case is briefly described here, but I have changed identifying details. The person involved, Mr. N, had fought an incredibly long and complex legal battle for this certificate. His case began in the late 1970s, when on the basis of a certificate issued by a Tashildar he was admitted to high school in a large city in Tamil Nadu under the ST quota. The authority of that Tashildar was questioned. Mr. N, however, stated that he had already appealed for a legitimate certificate and would shortly provide it. But his appeal turned out to be a complex and lengthy process. The replacing certificate was still due when Mr. N graduated from the school and was given a job in a large company—on the same understanding that his community certificate would shortly be provided.

Two decades passed, during which Mr. N was promoted several times, although the decision regarding his application for a community certificate was still pending. Mr. N awaited court decisions in a process that became more and more complex, and the case moved up the legal ladder, reaching the Supreme Court in Delhi where, thirty years later, some are still awaiting a final decision.

At one point in this long and complex legal battle, in the mid 1980s a District Collector passed an order to the effect that the appellant belonged to the Hindu Vedar community and not the Kattunayakkan community as claimed by Mr N. Following an appeal to the High Court in Madras, the issue was reconsidered by a State Level Scrutiny Committee that approved the applicant's Kattunayaka status. As part of his appeal, the applicant provided an anthropological report, dwelling at some length on the ethnonym. An argument that considerably helped winning the claim was that Nayaka is commonly used locally as short for Kattunayaka in the Nilgiri-Wynaad. Mr. N's community lived hundreds of kilometers away from the Nilgiris, but the name had its own social life. The argument that Mr. N's community is known as Nayaka in its locality (here, as short for Vella Nayaka) was strong enough to win the appeal. The court is bound by the logic of evidence. The ethnonym Kattunayaka has progressed in the legal arena to another phase in its rich and eventful social life. This case brings the story of the social life of Nayaka/Kattu Nayaka to an unimagined climax.¹

CONCLUSIONS

No doubt the social life of the ethnonym Nayaka/Kattunayaka has not come yet to its conclusion. The saga of this ethnonym, which has gone on for nearly two centuries, will continue. The case so far is a thought-provoking reminder of the need not simply to name indigenous people and distinguish between indigenous ethnicities, but to discuss the complex and ironic process of the naming itself for a sense of the performance of indigenous polities in contemporary India. This case calls for examining the ironies, paradoxes, and subversions that take place on the way, and the intersection of colonial, scholarly, and postcolonial arenas in the reproduction and transformation not only of the ethnonyms but the lived realities behind them.

NOTES

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