

CHAPTER 23

The Religion of the Tribes of Kerala and Tamil Nadu

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INTRODUCTION

God has made man in His image, but everywhere, especially among the tribal communities of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, we find humans making and remaking God in their own images, changeable according to time and circumstance. We find instances illustrating, but not proving, most of the theories of religion propounded by scholars. Max Mueller's theory that religion arises out of myths based upon the personification of natural phenomena can be reflected in some beliefs of some of our communities. We find cases illustrative of derivation of gods from early 'savage' experiences of 'ghosts' who could be the heroic ancestors of the tribe, as conceived by Herbert Spencer. The evolutionary view of religious development, as propounded by Tyler in his *Primitive Culture*, through various stages of animism to monotheism, may also be illustrated by examples from our tribes, but not the hypothesis of an evolution of belief from one stage to another, because all of them tend to co-exist simultaneously in the same community. Totemic rites designed to promote social solidarity, representing a compendium of shared sacred beliefs and rites along with a corresponding cult organization constituting the means enabling the social group to reaffirm itself periodically, may explain some of the characteristics of religion as asserted by Durkheim (1961). We may also see, with Levi-Strauss, religion as essentially a symbol system that expresses the basic qualities of a social reality. Or, with Lubbock we may trace the evolution of religious beliefs from atheism through fetishism, nature worship, totemism, shamanism, anthropomorphism and polytheism to monotheism, but not necessarily in that order! Purely as a phenomenon, in religion as practiced by the tribal communities of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, all modes of handling the unknown mysterious experiences beyond the ken of human understanding are present in them, but in different degrees depending on the level of influences, especially in terms of ecology, technology, and exposure to other systems of knowledge (Malinowski 1948). In this article, we start with the most isolated tribal communities, still forest-dwelling

and largely forest-dependent many of whom do not practice settled agriculture, not because they are 'primitive' in an evolutionary sense, but only to illustrate the influence of increasing exposure to the influence of other communities that resulted in change of religious belief and praxis.

COMPARATIVELY ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

The Cholanaikkar (singular - Cholanaikkan) of the deep evergreen forests far in the interior of the New Amarambalam Reserve Forests, just below the towering escarpment of the Kundah Range of the Nilgiri Mountains, are among the most isolated tribal communities in Kerala. They continue to stay in natural caves along the escarpment, where the steep climb saves them from unwelcome attention by wildlife. The caves have pure water that percolates through the rocks and trickles down in streams, so that water supply is perennial and right at hand. Each cave is actually a 'hamlet', where a set of families belonging to the same clan live together, but each has a separate corner. They have an elaborate system of sharing of food, so that none goes hungry. They consider the caves in which they live as sacred places, and do not dirty them by answering calls of nature in them - in fact, husbands and wives have sex, not in the caves, but in the surrounding jungles (Bhanu A 1989). They subsist by gathering food from the forests, occasionally trapping monkeys and other animals, and by catching fish from the streams. They recognize a strange form of property, *chemmam*, according to which each family has the right to collect minor forest produce (non-timber forest produce) from the resources in a specific reach of the forests, including individual trees. Thus, a family may have the exclusive right to collect honey from a specific tree, which is recognized and never encroached upon by others. (The word *chemmam* has close similarity with '*jenmam*', literally meaning 'birth-right', used in Kerala to designate an over lordship over territorial possessions. Thus, it is possible to surmise that the Cholanaikkar adopted it by acculturation from the outside world.) The head of the family may generously allow another Cholanaikkan to collect the honey on some specific occasions when the other is in dire need. They are now in the "Core" zone of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, and are likely to be victims of rigours imposed by governmental agencies, legally empowered to trample on the lifestyles of the poor in pursuit of the sophisticated world's newfound "love" for Nature and wildlife.

Their pantheon consists of many gods and spirits, "*dewa*" being the generic term for the former, and "*nilalu*" for the latter. Linguistically, it can be seen that the former is probably an adoption of a term from the language of outsiders, but the latter is typically Dravidian in its origin, and probably indigenous to the Cholanaikkar. The former is represented by metal images of deities and ancestor spirits, kept in a basket (*devakotta* = literally, "the basket of the gods") in the households. The corner in which this basket is kept is especially sacred; women even if they are not in their periods are barred from approaching it. There are some other deities whose idols are kept in the interior forests because they are so holy. Significantly, it is believed that, if disturbed by too close human approach, they will become powerless against the gods of the plains. Splendid isolation is thus the key to their supremacy.

Each cave (*alai*) keeps an idol representing the *Mala dewam*, god of the Mountains. Cholanaikkar believe that this god controls the whole eco-system and will protect them from all calamities, of wind and weather, storm and deluge. Each river has a deity representing it, known as *Oie dewam*. Some families whose transactions in non-timber forest produce take them down the mountains, worship also *Natu dewam*, the god of the plains territories, who protects them from infections and diseases that may otherwise be transferred to them from the mysterious and powerful denizens of the outside world, perceived by them as the 'plains'.

There is another category of deity known as *uruva*, literally meaning 'figure' or 'shape', and which can be annotated as 'the essence of being'. Every headman keeps and worships the *one uruva*, represented by the figure of an elephant (*aane* = elephant.) It is a talisman that even if not formally worshipped and propitiated, will prevent elephants from attacking and harming members of his group. The *uli uruva* represents the essence of the tiger, and is actually in the shape of a tigress – the female of the species being notoriously the more ferocious. Less ferocious but still feared are the oxen and bullocks that sometimes stray into the forests, until they are killed off by the predators; they are neutralized by the *kala uruva* kept by the Cholanaikkar. And, last but not the least, the *aalu uruva* is the effigy of a human being from the "plains" – the most feared intruder into their sylvan surroundings, the constant prayer of the Cholanaikkar being that no harm should come to them from these unknown beings, shaped like themselves, but behaving so strangely and savagely, and with so many different needs and desires! But there is also another human figurine worshipped as a benign deity – *vilakkuthampuratty*, the 'Lady of the Lamp'.

Apart from these deities, formless but ever-present ancestor spirits are worshipped and propitiated with offered boiled rice, tobacco, betel leaves and arecanut, whenever the group comes into possession of these rare luxuries. The headman, known as *chemmakkaran*, is priest and religious functionary at these acts of worship. It is believed that he is so powerful as to control the evil propensities of some of the spirits, and that he can punish people by setting them against his enemies, when they will be devastated with diseases and pain.

Their concept of illness and disease is that they are due to the anger of any one or more of these supernatural beings. When one feels uncomfortable, he approaches the *chemmakkaran* sits beside the sufferer and blows air on him, from head to foot and along each side successively. The *chemmakkaran* touches the patient's forehead with his hands, and moves closer every time he blows on him; the last puff is life a kiss. If this does not improve the condition, then *valatsalu* is tried. A bell is taken from the divine basket, and circulated round the patient's head a number of times, uttering the names of the gods and ancestral spirits. Still if there is no improvement, *adikkanalu* is performed with a religious instrument called *bide*, which is the dry fruit case of a creeper, into which small seeds or beads have been put in, the hole then having been sealed with beeswax. The *chemmakkaran* dances round the patient rattling away, until he gets an afflatus that enables him to divine the precise cause. This might have been a transgression against some norm (*thettu*), which thus becomes an offence (*kuttam*), for which a suitable punishment such as fine or propitiatory worship is prescribed. If

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still, there is no improvement, then, the suffering is ascribed to the evil influence of the "Plains Gods" over whom the *chemmakkaran* has no control. The patient either dies, or recovers.

We can see in the Cholanaikkan religious system the proto-form of every element of popular Hinduism. Theirs is a 'primitive religion' in the sense that it is practised by a people living in a small society with simple material culture, and lacking a corpus of written literature, as defined by Evans-Pritchard (1965).

The Kader, especially those of the Parambikulam area, had been the subject of classic studies a century back by several famous anthropologists like LK Ananthakrishna Iyer. They worship a giant, centuries-old natural-grown teak (*Tectona grandis*) tree that they call the *Kannimara*, the First or Original Tree, the primordial being. They keep garlands on it all the year round, and offer flowers whenever possible as they pass by it. In addition, they worship it at an annual festival, when they renew all the garlands that had withered away. This is a benign god, who is there spreading branches far and wide, protecting man and beast, and demanding nothing in return – what more need a "Supreme God" do? But there are many other spirits that are malevolent, and known, strangely enough, as "*Muni*" – a borrowing from a word meaning a saint or an ascetic, or in ancient times, a Jaina monk. They are not exactly worshipped, nor are prayers addressed to them, nor does any form represent them. But sometimes a man may get into a frenzy and blow hard on children to exorcise them of these spirits. Munis are believed to cause conjunctivitis, and may desist if propitiated with coconut, plantain, rice and *agarbathi*. There are several more deities in their pantheon now; acculturated from the ubiquitous Tamilian population around them, who and whose immediate ancestors were imported into the area for the works on the mighty Parambikulam Hydro-electric Project. There is Mariamma and Mariyathai, Matti Godan and Kali Amman, Murukan and Atuvancherry Amman. They jostle with the deities of the hill and forest, and with the typical deity of the South, Ayyappan of Sabarimala. Malavazhi, the Supreme god of the hills and forest, is now just one of the multitudes.

In a remarkable insightful passage, Ananthakrishna Iyer recorded a century ago:

Special interest attaches to the religion of the Kadars as representing a comparatively early stage in the process of conversion to Brahmanism... The real working religion of the tribe is pure animism of the type which still survives comparatively untouched by Hindu influences... Kadar believe themselves to be encompassed about by a host of invisible powers some of which are thought to be their ancestors, while others seem to embody nothing more definite than the vague sense of the mysterious, uncanny, with which the hills, streams and the lonely forests inspire the savage imagination. Of these shadowy forms, no images are made nor are they conceived of as wearing any bodily shape... their names are legion, their attributes are barely known. But so much is certain that to neglect their worship brings disaster to the offender, death or disorder to the household, murrain upon the cattle, and blight on his crops. In order to avert these

ills, but, so far as I can gather, without the hope of any benefit from gods, who are active only to do evil, the Kader sacrifices pigs, fowls, goats and pigeons... in the sacred groves in which his deities are supposed to dwell. The priest is a man of the tribe who combines the sacred functions with those of the barber to the Kadars of the villages of the neighbourhood. The Kader, if questioned about their religion, will reply that they are Hindus and will talk vaguely about their Hindu gods... instead of being wholly outside the sphere of the Brahmanical system. To talk about the Hindu gods is usually the first step towards that insensible adoption of the externals of Hinduism... The next step is to set up Brahmins, whose influence... gradually disposes of the tribal gods and transforms them into orthodox shapes, and gives them in places in the regular pantheon, as local manifestations of this or that well-known principle, and relegates them to a decent and inoffensive obscurity as household or village deities. Last of all, if the tribe is an influential one, it gives itself brevet rank like the Rajputs.

During the century that has elapsed since Iyer's analysis, the Kadar barely escaped the "Brahmanical" reclassification and cataloguing of their deities. They were too poor to attract the Brahmin priests, and could not pay the fancy charges expected by Brahmin religions functionaries. Instead, Tamil folk flooded into the habitat, bringing in their deities, and their sacred agents. Mari and other popular deities, propitiated in a variety of ways by a variety of professional and semi-professional 'religious specialists', fulfilled the historic role envisaged by Iyer for the Brahminical religion. That its tentacles are long enough is proven by the spread of the Ayyappan cult, and the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, where the blessings of god are proportionate to the fees paid to His Brahmin pujari and the institutionalized Devaswam Board.

AGGRANDIZEMENT AND HINDUIZATION OF DEITIES

Iyer's thesis is better illustrated in the case of the Irula. This tribe has a vast distribution, spreading from around the Doddabetta Peak in the Nilgiris to the Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, almost on the coast of the Bay of Bengal. The wide spread of Irula communities may indicate that they might have been the autochthons in the entire Peninsula. They display Australoid features, and might have been indigenes whom in-migrant "Mediterranean" types of Dravidian-speakers displaced. They remained outside the *Varnashrama* system in subsequent ages, refusing to integrate themselves among the lowest castes. The western extremity of their geographical distribution, the Attappady Valley in the Palakkad district of Kerala, was once believed by their ancestors to have been the "land of the dead" (Zvelebil 1987: 51-54), probably indicating that it was the last area settled by them. Their tradition asserted that they once lived in the plains east of the Nilgiris and used to be led by a heroic chief named Koya, and that the town "Koya-mutturu", which later became "Coimbatore", and is now known to Tamil-speakers as "Kovai", was founded by him. After him, the tribe became

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disorganized; one went up the Nilgiris and are now known as Melenadu Irula; another went to the Attappady area, which is known among them as Vettekkaadu, a third went into the jungles (*cole = cola*, evergreen forest), and became known as Sholega; and a fourth the Kasaba, so called because they were in a state of total confusion (*kacambu*) (Aiyappan 1948:102). Zvelebil (1982:64) hypothesized that they formed a set of tribes, of which the Nilgiri Irula could be subdivided into a southern group, consisting of the Vettekadaru in Attappady, and the Mele Nadaru higher up in the Nilgiris. A northern group forms the Kasaba, and the Urali Irula spread into the lower areas. Based mainly on linguistic evidence, Zvelebil believes that the Attappady and Nilgiri Irula are one endogamous community, living in two moieties among which intermarriage is still possible.

Parthasarathy (1996:68) reported that the Irula of Chengalpattu (plains region) had been "animists", but now profess Hinduism. They had been described as a "semi-Brahminised forest tribe" because of the greater involvement of Brahmin priests in their life cycle rituals, to the neglect of their own pujaris. They have also started worshipping Vishnu and Siva, and go on pilgrimage to Tirupati, Tirttani, Palani, Kanchipuram and Sabarimala, all popular Hindu places of worship. However, they retain their Mother Goddess, Kanniamma. Most settlements have shrines sacred to Her, represented by five pots arranged in a square, with another in the centre, all filled with turmeric water, and a clay lamp, lighted to honour them. They celebrate an annual Kanniamman festival when the pujari belonging to their own community gets into a trance, and conveys the deity's message. It will not take much time for Her to be re-catalogued, "transformed into orthodox shape, and given an appropriate place in the regular pantheon, as a local manifestation of this or that well-known principle, relegating Her to a decent and inoffensive obscurity as household or village diety", as predicted in the case of Kader by Iyer long ago.

The Irula of Nilgiris illustrate the further process in the Hinduization of tribal religion. The Bannari Amman temple, near Coimbatore, dedicated to a Mother Goddess, has now been taken over by the Hindus, the Irula priest having been replaced by those belonging to non-Brahmin caste. But the Irula still retain some sacerdotal privileges during the annual festival. They used to worship, the prominent Rangaswami Peak in the Nilgiris, and had a temple lower down, known as the Rangaswami Temple. When the British opened up the area and made it a prosperous resort, the deity and the temple were "taken over" by the Vaishnava Brahmins, but the right of worship at the more inaccessible Peak itself remains with the Irula. The deity has been re-classified and catalogued as a 'form of Vishnu', known as Ranganatha. Now, the Irula consider "Parvadi" and "Paramasiva" as the supreme deities, just below whom they place Ranga of the Rangaswami Peak.

Apart from Bannari Amman, they worship Masini Mother Goddess who has Her abode at Masanigudi on the lower northern slopes of the Nilgiris, and consider Her the most "powerful". They share with the surrounding Tamil population the worship of Man, the fearful deity who controls the small pox. They also worship semi-divine beings, a host of goblins, ghosts, vampires and demons who have each to be propitiated or neutralized. These spirits are accommodated in the *pey-gudi* (abode of the spirits).

in most hamlets, and Pujari or Guruva, a specific religious functionary who is also the 'spiritual auditor' of the settlement, performs worship.

A REGIONAL CASE OF HINDUIZATION

In the Attappady Valley, where the large-scale incursion of non-tribals started only half a century back, the dynamics of Hinduization are clearly analyzable. This Valley is a southward extension of the Gudalur Plateau of the Nilgiris, east of the watershed line of the Western Ghats, and is at an average elevation of 800 to 1000 meters above Mean Sea Level, southwest of the Towering Kundahs", a ridge the average elevation of which is about 2000 meters above MSL. The Bhavani, a sacred river, originates from these high mountains and courses south through the western part of the Valley, until it takes an acute angle at Mukkali, and rushes off in a east by north-east direction, draining the rest of the Valley. Just about this acute angle turn is the prominent needle-shaped Malleeswaran Peak, worshipped as the Supreme God by all the three tribal groups indigenous in the Valley, viz., the Irula, the Muduga and the Palu Kurumba, who are distinguished from the closely associated but endogamous sub-tribe, the Alu Kurumba of the higher regions in the Nilgiris. The Peak is visible from most points in the Valley, and tradition had been that every hamlet should be so sited that it commands a view of it. The first thing that people do is to offer obeisance, however far off they be, to this possible symbol of dominance.

These three tribes exhibit great contrasts. The Irula, probably the last among them to settle in the Valley, had been shifting cultivators adopting the Slash & Burn method, and have a distinct language, unintelligible to the other two tribes. The Muduga live in the areas that had less dense forests, lower down the Bhavani, but intermarried both ways with the Kurumba. Muduga and Kurumba understand each other's speech, though the languages are 'technically' different. The Muduga were in the process of adopting the Slash & Burn method, when the lands in their possession were grabbed by the incoming hordes of 'settlers' from the plains. Now they subsist mainly as landless agricultural labour. The Kurumba continue to live in the deep evergreen and semi-evergreen Reserve Forests. The ecological conditions of their moist environment and the floristic composition of their habitat make it difficult to sustain a sufficient fire to denude the forest. So they have adopted a technology of cultivation that may be described as "Dig & Scratch" - they clear just enough land to dibble the seeds of their sorghums, pulses and vegetables, dig or scratch the surface, and sow all the seeds at once, to harvest the variety of crops as each matures. Because they developed such a non-invasive and eco-friendly system of agriculture, they are considered as a "Primitive Tribe"! The Muduga and the Kurumba retain some remnants of megalithic culture - after the primary burial, they collect the jawbones and rebury them in sacred and secret ossuaries, where they are venerated in great feasts at long intervals, depending on whether the community can afford the indulgence. The Alu Kurumba of the Nilgiris pick up smooth pebbles from the mountain streams and place them in a holy dolmen, to represent their ancestors.

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Apart from Malleeswaran Peak, they worship other peaks, prominent trees, rivers, etc. They have myths relating to each, linking them to cosmic occurrences explained by the conjunctions of stars and heavenly bodies. They also worship great ancestors, including benefactors who may not belong to their tribe, like the well-known anthropologist Dr. P.R.G. Mathur, who worked and lived among them. He is worshipped as a household deity, his photograph being a 'portable' god. Relics are kept in a basket, entrusted to the sacred functionary and agricultural expert, *Mannukkaran* "knower of the soil" in each hamlet. The baskets are kept suspended in the sacred corner of his hut. When the community goes for collection of forest produce, or other business, the baskets are carried with them, so that worship to the sacred objects is not interrupted. There are also sedentary gods, *Karadeivam*, represented by various natural objects. They are feared magicians and sorcerers, practicing both "Black" and "White" varieties. This occult art is also the mystic foundation for their medicinal systems, which have attracted wide attention recently, because they could cure many diseases like some forms of leukaemia with herbal dregs.

Though the least Hinduized, they are also being fascinated by the gods of the outside world. *Mudda Mooppan*, nearly a hundred years old now, and the most famous and feared of their magic-medicine-men, introduced a female deity, *Banjama Tayi*, from Coimbatore; She is associated with sorcery and healing. He also uses the mantra "Shiva" at the end of each of his incantations. Nowadays, *Ayyappan* of Sabarimala is becoming increasingly popular, and they join the annual pilgrimage to this sylvan deity. Some are devoted to *Subrahmanya* at His famous temple, at Palani Hill in Tamil Nadu, and make pilgrimages to that place.

Their sub-tribe, the *Alu Kurumba* of the Nilgiris, have a slightly different appreciation of religion, showing the results of their greatest exposure to dominant Hindu models. They worship a unique Mother Goddess, *Kurupade Tayi*, meaning, probably, the Mother of the multitude of the Kurumba (Kapp 1985). She is the mythical genetic Mother of the tribe, and is not formally represented, because She is omnipresent. *Munispara* is a male deity, benevolent if propitiated with an annual goat sacrifice. Each hamlet has a sacred place or platform near the burial ground, where crude pottery images, a sacrificial knife, a trident, etc., may be erected and worshipped sporadically. The gods of the Hindu pantheon are increasingly adopted. Curiously, Brahma the Creator, rarely worshipped by 'mainstream Hindus' in South India, finds place in Kurumba belief as *Baruma Deva*; so does *Emme Daruma Raja* (*Yama Dharmaraja*), who is associated with a buffalo (*emme*). *Siva*, *Vishnu*, *Krishna*, *Lakshmi*, etc., attract increasing numbers of Kurumba devotees.

"What has expressly to be noted, however, is the fact that the concept of reincarnation has not gained ground in the religion of the *Alu Kurumbas* so far" (Kapp & Hocking 1988:243). Instead, they believe that each individual has two souls, the big or *dodda ujuru*, and the small or *kil ujuru*. The former is associated with a Visible Shadow (*toro nalu*) and the latter, with an Invisible Shadow (*toroda nalu*). During lifetime, the two souls and the two shadows are united; afterwards, they separate but join again in paradise, where they remain united forever. Even during lifetime, the Big Soul wanders causing dreams, and the small soul may be taken over by evil spirits

or under sorcery, to be kept prisoner by the sorcerer. At the time of death, both the souls are forcibly dragged out of the body by Emme Daruma Raja, but the small soul and the associated invisible Shadow finger nearby, until the body is buried. Then, they sojourn in the stone kept in the dolmen, and, after the second burial, will rejoin the Big Soul in heaven. But they have to undergo eventful adventures en route. Emme Daruma Raja entrusts the former to a messenger, who in turn commits it to the care of a black dog; it takes it to the Ammagallu Peak in the Nilgiris. The dog directs it to drink from the pond there, which washes off some of the sins the soul had committed. Then the dog takes it to the middle region, where it faces judgment before Chitragupta; if the soul has nothing to answer for, it is straightaway sent along a thread bridge to the upper region. Then, the soul falls into the hands of a Rakshasi (demoness), but her daughter releases it after it walks through a fire, purifying it further. It then ascends to the Region of Ancestors, where it is well received and may live happily ever after, the small soul rejoining it in due course after the second burial of the stone kept in the dolmen. Sinful souls have to cross through several appropriate hells, because they will fall off the thread bridge. Ultimately, everyone reaches the Heavenly Abode. They may have adapted their Sacred Geography from their neighbours and clients for sorcery services, the Toda (see below).

Another tribe just north of the Nilgiri range, in the border between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the Soliga, also believe in the existence of two souls. The big is in the heart, the location of the small, unknown. They are females, and sisters. When a person sleeps, the big soul may wander, and hence, dreams. It is only when both the souls leave the body that breathing stops, and death ensues. Animals, plants, rocks, in fact all existing things have souls (Morab 1977:97-98). They were called 'animists' because they saw God-in-everything, worshipping the tiger and even its footprints. The Biligirirangan Peak, Yellamma, snakes, etc., are all worshipped. Some families have household deities kept in baskets in a sacred spot.

The 'original' religion of the Kurumbar's agnates, the Mudyga, manifested itself in the worship of natural geographical features and material objects. The former are the 'global' deities worshipped throughout their world ('*ulakam*'). The most prominent and mighty is the Malleeswaran Peak, with which they are mythically closest bound. To them, Malleeswaran was an ancient headman, who left on a long pilgrimage, entrusting the task of finding a second wife for him to his first wife - this cultural trait is still seen among the older generation among them. He returned sixteen years later; his first wife was dead, but there was a resplendently beautify maiden of sweet sixteen, waiting for him in his hut. Not knowing that it was his own daughter begotten before he had left, he sought to make her his wife; but the brave girl jumped to her death from a great height, rather than commit incest. Only then he realized the reality; in remorse, he instantly turned himself into the finger-like peak, pointing to the skies, and visible from all over Attappady. (The members of his own traditional hamlet, Karuvara, do not believe in his divinity; they pertinently ask: if he was really a god, should he not have known the truth, and desisted from causing all the tragedy! Incidentally, Karuvara is the only traditional hamlet that is turned away from the Peak, and does not command a view of it.)

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Originally a purely tribal legend, "Hinduization" commenced to link Malleeswaran with a 'form of Siva'. The *muth* itself underwent changes: Siva and Parvati, incurably peripatetic, chanced to visit Muduga settlements. She wanted that there should be light and puja everyday on the Peak; Siva was more reasonable, and prescribed them for only once a year. And it is on Sivaratri that Mudyga headmen climb the 2000 metre peak, after having observed penance and fasting for 41 days, and to commemorate the double tragedy of Malli's suicide, and Malleeswaran's transformation into a rock. They light a fire on top, and that is the signal for all the people in the Valley to break their Sivaratri fast. It was also visible at Mannarkad, about 30 km away, the seat of Nayar chieftain who claimed the over-lordship and landlord's rights, and who too broke his fast only after seeing it. It signified the start of the forest produce collection season, during which he extracted '108 varieties' of items from the terrorized tribal people of the Valley.

The influences on tribal religion have thus been many, among these tribal communities of the Nilgiri-Attappady region, comprising Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Fundamentally, there was a megalithic belief in the divinity of all existents, of which man and his body were also part. An all-powerful Will pervaded all, but manifested itself in the interplay of man and nature. External influences coloured its surface, but did not alter its essence. The myths had already been made; further and newer myths had to base themselves on the same phenomenological substrata. And, religion became a tool and a calendar for the exploitative forces that the dominant classes unleashed on the tribal communities. About three decades back, the Tamil settlers in the Attappady Valley sought to take over the base temple of the deity on the banks of the Bhavani. The Irula, who had appointed a Pujari there resisted; the local officers protected the Irula interests by appointing a committee of management consisting of the Irula, under 'official patronage'. The State Hindu Religious Endowments Board then stepped in, claiming that it was a place of 'Hindu worship', and appointed another committee under the relevant Act, which had tribal representatives also in it. The Board did not interfere in the internal or sacerdotal management of the temple, nor did it give any financial assistance to it. Economic development caught up with the Valley, and its non-tribal settlers prospered – they flocked to the temple to thank the deity for their windfall gains, and temple finances improved. A new structure in the 'Dravidian' style was built, and the Irula Pujari found full time employment. But it is now reported that the Religious Endowments Board proposes to devise a 'scheme' of management of the temple, envisaging the 'purification' of the deity and the premises according to Brahminical practice, and the appointment of a Brahmin priest – Iyer's prediction is coming true!

UNIQUE CASE OF TODA RELIGION

Apparently negating Iyer's thesis of the universal Brahmanization of religious belief, the Toda have been retaining a unique religion, the essentials of which showed tendencies of change only when the economic bases of their culture altered after

Independence. The community had always fascinated Western anthropologists some of whom, especially the latecomers, loved to theorize broadly and sometimes shallowly from the merest scraps of evidences. It has been described in full in Rivers's classic work on them (1986:11, Emeneau 1938, Walker 1986).

Though they do not have anthropomorphic idols of worship, their religion was founded on the belief of anthropomorphic beings who lived in this world before man existed, viz., the Towthit (gods of the mountains) (Rivers: II, 443). The first was Pithi, born in a cave; His son On married Pirarkurs and was the dairyman-priest of the buffaloes of the Nodrs clan of the Tartharol moiety. On's son, Puv, was the priest at Kudr, and other gods filled dairy offices from the earliest times. On and his wife went to the hills near Kundah; He produced 1600 buffaloes, but His wife did better with 1800. Clinging to the tail of the last of On's buffaloes came the first Toda man; from his right rib, On made the first Toda woman (Subbarayulu 1994: unpublished. Perhaps this was a later legend, partly inspired by Christian missionary activity).

"Death came to the gods in the person of Puv, and On followed him to Amnodr, the world of the dead, of which he has since been the ruler" (Rivers, *ibid*). He left behind Him the goddess Teikerzi who is associated with the Nors hamlet, where she divided the buffaloes into grades of sanctity. She is credited with the origin of most of the Toda institutions. Both Rivers (op. cit.: 1,186) and Walkers (1986:121) were told that She lives in England and America, just as much as in the Nilgiris. An indefinite number of gods arose out of Her, and hold council on certain special hills. Some are of the sacred places and dairy complexes. But Emeneau found that the dairies, consisting of the buildings and their contents, pens, pasturage, water supply, etc., were thought of in anthropomorphic terms (1971:xli). A few heroes too were deified, e.g., Kwoten, who established several cult practices. Importantly, light is revered along with the sun. The dairy priests salute this luminary, the sky and the moon every day in customary manner.

In practice, the religion is a highly ritualized buffalo-cult. Every operation associated with it is strictly according to a long-practiced ritual, and infractions involve pollution. The most sacred object is the milk of the holy buffaloes, which cannot be given to women, but may be drunk only by the priest, and the men. But, after it is processed to ghee, it becomes a profane object that can be sold in the market. The conservatism of Toda is evidenced by the fact that Rivers descriptions had been largely confirmed as being the practice, half a century later, by Walker.

The Toda buffaloes are a local variety, light brown and hairy, with long upward-curving horns. Fierce tempered, they are confined to Nilgiris, and especially adapted to the environment. The average milk yield is from 3 to 5 litres a day, with a fat content of 7.2%. So important to the belief system is the female buffalo that the "Toda have special terms to denote a calf under one year old, one to two years old, and three years old, while adults can be distinguished in terms for the pregnant, milking, dry or barren. There is a special term for one which has borne a calf within the past 6-7 months, and is producing a good quantity of milk..." (Walker 1986:104). The animals are divided into the ordinary, which are individually owned and the sacred or temple herds, hierarchically classified according to the sanctity of the dairy to which they are

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attached. A Toda woman may touch no sacred buffalo; only the priests of the appropriate grade may milk them.

While the Teivali clans have only one grade of sacred buffalo, the Tartharol have several. They ascend in sanctity from the *tarpaly* to the *ti*, which were "microcosms, maintained at the highest possible level of purity, of the wider Toda dairy cult" (*ibid.*). The ritual purity and personal asceticism required of the priest increased geometrically with each grade of dairy. At the highest level, reserved only for the Teivali, the dairyman had to undergo complex and elaborate induction rites extending over many days. The ritual gave a lot of sanctity to the *tudr* tree (*Melliosma pungens*), and its leaves, the most potent purificatory agent for the Toda. He could not visit any settlement at all nor use a bridge to cross a river... He should not cut his hair or nails. "The strenuous ordination rites and the secluded life... including enforced celibacy, are reasons now given for the total absence of volunteers for this office" (*ibid.*). Now, the top two grades of dairy are falling into disuse because of the absence of volunteers to work as priests, and the buffaloes attached to them have become feral.

The mythology associated with the soul and its journey after the death of the body, is also uniquely predicated on the local geography of the Nilgiris. Amunor, the Land of the Dead is just southwest of the towering Mukurti Peak (approx. 2500 metres above MSL) of the Kundah Range, just within the virgin forests of Kerala. The route is well known. Teivali take one path, and the Tartharol, another. When they touch a stone, they lose all ailments. They wash themselves at a stone near a stream of the ashes of cremation. Then, males take one path, and females, another, where they pound grain with the pounder burnt along with their bodies. The paths then rejoin, and the dead have to cross a stream over a thread bridge. Those who had been selfish, jealous, or committed offences against the deities fall down, to be bitten by leaches, until they are rescued by the spirits of their ancestors. Finally, they come to a pass between two large boulders, guarded by a celestial dog. If the deceased had had no sex with a person of a prohibited category while alive, he/she passes without trouble, but woe betide those who had been guilty, because the dog then submits them to a canine ravishment. Half a kilometre beyond is Amunor. On presides over it, and there are the spirits of the buffaloes that had been sacrificed along with the funerary sacrifices of the dead. Life there is pleasant, but the soil; very hard; so, after many-many years, the legs of the dead are worn down to the knee. On then sends them back to the Nilgiris to be born again as Toda babies. In the past, it was possible to travel back and forth between Amunor and the Nilgiris, but once cult hero Kwoten took a living man to Amunor; the tears of his sorrowing relatives formed a pool of water now the Marlimund reservoir near Ooty, and On prohibited free to and fro passage.

The Toda did not find anything worthwhile in Brahminical belief systems, nor adopted any of their deities. This is strange, because they are also strictly vegetarians, the meat of the buffaloes they kill during the funerary rituals being given to the neighbouring Kota persons. Perhaps, the ritual purity that Brahminical religion insisted on, and which probably added such a sanctified halo to it, was lost on the Toda, who had stricter standards for such purity.

But, because of ubiquitous presence of Hindu outsiders, influences from folk practices have percolated into Toda praxis. They attend the Mariamman (Tamil Mother

Goddess) temple at Ooty, during the great annual festival there, and use it as the venue of their ear-lobe-piercing ceremony. The pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses are sometimes exhibited in Toda homes. The modern Toda accepts the efficacy of his own systems, as well as those of the popular South Indian variety, but not those of the ambitious Brahmins. But the narrow end of the Brahminical wedge has found a way, as several Toda men have become devotees of the Aiyappan cult and make the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimala, increasingly priding itself on its strict adherence to Brahminical orthodoxy.

THE RELIGION OF THE POOREST OF THE POOR

The Paniya used to be agrestic slaves in Wayanad, subjugated by the settlers a few centuries back. They were landless, and were 'bought and sold' along with the master's lands. The bonding used to take place at the annual festival of the regional Mother Goddess, the Valliyoor Bhagavathi. For a few rupees, a land-holder would contract with the head of a Paniya family, whereby all the members would be bound to work for him for a whole year, until the next festival. The payment in effect amounted only to subsistence wages, and accommodation in a hovel constructed by the landlord near by.

Ayyappan (1992:87 *et seq.*) recorded that they had "only borrowed and adapted from their masters scraps of religious rites and a very superficial knowledge of the gods and goddesses of folk Hinduism". Negating the grand theses of philosophico-religious evolutionism, they had conceived, originally, of a single great Creator-god, *Patochavan*, who was formless and omnipresent, and to whom no formal worship need be offered. But, to the Sun, *pakal bagavan* (*God of the day*) and the Moon (*iravu bagavan*), obeisance was made; they are responsible for sending life down, and taking it up again at stipulated intervals. They believe that 'life' is measurable in units, *cima*, which is one seventh of a mustard seed in size. While it is in a human being, it is powerless as it is subject to the body's conditions; after death, it becomes a *peena*, and proceeds high above to where the Sun is - if interrupted, it can do serious harm. Then there are thousands of gods and goddesses and millions of evil spirits, distributed among 17 worlds above and 7 below.

Inside every Paniya house, a small platform is constructed to accommodate these spirits. For the gods and goddesses, there are shrines in the open, under trees. At the foot of a tree, a cairn is erected and shapeless boulders represent the deities. "The Paniyas seem to have been only borrowing the gods and goddesses of their employees. In eastern Wayanad (where there is a sizeable population of Tamil estate labour), the Paniyas include ... the small pox goddess, ... Mari Amma, whose shaman is expected to speak in Kannada. Some Paniya families have borrowed Malakkari worship from the Kurichiyas and the Paniya shaman of Malakkari uses typical Kurichiya idioms and slang terms (*ibid.*) They also feature a Muslim saint as a god; when impersonating this deity, the *attali* (religious functionary) uses the local Mappila (Muslim) intonation and goes through the motions of smoking bidis and eating non-vegetarian food, after mimicking the performance of *namaz*. They include in "their little cyclopedia of the

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gods" a *Sayippu* (Sahib) god with solar topi, pants and European dress, representing the British officers of the East India Company days; the deity is also known as *kumpani teiyam* and *Bombay teiyyam*, because, in those early days, Malabar was in the jurisdiction of the Bombay unit of the EI Company. This exotic deity is offered biscuits and *arrack* (fermented palm liquor) in propitiation.

Thus, originally believers in a monotheistic religion, with the Sun and the Moon as active ingredients of the unknown, the Paniya have invented many gods, in the shape of those who terrorised them, and established dominance in the region. Their theory of the 'units of life' is intriguing, and original – perhaps it may have some similarity with Jaina logical categories, as that religion was once prevalent in the region.

Another impoverished tribal community the Urali of the Idukki district Kerala, also believe in one Supreme God, Padacha Thampuram, who created the; Universe. Until independence, they were hunters and gatherers, and took sporadically to shifting cultivation. With the strictures of forest protection, they are now mainly landless labour, and are often totally at the mercy of the local forest subordinates. Nowadays, they have adopted Hindu gods like Kali, Sastha, etc.

JAINA INFLUENCE AGAIN

Another tribal community in Wayanad who seem to have been influenced by Jaina philosophy is the Kurichiya, very much in contrast to the Paniya. They had not enslaved the Paniya, nor did they employ agrestic slaves though they have been a land holding, matrilineal community, who once claimed over lordship of the entire area. They believe in a High God, Perumal, who, at the prayer of the Kurichiya, assumed the form of Malakkari (the Dark One of the Mountains). Armed with bows and arrows, He descended to earth, where he subdued evil spirits, and replaced bloody sacrifices that used to be performed to propitiate them with offerings of toddy. "The Kurichiya are the only Kerala community that does not perform animal sacrifices..." (Aiyappan 1990:83). To the various minor gods who filled the hills with their multitude, Malakkari assigned various duties; each household was assigned a guardian deity. There are Four Great Aother Goddesses, the most popular of whom is Karimpilli Bhagavathy, who in Her fierce original form, confronted Malakkari, and challenged Him to manage a complicated delivery case. He could not, and requested Her to assume a milder form to help the suffering humans; She agreed on condition that He would marry Her, which He did. Ever since, She has specialized in helping women at their delivery.

Vettakalan is the god of the hunt. Born of a Kshatriya chieftainess and her Kurichiya servant, He accepted toddy and a knife from local Kurichiya families. But the deity most closely associated with every Kurichiya family is *muunnaamon deivam* (the third, or mediator god). He is invoked when disputes arise among them; after that, no Kurichiya will depose a lie. There is another god, Pulla Mottan, to look after children and novices. There are a number of other gods and goddesses, some with specialized functions. In addition, there are innumerable spirits, ghosts and goblins,

everywhere waiting to trip the humans. While the Kurichiya harbour them in shrines, Supreme God Malakkari is represented only by cairns.

The theory of Karma and rebirth does not find a place in their belief. Outstanding men, who have contributed to the welfare of their extended matrilineages, become *nizhal* (benevolent spirits) and continue to be present in the household shrines. Women after death become *pena*, very powerful spirits who grace the household kitchen, and are represented by lighted wick lamps on special occasions. Even the *muunnaamon deivam* who mediates the personal destiny of every Kurichiya, has to seek Her assistance when He wants to deal with an erring Kurichiya lady; She makes the culprit fall sick.

"The Kurichiya ... are at one end of the sanskritization continuum representing the lowest degree of involvement in puranic Hinduism, which has been present without break but only to a minor degree in Wayanad" (Aiyappan *op. cit.*: 79). The famous Vishnu temple in the region, at Thirunelli, was established about 12th century AD, but Kurichiya do not attach great sanctity to it nor observe the *ekadasi* fast. Even the most widely worshipped Mother Goddess of Wayanad, the Goddess of Valliyurkavu, does not find a specific place in the Kurichiya pantheon. But many deities of the local popular Hinduism did intrude; Muthappan of North Kerala who introduced toddy tapping, Kali who demanded human sacrifices but was reduced to size and thrown, by Malakkari, into the sea, whence She was rescued by some fishermen to return in much milder form – She still induces people to commit incest! Pillyaran is similar to Ganapathi, but reduced by Malakkari to the status of a godling, to protect the Goddess Velanilam, a deified Kurichiya girl.

The Kurichiya religion is fascinating because the 'original' Great God became "inadequate" to meet the dynamic requirements of a human community; He had therefore to manifest Himself in an active alternative form. His supremacy suffices to reduce the deities of the ambient Hindu folk worship to subordinate position – a strange reversal of Iyer's theory of the reclassification and cataloguing of folk deities into pan-Hinduism. In fact, it may indicate the need to rethink the famous dichotomy of the "Great Tradition" and the "little traditions".

Another Wayanad community who also were probably Jaina are the Pathiya. They have a religious functionary still known as "Jaina Brahman". They also worship the local hill deities, and have started visiting the local Hindu temples.

OTHER STRANGE CASES OF ACCULTURATION

The Mala Ullada are an impoverished tribe of South Kerala, largely forest-dwelling and forest-dependent. Their traditional deity is Thalaparamalaswamy, the deity represented by the peak Thalaparamala, the dominant orographic feature in their territory. Kappiri, Thokutty, etc., are other deities representing and represented by natural objects. But in the early thirties of the 20th century, the anthropologist LA Krishna Iyer who was also a Forest Officer, used to camp and conduct fieldwork among them. As a devout Brahmin, he installed a stone as a Siva Lingam and worshipped it

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daily. After he left, the Mala Ulladan continued to worship it. A Velichapad (holy performer who gets the afflatus of the deity) took up the priestly functions (Nandi 1971:90).

The Wannan of the Idukki district have 'discovered' that their Mother Goddess Kanchiyar Mutti, is the 'younger sister of the popular Hindu Goddess Madurai Meenakshi': The idol, believed to have been brought from Madurai, used to be kept in a secret cave but is now installed in the house of their traditional 'King', Raja Mannan. For the annual festival, the Raja Mannan and seven others go to Madurai to bring seven earthen pots, and seven goats. They observe strict bodily cleanliness during the process.

The Mullu Kuruma of Wayanad did not worship idols. In every lineage house, they have a separate shed known as the *deiva pera* (the god's hut). It is maintained scrupulously clean, and decorated with various finger traced designs. No idol is placed in it, though the clan deities, collectively known as "Athiralanmar", are believed to reside there. There is no special office of priest, and the head of the household conducts such ritual worship as may be required. All auspicious ceremonies associated with the life cycle rituals are performed there, and sometimes, it may be used as a guest room for an august and venerable visitor. Now, they have started worshipping Siva, Parvati, Krishna, etc., and are adherents of the cult of the Ayyappan of Sabarimala.

THE WORSHIP OF MOTHER GODDESSES

What might have been the prototypes of the village Mother Goddesses of popular Hinduism may be seen among Tribal communities of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Toda Mother Goddess Teikirzi is believed to be all-mighty, and omnipresent. Though the mythology narrates that She was married, She created the gods, the humans and the buffaloes without reference to or dependence on Her husband: Her elder brother had failed to create them in sufficient numbers, and She therefore had to supply the deficiency. The Todas neighbours, the Kota, worship a trinity comprising two male and a Mother Goddess.

(This) ... system is completely *sui generis*. There is ... a very deep conceptual difference between the autochthonous-indigenous systems and codified Hinduism. Although tribals (sic!) know both the pragmatic, immediate, short term functions of religion and the long term transcendental functions ... they do not differentiate these two aspects sharply. They usually do not make a distinction between sharnan and priest... They both help chiefly to deliver supernatural boons rather than to demonstrate the sacrosanct life (Zvelebil 1983:132).

Many of our tribes do not have specific anthropomorphic representations of the Mother Goddess, though. She may be symbolized in various ways. She may also take a multiplicity of identities, names and representations, each 'special' for a designated

purpose; for example, as Mari or Mariamman, she is associated with small pox and eruptive fevers. The dancing with fire baskets in the hands and of fire walking, is associated with Her worship, and many be the surviving reminders of Her origin from the Kannagi cult, once upon a time perhaps as widespread in South India as it in Sri Lanka even now, where it is known as the Cult of the Goddess Pathini (Obeyesekere G 1984). Mother Goddesses are the repositories and founts for magic and sorcery.

Thus, prototypically, many of the features of folk worship of Mother Goddesses can be seen to have been practiced by tribal communities. Be they in the Tantric, or in the folk tradition of worship, as in the case of tribal worship. She is the Power who moves and controls the Universe in so far as it concerns the human being. She combines virginity and motherhood, connoting power rather than asexuality. She is cruel and kind, and can destroy totally or protect fully. And, She identifies Herself so much with Her worshippers that She may enter their bodies in afflatus, and speak to the rest of humanity through their voices.

RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONARIES

The more 'simple' and elementary the material culture of a tribal community, the more likely it is to have a member of itself, usually the headman of the group, as the religious functionary. But communities that have adopted settled domicile and shifting or settled cultivation prefer the specialization of religious functions. The Toda dairy priest is usually selected from the inferior of the two Moieties, the Teivali, though members of the Torthorol may take up priesthood in some higher grades associated with some settlements of hoary antiquity. The priest 'graduates' from temples lower down in the hierarchy, undergoing increasing rigours of selection, induction, ritual complexity and isolation, as he progresses. The rigours to which the priests of the two highest grades were submitted have now resulted in their being none to take up the onerous job, and this grade is now virtually defunct.

The Kurichiya have rigorous training schedules for the religious functionaries. Novices and acolytes attach themselves to senior practitioners, who put them through several tests of endurance and learning. Then they are allowed to "practise" on the lesser deities, progressing step by step till they can perform the worship of Malakkari Himself.

Among many tribes especially in Tamil Nadu, there is a tendency to engage priests from non-Brahmin Hindu castes, such as "othuvar", etc. The trend in this State is to avoid Sanskrit and other languages even in the performance of worship to deities of the Hindu pantheon, and to adopt Tamil hymns – the language has a rich repertoire of such forms. The implantation of deities of the folk farms also starts with faith in and worship of Mother Goddesses like Mariamman, rather than of Sanskritized forms such as Durga or Parvati.

But even those among the poorest of the poor, like the Koraga consider it a status symbol if they can engage a Brahmin to officiate at life cycle rituals. Every stage of life, marked by respective ritual, has religious implications. While the community

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priests continue to officiate in the 'domestic' parts of the rituals, the Brahmins are engaged in the 'public' or conspicuous part of it, including puja, *homam*, *havan*, etc., in specially constructed pandals outside the residential houses. Brahmin priests have learnt precisely how much to charge for these services so that they are not perceived to be prohibitory.

THE IMPLANTATION OF CHRISTIANITY

The Koraga of Kerala and of Karnataka were converted because of the terrible humiliations to which they were subjected by the local Hindus – even until recently, Koraga customers used to be served tea only in their caps made of the spathe of arecanut leaves, which they had to doff for the purpose. The Government of the erstwhile Madras Presidency allotted a few hundred acres of land to a Christian Mission, and a colony has been formed for the converts. They are reported to have done better than the other Koraga, in the matter of education. Economically, however, they remain in about the same level.

It was education and realization of the need for it that led to the large-scale conversion of the Malayaraya of Central Kerala. Iyer LAK (1937:1,199) had reported that there were then about 2000 converts. They had no connection with the non-converted, and had given up their clan system, polygamy, polyandry, and levirate. The old village organization had become extinct. The access to education enabled the Malayaraya to become one of the most advanced tribal communities, with a literacy rate not less than that of the general population. They have benefited the most by the reservation of job opportunities as well as seats in institutions of higher learning, including professional. Many of them have married non-tribal Christian partners, but the children continue to be eligible for all the benefits of reservation because they are certified to be members of the Scheduled Tribes, because one of the parents belongs to ST.

The excessive rigours of their own moral code forced excommunication on many Kurichiya people; the Christians welcomed them into their fold and there are now strong communities of "Kurichiya Christians" in Wayanad. The non-converted orthodox Kurichiya will have nothing to do with them, but they find mates more readily among the non-tribal Christian 'settlers' who have virtually 'colonized' Wayanad. They have also taken avidly to school education, and have given up their cultural mores and traditional tribal moorings.

Among the Toda, Christianity was implanted by the association of various denominations whose higher priesthood domiciled themselves in the cool and salubrious climate of the Nilgiris, in the Toda territory. The converted Toda, especially the attractive women, were quickly married by successful Christian men, and gave up many of their cultural traits.

Christianity has been the strongest spearhead for the penetrations Westernization among tribal communities. The "Jealous God" of the strictly monotheistic religion allows no place for the old deities along with the old observances and rituals have also

to disappear. All forms of leadership, social, intellectual and sacerdotal, pass from the traditional tribal functionaries to the person of the pastor or priest. Nuns, dedicated to the "Greater Glory of God", educate and retrain the tribal women and children, fitting them into the moulds of internationally accepted Christian models. Combined with "English" education, and inter-marriage with Christians of other denominations, the process of 'detrribalization' is rapid after conversion to Christianity.

ISLAM

The indigenous people of the Lakshadweep Islands (Union Territory) are all Muslims. They were converted to that faith by about the 10th century AD by Arab traders who used the Islands as a halting place on the long sea journey to the Kerala coast. Later, the area came under the Kolathiri Rajas, who had great tolerance towards all religions. A lady of that lineage married a Muslim, and the Kolathiri constituted a kingdom for her, thus founding the line of the Ali (Muslim) Rajas of Kannur. The religion is virtually indistinguishable from the forms practised by the Moplas of Malabar, except that they observe the tenets more strictly than on the mainland.

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APPENDIX – SALIENT FEATURES OF RELIGION
OF TRIBES OF KERALA & TAMIL NADU

Sl.No.	Name of tribe	Location	Salient religious features
1.	Adiya	Wayanad, Kerala	“Own” deities like Malkkari, Pakkatheyyam, Muthumalayan, Vengarian, etc. Worship of popular Hindu deities gaining ground. Cow and cobra are totems. They engage members of their own community as religious functionaries, who practise magic and sorcery, and medicine.
2.	Allar	Palakkad, Kerala	Not a Scheduled Tribe, but classed as Other Eligible Community. Among the poorest of the poor, they worship trees, rocks, streams, Malavilli a female deity, and Karikutty, a god of sorcery. Practice sorcery and magic to ward off spirits. Considered as “untouchable” and previously denied entry to Hindu temples.
3.	Aranadan	Malappuram, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Nature worship – the Sun is worshipped as the Day’s Grandfather. Worship some stones placed under trees in forest the site being considered holy. The stones are “Thampuratti”, the Mother of Mothers. Religious functionary, known as Chemmakkaran
4.	Chingathan	Wayanad, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Worship forest deities, mala deivam. Engaged as specialist performers of dances impersonating deities of folk Hinduism by neighbour communities of locality.
5.	Cholanaikka	Malappuram, Kerala	“Cavemen of Kerala”, Please see text for detailed description.
6.	Eravallan	Palakkad, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Believe that the world is full of spirits living in trees rocks, etc Also worship Kali, Kannimar (<i>saptamatr</i>), Karupparayan, etc., as family deities Muni Jaina remnant?) is also worshipped.
7.	Irula	Kerala & Tamil Nadu	Please see text.
8.	Kadar	Kerala & Tamil Nadu	Please see text
9.	Kalanadi	Wayanad, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Hinduized; worship temples. Goddess Bhadrakali is the favourite deity. Women dance to please Her.
10.	Kanikkar	Kolam & Thiruvananthapuram Kerala, and Kanyakumari	They worship prominent features, spirits, heroes, and gods and goddesses. Offer propitiation to spirits of wild animals for protection from live ones. Elaborate rituals, and specialized functionaries, who perform annual worship.

Sl.No.	Name of tribe	Location	Salient religious features
11.	Kaniyan	Tamil Nadu	Saivites; use sacred ash as symbol. Worship Bhadra Kali, as the favourite deity. Also others in the Hindu Pantheon.
12.	Kasada	Nilgiri, Tamil Nadu	Sub-tribe of Irula. Please see text.
13.	Kochuvelan	Pathanamthitta, Kerala	Worship a prominent peak, associated with the legend of Ayyappan in nearby Sabarimala. Have own religious functionaries. Worship also a Mother Goddess.
14.	Koraga	Kasargode, Kerala & Dakshina Karnataka	Poorest of the poor. Worship Bhuta spirits. Now also Hindu pantheon. A few converted to Christianity decades ago:
15.	Kota	Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu	Characteristic deities Kambattarayan (m) & Kambatisway (f), known also as Ayyanco & Ammanor respectively. Have adopted other deities also, including Great God Vishnu. Folk tales show Jaina influence (Emeneau 1967: 445)
16.	Koya	Lakshadweep	Muslims - Scheduled tribe because of domicile in island UT.
17.	Kunduvadiyan	Wayanad, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Have religious institutions in each hamlet under headman, but now worship popular Hindu deities.
18.	Kurichiya	Wayanad, Kerala	Please see text.
19.	Kurumba Alu	Nilgiri, Tamil Nadu	Please see text.
20.	Kurumba Palu	Attappady, Kerala	Please see text.
21.	Kuruba Betta/ Kadu	Wayanad, Nilgiris Karnataka	Known by many ethnonyms. "Pure animists" according to Iyer 1930. Worship local deities but not clear whether they are associated with specific localities.
22.	Kuruba Jenu/ Kattunaikka	Wayanad, Kerala	Worship rocks, hills, snakes, etc., and claim descent from them. Were and some are semi-nomadic, without definite places-of worship; deities portable inside spherical gourds. Main god Odiyan and goddess Oditti represented by black stones. Religious functionary known as Jenmadeva. Used to worship Sun and Moon, and have adopted popular local Hindu deities like Hethappa (Muttappa), and Mother Goddess of Valliyurkavu, the regional deity of Wayanad.
23.	Mahamalar	Palakkad, Kerala & pollachi Tamil Nadu	Dwell in remote forests. Worship spirits, believe the dead live inside huge trees, and as animals. Also, peaks, trees, rivers, etc. Now adopting local Hindu deities like Banaru Amman, Perungunruamman, etc.

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Sl.No.	Name of tribe	Location	Salient religious features
24.	Mala Araya	Kottayam etc., Kerala	Took to Christianity from about a century ago, and now majority Christians. Hindu Mala Araya worship Ayyappan of Sabarimala as favourite deity. Christian converts have given up traditional mores, customs, life style and beliefs.
25.	Mala Kuruva	Trivandrum, Kerala & various, Tamil Nadu	Only older members remember the old deities. March of Pan-Hinduism has been irresistible among them. Ayyappan of Sabarimala favourite. In Tamil Nadu, they still worship spirits, ancestral and forest deities.
26.	Mala Muthan	Malappuram, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Worship deities of their own, with fanciful appellations, eg., Pottanthiruvadi, the "Holy Foolish God"! Believe in a soul that persists after death, but not in rebirth.
27.	Mala Pandaram	Pathanamithitta, Kerala, Madurai, Tamil Nadu	Worship forest deities. Thalapalamala, a peak, is holy. Karuppaswamy, one of Ayyappan's lieutenants in the legend, the favourite deity. Observe Ayyappan cult.
28.	Mala Panikkar	Malappuram, Kerala	Other Eligible Community. Worship local gods of the Hindu pantheon, but favourite deity is Maladeivam, God of the Hills.
29.	Mala Pulaya	Idukki, Kerala	Worship Mother Kali, and variants, Mariamma, Kottaparamma, Chaplamma, Anragalinachi, etc., in secret rituals at midnight Chaplamma is held in such dread that the festival in Her honour is conducted only once in eight years.
30.	Mala Ullada	Pathanamithitta, Kerala	Worship local peak, Thalapalamala. Nowadays becoming adherents of the Ayyappan of Sabarimala cult. Strange case of acculturation, adopting a stone that had been worshipped as Shiva by L.A. Krishna Iyer anthropologist (please see text).
31.	Mala Veda	Pathanamithitta, Kerala; Madurai, Tamil Nadu	Hinduized; but have a cult of their own, centred round the myth of the first Sanskrit Poet Saint Valmiki, author of the Ramayanam. In Tamil Nadu, their favourite deity is Karim Kali, a fierce form of Kali.
32.	Mala Vettuvan	Kannur Kerala	Other Eligible Community. "animists", but observed Sivarattri in honour of Chamundi.
33.	Malasar	Palakkad, Kerala; Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu	Dwelling in deep forest. Worship spirit "Mailung", represented by a stone encircled by a wall. Also Veerabhadra & Bhadrakali. Ayyappan of Sabarimala becoming popular.
34.	Malayali	Salem etc., Tamil Nadu	Unlike the name, they are Tamil speaking. Totally Hinduized.

Sl.No.	Name of tribe	Location	Salient religious features
35.	Malayan	Palakkad, Kerala	Virabhadran & Bhadrakali, represented by stones, are favourites. Also a domestic deity, Mallan, in Tamil Nadu, they worship the popular deities, and Muniyappan.
36.	Malmi	Lakshadweep	Endogamic community of Muslims in Lakshadweep, Island Union Territory.
37.	Mannan	Kerala, Madurai, Tamil Nadu	Hinduized, own Mother Goddess, Kanchiyar Muthi, now presented as the younger sister of Madurai Minakshi.
38.	Melacheri	Lakshadweep	Another endogamous Muslim community in Lakshadweep.
39.	Muduga	Palakkad, Kerala	Especially associated with Malleeswaran legend. Please see text.
40.	Mullukuruma	Wayanad, Kerala, Nilgiri, Tamil Nadu	Each lineage has own gods formless in deivaperam (God's-Hut). Now worship local and Pan-Hindu deities.
41.	Muthuvan	Kerala, Madurai, Tamil Nadu	Sylvan deities. But Madurai Minakshi has always been favourite Goddess. Now, they worship all deities of Hindu pantheon.
42.	Paliyan	Kerala, Madurai, Tamil Nadu	Mariamamma is the most popular deity. Her temple at Cumbam, T. Nadu, being specially sacred. Ancestral spirits are worshipped. Adopted most of the Pan-Hindu pantheon.
43.	Paniya	Wayanad, Kerala	Please see text.
44.	Pathiyan	Wayanad, Kerala	Originally Jam? (Aiyappan 1948:47). Officiant at marriages known as "Jana Brahmana". Now they worship local Hindu deities.
45.	Soliga	Bilgiri-rangana Hills, Karnataka, and adjoining areas of T. Nadu	Belief in two souls, "animists". Also worship Mother Goddesses Yellamma Madaigiriamman, etc., snakes, ant hills, etc., Thimmaraya. etc. Keep household deities in baskets. Ranganaswami, a local high point deified as Rangaswami, a "Om of Vishnu", who espouse a Soliga girl, Kusumale.
46.	Toda	Nilgiris, T. Nadu	Please see text.
47.	Urali	Idukki, Kerala	'Animism, totemism, taboo, etc.' Believe in Mala deivam, deities of the hills. Soul is believed to be mortal and ancestors worshipped. Supreme God. Pacacha Thampuran is formless and unknowable. Religious functionary known as Plathy. Recently adopted locally worshipped and Pan-Hindu deities.
48.	Urali	Nilgiri, T. Nadu	Entirely different from item 47. Worship local village deities, Bannari Atta, Mulsukkara Ayya, etc. Karamade and Belereswamy, named after regions.

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Sl.No.	Name of tribe	Location	Salient religious features
49.	Urali Kuruma	Wayanad, Kerala	An artisanal community. Have own gods and goddesses. Functionary known as Binji Kalan performs religious duties. Also believe in ancestral spirits, etc. Special worship known as "binj".
50.	Urindavan	Wayanad, Kerala	Totally Hinduized.
51.	Yerukula	North Arcot, T. Nadu	All places on earth and sky are holy, as they are the seats of the spirits. Also worship popular deities of local Hinduism.

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