

## CULTIVATING TRIBES OF TODAS – A HISTORICAL STUDY THE REFERENCE OF TAMILNADU

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### ABSTRACT

*The custom of infant marriage is well established among the Todas, and a child is often married when only two or three years of age. When a man wishes to arrange a marriage for his son, he chooses a suitable girl, who should be, and very, often is, the matchuni of the boy, the daughter of his mother's brother or of his father's sister. The father visits, the parents of the girl, and if the marriage is satisfactorily arranged he returns home after staying for the night at the village. A few days later the father takes the boy to the home of his intended wife. They take with them the loin-cloth called tarp as a wedding gift and the boy performs the kahelpudithi, salutation to the father and mother of the girl, and also to her brothers, both older and younger than himself, and then gives the tarp to the girl. Father and son stay for one night at the girl's village and return home on the following morning. Sometimes the girl returns with them to the village of her future husband, but, much more commonly, she remains at her own home till she is fifteen or sixteen years of age. If a man has not been married in childhood he may undertake the arrangement of his marriage himself, and visit the parents of the girl unaccompanied by his father; and in this case the girl may at once join her husband if she is old enough. From the time of the child-marriage the boy has to give a tarp twice a year until the girl is ten years old, when its, by a putkuli. The tarp which is given at first is very small, worth perhaps only four annas, but as the girl becomes older it is expected that the garment shall become larger and more valuable. If any member of the girl's family should die it is expected that the boy's family shall on each occasion give a sum of eight annas or a rupee. This gift is called tinkanik panni litpimi, or "we give a piece of money to the purse."*

**Keywords:** *The tribes, General view of their History, sources of information, Local distribution.*

### Introduction

The Todas surpass all the other tribes in physique and dignity of bearing, but they are not as tall as the Badagas. Still they may be spoken of as tall, the height of the men averaging 5 feet 3'30 inches, that of the women 5 feet 0'25 inches. Their feature may best be described as European, with Roman noses and bright hazel eyes, good teeth and an abundance of rather coarse but glossy black hair, which is worn in a crop by the men and in long thick ringlets by the women. The expression of their countenances is open, fearless, and agreeable, and their smile invariably pleasant although rather vacant. Those who are interested in the lost tribes have been attracted by the peculiar noses of the Todas. The mode of wearing the hair also seems to point the same way, the luxuriant crop or mop of hair, which is their pride, differs but little from the rough, shaggy and unkempt hair of many of the Pareiya and wandering castes of the Carnatic and Dekhan, except that it is oiled and combed. This pride in "these redundant locks, robustious to no purpose" is shared in an eminent degree by the women, whose desire to curl their hair, which has little natural wave in it, may be a point deserving the attention of the 'mode of some superior race with whom their ancestors were familiar. The hazel or brown eye common to the Toda, Kurumba and Kota, is also met with in the wild castes of the eastern plains.

From Frazer's Golden Bough (1922):

"Among the Todas of Southern India the holy milkman, who acts as priest of the sacred dairy, is subject to a variety of irksome and burdensome restrictions during the whole time of his incumbency, which may last many years. Thus he must live at the sacred dairy and may never visit his home or any ordinary village. He must be celibate; if he is married he must leave his wife. On no account may any ordinary person touch the holy milkman or the holy dairy; such a touch would so defile his holiness that he would forfeit his office. It is only on two days a week, namely Mondays and Thursdays, that a mere layman may even approach the milkman; on other days if he has any business with him, he must stand at a distance (some say a quarter of a mile) and shout his message across the intervening space. Further, the holy milkman never cuts his hair or pares his nails so long as he holds office; he never crosses a river by a bridge, but wades through a ford and only certain fords; if a death occurs in his clan, he may not attend any of the funeral ceremonies, unless he first resigns his office and descends from the exalted rank of milkman to that of a mere common mortal. Indeed it appears that in old days he had to resign the seals, or rather the pails, of

office whenever any member of his clan departed this life. However, these heavy restraints are laid in their entirety only on milkmen of the very highest class".

The Nilagiri District as it existed prior to the annexation, on the 31<sup>st</sup> march 1877, of the tracts known as the Nambalakod, Cheramkod. Thus far I have treated of the cultivating tribes.<sup>1</sup> The fact that they, relatively to the Badagas at least, the principal cultivating tribe, were the earliest occupants of the plateau, gave rise to pretensions on their part to lordship over the Hills, pretension which received for many years the enthusiastic support of Mr. John Sullivan, of Mr. Hough, and of Captian Harkness, but which were as strenuously opposed by some distinguished members of the Civil Service, especially Mr.S.R. Lushington, Mr.C.Lushington, and Mr. Bird. Mr.S.R.Lushington, whilst Governor, has practically ignored these claims, but his successor, Sri Frederick Adam, regarded them favorably, and made concession which were opposed to the permanent rights in soil which throughout India belong to the state.<sup>2</sup>

Toda people are a Dravidian ethnic group who live in the Nilgiri Mountains of Tamil Nadu. Before the 18th century and British colonization, the Toda coexisted locally with other ethnic communities, including the Kota, Badaga and Kurumba, in a loose caste-like society, in which the Toda were the top ranking. During the 20th century, the Toda population has hovered in the range 700 to 900.<sup>3</sup> Although an insignificant fraction of the large population of India, since the early 19th century the Toda have attracted "a most disproportionate amount of attention because of their ethnological aberrancy" and "their unlikeness to their neighbors in appearance, manners, and customs."<sup>4</sup> The study of their culture by anthropologists and linguists proved significant in developing the fields of social anthropology and ethnomusicology.

The Toda traditionally live in settlements called *mund*, consisting of three to seven small thatched houses, constructed in the shape of half-barrels and located across the slopes of the pasture, on which they keep domestic buffalo. Their economy was pastoral, based on the buffalo, which dairy products they traded with neighboring peoples of the Nilgiri Hills.<sup>5</sup> Toda religion features the sacred buffalo; consequently, rituals are performed for all dairy activities as well as for the ordination of dairymen-priests. The religious and funerary rites provide the social context in which complex poetic songs about the cult of the buffalo are composed and chanted. Fraternal polyandry in traditional Toda society was fairly common; however, this practice has now been totally abandoned, as has female infanticide. During the last quarter of the 20th century, some Toda pasture land was lost due to outsiders using it for agriculture or a forestation by the State Government of TamilNadu. This has threatened to undermine Toda culture by greatly diminishing the buffalo herds. Since the early 21st century, Toda society and culture have been the focus of an international effort at culturally sensitive environmental restoration.<sup>6</sup>

The Todas live in small hamlets called *munds*. The Toda huts, called *dogles*, are of an oval, pent-shaped construction. They are usually 10 feet (3 m) high, 18 feet (5.5 m) long and 9 feet (2.7 m) wide. They are built of bamboo fastened with rattan and are thatched. Thicker bamboo canes are arched to give the hut its basic bent shape. Thinner bamboo canes (rattan) are tied close and parallel to each other over this frame. Dried grass is stacked over this as thatch. Each hut is enclosed within a wall of loose stones. The front and back of the hut are usually made of dressed stones (mostly granite). The hut has a tiny entrance at the front – about 3 feet (90 cm) wide, 3 feet (90 cm) tall, through which people must crawl to enter the interior. This unusually small entrance is a means of protection from wild animals.<sup>7</sup> The front portion of the hut is decorated with the Toda art forms, a kind of rock mural painting. The Todas are vegetarians and do not eat meat, eggs that can hatch, or fish (although some villagers do eat fish). The buffalo were milked in a holy dairy, where the priest or milkman also processed their gifts. Buffalo milk is used in a variety of forms: butter, butter milk, yogurt, cheese and drunk plain. Rice is a staple, eaten with dairy products curries.

According to the Todas, the goddess *Teikirshy* and her brother first created the sacred buffalo and then the first Toda man. The first Toda woman was created from the right rib of the first Toda man. Many rites feature the buffalo, as its milk and other products form the basis of their diet. The Toda religion exalted high-class men as holy milkmen, giving them sacred status as priests of the holy dairy. According to Frazer in 1922 (see quote below from *Golden Bough*, the holy milkman was prohibited from walking across bridges while in office.<sup>8</sup> He had to ford rivers by foot, or by swimming. The people are prohibited from wearing shoes or any type of foot covering.

Toda temples are constructed in a circular pit lined with stones. They are similar in appearance and construction to Toda huts. Women are not allowed to enter or go close to these huts that are designated as temples. The Toda language is a member of the Dravidian family. The language is typologically aberrant and phonologically difficult. Linguists have classified Toda (along with its neighbor Kota) as a member of the southern subgroup of the historical family proto-South-Dravidian. It split off from South Dravidian, after Kannada and Telugu, but before Malayalam.<sup>9</sup>

The Todas have a number of gods. In fact every clan has its own god. They also recognize a hunting god called Betikhan, who they believe is a son of Dirkish, who in turn was son of En, the first Todas. Some of them also worship the sun and the moon and keep fast during eclipses. To some extent they have been influenced by Hinduism and often visit Hindu temples. Occasionally they apply the Saivite mark on their foreheads. A religious ceremony which they perform is the Kona Shastra in which a male buffalo calf is sacrificed each year.

The Temple of the Todas are two kinds, the *Boa* and the *Palthchi*. The former is a conical shaped temple with a low wall all around and the latter has two varieties.<sup>10</sup> 'The first the *dairy-house* of which every *mand* possesses one at least: the second variety, though similar in appearance, is something more than a *dairy-house* and wherever found, the *mand* is called by Todas *Etadmand* (*Great Mand*), and by the Badagas *Mui Mand*, in contradistinction to a *Buri* or common *Mand*. Both *Boas* and *Palthchis* are used as dairies, the only difference apparently being that the priests may live in the latter, and not in the former. When a *Mand* has two temples there are generally two priests, one a *Varzhal* and the other a *Palikaarpal*.<sup>11</sup> Each has his own division of the village herd to milk, and his own temple in which to keep the milk and ghee. The *Boe*, if there is one, is appropriated to the *Varzhal*.<sup>12</sup>

The forced interaction with other peoples with technology has caused a lot of changes in the lifestyle of the Toda. They used to be primarily a pastoral people but now, they are increasingly venturing into agriculture and other occupations. They used to be strict vegetarians but now, some people eat meat. Although many Toda abandoned their traditional distinctive huts for houses made of concrete, in the early 21st century, a movement developed to build the traditional barrel-vaulted huts. From 1995 to 2005, forty new huts were built in this style, and many Toda sacred dairies were renovated. Each has a narrow stone pit around it and the tiny door is held shut with a heavy stone. Only the priest may enter it. It is used for storage of sacred buffalo milk.<sup>13</sup>

Formerly the boy's family had also to contribute one of the buffaloes killed at the funeral, but this custom is now obsolete. The contribution of buffaloes and money from the boy to his parents-in-law is called *podri*. The boy has to take part in a ceremony at the funeral in which a cloth is laid on the dead body, and with this ceremony there is associated a further gift of one rupee, paid to the relatives of the dead person by the family of the boy who has married into the family of the deceased. Certain ceremonies are performed shortly before the girl reaches the age of puberty. One is called *puttkuli tazar utiti*, or "mantle over he puts," in which a man belonging to the *Tartharol* if the girl is *Teivali*, and to the *Teivaliol* if she is *Tarthar*, comes in the day-time to the village of the girl and lying down beside her puts his mantle over her so that it covers both and remains there for a few minutes.

Fourteen or fifteen days later a man of strong physique, who may belong to either division and to any clan, except that of the girl, comes and stays in the village for one night and has intercourse with the girl. This must take place before puberty, and it seemed that there were few things regarded as more disgraceful than that this ceremony should be delayed till after this period. It might be a subject of reproach and abuse for the remainder of the woman's life and it is even said that men might refuse to marry her if this ceremony had not been performed at the proper time. It is usually some years later, when the girl is about fifteen or sixteen that she joins her husband and goes to live with him at his village. The parents of the husband announce that they will fetch the girl on a certain day, which must be one of two or three days of the week, different for each clan. The husband, accompanied by his father and a male relative of the same clan, goes to the village of the girl, and the three are feasted with rice and jaggery. The husband puts five rupees into the pocket of the girl's mantle and then takes her home. There is no ceremony of any kind, not even the salutation such as was performed at the original ceremony. If the youth does not wish to live with the girl when the time arrives, he may annul the marriage by giving one buffalo as a fine (*kwadi*) to the girl's parents; but, on the other hand, the parents of the girl have to return as many buffaloes as he may have given as *padre* at funeral ceremonies.<sup>14</sup>

The Todas themselves say that they came from the jungle tract of inferior hills situated between the Kanarese and Tamil Districts, in the direction of the Hasanur Pass in the Eastern Ghats, north-east of the Nilagiris. In making this assertion, they are probably repeating parrot-like the Badaga tradition regarding the latter's advent of the hills, as is their wont, not being gifted with sufficient imagination to evolve a mythic history their own. Another theory is that they came from the West Coast. The similarity of some of their customs to these of the Malayalams and the position of their *Mands*, which are mostly in the western uplands of the plateau, whilst some are even in the Waned, seem to lend color to the view that their country lay to the west of the Nilagiris.

**Conclusion**

We have now concluded this study of the tribes of South India. The region presents a vast variety of tribal's and their customs, like the picturesque. Todas and Kotas, Irulas, Kurumbas, Badagas and others. They have old and ancient origins, and spectacular customs as regards birth marriage and death, and a rich and engrossing folklore. It will be no exaggeration to say that the culture and tradition of the South Indian tribes is one of the noblest and most fascinating.

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