

The Kurumbas of the Nilgiris: An Ethnographic Myth?

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THE paper¹ is divided into three parts. In the first part I discuss ethnographic accounts from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries which concern the tribal Kurumbas of the Nilgiri Hills in South India. In the second part I present a brief profile of the Naiken, one of the Kurumba sub-groups with whom I conducted anthropological field-work between September 1978 and October 1979.² The name Naiken³ is used by the people themselves and their immediate neighbours. In the literature they are often referred to as Jenu Kurumbas. In the final part of the paper, I critically re-examine the literature in the light of my field material and experience. Prior to my work none of the Nilgiri Kurumba groups have been subjected to intensive anthropological studies, although there are references to them, and in particular to their role *vis-à-vis* the other Nilgiri tribes in numerous accounts, including such seminal works as *The Toda* by W. H. R. Rivers (1906) and 'Culture Change among the Nilgiri Tribes' by Mandelbaum (1941). I suggest that the much-criticized early accounts by 'amateur' travellers, administrators, and planters may be more accurate than has been thought and perhaps even more revealing than the subsequent references up to the present offered by 'professional' anthropologists.

I. The Ethnography

The name Kurumbas, Fürer-Haimendorf suggested, is 'one of those

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³ The spelling of Naiken is not phonetical, but as it sounds to me. Inevitably, many proper names appear in the sources in a variety of spellings. These are here given as found.

tribal names which have done so much to obscure the ethnic picture of many Indian regions' (1952: 19). There are accounts of many groups referred to by another name followed by the suffix Kurumba, or by some permutation of this name, in census reports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in collections of descriptions of tribes and castes. Some of these groups are described as food-gatherers and shifting cultivators, others as cultivators of some sort. They are spread throughout the Nilgiri Hills, and the Mysore plains. The controversial issue in this body of literature is concerned with the possible common origin, if any, of this perplexing array of Kurumbas and Kurumba-like groups (summaries can be found in Thurston 1909 IV: 155-7, Rooksby 1961: 26-51, and Misra 1971: 183-6). In recent literature, discussion has been confined to the Kurumba groups of the Nilgiri region alone, who are spread throughout this geographical region, from the top plateau, reaching 8460 feet above sea-level, and the high elevations of the Hills through the lower elevations and the foot of the hills to the Wynaad which is an elevated step of land between 2000 and 3000 feet above sea-level breaking the northern-western steep fall from the Nilgiris to the Malabar and divided administratively into the Nilgiri-Wynaad and Malabar-Wynaad.

Until the British colonization, starting in 1823, the tribal population of the Nilgiris were by and large cut off from the Hindu India of the plains. The British travellers, administrators and planters were struck by the quite extraordinary features of the Nilgiri tribes, and a large volume of accounts, reports, surveys, published letters etc, describing the tribes ensued. Seven such sources which are important and representative will be examined. It is striking that each account confidently gives a quite different number of differently-named tribal divisions.

The first source is Buchanan's *Journey through Mysore, Canara and the Malabar* published in 1807. It contains one of the earliest references to the Kurumbas. Buchanan refers to two Kurumba sections: the Cad Curubaru and the Betta Curubaru. He describes the wilder Kurumbas—the Cad Curubara—as follows:

The Cad Curubaru are a rude tribe, who are exceedingly poor and wretched. In the fields near the villages, they build miserable low huts, have a few rags only for clothing, and the hair of both sexes stands out matted like a mop, and swarms with vermin . . . they work as daily labourers, or go into the woods, and collect the roots of wild yam . . . , part of which they eat, and part exchange with the farmers for grain . . . These Curubaru have dogs, with which they catch deer, antelopes, and hares; and they have the art of taking in snares, peacocks and other esculent birds. (Quoted in Thurston 1909 IV: 163-4.)

The second source is Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1897). Dubois refers only to Kadu Kurumbas who are one of the 'wild tribes which inhabit jungles and mountains'. His Kurumbas appear much wilder than the Cad Curubaru of Buchanan. Dubois writes:

These savages live in the forests, but have no fixed abode. After staying for a year or two in one place they move on to another . . . There they sow small seeds, and a great many pumpkins, cucumbers, and other vegetables; and on these they live for two or three months in the year . . . During the rains these savages take shelter in miserable huts. Some find refuge in caves, or holes in the rocks, or in the hollow trunks of old trees. In fine weather they camp out in the open . . . Roots and other natural products of the earth, snakes and animals that they can snare or catch, honey that they find on the rugged rocks or in the tops of trees, which they climb with the agility of monkeys; all these furnish them with the means of satisfying the cravings of hunger. Less intelligent even than the natives of Africa, these savages of India do not possess bows and arrows, which they do not know how to use. (Dubois 1897: 76.)

Dubois is the first, to my knowledge, to point out the fear of the Kurumba sorcery—a theme which appears in most subsequent references to the Kurumbas. He writes:

They have little or no intercourse with the more civilized inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The latter indeed prefer to keep them at a distance from their homes, as they stand in considerable dread of them, looking upon them as sorcerers or mischievous people, whom it is unlucky even to meet. If they suspect a Kadu-Kurumbar of having brought about illness or any other mishap by his spells, they punish him severely, sometimes even putting him to death. (*ibid*: 76.)

The descriptions of Buchanan and Dubois relate to the Kurumbas of the lower slopes. References to the Kurumbas of the Nilgiri plateau are found, naturally, in accounts published after the discovery of the plateau, and during the intensive British colonization of it in mid-nineteenth century. Breeks' book *An account of the Primitive Tribes and Monuments of the Nilagiris* (1873) is a useful source because it offers some comments on the circumstances in which information was gathered. Breeks proposes four divisions of the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris: Botta Kurumbas, Kambale Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas, and Anda Kurumbas. He mentions that these names were given to him by the headman of one village. But prior to that he writes: 'It is difficult to get a complete account of the tribal divisions recognized by them. One man will name you one (his own); another two divisions; another three, and so on.' (Breeks 1873: 48.) He also writes: 'Their villages . . . are so dispersed over the slopes and base of the hills, that the inhabitants of one

locality know nothing of those at a distance.’ (*ibid*: 50.) In his description Breeks actually refers to two kinds of Kurumbas—those of the upper slopes, and those in the dense jungle at the base of the hills. Breeks mentions lack of birth, betrothal and marriage ceremonies among the Kurumbas—a theme which predominates in most other accounts and has been regarded with some incredulity by contemporary Nilgiri ethnographers. Breeks writes: ‘There seems to be no marriage ceremony amongst the Kurumbas, no early betrothal . . . They have no birth ceremony.’ (*ibid*: 54.)

In 1880, only seven years after the publication of Breeks’ work, a massive handbook appears *A Manual of the Nilagiri District in the Madras Presidency* edited by H. B. Grigg of the Indian Civil Service. Grigg mentions six different caste divisions, as he calls them, in the Nilgiris: Eda Kurumbas, Karmadiya Kurumbas, ‘Kurumbas proper’, Kurumbas Okkiliya, Male Kurumbas and Pal Kurumbas. All six names are different from the names of the four divisions mentioned by Breeks. Grigg takes further the theme mentioned by Breeks and states: ‘They are said to have no tradition of any kind.’ (1880: 213.)

The fifth source is a report, written in 1876 by a forest officer named Morgan, which describes the barter of forest produce with villagers and traders of the plains. This theme is found in most references to the Kurumbas, but Morgan points to the important place of payment in advance in the regulation of this barter, a factor which is often overlooked in the literature. He writes: ‘These men collect almost all forest produce, such as soapnut, myrobolams, dye barks etc., which they sell for a trifle to the plains traders, whose debtors they are, in return for salt, grain, chillies, and other necessaries.’ (Morgan 1876: 100.)

A revised version of the Nilgiri manual of 1880 *Madras Gazetteers: The Nilgiris*, was published in 1908, edited by W. Francis. In the late nineteenth century there had been an increasing interest in the jungle Wynaad, which is reflected in this volume, compiled just after the colonization of the area. While it was suggested by Breeks and Grigg, who were placed on the plateau, that the Kurumbas of the lower slopes are more ‘primitive’ than those of the plateau, Francis, for whom the centre shifts to the Wynaad, asserts that the Kurumbas of the plateau are the ‘more backward brethren’ of the Kurumbas of the Wynaad. Francis distinguishes between three kinds of Kurumbas: the Kurumbas ‘proper’ of the plateau, and the Ur Kurumbas and the Jen Kurumbas, or Shola Naikan, of the Wynaad. In general, Francis’ descriptions are notably detailed. Like his predecessors he refers to the lack of certain life-cycle rituals and emphasizes that the people have ‘religious ideas . . . of

the vaguest'. (Francis 1908: 155.) He notes nevertheless a festival that takes place annually—and is also mentioned in other sources: 'A ceremony in their [the deities'] honour, subscribed for by the caste in general, is held in April every year, a cock or two being sacrificed, much rice cooked and eaten by the celebrants, and a dance being held.' (*ibid*: 156.)

The last source to be mentioned here is a letter, quoted in Thurston's entry on the Kurumbas, by a Mr F. W. F. Fletcher, planter in the Wynaad. This source is valuable because Fletcher bases his comments on daily and regular contact with people he employs in his plantation. Fletcher makes a simple distinction between two groups, the Kurumbas and the Nayakas. He writes:

It may be that in some parts of Wynad there are people known indifferently as Kurumbas and Shola Nāyakas; but I have no hesitation in saying that the Nāyakas in my employ are entirely distinct from the Kurumbas . . . The Kurumba of this part lives in comparatively open country, in the belt of deciduous forest lying between the ghāts proper and the foot of the Nilgiri plateau. Here he has been brought into contact with European Planters, and is, comparatively speaking, civilized. The Nāyaka has his habitat in the dense jungle of the ghats, and is essentially a forest nomad, living on honey, jungle fruits, and the tuberous roots of certain jungle creepers. (Quoted in Thurston 1909 IV: 176.)

Fletcher mentions that the Nayaka have those supernatural powers which are often attributed to the Kurumbas, for example: 'Some Nayakas are credited with the power of changing themselves at will into a tiger, and of wreaking vengeance on their enemies in that guise.' (*ibid*: 177.)

Following the British 'amateur observers', dozens of anthropologists have come to study the Nilgiri 'exotic' dwellers. However, in their accounts, the confusion about what and who the Kurumbas are, seems to have completely disappeared. They depict the cultural map of the Nilgiris as consisting of four inter-related tribes, the 'pastoralist' Todas, the 'agriculturalist' Badagas, the 'artisan' Kotas and the 'food-gatherer and sorcerer' Kurumbas following Mandelbaum's model in 'Culture Change among the Nilgiri Tribes' (1961).⁴ (A detailed summary of the inter-links is provided in Hockings 1980: 99–131.) They were concerned with the 'traditional' state prior to the rapid changes—and especially before the decline of the 'traditional interchange' between the tribes—that occurred after the first world war. This point is too often overlooked

⁴ Another tribe, the Irulas, are sometimes mentioned together with the Kurumbas. The interrelationship between the tribes is already mentioned in some early accounts (e.g. in Brecks).

in the literature, as Hockings indeed mentions (1980: 99) and it implies that the recent literature is still concerned with the societies that the early 'amateur observers' encountered and reported on. Anthropologists have studied intensively the first mentioned three tribes, the Todas, the Badagas, and the Kotas. As for the Kurumbas, they are quite simply described as inhabitants of the jungles on the slopes of the Nilgiris, sorcerers and food-gatherers who are engaged also in selling forest produce. Interest in the ethnography is focused in particular on the inter-relationships between the four tribes, and hence more information is provided on the relationships between the Kurumbas and the other three tribes than on the Kurumbas themselves. Rivers, for example, tells us that the Kurumbas provide the Todas with the funeral post at which the buffalo is killed (1906: 641). Or, to take another example, we learn from Hockings' study of the Badagas that Kurumba men act each as a guardian and watchman to a Badaga commune, and furthermore help the Badaga priests in certain agricultural rituals (1980: 122-3).

Recently, several investigations have focused on the Kurumbas themselves, with the result that the complicated nature of the Kurumbas seems to have re-emerged. Fürer-Haimendorf (1952) conducted a brief investigation in the Nilgiri-Wynaad during the summer vacation of 1948. He describes three 'types' of Kurumbas: the food-gatherer Jen Kurumbas (also named Naikr), the shifting cultivator Bette Kurumbas (also called Uralis) and the plough-cultivator Mullu Kurumbas. Two intensive studies of the Mullu Kurumbas followed: Rooksby's *The Kurumbas of the Malabar* (1961), and R. Misra's more specifically entitled *Mullu Kurumbas of Kappala* (1971). Both see the Mullu Kurumbas as a separate and endogamous ethnic group, and Rooksby even suggests that they are more part of the caste system than part of a 'tribal' Nilgiri system.

A German linguist, Dr D. Kapp, conducted the most recent study of Kurumbas before my own, looking in the mid 1970s at three Kurumba groups on the upper slopes of the Nilgiri hills (1978a, b, 1980). He describes the people as food-gatherers, shifting cultivators and plantation workers divided (though not respectively) into three groups called Ālu Kurumbas, Pālu Kurumbas and Muḍugas. Kapp suggests that seven 'Kurumba tribes' inhabit the Nilgiri hills and the adjacent areas, the Bette Kurumbas, the Jenu Kurumbas, the Mullu Kurumbas and the Urali Kurumbas, in addition to the three studied by him. He writes:

All these tribes are distinct ethnic groups differing from each other in language,

culture, religious beliefs, and customs and manners. With the exception of the Ālu and the Pālu Kurumbas being sister tribes, and the Muḍugas, they are strictly endogamous. (Kapp 1978a: 168).

He argues:

As for the Kurumbas [Ālu Kurumbas], most of the informations [*sic*] to be gathered from articles and studies which have been written on this tribe during the past 150 years, are scanty, vague and often wrong. Not even the name by which they call themselves to be differentiated from other Kurumbas tribes, mainly Ālu Kurumbas, has been mentioned in any of the available sources on the subject. (1978a: 167.)

Inhabitants of Ootacamund, the capital of the Nilgiris, hold at present the same cultural map drawn by the anthropologists. Tourist brochures, officials and people in the street, talk of the four interrelated tribes, the Todas, the Badagas, the Kotas, and the Kurumbas. The Kurumbas are still described as primitive wild people living in the jungle, at the slopes of the hills. Some people add that they wear no clothes, and live on trees. In other words this image of four interrelated tribes, and in particular of one homogeneous Kurumba tribe is held internally and sold to outsiders.

II. The Naiken people

The Naiken inhabit the Wynaad. Official estimates of their number vary and are not reliable, not least because of the confusion concerning boundaries and identities of the various forest communities. Their number would appear to be in the order of 1000. The name Naiken perhaps was given by Malayalam speaking neighbours (Fürer-Haimendorf 1952: 20). Local government and other agencies use the names Jenu Kurumba, and Kattu Naiken. It would appear that as the observer moves closer to the people both in terms of spatial and social distance, so the name changes from Jenu Kurumba to Kattu Naiken, and finally to Naiken. For example, in the District Harijan Welfare Office, I was informed that some Jenu Kurumbas lived in the Government Game Reserve about 50 km away. The local officials there did not know of any Jenu Kurumbas. They spoke only about Kattu Naiken living in the area. A Malayali contractor who worked with them closely used the name Naiken.

The Naiken are interspersed throughout the Wynaad in small local groups, each situated discontinuously in a pocket surrounded by other populations. Each such group comprises 2-5 clusters, each of 1-5 huts,

with an average distance of about 4 miles between clusters. The huts in the clusters are scattered randomly, often with their opening facing in different directions and with no central place amidst them. Sometimes there are a few huts located outside the range of a local group near market villages and places of employment. Beyond these huts on the fringe of his local group, the Naiken usually does not know where other local Naiken groups can be found, and when pressed about it simply refers to the *Wynaadu*.

The Naiken language which is referred to by Naiken simply as *nama basha* (our language) is basically of the South Dravidian family, like most other Nilgiri languages. It contains elements of Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil (Zvelebil 1981). Kannada is predominant in it, though the dialect is distinct and is barely intelligible to Kannada speakers. All Naiken speak in addition some Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil. In general, they speak fluently that language which they use frequently in their interaction with the non-Naiken neighbours, whoever these may happen to be in each particular instance. The languages spoken around them also affect their dialect, and there are variations in the Naiken dialect between local groups and even between huts in different localities of the same local group. Fletcher, the planter referred to earlier, made a similar observation:

although the two colonies are within five miles as the crow flies . . . the low country Nayaka . . . speech is a patois of Malayalam. The Nayaka on the hills above . . . speaks a dialect of his own . . . derived from Kanarese. (Quoted in Thurston 1909: 177.)

These variations do not cause any problem of communication. All the dialects remain clearly within *nama basha*.

There are similar variations between local groups and even between clusters within them, with respect to the nature of economic interactions with the outside and to details of ritual, the construction of huts, manner of dressing, etc.

Each local group is by and large a separate economic, social, ritual and even kinship unit. Within it, people have regular contact with each other. Most people, if not all, are related by kinship ties. Beyond it, there are no pan-Naiken social, ritual or economic transactions or institutions. Even kinship ties do not link the local groups. When a Naiken moves out of a given local group, his whereabouts are usually not known, and even his close kin effectively forget him and keep no contact with him. Any economic, social and even ritual interaction outside the local group is usually with non-Naiken neighbours and not with Naikens of other local

groups. Thus for example, Naiken may attend festivals of their neighbours, with whom they also transact in various ways.⁵

When a Naiken is pushed to make a reference to something which corresponds to the enquirer's notion of a Naiken territory, he simply says *nama sima* (our place), the same term which he uses to refer to the place where he and his family live, and to the compound of huts where his hut is. Responding to an insistent enquiry concerning the Naiken tribe, he similarly refers to *sonta* (family in the wide sense), which he also uses for referring to the nuclear family, to his kindred, and to the totality of people in the local group. For example, the Naiken do not have any body of myth, which explains the origin of the Naiken people, nor any story to account for their place amidst other populations.⁶ For each individual Naiken the practical Naiken universe is contained within the local group.

If we adopt the Naiken perspective we must take the local group as the natural unit of study, and in many ways the only meaningful sample, because of the variations between local groups. A detailed study of the Naiken of one local group—especially aspects of their economy, social organization and kinship is provided elsewhere (Bird 1983a). Here a brief selective summary is offered, aiming to give enough background to support the present argument.

Naikens are engaged in a variety of economic activities including gathering for consumption and for trade, fishing, honey collecting, some hunting, occasional day labour in the fields of low-caste Muslim Moppalas, constructing huts and fences for Moppalas, occasional work with officials who visit the area, acting as watchmen and guides, and increasingly wage labour in a nearby rubber and coffee plantation. The recently added work in the plantation fits in with the traditional economic activities with respect to nature of tasks, manner and rationale of work etc., and does not greatly affect the Naiken economic and social system as a whole. (Bird 1983b.)

In general, Naikens do not plan their day in advance but take up any opportunity which presents itself during the course of that day. They

⁵ The description of the Naiken which is provided in this paper, raises some serious questions concerning the modes of social cohesion and social solidarity, and the form of kinship and marriage, which do bond together the segregated, independent families. These questions are examined in a book I am now writing to submit to Cambridge University Press.

⁶ One 'story' was elicited, and it tells how first there were pairs of *etta(n)* and *ette* (grandfathers and grandmothers) dispersed in the *Wynaadu*, who then found for themselves 'gods', and from them all the present Naiken have descended. This story 'explains' the decentralized, open and atomistic social system of the Naiken.

idle around their fires, quite often until late morning, and then set out to the forest, to the tea shop, or to a nearby market village. On their way they may encounter a Moppala, for example, who may ask them to do some work for him, or they may come by a tradeable minor forest produce which they then collect. They respond to the circumstances presented to them to meet immediate needs. Relative affluence of natural resources (cf. Sahlins 1972) gives the Naiken a secure base from which to transact with the non-Naiken people. They do not depend on outsiders, some of whom, for example contractors of forest produce, and the owners of plantations in the jungle area, at the same time depend considerably upon them. Payment in advance characterizes and regulates the transactions with outsiders including the plantation, just as described by Morgan in 1876. Naiken usually receive money or goods, and then are constantly exhorted to repay by labour or by minor forest produce. When they do, they receive more money or goods and are again indebted, and so on.

Social life within the local group shows a pattern resembling the physical layout of the huts, in that they are independently located, with little coordination, and with no focal common space. Nuclear families are independent social and economic units. The observer usually sees families each on its own, engaged in subsistence activities, or just idling near their fire. There is little direct social contact between families. Occasionally one can see a few people gathered, but even then they usually stand facing different directions, exchanging words only very infrequently. Kinship ties by and large are not load bearing, that is 'they do not carry a heavy burden of goods and services transmitted between the participants in recognition of claims or obligations' (Woodburn 1980: 105). Nor do kin tend to visit each other specifically.

The conjugal pair is the most important social unit in the Naiken system. The pair usually carry out subsistence activities together, and to a large extent share domestic chores. They spend most of their leisure time together. The spouse is one's main, if not only friend upon whom he can rely for help. The conjugal bond overshadows all other kinship relationships and perhaps because of this mutual affection is the essential prerequisite in the formation of the conjugal union. Marriages are often merely *de facto* arrangements whereby the couple start to live together. Occasionally, a meal may be offered to a small gathering to celebrate the event. The situation is very reminiscent of that described by Grigg, as well as by others: '... after a couple have cohabited for some time, they agree to live together for life' (1880: 213).

Nineteenth-century accounts emphasizing that the Kurumbas have

'religious ideas of the vaguest' and 'are said to have no tradition of any kind', broadly speaking, fit the Naiken well enough. There are very few rituals to celebrate life-cycle events. There are no birth or marriage ceremonies—a fact not only heard from informants but also ascertained during fieldwork by observations of births and formations of conjugal unions. Burial is the only life-cycle event which is celebrated, in common with the wider Nilgiri cultures, where elaborate burial ritual is a characteristic feature (Hocking in press). The Naiken have one main public event, a festival celebrated for 24 hours once a year. It appears to be similar to the annual festival that is described in the nineteenth-century accounts of the Kurumbas, in particular in Francis' work.

Naiken shamans go into trance during the annual festival, and then the Naiken converse with the animistic and ancestral spirits which possess them. Between one annual festival and another, however, the shamans hardly have a role to play, and they cannot be differentiated from other people by any social or economic criteria. Occasionally only they are consulted in cases of certain illnesses for which the causes are not clear to the Naiken to find out if the illnesses are supernaturally caused, and if offerings to the spirits are required to avert danger. In contrast, the non-Naiken seek the Naiken shaman's advice for a wide range of purposes—for example various illnesses, prosperity, change of jobs, etc. Non-Naiken ask advice not only from the Naiken shaman, but also from other Naikens, especially those in their employ and so accessible to them.

III. The Ethnographic Myth

From the first part of this paper it can be seen that in the early Nilgiri literature there is a confusion concerning the various Kurumbas groups, their numbers and the relations between them. Their culture in general is portrayed as 'scanty' in its ritual, with 'religious ideas of the vaguest' and with 'no tradition of any kind'. There are references to dispersal of hamlets (even in the same local aggregate), to localized cultural forms, and to varied economic activities. These accounts have been criticized in the recent literature, precisely because of such descriptions. In the recent literature, the problem is almost reversed. Here, there is a clear and simple formulation of the food-gatherer Kurumba tribe, who is customarily involved in highly patterned relationships with the other tribes, specializing of all things in providing ritual objects and services to the other Nilgiri people. But only 'scanty' details of this Kurumba tribe are offered almost always from the perspectives of some other 'tribes'.

It is not possible to explain the dissonance between the early and the recent accounts by the simple proposition that the people in question underwent radical changes between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. As pointed out above, the traditional interchange between the Nilgiri tribes, which is described in the recent literature, flourished in the nineteenth century, and was declining after the first world war (Hockings 1980: 99)—a point too often overlooked in the literature. The early and the recent literature concern the same people under conditions which are sufficiently similar not to affect the present argument.

The Naiken material suggests another possible explanation, though we must bear in mind the methodological difficulties in inferring from the Naiken of today to the Kurumbas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This exercise is nevertheless important since there is no other way of reconstructing the early Kurumbas independently of the literature, which is so problematic, and at the same time there have been no other intensive anthropological studies of any of the Nilgiri Kurumba tribes.

From the second part it can be seen that the Naiken do not conform to the stereotype of a closed, bounded, traditional 'tribal' society as is often assumed (in other cases perhaps rightly) with the term 'tribe' in Indian sociology. They are dispersed in small local groups amidst other populations, and these local groups are not linked by any pan-Naiken structure, be it economic, social or ritual. A nucleated pattern of social organization characterizes each independent local group. In a conventional sense, as Breeks (1873: 50) said of the Kurumbas 'they can hardly be said to have any tribal existence, but are isolated scattered families'. Their culture in general is distinguished by variety rather than homogeneity. Economic occupations are strongly influenced by external opportunities, and less by internal customary cultural prescriptions, and are accordingly varied. The people in general are comparatively little concerned with life-cycle ritual and with religious ideas.

Broadly speaking, then, there is a certain similarity between the Naiken and the Kurumbas as they are portrayed in the nineteenth-century accounts. The early references to the Kurumbas have been criticized by scholars for being vague and unreliable, largely because of the details provided in them concerning their lack of interest in ritual and cosmological views, as well as their dispersion, variability, and flexible divisions and divisions' names. The Naiken case suggests the possibility that the details in the early literature directly reflect upon the nature of the people who studied them.

With specific reference to the problem of divisions and their names, judging by the Naiken case, it is highly possible that individual Kurumbas did not provide a uniform, overall picture of Kurumbas' divisions and their names, because the category 'Kurumba' was not structured in this way. It is more likely that informants, like the Naiken, had each a highly personalized view of the Kurumbas. They each knew their own group, and in addition perhaps a few other groups near their own. In the words of Breeks himself, who so carefully provides the background information, it is not that 'it [was] difficult to get a complete account of the tribal divisions recognized by them'—which Breeks presumed to exist. But as Breeks continued that 'one man will name you one (his own); another two divisions; another three, and so on'.

Similarly, it is quite possible that descriptions concerning the lack of marriage and birth ritual, and the vagueness of religious ideas in general, may not reflect upon the failure of the early observers to *find* information on these aspects, but simply point to the relatively little importance of ritual in Kurumbas life, as it is among the Naiken.

Finally, with specific regard to the wide range of economic occupations which are attributed to the Kurumbas in the nineteenth-century literature and which have sometimes puzzled anthropologists, it can be said that a simple denominator connects them all, namely the readiness of Kurumbas to be engaged in any local casual labour in return for the simple commodities they require, such as salt, grain, cloth, etc. It is also possible that observations in different seasons gave different ideas as to the importance of gathering in the economy. Dubois' description is a good example.

The Naiken material suggests then that what seems to be perplexing in the nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts by administrators, travellers and planters may not be so problematic, and that the accounts on the whole are reasonably adequate, and in any case not 'scanty, vague and often wrong' (Kapp). A problem arises, then, of explaining the way in which the Kurumbas are portrayed in the recent anthropological literature. It cannot be doubted that Kurumba persons did fulfil for the other three tribes the functions described in the twentieth-century accounts, because there have been so many intensive studies of these tribes. In particular, firstly that they provided ritual objects procured from the forest, important to the other three tribes. Secondly, they were approached for supernatural curing and other advice by the other three tribal people. And thirdly, individual Kurumbas acted as watchmen, each for one Badaga commune, playing an important part in certain agricultural rituals and helping the Badaga priest. Further-

more, this appointment was for life and was hereditary. There are added methodological limitations in making inferences from the Naiken case on this particular problem, since the Naiken live on the lower slopes of the Nilgiris, not near the plateau in the immediate vicinity of the other three tribes. However, early sources suggest that Kurumbas of the lower slopes in the Nilgiri-Wynaad and the Malabar-Wynaad were in contact with these three tribes. Rivers, for example, mentions that 'poles of the proper length (for the second funeral ceremonies of the Todas) are said to grow on the Malabar side of the Nilgiris' (Rivers 1906: 641). Similarly Breeks reports of information obtained from 'two Kurumbas who came to the Kundah Kotagiri (bringing their hoes to be sharpened by the Kotas) from a Motta in Malabar . . .' (1873: 55). There are, and were, in addition, Badaga and Kotta communities in the Wynaad area. Finally, the Kurumba groups that do live at the higher elevations, have undergone considerable changes during the past decades, as they live near the principal Nilgiri administrative centres, while those down below have not.

Examining in detail each of the alleged roles of the Kurumbas, it can be suggested with regard to the first role that it is likely that, like the Naiken, the Kurumbas provided any forest item for which there was demand in return for the simple commodities they required. While for the recipient Nilgiri tribes some of the items provided were of particular ritual importance (e.g. the sacrificial pole for the Todas), for the Kurumbas these were only one among many other types of forest produce for which there was external demand (i.e. poles cut from certain trees).

Similarly, with regard to the second function mentioned, it can be proposed that Kurumbas, like the Naiken, were considered as healers and as sorcerers mainly by outsiders—settled people who fear the forest-dwellers outside their system and choose to use them for this purpose. Within internal contexts even the shamans were not very active, and their range of activities was very limited.

Finally, concerning the third function, in itself the engagement as watchmen seems to have been common among the nineteenth-century Kurumbas, as it is among the Naiken at present, and Kurumbas could have been employed by Badagas as by any other outsiders. The fact that the Kurumba watchman was employed by the Badaga commune as a whole and not by an individual Badaga was perhaps related to the nature of the Badaga society. From Hockings' work it is clear indeed that the commune was particularly important in the Badaga social organization, and in certain cases acted collectively under its headman

and priest. The Kurumba watchman was not present in the village all the time. Hockings writes: 'If he [the Kurumba] does not appear there very often the Badagas nevertheless believe he is magically present each night or else knows by clairvoyance what is going on in the villages' (1980: 123). Hockings then continues: 'yet his visits tend to be frequent, for he is fed by the commune'. The Kurumba, then, may well have seen this duty as any other casually-based engagement (cf. their ready assimilation of the opportunity of plantation labour). Furthermore, it is quite possible that while for the Badagas the Kurumba appointment was for life, the Kurumba as he saw it was simply involved in a type of barter relationship, going occasionally to the Badaga village to perform certain duties and receive in return the commodities he wanted. The case may be similar with regard to the alleged hereditary nature of the post. Hockings writes: 'When a Kurumba watchman dies the headman of the Badaga commune should collect some gifts from the villagers and take them, or have them sent, to the bereaved family. This used to be imperative to secure the goodwill of the family from which the next watchman would also be drawn' (*ibid.*: 126). For the Badagas the gift was merely a matter of securing the goodwill of the family with whom they have hereditary links. But for the Kurumbas, it may well have been the establishment of a new 'barter' relationship. Payment in advance was indeed very important in Kurumba economic transactions with the outside, as they are still for the Naiken. Finally, we come to the Kurumba participation in the Badaga ritual. This was essential for the Badagas, but perhaps less so, if at all, for the Kurumbas. For his participation, the Kurumba, as one could almost predict did indeed receive money, tobacco, some grain and other items. Inferring from the Naiken, an adjustable and contextual code of behaviour was not foreign to the Kurumbas, who could operate quite satisfactorily within the framework of the Badaga ritual.

It seems thus that the Kurumba's involvement in the Nilgiris' traditional interchange, from his point of view, may not have been as regulated by customary norms as it is presented in the literature and by informants from the other three tribes. The form which this interchange took may not necessarily reflect a traditional Kurumba society structured as the other three societies are depicted to be structured. A case of a similar type of interrelationship between the food-gatherer Mbuti Pygmies of the Congo (Africa) and their neighbouring Bantu-speaking cultivators is reported in Turnbull's book sub-titled *The Two Worlds of the African Pygmies* (1965). Turnbull clearly shows that the interrelationship (which extends to the ritual domain) is interpreted in

different ways by the two participants, and is entered upon for different purposes. The pygmies take part in it mainly for economic advantages. Hockings' own summary of the traditional interchange between the Nilgiri tribes supports the present suggestion, where he gives summarizing diagrams of economic and social relations (1980: 100). In the diagram of economic relations, the Kurumbas are shown to give and receive goods, that is, arrows lead from and to the Kurumbas. In the diagram of social relations, arrows lead only away from the Kurumbas, that is, Kurumbas give services but receive in return economic goods.

If the Kurumbas' place in the Nilgiri traditional interchange is indeed as it is suggested here, there is not necessarily any clash between the portraits depicted in the early ethnographic accounts and the later anthropological studies. The early accounts are not inadequate and inaccurate, nor 'scanty, vague and often wrong', but rather the reverse. It would appear that the descriptions offered by travellers, administrators, and planters are perhaps more accurate than the references in the later anthropological accounts, because the early observers were less constrained by the anthropological stereotype of a traditional/primitive society, and included details which deviate from it. The simple formula of the Kurumbas in the twentieth-century anthropological literature was perhaps created because the scholars presumed the Kurumbas to be a bounded, highly structured traditional society.

Malinowski, the eminent social anthropologist, suggested that myths document the sociological and ideological reality of the actors who tell the myth and think with it, and not necessarily the reality of the subject of the myth (1926). It is thus perhaps not an accident that the Kurumbas, as actors, appear to have had no 'myth' of themselves. Like the Naiken, they seem to have held no articulated view of a Kurumba tribe(s). It is possible to conclude that the observers, as actors, had created a myth of the Kurumba tribe, which reflected upon their—the commentators'—sociological disposition and, in Malinkowski's words, their 'living faith'.

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