CULTURE CHANGE AMONG THE NILGIRI TRIBES*

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FOUR tribes, isolated together, mutually interdependent, yet culturally distinct, are simultaneously exposed to alien custom. The culture of each takes a different course of adaptation to the new circumstance. Our purpose is to indicate some reasons for these differences and, if possible, to discern certain general trends underlying the variant processes of acculturation.

For many centuries the tribes of the Nilgiri Hills in South India were isolated from the people of the plains below. The steepness of the hills and the climate of the plateau discouraged any extensive contacts with the Hindus of the lowlands. So the tribes formed a social enclave which was geographically close to Hindu life but culturally remote from it. The Nilgiri folk lived in economic and social symbiosis, the Todas being pastoral people, the Badagas agriculturalists, the Kotas artisans, the Kurumbas food gatherers and sorcerers.

It was about a hundred years ago that the English discovered the plateau and there found a godsend as a haven from the summer heat of the plains. They soon pushed a road through to the summit and before long moved the seat of the provincial government up to the hills for six months every year. With the British administrators and vacationists came an influx of lowland Hindus and Mohammedans, servants, merchants, wanderers looking for a living—men from many castes and areas.

The natives of the Nilgiris were thus subject to the impact of two levels of invading culture, Hindu and European. From both sources each tribe took over certain things, rejected others—each group according to its own tastes and inclinations. Before attempting to assess these borrowings, it is well to consider the nature of cultural interchange before Europeans appeared in the area.

There was some cultural give and take among the tribes; the great wonder is that it amounted to so little. The four peoples lived in constant and close contact with each other, yet were culturally and linguistically segregate. Any village of one tribe was, and still is, within a short walk of villages of each of the other tribes. But the four cultures have relatively little in common. The complex Toda ritual and social organization had only vague parallels in Kota life. While Kota dress and housing are similar to that

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of the Badaga, other phases of the two cultures bear but little resemblance. Both Kota and Badaga admired and respected the Todas, yet in spite of the high prestige rating of the Toda, the others took over very few Toda traits and those unimportant.

There are several reasons why so little trait diffusion went on among these four groups who lived almost literally cheek by jowl. For one thing, each of the cultures operated on a totally different economic base. All of Toda life had to do with the buffalo herds. Kota religion and interest centered about the smithy, Badaga life was engrossed with the welfare of the crop. Each group had a different focus of interest to which the other societies could contribute little.

Perhaps more important is the nature of social intercourse. Kurumbas are often called from their jungle homes to minister to Kotas and Badagas. Their magical services are indispensable. In the practice of their profession, Kurumbas may have occasion to call on their Kota clients several times a week. Yet whenever a Kurumba comes into view, the word flashes through the village, women and children run for the safety of home, cower inside until the Kurumbas have gone. All transactions between Kota and Kurumba take place outside the village limits, rarely is a Kurumba allowed within the home confines of another tribe.

In like manner, Kota musicians have to be present at all major Toda ceremonials; yet if the band comes too close to a dairy, the place is polluted and can only be resanctified by elaborate purificatory rituals. So it goes for the relations among all the tribes. Although contact was frequent, social intercourse was confined to a fixed number of narrowly defined activities. Any intimate contact, of a kind which would allow members of one group to mingle freely with another, was stringently tabooed.

A third bar to intertribal diffusion is the matter of prestige symbolism. A unique tribal trait tends to be interpreted as a symbol of group status. Any attempt to imitate it by another group is violently resisted. For example, Badagas wear turbans, Kotas do not. When a few Kotas once took to wearing turbans, the Badagas felt that the Kotas were getting above themselves. Some of the Badagas ambushed and beat up the Kota offenders, tore off their headgear, and effectively blocked the borrowing of this trait.

This situation is typical of conditions which prevail throughout India. Each caste and tribe has its own unique configuration of custom, represents a distinct cultural compartment. Diffusion is impeded by barriers against intimate connections and symbolic considerations of group status.

All the factors which made for frequent contact without acculturation in the Nilgiris are still valid. But there have been certain important modifica-

tions. In aboriginal times the ultimate sanction in tribal or intertribal disputes lay with a council composed of the headmen of the tribes. Now the British administrator, not the council, is the court of last appeal. Economic changes have been quick to appear. The former subsistence crop of the Badagas, millet, is being replaced by a cash crop, potatoes. The cash so acquired can be used to buy imported tools, and so the economic base of the Kotas is endangered. For fifty years past, the tribesmen have been coming into the weekly market where they see strange goods and customs, even movies.

The effect of these changes on the Kurumbas cannot be gauged at present. They still live in their jungles, still come forth to purvey magical protection, still slink quickly back. No field work was conducted among these people and my acquaintance with them is slight.

The Badagas, however, have been deeply affected by the opening of the area. They, of all the Nilgiri people, were closest akin culturally to caste Hindus. Renewed contact with Hinduism has engendered a drive to align their ways with those of the caste structure. This requires the eliminating of old traits as well as the adopting of new practices. For example, musicians rank very low in the caste system and do not merit as important a place as Kota musicians held among the Badagas. Hence many Badagas want to eliminate Kota music from ritual performances. The more conservative Badagas see a threat to the whole tenor of tribal life in this change and stubbornly retain their old relations with the Kota. This conflict has crystallized factional differences, and a fight between the pro-music and the anti-music party recently led to several Badaga deaths. Here as in other acculturative situations, we find the growth of factions, one striving to effect the change, the other bitterly resisting it.

The Badagas have borrowed little directly from the English, but the very establishment of an authority superior to any native sanction has undermined the old way of life. When disputes of a serious nature are decided by the British official instead of by the tribal headmen, then all of the old societal structure loses some of its grip. Whites have had a great effect on the Badagas, not so much because of positive contributions to Badaga life, nor because of the suppression of previous custom, but rather because of the general debilitating effect they have had on the compulsive value of aboriginal sanctions.

The Todas have been exposed to the ways of the whites more, perhaps, than any of the other groups. Two of their villages are within the limits of the largest English settlement. They constitute one of the famed sights of the town and every newcomer to the Nilgiris is dutybound to inspect and

photograph the Toda soon after arrival. A mission for the tribe was established just fifty years ago and intensive missionary efforts have gone on ever since. A few Todas have been employed as herders by Europeans and some serve as ornamental guards for the palace of one of the Maharajas.

Dr Murray B. Emeneau, who conducted linguistic studies among the Toda over a period of three years, has written a paper called *Toda Culture Thirty-Five Years After: An Acculturation Study.*[1] This paper traces the changes in Toda culture during the thirty-five years which intervened between Rivers' studies and Emeneau's stay with the tribe.

In 1901 Rivers found the Todas but little affected by invading peoples. True, they sold their ghee in the market and occasionally paid vows to Hindu or Mohammedan shrines, but all the rest of their way of life remained inviolate. A few had become converts, but they lived apart from the tribe and had no effect on the tribal career. Emeneau diligently searched for further changes and found but one that could be noted for most of the tribe. The young men have taken to wearing gaily colored neckerchiefs. Only a single sib exhibits more than this trifling change through three decades.

Just as Toda life has furnished some standard textbook examples in other matters anthropological, so does it offer a classic case of contact without acculturation. Toda culture is so highly integrated, so tightly knit around the care and cult of the buffalo, that unless the buffalo cult breaks down, other influences can hardly penetrate. And the buffalo herds of the tribe, save for the one sib above mentioned, are larger and more flourishing than ever. The English have seen to it that Toda pastures are not encroached upon, that Todas cannot sell pasture land. British motives for this consideration have been twofold; they cherish the Todas as they do ancient monuments and game preserves; secondly, the Toda pastures make excellent cover for the hunt (with jackals as quarry) which the English and the native Rajas maintain in the Nilgiris. Since the basis of Toda economics remains unimpaired, all of the complex structure erected on this basis is unfractured.

All, save in the sib-village *uŋkitj*. Only this solitary settlement has taken to raising potatoes, only they keep cattle as well as buffalo. The reason for their deviance is not far to seek. The heart of the Toda cult is in the sacred dairies, and the sacred dairies of this sib lie beneath the parade ground of the cantonment of Wellington. The site chosen for the military

[1] (Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, vol. xix, January, 1938), pp. 101–121.

station covered the pastures of these Todas and they were moved to a neighboring hillside. But there they muddied the water supply of the soldiers and they were shifted again to a more distant ridge. In this new location, they can keep buffalo easily enough but cannot carry on the buffalo ritual since they have no sacred places. For the sacred dairy sites of a sib are one, inalienable, and irreplaceable. Deprived of the hub of their ritual, this group has lost its zest for buffalo care and has taken over certain non-buffalo traits.[2]

The history of this single deviant sib illustrates the potentialities of Toda acculturation. The amputation of dairy ritual, unintentional though it was, affected the economic life of this group, weakened the cohesiveness of the whole culture, made possible the infiltration of new elements. While other alien influences have little marred the surface of Toda society, this blow struck at the vitals of the culture. Every culture is especially vulnerable to profound change in certain of its spheres. One such strategic area in Toda life is the sphere of ritual. The other Toda sibs continue to maintain their ritual, retain the old economic pattern, remain impervious to foreign ways.

The Kotas have been more susceptible to change than have the Todas but have not yielded as greatly as have the Badagas. Not so immured within a single pursuit as to be insensible to all else, they still have not been as sensitive to Hindu manners as have their agricultural neighbors. A great cultural and social distance separates the Kotas from lowland Hindus. As blacksmiths, musicians, carrion eaters, their presence cannot be tolerated by caste men and so they have less opportunity than have the Badagas to associate with plains folk. Since the gap between Kota and lowlander is bridged by a few tenuous contacts only, the tribesmen have greater reluctance to cross over into strange cultural territory, have less longing to identify with Hinduism than have the Badagas. They have had to make certain adjustments because of the partial breakdown of the old system of intertribal relationships, but these changes have not yet involved any great departure from aboriginal custom. The diminishing return from their handicraft has been supplemented by an enlargement of their old cultivations. They still carry on the traditional exchange of goods and services with Toda, Kurumba, and some Badaga.

The direct impress of European influence on Kota life meets even the casual eye. Chevrolet axles have replaced native ore as raw material for spades. Tea and potatoes are ousting millet and barley from the tribal fields.

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[2] I am indebted to Dr Murray Emeneau for this information.

Tiled roofs and tailored jackets are supplanting ancient thatch and tribal toga. But these in themselves are mere surface substitutions. Whatever the source of the metal, the tribesmen still are smiths, and the smithy plays much the same part in social and religious life as before. The new crops have not altered ideas of land ownership or familial usufruct. Beneath the tile and store clothing reside ancient concepts of manly demeanor, of sib solidarity, of supernatural sanctions. These innovations have not really affected the core of Kota life.

More significant have been certain less conspicuous happenings, whose repercussions have created series of disturbances through the whole of the society. A single seemingly innocuous order by a British official may profoundly disturb the tribal equilibrium. Such a train of events was set going when the villagers of Kotagiri were ordered to use latrines.

The village happened to be located in a place of great scenic and climatic attraction. In the words of the interpreter and informant,

> Then the English came and bought land from the Kotas of Kotagiri and built bungalows around the village. Police station, bazaar, English hotels, all come. These civilization people have latrines but the jungle people, the Kotas, go out of the village and in the night they just sit where they wish. The government built two two latrines, one for males, one for females, and the government ordered that the Kotas use them. The priests and headmen and diviners had a council about it, but they wanted to ask the *pembačol*, the woman who becomes possessed to the music of the flute.

The woman who was consulted forbade the use of latrines, and when a council of the whole tribe was called, the decision was taken to move the entire village. The proponents of this move tellingly argued that the smell of the new institution would offend the sensibilities of the village gods. To avoid offending either British or divine powers, the whole community was shifted to a new locale.

This resistance, however, raised fresh problems. For the two priests of the village could not agree on a site. The followers of one settled in his chosen spot and there built a temple, while the adherents of the other built their houses and temple in another place, about a mile away. Never before in tribal memory had the village deities been separated or a village so sundered. Since protracted argument, threats of force, and tribal pressure failed to bring either side to yield, the quarrel eventually reached the British court. True to the diplomacy of colonial administration, the court ordered a compromise; the united village was to be located on a third site, midway between the two previously selected.

Thus the resistance to one minor regulation of British authority led to

submission in a matter of much greater import. Since the government official had the last word to say in matters pertaining to the gods, he had unknowingly usurped some of the sanctions formerly accorded to the gods and their retainers. The weakened prestige of the priests led to this further incident.

A few of the villagers had kept title to their lands in Kotagiri and in time received considerable revenue from rents. In the course of some years, one of these wealthy men was chosen to be priest. He chafed under the ritual taboos incumbent upon priests since they prevented him from enjoying the tastes his wealth had enabled him to acquire. Moreover, as I understand the case, the lowered prestige of the priesthood caused him to take the duties of his office less seriously than he might otherwise have done. On a grand spree one fine day he violated many of the rules of priestly conduct in a single fell swoop. He got drunk, had a barber cut his sacerdotal beard, donned footgear.

But the group had not so far relinquished its old values as to tolerate this breach. The priest was promptly subjected to the direst punishment—he was made an outcaste. The society was still sure enough of its scale of values and well enough integrated to make this punishment stick and rankle. Only by dint of great expenditure and abasement did this wayward priest secure readmittance to the tribe.

The chain of events started by the latrine edict is one index of the degree of acculturation—in matters of basic importance—among the people of Kotagiri. At least one individual, the priest, was ready to throw over an important sector of the integrating framework of the society. His unique position and experiences as a man of wealth brought him to that juncture. But his fellow villagers had not shared those experiences, for them the aboriginal patterns were still satisfactory, and in the end they forced the vagrant to reaffirm publicly the continuing validity of the traditional way. Had the group been subject to deeper frustrations, some men would very probably have supported the dereliction. Or if the priest had been a more forceful personality, if he had so manipulated the prestige set-up of the society as to accrue to himself greater power over his relatives and neighbors, then too he might have been able to flout tradition without recanting.

In another Kota village there lives a man who has done that very thing. He is a vigorous personality who has been able to bring about significant changes in several villages. This individual, Sulli, is the one Kota who can speak English. He alone of all the tribesmen has lived among Hindus, as he had to do in the course of receiving enough education to become a school teacher. Whole complexes of behavior which are significant in present day

Kota life, behavior toward Europeans, literacy in Tamil and English, are carried only by him.

A life history of this individual shows that he has sought to deviate from the established patterns of his culture since childhood. The very fact that he went through a long and painful process of education is one reflection of his desire to deviate. Sulli's perpetual drive to seek new ways and to induce others to follow him finds expression in his present efforts to get his tribesmen to cut their hair, to abandon music as a tribal vocation, to give over the eating of carrion, to abolish the menstrual seclusion hut. This last reform probably stems from lessons in hygiene, but the other traits are stigmas of group inferiority according to Hindu concepts.

Sulli himself has gone beyond the reforms he advocates. The prestige value imparted by contact with an ethnographer and a linguist lent him enough courage not only to cut his hair but also to tog himself out in shorts, topee, and stockings in the style of an Englishman. Although his reforms are savagely opposed by many, some of the younger men have followed his example in cutting their hair and in abandoning other tribal practices. Had Sulli been a weaker personality, he could not have held his followers or himself to his schedule of acculturation. Much of Kota culture change is channelled through and directed by a single individual, the leitmotif of whose personality is deviation from established tradition.[3]

A study of recent history in the Nilgiri area reveals differences in degree of change and in the nature of the acculturation process among the tribes. The old structure of Badaga society was generally weakened by the advent of the English so that many Badagas were ready to take over new traits. Since these Badagas felt more closely identified with Hinduism than with other cultures, they took over new behavior patterns mainly from the plains folk. Toda life, narrowly concentrated on the buffalo, has little time for or interest in extra-buffalo behavior. The conditions under which the integrity of Toda culture can be shattered are illustrated by the career of one aberrant sib. The sketch of Kota change reveals the varying force of different acculturative impacts and demonstrates the role which personality may play in mutations of the social mass.

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[3] Some aspects of this situation have been discussed in a paper which is shortly to appear in the Sapir Memorial Volume.