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Author(s): J. R. Freeman

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Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala

J. R. FREEMAN

University of Pennsylvania

The substantive aim of this essay is to document popular attitudes towards the forest and its biotic resources through time as I have encountered these in the northernmost areas of the modern Indian state of Kerala.¹ The interviews and folk-lore I have drawn upon in the present, however, are very much a legacy of Kerala's past. And since, sadly, most of the forests themselves have become a rapidly fading memory, my approach must be not only anthropological, but also folkloric and ethnohistorical.

Theoretically, my principal aim is to demonstrate that an anthropological focus on actual local discourses about Kerala's forests, both past and present, casts serious doubt on the kind of ecological idealism that has gained a certain currency in recent reconstructions of India's environmental past.² Since much of this discussion has focused on the institution of 'sacred groves', my critique begins there, but moves on to the more sweeping projection of this 'ecologic' into a kind of generically 'Hindu' human ecology. While my efforts will be framed by the deconstruction of this environmentalist scenario, my positive intent is to thereby resituate the social forces of culture and history, in all their regional complexity, back at the center of our models. Finally, this will lead us to the intersecting histories of these environmental discourses themselves—Western,

¹ Fieldwork for this project was carried out in Taliparamba Taluk of Cannanore District and throughout Kasargod District from June through November of 1993. I would like to thank the French Institute of Pondicherry for their hospitality and financial support of this research, and especially the former director, Dr. Jacques Pouchepadass, for his encouragement throughout this project, and subsequently.

² Arnold and Guha (1994:3) draw the distinction between a naturally construed 'ecological history' and the humanly conditioned 'environmental history' they advocate, though the kind of idealization that I am critical of can attach to either sort equally, be it through the hand of 'nature' or 'Hindu (vs. Western) values'. I thus add to the studies of Hardiman (1994), Shivaramakrishnan (1995), Krishna (1996) and a growing number of others, similarly critical of the implicit idealist or romantic assumptions informing much environmental history.

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Indian, traditional, and modern—to suggest that though they each emerge as culturally specific socio-historical constructions, they seem to be converging on a shared perception of natural resources as both finite, and at risk from the material and social technologies of modernity.

Regional and Theoretical Context

The focus of this study is on the eastern highlands of the three northernmost revenue divisions (*taluks*) of Kerala State. Until the Mysorean invasions and subsequent British take-over at the close of the 18th century, each of these areas lay in the mountainous territories of three contiguous kingdoms—Kolattunad, Nilesvaram and Kumbla—ranged south to north in domains reaching from their prominent western coastal centers up into the highlands. Though claiming intermittent independence, the northern two kingdoms were at least putatively tributary to the Raja of Kolattunad, who held larger territories still further to the south. The British made this Kolattiri Raja's realm part of Malabar and administered the other two taluks as part of South Kanara District. In the years following Indian Independence, they were all rejoined as part of the northernmost district of the unified state of Kerala, then recently split again into two districts within Kerala.³

What initially attracted me to this region was the discovery that many of the older inhabitants of this mountainous zone recall a time when their subsistence derived exclusively from a combination of swidden agriculture and hunting, a way of life that has all but vanished from contemporary India.⁴ I was further surprised both by what I learned of the way this subsistence regime was organized, the social groups involved in it, and the kinds of linkages that tied these communities with the lowland ones I had known from previous fieldwork. More disturbing was the remarkably rapid and historically recent manner in which this forest existence was brought to an end.

³ In 1981, these northern two taluks of Hosdrug and Kasargod (as Nilesvaram and Kumbla were renamed by the British), were formed into a separate Kasargod District, while Taliparamba Taluk remained attached to Cannanore District which basically corresponds to the Kolattiri's former holdings.

⁴ A survey of swidden agriculture in India is provided in S. Bose (1991); a brief profile of the few remaining acreages under swiddens in Kerala and South Kanara can be found there in P.K. Bose (1991:139-43).

This swidden mode of subsistence was completely supplanted over some thirty years' time by an enormous but seldom remarked event of internal colonization in recent south Indian history. From the 1930s into the 1960s, over 70,000 petty capitalist planters from the Syrian Christian community of Travancore streamed into the highlands of Malabar, in an enormous, concerted purchase and clearance of the vast tracts of private forest lands there. The bulk of these migrations came in the decade from 1945 to 1955, and seems to have peaked in the years from 1955 to 1960. The transformation sparked by that single generation of settlers has destroyed nearly all the natural forest cover of the region and has converted the former jungle lands into commercial plots of rubber, pepper, areca nut, tapioca, coconut and cashew.⁵ I will have more to say on certain features of this migration towards the end of this paper, since I believe the reception of this settlement affords important insights into the pre-existing social conditions and values of the region and their subsequent transformation into the present.

In any case, with this wholesale destruction of the forests and their biota, the way of life of those who subsisted from these resources was simultaneously effaced, leaving only the testimony of survivors from the eldest generation as evidence of the forest life that previously existed. It was the imperative to record the fading remnants of this earlier lifeworld, along with their links to the surviving religious institutions of the region, that motivated much of this research.

When I embarked on this study, I was of course aware of a burgeoning academic and popular literature on the place of India's forests in the life of its traditional peasant and tribal populations.

⁵ There is an excellent study on the forces driving these mostly small-scale commercial agriculturalists out of their native lands in Travancore and into Malabar by Tharakan (1984), alluded to at the close of this essay; see also Kurup (1988). For similar forces acting on this community as agents of deforestation in the Cardamom Hills of Travancore, see Moench (1991). The evidence I have collected so far suggests that the inland areas of my region of study had remained largely inaccessible to the commercial exploitation for timber until the arrival of the Syrian Christians in substantial numbers. Thus the District Gazetteer records: 'Lands which were inaccessible for centuries due to thick forest growth have been cleared off and brought under effective cultivation'. (Sreedhara Menon 1972:181). This makes the history of deforestation seem rather different here than for the areas immediately to the south (Kunhikrishnan 1987) and to the north (Pouchedapass 1990), where the blame is usually laid to commercial exploitation of timber. Due to the absence of roads and rivers to get the timber out for profitable sale, members of the Syrian community reported to me that they burned the bulk of the timber where it stood as fertilizer for their initial jungle crops.

Informing much of this literature is the thesis that prior to colonialism and industrialization, India's culture was imbued with a set of beliefs and practices that naturally held human demands on the environment in check, so that populations and their forest environment existed in a kind of ecologically sustainable homeostasis.⁶ In particular it is the religious values and institutions of Hinduism or its folk-variants that are supposed to have somehow encoded and transmitted this ecological wisdom across the generations.⁷ In its extreme development this religious eco-logic is even invoked as nature's mandate for the caste-system. The claim is that the supposed endogamy of castes made them like natural species, and their supposedly caste-exclusive occupational specialization was like the adaptation of species to different and complementary environmental niches.⁸

The objective characterization of caste societies that such a scenario posits is, I believe, factually dubious, and will be critiqued with specific reference to northern Kerala later in this paper. My concern at the moment is rather with how the subjective desire for confirmation of modernist ecological doctrines may generate a tendency to reconstruct idealized models of 'traditional' Indian society and its dominant ideologies that are clearly at odds with what historical and anthropological research reveals of actual Indian societies. This becomes all the more worrisome for a cultural anthropologist, since it often appears that cultural values are being imputed to populations not on the evidence of their actually espousing and expressing those values, but on the basis of inferring that they must hold some such values and beliefs from the requirements of the analyst's own ecological model. Indeed, much of the productive tension of my research in Kerala emerged from the constant juxtaposition of what my informants and their cultural documents were telling me, on the one hand, and what the scholarly literature on Indian forest life had prepared me for, on the other.

My own project accordingly attempts a more direct engagement with the express attitudes and beliefs of people who recall a time

⁶ Greenough (1992) has, I think, usefully critiqued a number of the assumptions underlying what he calls the SEN or Standard Environmental Narrative. For a good assessment of the larger force of his critique, see Sinha and Herring (1993).

⁷ For the most succinct statement of these linkages, see the opening pages of Gadgil (1989).

⁸ The clearest expression of this is in Gadgil and Malhotra (1994). For a recent statement of this, see Gadgil and Guha (1992: 105–6); it continues implicitly even in Arnold and Guha (1995: 9).

when they lived in dependence on forest resources, as these are reflected both in their personal memories and in their collective religious institutions. Since one of the main examples cited of the 'folk's' religiously-inspired ecological ethos is the institution of sacred groves, I shall begin by briefly characterizing what I learned of these in northern Kerala.

The Sacred Groves in Cultural Perspective

The concept corresponding to what we usually find called a 'sacred grove' in the literature is termed *kavu* in Malayalam.⁹ Physically, the modern *kavu* is indeed a piece of garden or forest land, but what culturally defines it is that it is dedicated for the exclusive use of particular deities; it is 'guarded' (*kavu*<√*kakk-*) in *their* interests. In this capacity, the groves usually adjoin or are a short distance from an associated structural temple or shrine, though sometimes the sacred structure may be within the *kavu* itself, and in such cases there need be no connection with structures beyond the grove's confines (Achyutha Menon 1943: 10ff).

In the most well-known pieces by environmentalists, sacred groves have been typically presented as stands of primeval forest, left undisturbed for reasons of deep religious sentiment at their climax stage of floristic succession, preserved in the midst of surroundings otherwise transfigured by human agricultural activity and resource exploitation.¹⁰ While not denying that some *kavus* may take this form, the majority of others in my experience do not.¹¹

⁹ See the discussion in Achyutha Menon (1943: 7–9) and the article in Nambudiripad (1976: 767–8). Subsequent to completing this paper, I learned of the unpublished dissertation by Uchiyamada (1995) on *kavus* in Alleppey District, in the lowlands of southern Kerala.

¹⁰ For example, 'Sacred groves are more or less pockets of climax vegetation ... These forest patches preserved on religious grounds are the true indicators of the type of vegetation that once existed along these hilly terrains long before the dawn of modern civilisation' (Vartak and Gadgil 1981: 272). The idea that these groves are oriented towards the preservation of biodiversity is developed in the article, following, in that volume (Gadgil and Vartak 1981). This then yields an ideal-typical reconstruction of ancient Indian ecology in which sacred groves, as biodiverse refugia are envisioned to have been surrounded by common lands of forest and pasture, which the interspersed human settlements and agricultural works drew upon in concert with religious dictates that functioned to preserve the biomass and biodiversity of the ecosystem (see the discussion and accompanying illustration in Gadgil, 1991:20–1).

¹¹ Over my years of research in Kerala, I have visited several dozen *kavus* in my capacity as a researcher of folk-religion, but concentrated only in this last field-

What seems evident is that the category 'sacred grove' in this literature, derives not from local understandings, but from a botanical ideal. The instances that approximate that ideal are held up as exemplars of the ideal-type, and in lieu of locally sustained cultural or historical research, a correspondingly idealized value-system is selectively devised from an ahistoricized 'Indian tradition'. When the majority of groves, however, are inevitably found at variance with this ideal, this is testament to that lamentably modern state of 'degradation' and 'invasion of foreign elements', where both a botanical *and* a cultural reading can be given to those terms. The evidently flawed construction of these arguments, and the directly contradictory cultural evidence I collected, have led me to conclude that there is little correlation between the concerns and depictions of the modern environmentalist's models, and the actual local reasons for instituting and maintaining sacred groves. This being the case, we are also relieved of having to contrive improbably naturalistic explanations for how cultural practice comes to conform with either a hidden ecological imperative or an environmentally discerning folk-wisdom.

The better place to start our enquiry is with the *cultural* constitution of the category, for there is a firm local consensus as to what the defining features of *kavus* are: they are groves or gardens dedicated for the exclusive use of particular deities. What is of central importance here are the concerns of religious belief and worship, as a set of primarily conceptual and discursive features that underlie the otherwise contingent and variable physical forms the groves or gardens may take. As I was repeatedly told, it is the religious concept (*sankalpam*) that a deity resides in, or regularly resorts to and uses a grove or garden that makes it a *kavu*: 'Our *kavu* here is a religious concept (*sankalpam*). These religious concepts pertain to a *kavu* that has the aura of a temple about it . . . When we say *kavu*, this is a place of worship, exactly like a temple'.¹²

season on being as systematic as possible in inquiring into the physical conditions, histories, and beliefs attached to a variety of different kinds of grove I encountered. Mr. N.C. Induchoodan has been undertaking a much more systematic botanical survey of *kavus* throughout the length of Kerala under a grant from the French Institute of Pondicherry, expected out shortly. Cf. the botanical appendices from many named *kavus* in Unnikrishnan (1995).

¹² Unless otherwise stipulated, all quotations are the author's translations from Malayalam interviews tape-recorded in the field-season 1993, and transcribed by my able assistant, Mr A. Thamban.

In further exploring the content of this concept, informants supplied the more specific meaning of *kavu* as a garden, particularly a ‘pleasure garden’ (*udyanam, aramam*).

In these pleasure gardens (*aramam*) and retreats, the gods and goddesses sometimes gather to catch the breeze, full of fragrances from the flowers and groves. This is the meaning of saying that these are places harboring a religious conception (*sankalpam*) . . . The *kavu* is the place they have where they can ramble about. They can't always stay in the temple. In the pleasure garden, they will swing and sport. It must be that sometimes they are only conceptually present in the temple, while most of the time they are actually in the *kavu*. They take their food here [in the temple] and take their rest there.

It is well known that ideas of deity and of sovereignty have been closely modeled on each other throughout south India's history, and it is this kind of anthropomorphizing deities into human royalty that underlies the imagery of this passage.¹³ The association here equates the god's temple with a king's palace, and the *kavu* with the royal pleasure groves.¹⁴ It is thus as the gods' personal property, reserved for their monopolistic use, that encroachment or use by other mundane, human agents is proscribed. In an earlier paper, I have demonstrated something of the historical depth of the proprietary interest of lordship over such resources, whether vested in human or divine authorities. But commensurate with this goes the subjected nature of others' restricted access to, or total exclusion from, these resources, marked by all the disabilities and stigmas associated with caste and servitude in Malabar.¹⁵

I stress the hierarchical nature of these relations because there is a persistent and unwarranted tendency in the ecological literat-

¹³ For this equation of kings and gods in the ancient Tamil country (which included Kerala) during the early centuries, A.D., see Hart (1975: 13ff.). This same equivalence is manifested in the vocabulary of Kerala's Old Malayalam commentary on the *Arthashastra* (12th century) and continues well into the late pre-modern period as attested in Malayalam literature and folklore.

¹⁴ For an early example of conceptualizing royal forests from Kerala, see the same *Arthashastra* commentary (Sastri 1972 [1938], Vol. 2: 16–17; 165–70).

¹⁵ This paper, in French, is expected out soon in a volume edited by J. Poucheppadass and J. Puyravaud from the French Institute, Pondicherry. As argued there, the king's control and use of forest in the aforementioned commentary on the *Arthashastra*, the elite practices laid down in a Sanskrit treatise on groves, the *Upavana-Vinodha*, or 'The Pleasure of Groves' (1935), and norms governing forests dedicated to serpent gods, from a 15th-century Kerala astrological treatise, the *Prashnamarga* (n.d.), all exemplify these exclusionary proprietary interests, backed by temporal and supernatural sanctions.

ure to equate the rhetorical dedication of resources to a Hindu deity with a kind of public trust, as though they were thereby vested in a congregation as an egalitarian constituency. To the contrary, it must be realized that in Kerala, the networks of shrines, festivals and their accompanying rights and privileges, what Menon calls a 'community of worship' (1994:40–61), were predicated not on some collectivist consensus, but on a coercively enforced hierarchy of armed dominance (Freeman 1991). This dominance clearly extended to the control and management of 'divine property' (*deva-svam*)—temples, groves, and the like—where the god's will was far more likely to reflect the personal desires of landlord-chieftains, rather than those of the laboring community. Consider the following citation from Francis Buchanan, made of early 19th century villages in Karnataka.

The forests are the property of the gods of the villages in which they are situated, and the trees ought not to be cut without having leave from the *Gauda* or headman of the village ... who here also is priest (pujari) to the temple of the village god (cited in Gadgil and Chandran 1992: 186).

In light of what I have been saying, it is rather ironic that these modern authors cite this passage as evidence for the collectivist spirit of preserving the biodiversity of communal resources that supposedly prevailed in pre-British India.

The Varied Realization of a Cultural Type

Two larger points that need to be realized here about the sacred groves follow directly from their assimilation to the temple model of divine property: first, that their uses are exclusively reserved for the divine beings who own them; and second, that in this personalistic idiom of owner- or lordship, those uses refer to particular deities' needs, as these are culturally manifest through a combination of oracles and the personal powers and desires of groves' human owner-managers. Neither of these principles nor their resultant outcomes have any direct relation to the environmentalist ideals of bio-conservation, which makes it imperative that we attend to the cultural actualities of belief and practice instead. When we do so, what we in fact find is that many examples of what we might regard as human disturbance, resource exploitation, and encroachment are

happily accommodated within the cultural framework of the grove as the deities' personal preserve.¹⁶

Just as there are various practices specific to particular temples, because they are culturally mandated for the god in question, so different practices are allowed or even enjoined under the same cultural rubric of *kavu*, because different groves are devoted to different gods who have different histories and personal needs. This is to say that sacred groves are *cultural projects*, with varied histories as to their founding, uses, maintenance, and resulting physical profiles. While there is certainly a generalized ideal that a *kavu* should represent a natural state of uninhibited growth, it is hardly possible thereby to view most of them as pristine relics from a primeval past. To say culturally that they are created by divine fiat, means socially that they are created through the politics of temple control and oracular readings.

As to origins, a *kavu* may indeed result from the dedication of a patch of virgin forest to a deity, but I also know of those developed from what was once a stand of cultivated toddy-palms, from patches of shrubbery on laterite hillocks, and in one case, from an old tank in the middle of paddy fields. As to the varied practices allowed, most permit exploitation of resources in accordance with 'the god's needs', some routine, some contingent, including building walls, pathways and various structures at the expense of standing timber.¹⁷ The end result of these historical contingencies and the inherent tolerance in the cultural category of *kavu*, yields a variety of physical profiles and use-patterns for the groves themselves: some consist of stands of a few trees, others of scrub thickets where goats and cattle graze, some are open tree parks where people congregate to picnic, drink tea and play cards, and some are truly thick forests which may never have been exploited. But since all of these are equally entitled in local naming and practice to the designation *kavu*, it would be a cultural distortion to take only one instance of a stand of virgin forests as the archetype.¹⁸ And it would compound the error to then

¹⁶ Kalam has noted that for sacred groves in colonial Coorg, local notables argued that even converting them to coffee estates was fine, as long as part of the profits went to the god! (1996:13).

¹⁷ Even Gadgil and Chandran note that such processes are part of the life of sacred groves, but they choose to see this as another 'insidious threat' to the pristine type brought on by modernity, rather than an outcome of the normal logic of worship (1992:187).

¹⁸ The flexibility of the notion of *kavu* in terms of its physical profile is clearly seen from the treatment in Damodaran Pillai (1955:159–61). In terms of the shifting emphasis in the historical semantics, it is also clear from the fact that *kavu* may

use this partial or distorted representation as the basis for attributing general cultural postulates of an ethos like modern environmentalism back to the population in question.

The Social Claims on Ordinary Forests

If I have my doubts about deriving an indigenous conservationist ethos from the evidence of sacred groves, then I am even more dubious about the extension of such claims to the non-sacred forests and the wider sphere of nature. Informants quite readily distinguished sacred groves from ordinary forests, precisely because they think of the latter as a resource pool to be consumed with an abandon that sounded, at times, almost reckless.

Ordinary forests we can cut, just as we please. We can chop timber according to our needs. And wherever there are green leaves, we can take those away. Whatever it occurs to us we may want, we can take it from there. But from a *kavu*, we can't take things like that. For that there will be some restrictions . . .

Repeatedly in interviews like this one, the contrast seemed to be that in the absence of the religious restrictions that apply to *kavus*, ordinary forest, *kadu*, could be *in principle* freely seized upon for fuel, fodder, or jungle produce, felling timber, hunting animals or clearing tracts for swiddens. Rather than reflecting a positive carry-over from past practices, however, I believe this appetite for forest resources has been negatively shaped in the prohibitions of the past. For until the land redistributions of recent decades, most ordinary forests were decidedly *not* free—especially to the tenant and laboring classes who needed those resources most. The majority of forests in this region were attached to the estates of the small body of landlords and chiefs, the *janmis*, who claimed all the lands of Malabar and Kasargod as their hereditary family property.¹⁹ Though obviously not the same notion of landed property as promulgated under the market and rev-

refer to a temple that no longer has any associated grove, that the semantic weight of the term rests with the dedication of a site to a deity, rather than with the flora of the site, *per se*.

¹⁹ From the time the British first took control of Malabar, and before any English-inspired legal system of tenures had taken effect, it is quite clear that local notables were claiming long-established ownership rights (*udama-stha*) to the soil and the forests. See the overview of early documents and reports on land tenures in Moore (1905).

enue demands of colonial authorities, we must resist the tendency to project the pre-colonial regime as its idyllic inversion. This kind of 'reversed Orientalism' (discussed at this paper's conclusion) was first developed by a Malabar District Collector, William Logan (1897), through the last decades of the 19th century. Because his recommendations for alleviating the plight of the peasantry were progressive for their time, his idealized historical reconstructions have tended to be embraced by Kerala historians, against the evidence of the actual cultural documents.²⁰

Thus another stock scenario of environmental romanticism, the notion that natural resources in pre-capitalist social formations were generally communally held, as so-called 'common property resources' (CPR), or, more loosely, 'commons', finds no supporting evidence for this region.²¹ While it is obviously true that resources in forests and wastes in this region were utilized by local labor, in some sense, collectively, this says nothing of the actual proprietary rights of control in these resources, which were in fact privately vested.²² Thus while tenants and laborers had restricted use-rights over certain tracts of waste or forest, this was *only* in consideration of their more encompassing contractual obligations as laborers or tenants to the owners of those particular tracts.²³ Jungle swiddens were accordingly

²⁰ For instance, Kunhi Krishnan writes, 'In medieval Malabar social custom had the weight of law. Friction and fissure developed in the agrarian system only after the advent of the British power as the consequent impact of their political, economic and social measures' (1993:7).

²¹ A good discussion of common property resources in a number of recent studies for India is found in Sinha and Herring (1993). I believe it is essential in analyzing CPR's to follow Feeny *et al.* (1990) in distinguishing between the *resources*, including access and excludability, and the nature of the *rights* to those resources and where they are socially vested. In the context of South Asia's manifestly hierarchical societies, I believe the conflation by which 'commons' are definitionally 'resources available to the whole community of a village' (Jodha 1994: 150) impedes serious analysis of actual social patterns of resource access and use.

²² A very comparable case of forest and waste-land use can be found in the account of Vidyarthi for a socially and ecologically very different kind of village near Lucknow (1984). The counter-case can be found in Murali (1994) for Andhra, where a communal idealism seems pursued by definitional fiat, giving hierarchically vested institutions glosses like 'common wastelands', 'community common lands', etc.

²³ This is certainly the picture suggested from my interviews and the folk-sources. Historically, there is a strong and consistent argument for private claims over forests and waste-lands made by Sturrock for what was then South Kanara (1894). Logan (1887) attempts to sketch a more collectivist theory of property for pre-modern Malabar, but the material that he presents seems to work better against his argument rather than for it (cf. Moore 1905). A recent reappraisal of available documents, settlement records, etc. for colonial Malabar generally supports the

cleared and worked either by labor hereditarily or contractually bound to the owner, or by free-agents who rented the jungle plots in exchange for cash payments or a share of the crop.

Similarly, the hunting of animal life was conducted only by permission of the forest's owner, and in exchange for traditionally specified shares of the meat.²⁴ There are examples from the oral literature of poachers being killed for not presenting the land's owners with their share of the meat, and the killing of elephants by tribals carried a death sentence for them as far back as the 12th century.²⁵ Likewise, the collection of forest produce and the felling of timber were also regularly subject to receiving the owner's permission and the payment of specific cesses or tariffs on these items.²⁶

All of these economic relationships seem to reach back before the colonial presence, and attest to a well-developed notion of forest and

developed proprietary interests held in forests and waste-lands of the region (Menon 1994). Cf. Notes 26 and 27, below.

²⁴ Logan's statement that such permission was not required but was an imposition of the English courts seems clearly mistaken (1887:172). The rights to hunt particular lands were organized, ritualized and negotiated according to a developed system of rights and duties around shrines known as *Urpalli*, which had particular offices vested in them. Some pre-modern Malayalam manuscript material on the ritual of the hunt and its social organization has been summarized in English by Aiyappan (1937: 45–51), though he also quotes Logan's opinion. Some of this original manuscript material has been subsequently published (Kunhan Pilla: 1956). The control of hunting under social hierarchies for Kerala tribes in Vayanadu, to the immediate south, is also confirmed for the Kurichiyas (Aiyappan and Mahadevan 1990: 79–81) and the Mullukurumbas (Misra 1976: 56, ff.). The folk sources similarly make it clear that rights to hunt animals on a piece of land, or grant those rights to others, were vested in the land's owner. See for example, the following note.

²⁵ For example, the brothers of the woman who becomes the folk-goddess, Padakkatti Bhagavati, were murdered by their brothers-in-law for failing to inform the latter of a hunt on their land and to present them with the requisite portion of the deer slain. The injunction to kill foresters (*Shabaras*) who slay elephants is from the 12th century Old Malayalam commentary on the *Kautilya Arthashastra* (Sastri 1972 [1938], Vol. 2: 18).

²⁶ Ownership of forests and their resources as vested in individuals is confirmed by Sturrock (1894: 124ff.) for South Kanara where he discusses the private claims to forest-swiddens (*kumari*), waste-lands (*kumaki*) and forest-easements (*netti-kadu*). Logan's reprint of Graeme's Glossary (1887: Vol. II: clxviiiff.) gives a good idea of some of the varied particulars for Malabar, proper, as does Kurup (1984). Customs (*cunkam*) and taxes (*karam*) and various presentations (*kazhca*) were required of all kinds of collections and hunting in the forests, and various kinds of tenures for clearing or developing forest and garden lands (*kuzhi-kanam*, etc.) are well documented, as are particular timber-felling agreements around the payment of a stump-fee (*kutti-kanam*) for each tree felled.

other natural resources being vested exclusively in high-caste authorities over defined and bounded units of territory.²⁷ It seems relatively clear that aside from the labor of clearance, there was little to distinguish conceptually between the use-rights to forests and the social arrangements for cultivating settled agricultural lands.²⁸ This is a very important anthropological point for grasping how social relationships mediated cultural attitudes towards the environment in this part of India, and will be treated at greater length below. Here I just want to underscore the broad sociological fact that in these forest lands, the principle of socially vesting access to resources and control of labor and its products, followed not from some ecologically mandated primitive communism, but from the same general principles of hierarchy and dominance that we are familiar with from the caste-society of the lowlands.

The Tenor of Subsistence Activity

To convey the way forest-life was actually perceived by these people and their ancestors, I will first characterize the main subsistence activities of swidden agriculture and hunting, and then turn to the material I have garnered on the religious attitudes associated with them. Regarding swidden agriculture in the highlands, generally, we must first recognize that there is scant evidence for the presence of roving populations of tribals, wandering freely over their own territories and sowing jungle crops as they liked.²⁹ Just as was the case with agricultural labor of the lowlands, the actual castes and tribes who cleared and cultivated jungles in the highlands seem to have been traditionally bound to the estates of particular overlords who owned both definitively bounded holdings and had severe rights of governance over the workers attached

²⁷ The stock phrases of ownership to the soil and all floral and faunal life on it are continuous from the ancient grants, into those of the colonial period, as in Logan's deeds collected in the *Malabar Manual*, Volume II. The development of forest lands in the late medieval period is nicely treated in Ganesh (1991).

²⁸ I was delighted to find this discovery from my fieldwork so clearly confirmed and elucidated in its historical setting in Pouchepadass (1994) and am grateful to the author for sharing this paper with me in a pre-publication stage.

²⁹ Again, this is directly contra Murali, who claims for Andhra that 'the control of tribal groups over forests was recognized by rulers as their unquestionable natural right' (1994:121).

to those holdings.³⁰ Similarly, the higher castes of middle rank who wished to cultivate vacant jungle lands, rented them from these same overlords under terms very similar to those of agricultural holdings in the lowlands.³¹

The actual activity of swiddening carried out by these tenants or bonded labor hardly seems to have been conservationist in either its practices or its ethos, despite recent arguments critiquing colonial assessments and policies. Though recognizing both that the British administration's condemnation of the destructiveness of swiddening was likely motivated by their own interests in the governability of populations and revenue extraction (Pouchedapass 1994), and that the administration's own commercialization of timber had a devastating effect on the forests (Tucker 1988; Gadgil and Guha 1992: 207, ff.), neither of these observations bear directly on what is at issue here—namely, the actual practices and attitudes of the swidden agriculturalists themselves.

It was in fact difficult to detect any sensitivity to environmental degradation from my sources on shifting cultivation in this region, either in the spirit of this activity, or its practice. The routine of swiddening entailed completely destroying the forest cover over the acreage to be cultivated, along with a good margin around this area, through a combination of ax-felling, killing trees through stripping their bark, and burning. The timber was necessarily burned where it stood or fell, since this then provided ash for fertilizing the subsequent crop. Surrounding smaller trees were felled for use as rough fences and a variety of millets, pulses and vegetables were intersown with the main crop of hill rice. After cropping once or twice, the area was allowed to lie fallow for a number of years, but the preference was to return and re-use earlier swiddens before larger timber could take hold that would require arduous clearing again. Aside from some variation in the cycles of replanting and fallowing, and some occasional light ploughing of some plots, there was little vari-

³⁰ There are long traditions of indebted bondage and outright slavery attested for the highlands just as for the lowlands of Kerala. K. Panur has written a number of books documenting this for Kerala's tribals (e.g. 1963). See also Aiyappan and Mahadevan (1990) for 'feudal' servitude among the Kurichiyyas, and Mathur (1977: 95ff) for the recently existing practice of debtor bondage among various tribes of Vayanadu. These pledges were secured in oaths before deities, giving them supernatural sanction, a practice that was vividly attested among my own informants around their local shrines.

³¹ This point is again confirmed by Pouchedapass (1994) and Sturrock (1894) for South Kanara, and Innes (1908: 304), and Menon (1994) for Malabar, as well.

ation in these basic procedures of cultivation, whether reported from the colonial records, from descriptions in the old oral literature, or the recollections of my informants.³²

The other aspect of swiddening which must be taken account of is hunting. When I naively asked lowlanders who used to cultivate swiddens in the highlands whether they used to hunt in the forests there, they told me, 'To go for swiddening means you *have* to hunt'. The reason was that the forest animals were the main competitors for the jungle crops. In the absence of the ability to adequately fence or stay permanently in watch over the fields, the logic of this warfare against the wildlife was to make a preemptive strike, the goal being to exterminate all the potential pests from the surrounding forests before the crops were even sown. I was told that at the time when the swiddens were cleared, the labor would be deployed for half the day in the clearance work, and half the day in hunting.

The standard method of hunting was this: hunters armed with bows, rifles and often nets, were strategically deployed around a section of forest, and then beaters and dogs started at the other edge and drove all the game into the lines of waiting marksmen and nets.³³ The aim was quite simply to kill everything possible over that stretch of forest, and these mass extinctions are still occasionally attempted in remaining patches of waste and forest for religious purposes, as I will discuss shortly. Parenthetically, we might note that the same logic of overkill was evident in fishing as well, where the standard method was to dam up, then poison an entire water-source, gathering the fish as they floated to the surface.³⁴

Finally, it should be noted that the organization of the hunt was also in keeping with the social hierarchy of control and ownership over the land. The beaters and the net-men and the dog-keepers were of lower caste or tribal status, whereas the higher-caste chiefs or overseers had the stationary positions with the guns, and they

³² Again see Pouchedass (1990; 1994); Sturrock (1894: 208ff.) and Innes (1908: 220). Some specific folk-songs treating swidden cultivation will be touched upon briefly below.

³³ These hunts are depicted in numerous folk-songs and accord very closely with the descriptions I collected from informants. I was able to participate in a ritual hunt dedicated to the folk-deity Vayanattu Kulavan in 1989. Ancestral percussion-cap, muzzle-loading rifles were used, and rites of *mantravadam* (sorcery) to protect the hunters preceded the hunt.

³⁴ Again many folk-sources celebrate this method of fishing, and it is described in the novel *Vishakanyaka* (Pottekatt 1980: 148). Colonial sources, as usual, lament the practice as wasteful (Sturrock 1894: 46).

were owners of the game and oversaw its distribution at the hunt's close.³⁵

Religious Attitudes

With this as background, I wish to turn to the religious attitudes one can document in association with these practices. The major context for information on local religion is the network of shrines to the local deities called *teyyams*, which cuts across and links the highlands and lowlands, and virtually all those communities we call Hindu, from Brahmins to former untouchables and tribals.³⁶ What is distinctive and historically most useful about *teyyam* worship is the oral liturgies they preserve which record the lives, activities and circumstances of their hero-deities from the pre-modern period.³⁷ Often these represent the apotheoses of various human ancestors of the communities, but even otherwise they contain much information on the social constituency, life-conditions and attitudes of the worshippers. Most pertinent to the present context, there are numbers of deities specifically devoted to or reminiscent of swidden agriculture and hunting, and I shall especially draw on these in what follows.

In trying to generalize first on what the actual religious attitudes are or were towards the vegetation of the forest, one would have to say that sentiment seems, at best, ambivalent. To the extent that the peoples of Kerala traditionally view their vegetation as imbued with aspects of the sacred, those various trees, plants, groves and forests are regarded as ambivalently as other repositories of the sacred.

Though individual plants and trees are not normally considered to harbor spiritual powers or beings, on occasion, they certainly may. Human relations with these then depend on the nature of the interest in the plant resource and on the nature of the being inhabiting it. For example, a benificent god resident in a tree outside a temple

³⁵ A number of folk-songs include pleas or complaints addressed to higher-caste lords or overseers for a deservedly fair share in the distribution of meat subsequent to a hunt.

³⁶ See, for instance, Kurup (1977), Ashley (1979), Freeman (1991), and Menon (1994).

³⁷ Kurup (1973) gives summaries in English of a number of the prominent *teyyam* deities' narrative liturgies.

or in a household garden may be an object of worship. On the other hand, a spirit in a tree one wants to chop down for timber may be inimical and engage one in a supernatural battle for the wood. Demonic sirens called *yakshis* typically live in palmyras and lure men at night up their trunks and to gory deaths. Other beings lurk in bowers and infest pregnant women to feed on their fetuses. Godlings may linger in flowers to possess women who pluck the blossoms to adorn their hair, requiring rites of exorcism to void them. Such instances abound in the *teyyam* songs and folklore of the region.

Another vegetal complex often invoked in modern ecological discourses as evidence of the positive folk-values attached to the forest and the preservation of its biodiversity, concerns the purported medicinal value of many plant species. Despite the modernist, pharmacological veneer given to government-sponsored Ayurvedic medicine, however, the theory and practice of Kerala folk-medicine is thoroughly enmeshed with principles of Frazerian sympathetic and contagious magic, as well as implication with supernatural beings and agencies. Indeed, traditional medicines, their properties, their gathering and their application, are closely tied up with the worship of the godlings in sorcery (*mantravadam*).³⁸ Accordingly, there is also a negative side to the quasi-magical ‘medicinal’ properties of plants, and from ancient times the forest has also been the source of powerful poisons and magical potions connected with sorcery and black-magic.³⁹ The same tribal or low-caste masters of this jungle pharmacopoeia have thus also been seen as trafficking in the noxious supernatural beings, powers and substances of the forest, which has sometimes led to their being suspected, accused and even executed for practicing sorcery.

In terms of forest fauna, a similar complex has been well documented regarding the medicinal value of animal products at the pan-Indic, Sanskritic level (Zimmermann 1987). I have found many corresponding beliefs current at the level of popular lore and literature

³⁸ On the intimate relation of indigenous medicine (*marunnu*) and sorcery (*mantravadam*), see Vishnu Namboodiri (1979: 41–8).

³⁹ In the section on the royal forests and their useful produce from the *Arthashastra*, just after the brief mention of medicinal herbs comes a much more explicit list of poisons as a prominent resource of the forest (Kangle 1963: 149; Sastri 1972 [1938], Vol. 2: 167–8). Indeed the entire fourteenth book of the *Arthashastra* is devoted to means of sorcery against ones enemies, many of which entail elaborate preparations from forest and other organic products (Kangle 1963: 573ff.).

where such preparations as a paste of monkey flesh or the lard rendered from pythons are extolled for their curative properties.⁴⁰ Again, though, the associations of these preparations and the people who traffick in them may be sinister and tinged with the demonic.

Given the ambivalent estimation attached to individual plant and animal species, it is not surprising that at the aggregate level of the forests as a resource base for swiddening, I have encountered little concern for the scope of human destructive impact in either forest clearance or the accompanying hunting practices we have reviewed. The songs that describe the clearing of forests are matter-of-fact as to the actual process of chopping down and burning the timber, and the description accords quite closely with the accounts of colonial sources and living informants. The overwhelming sentiment in the *teyyam* songs is not one of reverence or gratitude towards nature, but reflects the struggle in terms of the labor of wresting a living from the site, and apprehension of the dangers, natural or supernatural, that accompany this process.

The destruction of forest cover for the swiddens by fire is described in the sacred texts and informants' testimony with little sentiment or sense of loss concerning the natural environment. There is, however, a marked concern for the dangers to humans and their habitations from these fires. One *teyyam* deity, for instance, commemorates the death of a shifting cultivator, caught and burned alive in his own conflagration. (There are social and religious implications in the circumstances of his death to which I will return, below). A number of other *teyyam* deities also seem to wield fire as a potent weapon with which they burn forests and threaten the lives, homes, and dwellings of both their worshippers and of their higher caste antagonists. It seems certain that this fire they carry, in myth and ritual performance, is primarily associated with swiddening. As great hunters, they are equally efficient destroyers of wildlife as well. There thus seems to be an emphatic concern with the destructive powers of these gods, as demonstrated in their abilities to lay waste to the forest and its inhabitants, that leads to the establishment of their worship.

At any rate, it is clear that the main religious attitude shown towards the vegetal life of the forest in these songs is one of ambivalence.

⁴⁰ I was indeed scandalized by the suggestion of a companion when I literally stumbled over a giant python in the forest, engorged and immobilized with its recently swallowed prey. My friend wanted to find some way to kill it, since it would fetch a high price in the nearby village for rendering into medicinal lard.

ence as to whether the supernatural agencies harbored in particular species or in aggregate forests are noxious or beneficent, and that the main religious efforts are directed towards alleviating human labor and hardship, enhancing the expectation of a good crop, and the hope that social superiors leave their subordinates a fair share at harvest.

Aside from an obvious concern with the food-crops themselves, and with the occasional danger from forest demons and wildfire, the other major focus of attention was on wild animals and their depredations. While many *teyyam* gods and their liturgical songs are directed to the hunt in isolation from other activities, a few do relate hunting directly to a livelihood from shifting cultivation. The song of worship to the swidden god, 'He of the Mountain Slopes', for instance, begins by describing a long range hunt in which the killing of deer, boar, and panther in the surrounding forest is celebrated in preparation for clearing a swidden. A predatory panther later invades the sown field at one point and is dispatched by a huntsman. The final scene of this song then has the watchmen of the fields gleefully slaughtering with their slings thousands of parrots that come to feed on their crop, and declaring they have been exterminated from the whole country.

A major source of concern, however, lay not just in protecting the crops, but also, as this previous song indicates, in preventing predation on livestock and human beings.⁴¹ Informants recalled to me how the dwellings and the barns of their youth gave little provision for either light or air, since they were built as virtual stockades against the perpetual threat from tigers and panther. They also recalled the frequent loss of livestock to such attacks and the subsequent hunts these losses instigated.⁴² In the case of a successful kill, the cat was carried on display, impaled and spread-eagle on a

⁴¹ This state of affairs is dramatically confirmed in the statistical information given in Sturrock (1879, Vol. 2) for South Kanara. For instance, between 1888 and 1893, an average of over 3,000 head of cattle per year were lost to predation by wild animals. On the average, over half of all cattle deaths were due to predation, and in one year, this rose to 80% of total deaths (*ibid.*: 171). In terms of human fatalities, in the eleven years from 1882 through 1892, 813 people were killed by wild animals, an average of 74 deaths per year (*ibid.*: 94). (Note that a small portion of these figures may include deaths to humans and livestock through snakebite, as well).

⁴² Hunting of the big cats was officially encouraged by the British authorities, who, for instance, from 1888 through 1892, paid out bounties of Rs 10,728 in South Kanara, for the killing of 380 tigers, panthers, and leopards (Sturrock, Vol. 2: 186).

framework for presentation before the god at the local temple. Here the hunt was assimilated to a ritual presentation before the god, which indeed was periodically required for a number of deities, as we shall see. In short, an attitude of antagonism and fear was still manifest in the memory of informants towards the faunal life of the forest, as is also amply attested from the corpus of folk-literature.⁴³ I was indeed surprised to find among those original inhabitants who live in the highlands today, that however much they may resent the incursions of the Christian settlers, many remarked what a benefit it nevertheless was that one could move around the countryside now without fear of attack by wild animals.⁴⁴

In tracing man-animal relations into religious institutions, there is indeed a clear complex of rites focused on animals and hunting, but in keeping with the enculturation of nature seen earlier, there is far greater concern with human or divine regimes of prestige and power than with the animal populations as a resource to be rationally managed. Game-meat was and is a kind of booty, divided up in ritual shares as honors accorded to the deities, hunters, shrine authorities and owners of the forest-lands. The *teyyam* songs recount bloody feuds resulting from slights to the honor of hunters or landlords in matters of meat distribution, and there is still a cult of the hunt dedicated to *teyyam* gods, in which the traditional shares are jealously apportioned as tokens of prestige.⁴⁵ In keeping with the earlier-mentioned assimilation of human to divine authorities, the ultimate lord to whom the meat is first presented as his share is the deity, and the subsequent apportioning of the meat to the hunters and worshipping community is given out as grace of the god. I was surprised in tracking down and visiting the shrines of a particularly famous hunting

⁴³ Something of this animosity is also suggested by the account of the extended torture that was indulged in by the Mullukurumbas when they successfully trapped live tigers (Misra 1976: 59ff.).

⁴⁴ The thesis that the kind of attitudes I have documented here with regard to the mortal dangers from and animosity towards wildlife were likely widespread in pre-modern India has been lucidly argued and documented in Greenough (1992). My thanks to him for sharing this paper with me, which I understand is under editing for publication.

⁴⁵ The mythical origins of many hunting deities in Kerala trace themselves to a Sanskrit prototype (an episode called the *Kiratarjuniyam*) that recounts the forest feud between the great god Shiva (in the guise of a tribal hunter, a *Kirata*) and the epic hero Arjuna over which one of them has the right to a wild pig they have both shot. One of the traditional modes of hunt in Kerala was even named in commemoration of this episode.

teyyam, to find how many shrines still have annual hunts (despite legal sanctions), and that the system of apportioning the various cuts of meat as given in the *teyyam* songs is still known and, in the main, followed.⁴⁶

Hunting was clearly also linked with martial endeavor, since the same skills with weaponry were applicable in both pursuits, and since huntsmen were often recruited into the military service of chieftains.⁴⁷ This led to what we may call a militarization of the hunt along two dimensions. First, there developed an agonistic cult around predatory animals in which warriors tested their skills by having 'duels' with them, and in which both the animals and such warriors might later become deified as *teyyams* in testament to their valor. This kind of assimilation of the hunter-warrior to the prey is seen in the group of tiger-*teyyams*, where one of their number is in fact the apotheosis of a great warrior who sought to slay them when they predated on his king's cattle. What happened was that the warrior himself was killed by the tigers, after he killed one of them, and he then took on the partial form of a tiger and became one of their divine troop. That the thematics revolve around the issue of the warrior's manhood and valor is shown by the fact that he is not just dispatched by the tigers in the ordinary manner; rather, he is castrated.⁴⁸

The second aspect of militarization of the hunt, is the fact that traditionally hunts themselves were explicitly declared as a form of warfare against the animals who were mythically and ritually assimilated to the status of human or demonic enemies. Each village ideally had special shrines where these hunts were organized and ritually

⁴⁶ Misra shows that this system of formally naming and apportioning shares of forest meat is (or was) also current among the Mullukurumbas (1976, Appendix: 110–11). Despite his general thesis that Malabar's sacred groves are a Dravidian expression of reverence for nature, Unnikrishnan confirms the nature of these hunts dedicated to *teyyams*, and decries their destructiveness on conservationist grounds (1996: 111ff.).

⁴⁷ Gods like Vettakkorumakan ('The Hunter's Son') and Vayanattu Kulavan clearly typify this pattern, for they are both great hunters, originally, but are then drafted into regular military service and leadership in the lowland kingdoms. Again, this mythical template is exemplified in the aforementioned narrative of the Kiratarjuniyam (Note 45, above), since Arjuna and the hunter Shiva are both depicted as bellicose warriors. In the Kerala version, Vettakkorumakan is indeed the son of Shiva in his form as a Kirata.

⁴⁸ Cf. Brittlebank (1995) on similar thematics around the tiger-emblem in Tipu's Mysore.

dedicated, and the earlier-mentioned hunts for *teyyam* deities are clearly a remnant of this complex.⁴⁹ There is evidence that this assimilation of warfare and the hunt to a divinely mandated sacrifice was once more common and widespread among the higher castes. This is seen in the fact that even in Brahmanical temple festivals there is a scriptually required ritual of a mock-hunt, and that this is mythically justified as the commemoration of the gods slaying those demons who fled to the forest in the guise of wild animals.

Social Agonism in the Forests

While part of the ambivalent and even antagonistic attitudes towards nature that I have so far documented doubtless stem from the arduous labor and dangers entailed in wresting a subsistence from the tropical forests, what is far more evident in the folk-sources and informants' accounts is the social dimension of struggle in these swidden regimes. These struggles were primarily for the control of land, and in keeping with the shifting gradient between swidden and settled agriculture in Malabar, these were as perpetual in the highland forests as in the lowland paddy-fields. Once again, the character and depth of these tensions in the highlands can be readily gleaned from the folk-sources and *teyyam* liturgies. And as importantly, these sources also afford an indigenous inventory of concerns brought to bear on environmental relations, from a socio-cultural perspective.

A general profile of these materials reveals two intersecting dimensions of social conflict. On the one hand we have testament to the various elites and their military agents battling each other over lands and tribute, an arena of competition that demonstrably shifted back and forth across the highlands and lowlands, as well as between the various major coastal kingdoms. On the other hand, we have eloquent testimony to the vertical dimension of these relations, realized in the highlands by the domination by these same elites over their lower-caste and tribal laborers, and countered by the latter's attempts to secure a livelihood and modicum of social justice under these conditions.

As a prototype of this hierarchical antagonism in a religious idiom, we might consider those beings called *nagas*, a class of serpent god-

⁴⁹ Again, see Logan (1887, Vol. 1: 171–2) and Aiyappan (1937: 45–51). I have collected some fascinating information on these hunting organizations (*nayattu sangams*) dedicated to particular *teyyam* deities at their shrines which I hope to treat at greater length in the future.

lings to whom many domestic and public groves are dedicated (cf. Raju 1991). On the one hand, they seem to symbolize quite clearly the supernatural extension of the forest's fertility into the human realm, for *nagas* are the sylvan deities primarily responsible for assuring human fertility and childbirth. But there is also an ethnosciological dimension to their identity, as well, for they are said to represent the former ruling inhabitants of Kerala who were conquered by the Brahmanical order and consigned to the groves. They show their consequent resentment at this subjugation by visiting sterility and disease on those who fail to propitiate or otherwise offend them.⁵⁰ Their rootedness in this oppressed, autochthonous complex of the forest is also clear in the accompanying mythology which attributes *nagas* with the creation of the first forest game and the institutionalization of its ritualized hunt.⁵¹

A similar theme emerges at the more individuated level of certain *teyyam* deities who also seem to represent both the fertility of the forest, and a social pollutedness and violence which pose a threat to the established caste order. Stock narratives in this genre tell of childless, high-caste couples who adopt foundling children from the forest. Initially, life seems happy, but as these children mature, their wild, lowly and impure natures reassert themselves. This finally eventuates in some form of assault on the social order, in response to which they are eventually either banished or killed, prior to their divinization as *teyyams*. Significantly in these tales, the children's natural parents may interchangeably be either tribals or animals, for from the upper caste perspective, there is little difference in their natures. For instance, the divine tribal child, Kuttichattan, adopted by a great Brahman temple priest, eventually reverts to his inner animal nature when he leaps like a beast of prey to the back of the household bull and eats it alive. This interchangeability between the lower castes and dangerous animals is more literally rendered in the case of the chief *teyyam* of the Pulayan community, a sorcerer who has the ability to change himself at will into a tiger, and who is eventually banished permanently to the forest in this form.⁵² In such

⁵⁰ A more overtly vicious depiction of this side of the forest is seen in the forest demonesses (*yakshi*) and in the *teyyam* goddess, Karin Chamundi, who poses as a mid-wife in order to eat the fetus of a young mother as she tries to give birth.

⁵¹ This myth is recorded in the earlier-mentioned Malayalam manuscript (Kunhan Pilla 1956: 212ff.).

⁵² Cf. Bird-David' report that Kurumba tribals had the same sorcerer's power in the Nilgiri's (1994: 348).

cases it is clear that to the elites of settled agricultural regimes, the forest becomes a symbolic repository for the demonic, antinomian and antisocial qualities of all those lower castes and tribals with whom the higher castes were dependently, but ambivalently tied.⁵³

It is also quite clear that the complementary antagonism of the lowly towards the elite is similarly reflected in their relations with the forest. I argued in introducing sacred groves that they were considered the exclusive personal property of particular deities, and suggested that this mirrors what we have also seen of how ordinary forests and their resources were vested as exclusive property in human overlords. This being the case, it should not be surprising to find instances of resentment and even overt defiance against this arrangement expressed through the gods of the lower castes. Indeed, there are a number of *teyyam* gods whose myths show them as violators of the sacred groves and their temple precincts. For instance, the great hunting *teyyam* of the Tiyya caste, Muttappan, is recorded to have killed his Brahman adoptive father when the latter forbade him to hunt and cook his jungle meat in the temple's environs. Similarly, the *teyyam* Vayanattu Kulavan was blinded and banished from Shiva's presence when he defiantly hunted in the god's sacred grove and drank toddy from the pots reserved there as Shiva's offering. Relatedly, it turns out that the earlier-mentioned *teyyam* who burned alive in the fire he set to clear a swidden, had undertaken this clearance in a grove of sacred serpents, and by implication had died in punishment for this socio-religious dereliction. His charred corpse is subsequently revived and his person divinized through the power of this last-named Vayanattu Kulavan, and the two deities then proceed around the country as a stock pair, the one apotheosized for his hunting in and despoiling the offerings of a sacred grove, the other for putting another such grove to the torch for use as a swidden.

These and many other *teyyam* deities celebrate more directly incidents or movements of lower caste or tribal resistance to upper caste domination. Individual instances are those like the divinized forest colonist of the Maniyani caste who was murdered by one of his untouchable laborers in the fields, or like the famous Pottan, who was an untouchable notable put to death in the forest highlands when he volubly defied the behavioral norms and ideology of

⁵³ The impurity that Brahmins received from travelling about in the open, for instance, was known as 'forest-pollution' (*kattushuddham*) (Vishnu Namboodiri 1982: 63).

Brahmanism. At a more collective level, the earlier-mentioned Mut-tappan is also reported to have led tribal rebellions in the hilly regions of Kottayam and Vayanad against the oppression of its overlords. Similarly, after the demonic Kuttichattan was put to death by his Brahman foster father, his spirit, through his possessed mediums, continued to be responsible for wide-spread looting, arson, and murder in upper-caste settlements in the highlands.

The overall conclusion from this wealth of evidence must be that just as we cannot make of the sacred grove an ideal-type, in default of looking at the actual practices and attitudes which govern them, so we cannot extend this ideal as a model for ordinary forests on the presumption that the groves reflected a widespread ideal of deference to nature and its balance. The actual evidence suggests that views of the forest were far more determined by the hierarchies of political economy and their divine projections, where sylvan tracts were resource pools for actual or potential human use, and where the constraints and imperatives on that use could be cruelly oppressive, and so, occasionally meet with violent resistance. This is the context for how ‘nature’ was viewed in the highlands, and how the sacred and non-sacred forests could be viewed not just as resources benignly held in trust, but also as resources unjustly withheld. As such, they could even be encroached and destroyed as acts of social resistance, much as reserve forests have sometimes been targeted in contemporary times.

A Social Perspective on Human Ecology in the Highlands

We have seen that neither what we know physically of the states and conditions of the groves at present, nor the documented attitudes, beliefs, and practices that informed them, support the notion that traditional ‘Hindu’ values had much in common, ideologically or practically, with contemporary ecological estimations of forest-life. It was noted earlier that a scenario has been proposed by environmental scholars that would construe sacred groves along with the caste-constitution of Indian society itself as part of the same ecologically informed evolutionary process.⁵⁴ The logic here is thus part

⁵⁴ An explicit link is made between sacred groves and swiddening in Gadgil and Chandran (1992: 185). Elsewhere, groves are traced to the hunter-gatherer stage of society (Gadgil and Vartak 1994:85), but the underlying eco-logic is the same.

of a more general bio-cultural scenario, positing that 'traditional' socio-cultural institutions in India were shaped in accord with nature's dictates of conservancy. A starkly clear presentation of this states,

With its reproductive isolation and hereditary mode of subsistence, a caste population can be considered an analogue of a biological species ...

We, therefore, expect the evolution of a number of cultural practices resulting in a sustainable use of natural resources by the caste group which constitute not only the genetic but also the cultural units of Indian society (Gadgil and Malhotra 1994: 27; 36).

The two general requirements of the model portrayed here are that castes exhibit reproductive isolation, and that this is conjoined with occupational specialization.⁵⁵ In fact, it is relatively clear that neither of these conditions obtained in Kerala at any period of its history at a level of functional effectiveness or duration sufficient to warrant the application of a bio-evolutionary model to social institutions.

First of all, in terms of the putative reproductive isolation of castes, virtually every named group whose history we can trace in Kerala exhibits shifting strategies of marital alliance, both at the intra-caste level of constituent lineage or clan alliances, and in the often systematic inter-caste connubial relations, as with the famous Nambudiri–Nayar 'marriages' (Fuller 1976). These shifts are apparent even in the historical short-run and have been clearly more tied to resources provided by the socio-political, rather than the natural 'environment'.

As one example, the Velar, a traditionally polluting caste of *teyyam* performers, basket-weavers, etc., had a section of their caste elevated under the title Anhutton ('The Five-hundred') in association with their performing *teyyam* in the royal *kavu* of the Nileshvaram Raja. They then broke off marital relations with other Velar, to their south, over a number of generations. Now that the royal association has ceased to hold out advantages to them, however, they have begun to intermarry with common Velar again. I could document similar

⁵⁵ I cannot dwell here on the extended cultural, political and philosophical implications of such biologically inspired models of socio-cultural evolution, except to refute the specifics in this case. See, however, Moran (1990) and Rappaport (1990) for excellent discussions of the general conceptual and analytical difficulties in applying ecosystemic models to human populations, especially in complex societies. For an exemplary case-study, highlighting especially the wider implications of socio-economic embeddedness for human populations, see Ellen (1990), in the same collection of essays.

changes in the social and biological reproduction of caste identities for most other castes in Malabar (keeping in mind that the relation between the physical, discursive, and socially effective constitution of group identity and membership are far from simple or straightforward).

There has been a similar pattern of fluidity in the occupational engagements of the various Kerala castes, which hardly bound them in any determinate fashion to a fixed pattern of resource exploitation. In the first place, as Dumont (1970) argued long ago for India, generally, the traditional association of certain castes with certain occupations has always functioned at a largely symbolic level, where the social purpose of assigning ritual status can be achieved by only a few members practicing their profession. This was certainly the case in Kerala, where many of the caste-occupations, when they were even specified, often had more ritual than practical overtones, and were hardly practicable as a livelihood for the majority members of a group with that designation. Indeed, in many cases there either was no occupation clearly specified, or instead a spectrum of often unrelated jobs associated with any named group.⁵⁶ And as with the marital relations, these occupations also could demonstrably shift in response to historical changes of a socio-political or economic nature, as we shall see below.

So in summarizing the actual historical detail we have from this region, we must conclude that caste constituencies, reproductive strategies, and occupational profiles seem to have been highly fluid and multiplex, even over short spans of history, and seem to have shifted far more in reaction to socio-political forces than to the particularities of any environmental niches. So not only do the local requirements for an adaptational model of caste fail to obtain, but we can also see how caste was situated in more globally framed processes of polity and economy. Correspondingly, these larger processes are also reflected in the religious complex at the regional level, just as readily as the more localized ritual concerns. Indeed, it was through my researches into the histories of local folk-shrines that the role of migrations, conquests, and inter-regional societal adaptations in the formation of social identities brought themselves to my attention. These sources reveal that caste mobility and shifting

⁵⁶ This can be clearly seen even in the case of certain Brahmanical treatises on caste in medieval Kerala, where the attempt to assign caste occupations found its most artificially formalized textual expression.

identities were a historical reality, both within the highlands, and between the highlands and lowlands, and both within and between different political and cultural-linguistic realms. I will here cite only a few examples that bear particularly on the societal dynamics for the highland region that concerns us here (cf. Bird-David 1994).

There is a prominent caste, primarily of agriculturalists, known as the Maniyani in northern Kerala. Their identity is rather curiously intertwined with other named castes of herders and masons (Kolyan, Ayan, Eruvan, Urali, etc.), with whom they apparently have had variable relations of connubium and commensality, though they were also said to be 'a kind of Nayar' (the prominent warriors of Kerala). In my experience, they are most prominent in the highland border areas of the Tulu country, and some indeed claim historical affiliation with Tulu groups. What I additionally discovered in the highlands, however, is that they were frequently *karyasthans*, or agricultural managers over the tribal and mountain-caste labor that was used for swidden agricultural tracts, under Nayar and Brahman *janmis*. In fact, I was told by a number of them that *maniyanna* is their local dialect word for *karyasthan*; hence the derivation of their caste-name. They thus seem to have represented a pre-modern movement of colonists into the highlands, perhaps of Tulu origin, who were politically elevated by the mountain chiefs to the status of swidden overseers. There is evidence in temple myths of their subsequently having come into status competition with the lowland Nayars. In the highlands, some have even taken to calling themselves Nayars, in recognition of having served as war chieftains and guardians of mountain border zones for the lowland kingdoms. In the lowlands, they are still associated with the herders from which they perhaps derive, but recognized as a distinctly higher division of this group.

Similarly, at the lower end of the swidden regime were the Mavilar, a lower-caste (formerly tribal) group who have even clearer affiliation with the Tulu country to the north. Indeed, they told me they have three divisions, one of which still speaks Tulu and did not formerly intermarry with the other two. Their settlements and *teyyam* groves show them to have migrated almost exclusively through the mountain swidden settlements, and to have changed their language and their social pattern as they came under the employ of Kerala chiefs and overseers. Where they have settled around permanent paddy lands, they now work as ordinary agricultural laborers.

One of the prominent occupational engagements that cut across social identities in the highland forests was hunting. And since, as I mentioned, the same technologies and weaponry could apply just as readily to human 'prey' in warfare, this was an avenue of mobility to many mountain folk. There was a recurrent historical pattern of recruiting hunters as warriors and archers into lowland armies, where a number of them were elevated in status, and this is recorded in the legends of a number of *teyyam* gods. For instance, the famous *teyyam* and war-deity of Nayar military gymnasias, Vettakkorumakan, 'The Hunter's Son', is said to have been born of the deities Shiva and Parvati, when they were sporting in the guise of the Vettar hunting caste of the mountain forests. This rustic son of theirs is supposed to have saved the Kurumbranadu Raja's kingdom from conquest, and so was made the royal lineage's deity, whence he spread elsewhere in Malabar. Similarly, the earlier mentioned Vayanattu Kulavan, a god of the hunt *par excellence*, is said to historically commemorate a forest warrior who became the head of the military gymnasium of the greatest king in the region, the Kolattiri Raja (Balakrishnan Nair 1979: 86).

Groups of militant tribals also moved through the highlands themselves, and were recruited in the war-service of mountain kings. For instance, when a lineage of former Tulu chiefs fled Muslim incursions (reportedly from Malik Kafur) into the highlands to the east of Nileshvaram, they set up a small kingdom based on swiddening, and recruited tribals called Malakudiyans as their *padanayar*, or warriors. The latter are said to be a group related to the famous Kurichiyas, farther to the south in the Kottayam highlands, who fought against the British in the rebellion of Pazhashi Raja.

The migrant chief of this area, the Kattur Raja ('King of the Forest Settlement'), as he was called, eventually allied himself with the Nileshvaram Raja of the lowlands, through marriage and through adoption of that kingdom's *teyyam* deities, though the descendant claims his family was never subject to Nileshvaram. He also eventually attracted groups of Tiyyas and others from the lowlands who became his subjects, and so built up a small kingdom based on swidden agriculture and hunting, that was an amalgam of tribals, Tulu refugees, and lowland groups in a kind of replication of a standard lowland kingdom and its caste structure.

Another prominent tribal group in highland Kasargod are known as the Marathi, or Kurubi, or Naykka. They speak various varieties

of Konkani and Marathi in their homes, and the ones I spoke to recall a legend of their origins as refugees from some war in Maharashtra that led to their fleeing through the mountains of Karnataka into these forests. As they were lowlanders they had no survival skills until their Shakta goddess taught them how to hunt and live by swiddening (which they call *kumari*) from the forests.⁵⁷

We thus have abundant evidence for these narratively dramatic shifts in populations through warfare, military recruitment, and refugee movements. But more peaceable shifts were probably just as significant in integrating the 'vertical economics' of this region. These consisted of the forays of lowland agriculturalists as seasonal swidden tenants, the migrations of more permanent colonists, and the complementary movements of tribal groups into the lowlands seeking labor and food. I was initially puzzled to discover that songs to highland swidden deities had been incorporated into a regular lowland domestic rite. Then I realized that not only does the typically lowland caste of *teyyam*-dancers who perform these rites likely derive from the mountains,⁵⁸ but that many land-poor menfolk from the settlements patronizing the rite themselves regularly went into the mountains on seasonal contracts as tenants of the highland *janmis*. It was thus quite natural that though they were regularly resident in the lowlands, they would seasonally worship deities who secured their livelihood in highlands.

Subsequently, I came across more and more evidence of how typical such movements of populations must have been in the colonial and pre-colonial periods. This mobility became clear through charting the distribution and spread of many *teyyam* deities throughout this region, for many of the deities are associated with particular communities, and the songs themselves recall the movements of deities from named locale to named locale. In many cases then these centuries-old songs allow one to trace the crisscrossing movements of peoples back and forth between highlands and lowlands, and between regimes of swiddening and hunting, on the one hand, and the more settled agriculture of the lowland kingdoms, on the other. I have extended case-materials of geographical mobility from the earlier mentioned Vayanattu Kulavan and the Tiger-*teyyams* (*Puli-daivangal*)

⁵⁷ The usual term for swidden agriculture in north Kerala is *punan*; *kumari* is a Karnataka usage, apparently in keeping with their migration through that region into Kerala.

⁵⁸ The caste is called Malayans, 'Those of the Mountains' and have mountain-dwelling sections who traditionally worked swiddens.

in terms of their movements across this region and its kingdoms from highlands to lowlands and back again, as testament to the movement of the major communities who worshipped them.

The conclusions that we must reasonably draw from this wealth of material are that at both the micro-levels of caste structuring, marital relations and occupational engagement, as well as in terms of the macro-regional patterns of different subsistence regimes and the way they interlocked with the major political powers and movements, people's social identities seem not to have been shaped primarily through processes of the environment's authoring. Rather, it was the social dynamics of political economy as articulated through cultural values that has had the major role in how these people have interpreted and interacted with the natural environment.

The Modern Transformation

In thus contesting any simplistically ecological theory of caste, in my earlier overviews of the sacred groves and the swidden regime, I trust I have also conveyed the centrality of the social dynamics of community organization, land control, migration, and warfare that characterized these highland cultures. Indeed, all of the evidence of my sources underscores a cultural concern less with the forest and its resources *per se*, than with the often conflicting social interests that converged on those resources. And in fact, even as resources, the forests were already part way towards 'enculturation', since they were coveted not as species-rich pools of biodiversity, but as land for cropping. This emphasis on the political implications of swidden land and its convertibility into sociopolitical and economic capital becomes increasingly crucial when we consider this region's transfiguration over the past century.⁵⁹

I cannot review the history of this region here in any detail, both because of its micro-regional complexity and because a history of these highlands has yet to be written. There were few roads or navigable rivers until into the 1940s and 1950s and so the penetration of globally connected commercial agriculture such as Menon (1994) has documented for Malabar as a whole, was, I think, significantly

⁵⁹ See Prabhakar and Gadgil (1994) for an overview of the modern ecological transformation in the Nilgiri Plateau, including some adjoining areas of Kerala, based on historical and LANDSAT maps.

retarded in these mountains. People described the region as basically one of thick forests, interspersed with swidden settlements, lorded over by despotically powerful *janmis*. Elderly folks said it used to take two or three days to reach the coastal towns, and the only subsistence item they regularly needed from the outside world was salt!⁶⁰

At any rate, given this tenor of life in the highlands, it is understandable how the advent of the Christians, with their well-developed sense of land as capital for commercial agriculture and willingness to buy up land from the *janmis* at ten and twenty times the local values, transformed this region. Michael Tarakan has shown in a lucid series of studies (e.g. 1984) how this Christian community was commercially shaped in their homelands on the fringes of the British plantation economy, and how shifting socio-economic, cultural, and demographic forces drove them to sell their lands in Travancore for the lucrative attraction that the cheap forests of Malabar offered. Indeed, I think we can assess their migration as the encounter between a more 'advanced' attitude towards the value of land as agricultural capital and an attitude that was in many respects pre-capitalist.⁶¹ As one settler told me, in summarizing his community's relations with the locals

For the most part, Hindus are poor innocents (*pavangal*), gentle folk (*sadhukkal*) and good ones. They are better than we are . . . We who came from Kottayam [in Travancore] understood land scarcity and the pain of landlessness. We understood that whatever else you have may, without land there is no security of livelihood. When such folk came from there to any place that had land, they turned all their thoughts to how they might seize it the very next day.

Though the expression of this cultural-economic confrontation can occasionally take on communalist labels of (local) Hindu, versus (outsider) Christian today, it is quite clear that the development of this ethos was economic rather than tied to religious or other aspects of cultural identity. This is shown first of all in the fact that in those

⁶⁰ Most of the higher caste people I spoke to owned guns which they bought or traded for (many illegally) in the lowlands, but some of them still recalled making their own gunpowder.

⁶¹ There is no doubt that there had been some penetration of garden cropping (especially of pepper) for markets considerably before this period in many areas of the highlands in Malabar (see Menon 1994), yet I would still maintain, on the unanimity of any informants' testimony, that the remote areas where I worked were so largely given over to subsistence swiddening, that the Christian settlement marked a quantum leap in the transformation of local agricultural concepts and practices.

areas where Christians did not penetrate, Hindus quickly grasped the economic trend and moved in to fill comparable slots.⁶² Secondly, contemporary locals freely acknowledge the enormous insight and energy that the Christians demonstrated in clearing the forests and developing their farms, and many denigrated their parents' generation for being both lazy and ignorant of the vast bounty that they had in their possession. In this historical hindsight, then, the commercial ethos of the Christians is acknowledged to have been merely the advance wave of the contemporary order.⁶³

Whatever the subjective judgments, though, there seems little doubt that the Christian migrants were the agents of change, and that with them came the rapid commercialization of forest and swidden lands leading to their nearly total destruction with all the animal life they harbored. Regarding the wildlife, those settlers who had no penchant for the hunt turned instead to pit traps, poison, and baited exploding mines they called 'bombs'. Unlike the plantation regimes set up over the mountains in Coorg or farther south in Kerala, these farm operations were individually small, but intensive, comprising thousands of individual families each working their fifteen to thirty-acre plots. They started these tracts as subsistence swiddens, felling and burning the timber where it stood, which means that many of the forests in this region did not go out as lumber, but went up in smoke. The great difference between this and local practice, aside from the density of settlement, was that rather than allowing the swiddens to revert to forest, they were subsequently converted into cash cropping.

With these migrations also came roads, which intensified the pace of development and forest clearance through the later 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1960s, by which time most of the legally alienable land (and much that was supposed to be protected) had been cleared,

⁶² Kurup has noted that the Nayar Service Society sent Hindu colonists into Panathady and other regions, in an attempt to counter the force of Christian settlements (1988). I also researched some settlements, especially around Hindu temples, where Christians could never get a foothold, but where the local populace has vigorously effected the same commercial transformations.

⁶³ This was reiterated so often in my questioning as to become an entirely predictable response. There were indications, however, in a couple of my interviews, that we may be seeing the beginnings of a kind of communalized environmentalist scenario, as discussed in the final section of this paper, below. I believe this convenient thesis that the degradation of nature can be laid at the Christian doorstep, is, as will become apparent, untenable, though Christians, as well, did voice some concern to me over the rise of Hindu communalist inflammatory rhetoric through the B.J.P. in this context.

converted and settled. This extended period was of course witness to the enormous political and economic changes of both Kerala and India as a whole, which I cannot review in their local detail here, except to summarize what seems to have been the gross outcome in terms of the reshuffling of land holdings.

Most of the favorable lands were bought up and cleared by the Christians; there was no way the local swidden tenants could compete in this land-capital market, and of course the lower caste and tribal labor had no financial resources at all. A number of the *janmis* became rich through land and timber sales, and either moved away, going into politics or the professions, or developed local commercial agricultural and small plantation enterprises, or worked out a combination of these. A number of others were ruined through legal battles with each other or through squabbles over inheritance and partition sparked by the escalating commercial values of their holdings. The increasingly displaced tenants either migrated out, went to work as laborers for the Christians and other land-holders, or banded together into the politics of tenancy agitations. The last tactic eventually gained many of them small plots of land under the Marxist-led land reforms of 1971 (cf. Kunhi Krishnan 1993), which they have now turned into small gardens where they eke out a living.

The hardest hit in all of this are the former low-caste and tribal laborers. In general, they had neither tenancy claims, nor the political coherence to agitate for their rights. When they were put off lands they had little recourse, and many of them 'withdrew to the east' as one settler put it, meaning they migrated into the Karnataka forests and estates. Many others died of malnutrition and diseases exacerbated by it, and the remaining groups in the area live mostly in 'colonies' where they have been settled by the government under welfare schemes. They subsist on small doles and coolie labor, when they can find it, and those whom I interviewed recalled their swidden existence as far more secure and preferable to the life they lead today.⁶⁴

The impact of this wholesale transformation on the physical environment is visibly manifest in those many places adjoining the reserve forests across the Karnataka border. There one can see for miles

⁶⁴ They especially stressed to me the fact that when they worked swiddens, they got a regular and predictable share of the grain which they could stockpile and budget, seasonally. Now they are completely subject to the vagaries of an unstable labor market, and have no idea, from one day to the next, whether they will get work (and money for food) or not.

into the distance the sharp line defined by the thick forests of Coorg and South Kanara districts, abutting onto the peeled landscape of Kerala's denuded mountains. The latest any of my informants of the tenant or laboring classes said they had still gotten lands for swiddening was in the late 1960s.

Finally, we need to reconsider the complex issue of the groves themselves during this transformation. Many of them were sold to Christians, included in the tracts of lands they purchased, and were accordingly burned or felled for conversion into plantation crops. Many of these were ritual centers for the lower castes who were traditionally denied entry to temples, and who accordingly worshipped in *kavus* with monthly rites and annual *teyyam* celebrations. Cruelly, then, the sale of the forest-tracts not only deprived the laboring communities of their subsistence base, but also of their cultural and religious centers, as well.⁶⁵ Even the numbers of *kavus* that did not fall into Christian hands, were nevertheless considerably reduced in extent and encroached in this period, as well.

It is important to reflect here on the authority system this transfer of sacred lands entailed. For even in terms of the lower-caste *teyyams*, the worshippers had, traditionally, to seek the permission of the *janmi* for holding their rituals. The worshippers themselves owned nothing, not the lands they worked, nor the land for the groves or shrines at which their own communities worshipped. What this, and the *janmi*'s willingness to sell the *kavus* out from under their worshippers both point out, is that the *kavus* too were part of the *janmi*'s proprietary and traditional governmental rights. In theory, he was supposed to be the patron and protector (*rakshadhipati*) of such sacred institutions. In practice, it seems that once the political power associated with these offices was undercut, and the higher cash values of a new land-market were introduced, scant regard was paid to the religious sanctity of these sites. We must also note that the status hierarchies of caste were definitely mapped into *janmi*'s attitudes towards these lower rites, which were often held in a sort of tolerant contempt.

The same pattern can be seen with the lands called *devasvam* as well, those lands set aside for the support of the higher-caste, non-

⁶⁵ A considerable number of men in these castes also served as *teyyam* dancers and religious specialists attached to their own and to higher castes shrines. This was a considerable supplement to their incomes, in recognition of which the State Government has decided to pay a few of them I interviewed a tiny 'pension' as retired 'folk artists'.

'folk' temples. Many of these lands were in forest in this region, and many of them were similarly partitioned up and sold off by their owners as well. This does not, however, seem simply to reflect a cynical disregard for religious sanctity on the part of the higher castes alone. For if we look to the lowlands, we find there that where the tenant classes on *devasvam* lands were powerfully organized, it was they who successfully alienated these lands from the temples and their *janmis*, in favor of their own proprietary rights as former tenants. By reducing many temple holdings merely to the land on which the temple itself stood, the fairly successful land-reform measures in Kerala have thus precipitated a crisis for the financial maintenance of temples which is only slowly being resolved.

Similarly, for the *kavus*, these were not only cut-over, exploited or sold off under the big *janmis*, but also under lesser holders and tenants, as the value of lands went up, and as forest resources became more scarce. And as a continuation of those earlier *tayyams* I have referred to who actively encroached on groves as acts of defiance against their high-caste holders, there was a period, some twenty years ago, when Marxist-inspired members of these same classes actively violated and tried to despoil some groves. I think what all of this points to is the way religious institutions, from the highest temples to the humblest *kavus*, became arenas for giving open expression to the social structural strains that were a caste-inflected class legacy of land control inherited from medieval Kerala society.

In conclusion, through these modern transformations, the *kavus* seem to have provided no effective model for the preservation of the forests. Often, they were not even preserved in their own right, on religious grounds, because religion itself was an idiom of struggle among the landless, landed, and commercial interests. While the commercial interests represented a relatively new player on the scene, at least in terms of their intensity and sweep, the land contests were endemic to Kerala's earlier authority structures, and the forests, temple-estates and *kavus* were important pieces in this contest. Rather than serving as insulated exemplars for forest management, it seems that when the forests and temple lands went, the *kavus* often went with them, as part of the same cultural complex. Causally, I believe this indicates that it was the social interests vested in them, in the name of deities, that defined the identity and integrity of the sacred groves, and not any inherent reverence for, or even recognition of, their ecological worth.

Neo-Hindu Ecology

I hope this essay has shown how little there may have been historically in the 'Hindu' culture of traditional Kerala society that mandated any particular restraint or harmony in human relations with nature. It is my thesis that such a restraint was probably environmentally unnecessary, or was, at any rate, not perceived as necessary. To the extent that any sort of pre-modern ecological 'balance' existed in traditional highland Kerala, I think it was because resources were plentiful, population was relatively sparse, and the technologies of exploitation and transport rudimentary.⁶⁶

On the other hand, one does hear today that the rains in Kerala are less dependable than they used to be, and that this is because the forests to the east (in the Western Ghats) have all been cleared. Likewise, wherever there are *kavus*, many local residents claim, one gets plenty of ground water. And so they draw the conclusion that their ancestors, the ancient *Rishis* of Sanskritic Hinduism, must have known the value of the forests and mandated *kavus* for the environmental well-being of their worshippers. This proves, the reasoning goes, that environmentalist consciousness in India both antedated and is supported by 'science' (some used the English word), or by *shastra* (a term which, significantly, covers both modern science, and Hindu scriptural learning).

The generic form of this argument will be recognizable as one of the standard moves of Neo-Hinduism, prevalent over the past century. The logic is adaptable to almost any modern intellectual or technological innovation that its proponents want to assimilate and validate as authentically 'traditional' to India. Indeed, the specific form of this argument sketched above in its application to ecological sciences has had wide circulation in Kerala over at least the past decade, through the mass media, educational establishments, and common word of mouth. Moreover, there is no shortage of academic accounts of the *Rishis'* ecological wisdom which parallel and lend a

⁶⁶ Menon's book (1994) confirms in its particulars for Malabar the more generally remarked modern shift in land-labor relations for most parts of South Asia: namely, that the modern convergence of a burgeoning rural population with the commodification of agricultural production has effected a shift from the pre-modern surplus of vacant lands with a scarcity of labor to work it, to a condition of relative land-scarcity with a surplus labor-force seeking subsistence and economic support from it.

scholarly veneer to these anachronistic projections, at both local and national levels (e.g. Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987).

An obverse form of this general argument, its negative corollary, is equally widespread. This has been noted as a pattern typical of Indian nationalist thought, where a position is taken up ostensibly in opposition to Western discourse, yet still therefore derives its terms from the very discourse it opposes.⁶⁷ Where the earlier reasoning would thus assert that anything desirable the West has to offer was already established by the Indian sages as authentically traditional and antecedent, this second type of argument works by reversing the terms of whatever is negatively attributed to the West, to derive its positive and authentically Indian counterpart. Thus, if the Western ethos is to destroy environmental resources through profligate, capitalist profiteering, then by reversing these evils we arrive at what was authentically Indian: a conservationist, socialist, husbanding of nature's bounty. Accordingly, in this 'reversed Orientalism' as Hardiman calls it, 'an argument is advanced that the civilization of India conserves forest, the civilization of the West destroys them' [sic] (1994:90).

In our present context, this 'civilization of India' is indexed in that purportedly Hindu religious sensibility exemplified in the sacred groves. As I have striven to show throughout this essay, however, neither the reported practices of the groves and the swidden and agricultural regimes in which they were embedded, nor the explicitly recorded religious values associated with them, seem to attest the genuine presence of any environmentalist concerns. And so we must conclude that this attribution of an environmentalist ethos to the pre-modern culture of *kavus*, in either its negative or positive comparisons with the West, is historically insupportable. It serves rather to anachronistically legitimate current concerns by projecting them into an imagined past of Hindu sagacity.

And even in the present, it should not be imagined that these current environmental concerns that I was able to elicit through questioning were foremost in the minds of my informants. What indeed concerned them most was the religious aspect of worshipping

⁶⁷ Hardiman (1994:90) labels such a position 'reversed Orientalism' following his understanding of Chatterjee (1986: 38ff.). Though I am indebted to Hardiman's sketch of this second form of argument in its application to ecological discourse, I do not attempt to fit the paired arguments I present here under the categories 'Orientalism' and its 'reverse', nor to align them with Chatterjee's theoretically more elaborate concepts of 'problematic' and 'thematic' (*ibid.*).

the beings in these groves, properly, to achieve all the good things in life they thereby hope to receive. And as we have seen, this hinges on the religious conception (*sankalpam*) that the gods are actually resident in the *kavus*, a conception that obviously does not depend on the actual floristic composition or extent of the grove. As a cultural institution, the groves have thus been able to accommodate all kinds of physical reconfigurations, because the relation between them and the worshippers is symbolically conceived and not environmentally determined.

But lastly in this regard, I do not want to leave the substance of the larger ecological perceptions and concerns buried in the secondary games of cultural legitimation. For I think we must attempt something like an approximately 'right answer' to our historical questions, an attempt that will also hopefully restore the environmental issue to the center of the argument. Taking the lead from other historians, I would suggest the following strategy.

First, we must obviously reject the projection of an environmentalist ethos onto the Hindu past, and recognize that whatever the overall beliefs of pre-modern South Asians towards the ecosphere, they were certainly not commensurate with those of the modern environmental movement. Secondly, we must recognize the obvious fact that the roots of ecological conceptions and policies lie in the West, and ask with Hardiman, 'why the modern environmentalist movement should have arisen from a civilization supposed to be hostile to such concerns' (1994:91). While Hardiman poses this question only rhetorically, as a rebuttal of the 'reversed Orientalist thesis', I think the question contains its own answer, provided we recognize the multiplicity of 'Western' positions on the issue, and provided we historicize them.

Fortunately, this work has been done for us, specifically with regard to the British colonial administration of India in recent work by Richard Grove (1993; 1995). To rephrase Grove's thesis simplistically in terms of Hardiman's question, the environmentalist movement arose in Western civilization precisely *because* it had demonstrable proof of how highly destructive its own technologies and policies could be to the natural environment. These effects were first perceived most clearly in colonial island regimes, where the ravages to nature were unmistakable. Later, as similar processes of rapid degradation were observed in Indian forests, a sector of the colonial scientific community that was consulted on forestry expressed their alarm, and began increasingly to formulate and urge various conser-

vation policies on the British Government. Of course these rarely prevailed in the aggregate against the arrayed commercial and political forces of colonial capitalist expansion, but the point is that the environmental concerns arose as an opposition to the capitalist regimes of exploitation within the context of their very operation.

My tentative suggestion here is that something of the same sort has happened in Kerala (and of course India as a whole) over the past fifty years. Namely, that around Independence, as the powers and responsibilities of self-rule passed into Indian hands, there was a corresponding rush to implement policies and technologies whose detrimental effects to the environment are only now undeniably evident, once they are well advanced in their social and political momentum. This process has been evident in Kerala mostly through the complex transformations entailed in the commercialization of agriculture, which, in the highlands, has meant the replacement of forests and swiddens with cash crops. The impact of this transformation was most apparent where it was the most abrupt, as in northern Kerala, and especially in the remote highlands where I worked.

In making these observations, however, I mean neither to suggest that such abruptly apparent environmental transformations are necessarily accompanied by an ecologically informed counter-response, nor that the agency of such responses in the present is necessarily located in paradigms of a specifically Western modernity. For if Grove's treatment does indicate one line of particular historical derivation leading to an environmentalist ethos in this way, it also shows up the complexity and conflictual relation with competing themes of 'modernity' and 'progress' that were (and are) perhaps more prominent within the Western legacy. This is well reflected in the thorough entanglement of India's environmental issues within the larger programs of 'development' that have dominated social, political, economic and technological policy-making from at least the Nehruvian era down to the present (Roy, Tisdell, and Sen 1992; Krishna 1996). Here environmental preservation has been often pitted against development agendas, where the latter dictate the 'rational management' of forest resources for economic and industrial expansion, on the one hand, and the assimilation of tribal populations into regimes of settled agricultural labor and plantation economies, on the other.⁶⁸ The imbrication of these issues with schemes

⁶⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to the more complex ways in which modern Western paradigms have worked just as readily against an environmentalist ethos, as for it, especially among official policy-makers.

of social welfare, electoral politics, powerful business concerns, and the interests of an entrenched officialdom and bureaucracy has created a complex web of political and ideological agenda within which Indian environmentalist movements struggle to define themselves (Khator 1991). Such movements may alternately ally themselves with or oppose various strands of mainstream socio-political and economic development policies, and may thus selectively present themselves as progressively modern, or take up a traditionalizing stance in putative opposition to 'modernity' or 'the West', as I have suggested above.

The overall conclusion I draw from this historical comparison is that environmentalist thought in Kerala is as 'original' and vital as any, in that it grows out of a genuinely local experience of globally modern transformations. But though localized and historically later in time, I believe it is fueled by the same generic perception of capitalist development that sparked the environmentalist movement in the West. This perception is the evident and alarming recognition that it now lies easily within human capacity to completely transfigure the environment, often with very little understanding or appreciation of the larger ecosystemic consequences.⁶⁹

I would further suggest, prescriptively, that it is this generically comparable experience of processes already far advanced on a global scale, that needs to be stressed as the point of common convergence, rather than the kind of culturally nationalist accusations, counter-claims, and self-justifications that often plague the cultural ecological literature. I believe we must recognize the lamentable fact that South Asian cultures have proven no more attuned or sensitive to their environment than those of any other complex societies. To ignore this fact and retreat into some kind of culturalist defense, leads predictably not only to an insularly nationalist version of ecology in a global perspective, but seems also likely to regenerate within South Asia updated versions of earlier social cleavages in this new ecological idiom.

On this last point, consider, for example, these two competing versions of India's ancient ecological wisdom that I received from two different informants. The first was a prosperous lowland Nambudiri Brahman temple authority, while the second was a former swidden

⁶⁹ Ghimire (1991), for example, shows that populations in the Shivalik Hills are very much aware of the extent of deforestation and its consequences in their lifetimes.

tenant, an impoverished Nayar from the highlands who had been a long-time communist. The Nambudiri has worked out an elaborate set of correlations to show that the Vedic ritual and its sacrificial system were nothing but a way of preserving the ecosystem. The caste order existed to preserve the sacrificial order, and the sacrificial fires were designed to recharge essential atmospheric compounds (like carbon dioxide) through the smoke that is necessary for forest growth and regeneration. The Nayar, on the other hand, avers that the Nayars and all the lower castes were Dravidians, and that their gurus were materialists and lived in and from the forests, which they never allowed to be cleared. It was the Brahmans and their *Rishis*, on the other hand, the Aryans, whose gurus taught a religion of chopping down the forests and burning up all the valuable resources in their wasteful sacrificial fires.⁷⁰

In a contribution from two noteworthy academics, we find another interesting religious opposition raised in the context of ecological preservation:

Another insidious threat resulting in clearance of sacred groves is the identification of the wild woodland spirits and deities of the pre-Brahmanic societies with the gods of the Hindu pantheon. This has resulted in the installation of idols of Hindu gods in the groves or the deities of the groves are made minions of Hindu gods (Gadgil and Chandran 1992:187).

The social cleavage and historical characterization being posited here are of course both stark and familiar (and I think most historians of religion and anthropologists would argue, untenable), but they are more interesting when considered in terms of the contemporary social context. On the one side of this division, there have been decades of efforts by many tribals and lower-caste worshippers to establish the kinds of higher-caste affiliations and improvements to their gods and ritual institutions that these scholars are decrying, while on the other side, many of the upper castes have been correspondingly policing the religion of the sacred groves against rituals involving sacrifice, liquor, possession, self-mutilation and so on (cf. Kalam 1996). Now, even as we have the emergence of Hindu political organizations that would establish a kind of officially mandated communal homogeneity of practice, largely in conformity with bour-

⁷⁰ Unnikrishnan's study similarly argues that the kavus were the primievally Dravidian centers of worship, and that the entry of Aryans into Kerala, as represented by the Nambudiri Brahmans, brought about their destruction in favor of agriculturally based temple-complexes (1995: 35ff.).

geois sensibilities, we find these scholars suggesting that the disadvantaged groups should perhaps go back to their (environmentally worshipful) roots, possibly as a desirable model for higher 'Hindus'. As part of a larger reformist program they urge, 'The time has come to carefully retrospect the course of Hindu religion and cultural heritage and redefine what is sacred' (*ibid.*). It is not certain whether what they advocate here is an ecology that is to be Hinduized, or a Hinduism that is to be ecologized, but as I have suggested throughout this piece, I believe the rhetorical entanglement of these environmental issues with Hinduism as India's 'cultural heritage' is more a matter of cultural politics than of meaningful ecology, social science, or history. On the other hand, these very disciplines which cast doubt on the substantive claims of a 'Hindu ecology' must also force us to acknowledge that the local and nationalist politics of culture are often more vital and effective in their social impact than the remoter truth-claims we produce in the academy.

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