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GUARDIANS OF THE FORESTS: EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DEITIES AND RITES IN KODAGU

Abstract

This paper investigates the rites, rituals and associated historical memories within the indigenous religious tradition of Kodagu, a small district, on the summits and eastern slopes of the Western Ghats in Karnataka. Kodagu was throughout history an independent principality until its amalgamation with Mysore in 1956. The geopolitical isolation of the region, has fostered a distinct language and culture within the overarching framework of Dravidian cultures. Kodagu is home to many indigenous endogamous communities. The aim of this paper however is not to delineate the differences, but rather to investigate their shared cultural eco-space as evident in the worship of the sylvan deities who guard their forests, animals, and nearby human settlements.

Subsumed within all major religions of the world are localized rites, rituals, and belief systems, that have grown out of the groundswell of the lived socio-cultural experiences of people. These localized religious practices may differ from the tenets prescribed from their official religious identities and may include features such as the veneration of the ancestor, nature spirit, local deities, sacred sites, and folk magic. Such highly localized religious expressions, that are often confined to small groups and communities reflect their orally transmitted culture and history. These traditions are neither static or unchanging; but have permeable boundaries, indicating perhaps the historical transitions over time and processes of acculturation. The incorporation of fresh ideas, cultural forms, and traditions, do not mean a break with the past, but rather a process of cultural enrichment.

Studies have indicated the importance of studying the living traditions and customary religious practices of communities and various groups (Kosambi 1962; Eck 2012). Such explorations have revealed a rich mosaic of spiritual traditions in India (Zelliot & Berntsen 1988; Naqvi 2012)

Investigations into the living religious traditions of Hinduism have also showcased beliefs, spanning from local deities to widespread cults and belief systems. One noteworthy aspect underscored by such studies is the notion

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of the sacred landscape. Within this framework, the earth, rivers, mountains, and forests metamorphose into personified divinities. These deities are deeply intertwined with the local terrain—the village landscape-- and share a profound relationship with the community (Kinsely 2005: 197-208; Eck 2012: 17-18). Sontheimer (1989: 3-18) adds that ecological factors such as the monsoons, the characteristics of the soil and the landscape shape the historical narratives and the faith practices of people.

Some studies have also traced the transmission of localized cults and faith practices across regional boundaries to the migratory histories of tribes and communities in search of fresh pasture or those that followed trade routes. These studies highlight the porous boundaries between orally transmitted folk religions and scriptures within dominant Hinduism. The importance of these studies to Indian history cannot be underestimated because history is not a record of dynasties in power, but must include the "histories of those who plough the field, domesticated animals and minded the hearth" (Doniger 2009: 19-20). Such a search is possible when historiography looks beyond conventional sources, to investigate the living traditions of people (Kosambi 1962: 112-151; Sontheimer (1989: iv-vii).

Aim of the Paper

This paper investigates the sacred imaginings of indigenous communities of Kodagu, which lies on southern declivities of the Western Ghats.[1] These communities, such as the Kodavas, Amma Kodavas, Peggades, Kodava Mapillas, Aris and Gollas, etc., speak a distinct Dravidian language called *Kodava Thakk* and share a common cultural ethos. This does not mean that there are no cultural differences between each of these endogamous communities (Thurston 1910: 121-22; Malikarjun 2020).

The aim here is not to uncover their cultural distinctiveness, but rather to explore their shared culture, as evident in the rites, rituals, and belief systems. These traditions have evolved out of their historical experiences of living in the mountains, clothed with dense forests and indicate their deep connectedness with the land. The connection between the land and the people is reflected in their religious songs, rituals, as well as the family/lineage histories of those associated with the local shrines. These forms of cultural transmission reveal memories of migration, settlement, expansion of agriculture and growth of towns. It is also possible to discern processes of acculturation and amalgamation of cultural forms.

This exploration is undertaken through an examination of ethnographic records and field research conducted in three forest shrines near Madikeri. [2] The shrines visited include the Badrakali temple (known as the "seventh Badrakali" since she is one of the seven goddesses guarding Madikeri) Mythalappa (also known as Virabadra) and Mahishamardini, temple (previously

known as Karavale Bagavathi temple). While Badrakali resides in the 22-acre sacred grove of Karavele-Badaga village, Mythalappa lives in another sacred grove located at the Kalkeri-Nidugane village. The temple of Mahishamardini/ Karavele Bagavathi stands in marked contrast with other two shrines. Although located against the backdrop of a three-acre forest grove, the shrine has lost its identity as a forest shrine. It has gradually transformed into an urban shrine with the rapid expansion of urbanization in Madikeri.

These shrines provide the focal point of worship for the indigenous people living in, what they describe as *ettekeri nad,* a cluster of eight villages in Madikeri taluk situated between Kootpole (the confluence of two rivers and Kundermote (a hill) adjacent to Chuti Mariamma temple on one side, and on the other, it is bordered by the villages of Karangeri, Aroat, and Hebettegeri.[3]

Historical Background

Historically, Kodagu, was an independent principality until its merger with the erstwhile Mysore state in 1956. Little is known of its history before 1633, when a chief of the Ikkeri dynasty ascended the throne. This dynasty ruled Kodagu until the British took power in 1834. Kodagu's economy was traditionally paddy cultivation, cattle rearing and other allied rural occupations. The social structure of its indigenous communities centred around the *okka* (clan/lineage) with clan members living together in their ancestral house (*ainmane*). The cultural heritage and history of these communities was transmitted through oral traditions (including religious poems, hero-songs, and wise sayings) often accompanied with rites, rituals, and dances. (Rice 1878: 202-228; Richter1870:209)

The Sacred Landscape

Colonial ethnographers draw parallels between the folk religious practices of Kodagu with those observed by other Dravidian tribes (Richter 1870: 168-170; Rice 1878: 257-279. These writings indicate the dual aspects of Kodagu's folk religion, which can be categorized into two domains: the private sphere, encompassing rites, rituals, and belief systems practiced in ancestral homes and memorial sites dedicated to ancestors, and the public sphere, where community worship takes place. The underlying theme connecting these domains is the concept of the sacred landscape.

The Kodavas have a deep reverence for the forests where their ancestral shrines are located; hunting and cutting down of trees is prohibited in these areas. Similar such sanctions extend to the sacred forest (*devakadus*) that houses their deities.[4] Human entry into these areas of worship is restricted (depending on the myths associated with the presiding deities to a few hours in the morning or to a particular day of the week or month. Some of the groves like the Chomamamale in Kadiathnadu, and Iruli Bane in Kunkingeri

are considered so sacred that none can enter them. This idea of the sacred landscape is integral to all aspect of their daily life (Ragavendra & Kushalappa 2011: 4-10) The earth is worshipped before the start of the agricultural activities such as ploughing and harvesting. Further, significant milestones in a woman's life such as marriage and motherhood are marked by rituals that symbolically worship the river Ganges before a well or a tank (Ganapathy 1980).

Embodied Deities

The celebration of the powers of nature is communicated through the composition of their temples, rites and rituals. Arising of a belief system that the divine embodies the forests, the hills, and the rivers as well as the human space of a village, a cluster of villages and the country (Kodagu). This embodiment of the divine is seen through deities such as Igguthappa (the presiding god of agriculture) Cauvery (the river goddess and the patron deity of the Kodavas) as well as the local deities and cults located in specific village landscape. These gods and goddesses are personification of the land and represent the fierce and the benign aspect of nature.

Residing in the sacred forests (*devakadu*), near human settlements, these gods and goddesses are the guardians of the forests. Each of these groves is identified by the name of the deity who resides there. Igguthappa, the god of agriculture, who is consulted by the farmers before the commencing the harvest season, resides in Paliknadu in the inaccessible sacred groves known as Igguthappa *devakadu*. The Goddess Cauvery resides in a temple in Tala Cauvery near a sacred forest left untouched by humans. Similarly, deities like Palurappa, Rudhraguppelamme and Thumbemaledera the embody the landscapes of Palur, Rudraguppe and Tumbe hills respectively. The presence of these sylvan deities within pristine forests have prevented destruction of Kodagu's biodiversity (Ragavendra & Kushalappa 2011: 4-10;Wilks 1810: 711-715).

The sacred landscape of Kodagu is made more potent by the presence of demigods and spirits of the nether world. These include: Bhumi, Gulliga and Kuliya, protectors of the village boundary; Maledeva, the guardian of the hills; Ayyappa and Muthappa, the protectors of wild and domestic animals respectively. Heroes who die in battle are revered as demigods and worshipped alongside ancestral spirits. Additionally, there are mischievous spirits that must be appeasement to prevent them harassing humans. These spirits live near village temples, ancestral homes or on the outskirts of the village. They are propitiated with offerings of puffed rice and arrack during tere/kol performed for the temple deity (Chinnappa and Nanjamma 2014: 162-164).

Scripting the Sacred

The common script in each of their religious poems is that the gods

and goddesses emanate from the earth — from red ant-hills in dense forests in a distant land. They wander through many lands in search of a permanent abode and devotees to acknowledge their godly status. The poem *Evva Makka Deva* describes the journey of six brothers and their sister from Manika Malenad to Kodagu. Bythurappa, the eldest, settles in Bythur, Iguthappa, the next brother, settles in Ammegeri, Nelji and Perur, Palurappa in Palur, while Pannagalatamme, the sister settles in Pannangala.

In the religious poem dedicated to Choli Povvedemma/Bagavati, she manifests from a red ant-hill with seven peaks in Kerala and journeys to Kodagu, in search of devotees and settles in many villages. The Kettrappa poem recounts his journey from Bengur in Malabar in the company of Kalmanda Ayyanna, who had visited Malabar to sell rice. Kettarppa arrives in Kodagu accompanied by ten spirits of the netherworld and two goddesses named Poovadi (Bagavathi) and Chaundi, seeking divine status (Chinnappa 1924, *transl*. 2022: 287; Srinivas 2003: 174-212). These deities are neither ethereal nor otherworldly – each one of them are fully cognizant of the lives of the villagers. They manifest their power though afflictions affecting the villages such as crop loss, death of cattle or diseases. Pandira Karambiah describes their power:

> 'We have heard from our elders that, when a goddess decides to manifest in a particular spot, she needs *puja* and offerings. She causes disease, crop failure, and death of animals. When these malefic events happen, the people consult the *tantris* (soothsayers) who identify the need to propitiate the deity, recovered from an anthill. The spot is then sanctified and arrangements are made by the community for her worship. In these temples, the goddesses make their wishes known through the medium who may be from either the Golla and Malaya communities or from the Kodava community.'

There are no daily *pujas* performed in the forest shrines. The gods are brought to life with appropriate rituals prior to their annually/biannually festival and calmed on the conclusion of the *ballaynamme*.

Binding the Sacred Realm

The indigenous belief system is based on the concept of a vibrant and dynamic connection between the spirit world, human and natural world. The spirits, demigods, and gods who are revered, appeased, loved and feared are deeply intertwined with both the landscape and the everyday lives of the believers. Central to this belief system, shared by the predominant agricultural communities in Kodagu, is the veneration of Igguthappa, the deity associated with agriculture, and the river goddess Cauvery. Additionally, the worship of deities such as the hunter god Ayyappa, the mother goddess Bagavathi, and Badrakali is widespread, with dedicated shrines found in the sacred groves

scattered throughout Kodagu. In Madikeri taluk there are seven Badrakali temples guarding the sacred forest landscape, these goddesses are seen as sisters and have distinct identities associated with the forest. Certain other deities like Mythalappa, Kettrappa, Virabadra, Mandanna-Murthi, Korthi Sastha, Subamma, Kenchamma, and Kunthamma exert their influence within specific locations and do not receive widespread devotion.

The presence of numerous deities within the sacred landscape of Kodagu does not imply a lack of interconnection among them. The deities residing in a cluster of villages are perceived as siblings of equal power, with no hierarchical distinctions among them. In recognition of the relationship between the gods and the goddess, the deities living in the vicinity are invited to the main festival of each one of them. Pandira Karmbiah says, since Suburai in Kanergeri village is Mahishamardini's brother in Karavele, he is invited to her festival. Mythalappa from Kalkeri-Nidugane is invited to sister Karavele Badrakali's festival by the temple functionaries. Pandira Karambiah adds:

> 'Before the start of Mahishamardini's festival, we visit the temple of Suburai in Kanrgeri village to invite him to her festival. This means that when we visit the shrine of Suburai, we offer him ritual honour by dancing around his shrine and invite him and the clans associated with his worship to Mahishamardini's festival.'

Suburai makes his presence felt at the festival of Mahisamardini by possessing a shaman present at the festival. Similarly, Mythalappa's presence at Badrakali's festival is depicted by a shaman. Many other gods/goddesses living in nearby sacred groves are also represented at the festival by other shamans. Mahishamardini and Bagavathi, however, do not attend the Badrakali festival despite residing in the vicinity. This is perhaps because of the differences in the forms of worship observed in these temples. Badrakali's worship is led by a member Golla community from the village, whereas Mahishamardini/ Bagavathi temple rites is conducted by Brahmin priest.

Metaphysical Beliefs

Local deities are often regarded as *avatars* of either Ishwara or Parvathy, yet none of them are married or fettered by biological offspring. The local goddesses, are fiercely independent and when a temple to a male god is built nearby, they relocate to inaccessible locations in the sacred grove. These goddesses are intimately connected with the village life where they reside. The Bagavathi and Badrakali worship, for instance, is widespread across Kodagu. However, the powers of each one of them is restricted to a specific area. In *ettekeri nad,* Badrakali seen as sisters are worshipped in seven distinct locations of Karavele, Kalkeri, Galibeedu, Madikeri, Keddal, Makandur, and Haler. Each one's name is prefixed by the name of the village, indicating that the landscape belongs to the goddess.

The localization of their influence within specific geographic areas does not diminish their divine powers. They are viewed as temperamental and potentially perilous, demanding strict adherence to prescribed rituals from their devotees. Describing the gods guarding the *ettekeri nad,* Minnanda Ganapathy, states:

> 'These gods are *shakti devas.* It is necessary to maintain the sanctity of worship. During the fortnight of the festival, people must maintain *pattani* (fasting). They can eat rice only once a day and eat only *neer dosa* for dinner. They cannot eat meat or spiced vegetable dishes. During this period of *kette*, people are not supposed to leave the village. If any one goes outside the village on work, he must stay outside and cannot enter his home, until he sees the stars. In the old days, men had to sleep on the hay stack outside their home. There were also restrictions on hunting and cutting of trees or vegetables. We are told that during this period of *kette*, a menstruating woman had to leave the village for the period, if she wished to participate in the festival.'

It must be noted, that according to tradition, when *kette* was imposed on the village, the inhabitants were required to participate in community service, such as renovating the temple or maintain the village water source. Neglect of these duties could duties could incur a penalty or even lead to excommunication (*parambadi*) (Muthanna 1953, reprint 2022:333-34: Ganapathy 1980: 155-157).

Worship, Rites and Rituals

The shrines of the local deities are unimpressive structures. The deities are either placed on an open-air platform under s sacred tree or are housed inside small enclosed temples built on a raised platform. The sacredness of the landscape is communicated through the positioning of the shrine, against the backdrop of a rising hill covered with dark green forests. The worship of the local deities is performed two months prior to the commencement of the agricultural season in April. The dates of the festivals are fixed after the Cauvery Shankramana festival which commemorates to the river goddess Cauvery.

A committee established through the hereditary rights of clans from the indigenous communities living in the village manage the shrines and the annual/biannual festivals of the local deities. The committee comprises the *Deva Thakka* (guardian of the temple), *Bandara Thakka* (the trustee of the temple jewels), and the village headman (*Uru Thakka*) and *Nad Thakka* (headman of a cluster of villages) (Muthanna 1953, reprint 2022:333-34: Ganapathy 1980: 155-157).

The *Deva Thakkaamme* rights to the temples in the *ettekeri nad,* belong to the Pandira *okka* (clan) from the Kodava community. These rights are

currently with Pandira Karambaiah who is primarily responsible for the annual/ biannual festivals of Mahishamardini, Karavele Bagavathi, Badrakali and Mythalapa of *ettekeri nad*. The other indigenous clans from the Kodava, Airi, Golla and Malleya communities residing in the village, contribute financially towards the festivals and collaborate in the preparations. Underscoring the current challenges of organizing the village festivals and the ritual roles played by clans in the village, Pandira Karambiah remarks:

> 'In the past there were 101 *okkas* responsible for the ceremonies. Now only about 10 or 11 *okkas* cooperate in maintaining the temple rites. These *okkas* have clearly assigned roles. The *Mukkatis (*helper to the priest) in the Badrakali temple and in the Mythalappa temple, are Gollas from the Areyanda and Beddakanda *Okkas*; whereas in the Mahishamardini temple the *Mukkatis* are Kodavas from the Subbamanda and Ponnapanda *Okkas*. The *Mukkatis* are expected to hand the divine weapons to the shamans who are possessed by the divine spirit and ensure that he does not hurt himself or others in the frenzy of the spirit possession. The *Mukkati* also interprets the verbal and non-verbal communication of the shamans. These protocols and not rigid, and others may also control those possessed by the deity.'

Diverging Forms of Worship

There are two kinds of sacraments conducted in the temples in *ettekeri nad*. The rites and rituals performed in the Mahishamardini/Karavele Bagavathi temple is officiated by Brahmin priests, while in other nearby temples the worship is by non-Brahmin priests from Kodavas, Gollas, Aries or Maleya communities who hold hereditary rights to specific temples. For instance, in the Pomantemamme temple, the priest is a Kodava from the Ponnapanda *Okka*, and the priest in a Chaundi temple is a Maleya. The introduction of Brahmanical worship forms into the Mahishamardini/ Karavele Bagavathi temple has not resulted in the abandonment of indigenous religious practices. The two systems co-exist. Brahmin priests were introduced in many local temples during the rule of the Ikkeri dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These Brahmins in *ettekeri nad* do not have hereditary rights to worship and are paid out of the temple funds unlike the indigenous priests, who have hereditary rights.

The main difference in the two forms of worship is that animal sacrifices are not conducted in temples where Brahmin priests officiate. Animal sacrifices are, therefore, not conducted in the Mahishamardini/Karavele Bagavathi temple. This does not mean such sacrificial rites are not in vogue. They are performed in the nearby smaller shrines dedicated to Mahishamardini's helper goddesses such as Pootamme and Chaundi. Pandira Monappa states:

> 'Animal sacrifices are offered at the Poomatame and Chaundi temples

annually. There are certain special rites conducted and coconuts are broken, *arati* is performed and *ede* (ritual food) is offered to the goddess. A goat is also hung from the tree and subsequently sacrificed. During the sacrificial ritual, the devotees cry out, *Aal all amme aad*! (Not man, Amma, but a goat). It is possible that there was human sacrifice in the past; but now, they offer a goat or a rooster. We do not allow outsiders to witness these ceremonies since these mystical rites have to be kept secret.'[4]

Pandira Karambiah adds, Mahishamardini does not like her connection with her helper goddesses because of the performance of animal sacrifices. The administration of her shrine, is therefore kept separate from those of other goddesses, who are recognized as her helpers.

The Ritual language of Worship

The celebrations make a clear distinction between the insiders and outsiders. Only those from the indigenous communities with historical roots in the village can enter the sacred area of the temple and participate in the ritual dances celebrating their ties with the land and their deity. Outsiders can watch the ceremonies standing away from the sacred landscape and seek the blessings of the shamans. Women from the *Deva Takka's* family will carry the lamp to the temple, but they do not participate in the dances or the rituals and stand outside the sacred precinct of the shrine to witness the rituals.

A day prior to the festival, the lamp of the temple is not lit (*andibolk*); The next day the goddess is taken to the *Kootpole* for her ritual bath and from the third day the festival begins at around 3:00 O'clock in the morning. The landscape is shrouded in darkness and the only light present are those of the temple lamps and torches of fire. During the main rites, four men from the Kodava community play the *dudhi* (indigenous drum) and narrate the story of the deity, while the Medas play the musical instruments standing outside the temple premise. The other worshippers dance around the shrine to the rhythmic beat of the drum and sing the chorus. These men are dressed in white *kuppya* (a long coat traditionally worn in Kodagu), while those who have made special offerings wear red *kuppya*. The officiating priests of the Badrakali and Mallanna temples, from the Golla community wears a red sari and his helpers from the same community wears red *kuppya*. During the ceremony shamans[5] dressed in white *kuppya* carrying divine weapons are possessed by the spirits of their chosen deity. They provide counselling to the villagers on their problems such as family quarrels, illness, crop loss or lost animals. Subsequent, to the sacraments, the indigenous communities dance in the village meadows. These dances also have ritual significance. The men from each of the indigenous clans enter the meadow's carrying a bamboo stick with a red cloth tied to it to signify their family links with the land. Subsequent dances include *kaitale* (also called *chau atte*) *bolakate* and *piliatte*. At the conclusion of the dancing the dancing is in a reverse sequence. During the festivals, about 100 men

specially the bachelors from the *ettekeri nad*. In the afternoon the sacrificial goats are taken to the paddy fields and chased across the fields and then caught.

A few days later the *angola-pongola* dance (cross-dressing) dance is performed. [6] The nine-day festival includes a ceremony when the goddess is taken in a procession so that her devotees may she her and take her blessings. The conclusion of the festivities is only after *aarata kalas* is performed on the nineth day of the *ballayname,* when the fierce power of the awakened deity is calmed. Prior to the conclusion of the festival, animal sacrifices are performed in the dead of the night to the presiding deity. Since these rites are seen as esoteric, women or those who not the original inhabitants of the village may not witness the sacraments. Additionally, during the festival, the Poliyas sacrifices chickens to spirit deities such as Madi, Chaundi Mantara and Kodar by the Poliyas. Anyone who has recovered from disease, such as chicken pox or cholera offer rice balls to the spirit deities near the *Kootpole*. The festival season is completed after a visit to the Padamate, Chaundi temple.

Since the focus of worship in April 2021 was on Badrakali, the festival of Mythalappa was restricted to 3 days. Mythalappa's worship has a special significance to those women who wish to have a child. While the rites are performed early in the morning, these women accompany a priest into the forest and make special offerings to the gods. Mythalappa is also the protector of children, during the sacraments, the shaman dances with a naked child in his arms and seeks special blessings for the child.

Families, Temples, and the State

Narratives intertwined with the shrines and their deities are repositories of historical memories economic and political events that have unfolded in history. The Mahishamardini temple locally known as the Karavele Bagavathy/Poovadi Devastanam is a narrative of changing mores of worship introduced since the seventeenth century. Pandira Karamiah's narration indicates that the temple, which was once an ancient site of tribal worship in the heart of a forest has become a town temple with the rapid urbanization of Madikeri. Yet beneath the established town temple are cultural memories of ancient tribal/peasant practices that go back to a thousand years. Pandira Karmbiah says:

> 'I have heard our elders say, that the idol established in this temple is at least 1000-years old and has existed since *andi* (ancient times). The forest shrine was worshipped by the forest dwellers of this region. We do not know the legends associated with the worship of Mahishamardini… At one time the people residing in the area faced a lot of hardships. The king also faced a lot of obstacles. He consulted the Raj Purohit and learnt the need to propitiate the *devi*. He therefore built the temple and the Pandira *okka* were given *thakkame* rights to

the temple.'

The difficulties that the people faced and the building of the temple to appease the goddess, can be inferred by corelating the family history of the Pandira family, the *deva thakkas* of the shrine with documented history on the growth of Madikeri as the capital of Kodagu. King Mudduraja 1(1633-1681) who established Madikeri as his capital, encouraged agriculturists from other parts of his domain to settle in Madikeri and clear the outlying forest land for agriculture. This foray into forest land inevitably led to conflicts with the forest tribes. The building of a temple to a forest deity was perhaps an attempt to appease the tribal communities. This inference is substantiated through the family history of the Pandira clan.

Pandira Karambiah says:

'Pandira *okka* lived in Yevakapadi in Nalnad long ago. They along with Paradanda okka Nalathanad were the *desha thakkas* of Nalnad about 500 years ago. During the reign of Mudduraja, our forefathers came with the Raja and settled near the palace. They probably worked in the palace. They were later made the trustees of the Karavele Bagavathi temple and were given land in Hebettegeri village to cultivate. When we moved to Hebettegeri, a faction of the Pandira clan moved to Poramale (Horamale) near Galibeedu. That faction is identified as Poramale Pandira, whereas we are known as Madikeri *nad* Pandira. We now live in Hebbettekeri and cultivate our land. We are the *deva thakkas* of Badrakali temple in Karavele-Badaga and the Mythappa temple in Kalkeri-Nidugana. When Lingaraja built the Onkarashwar temple in 1820, we were made the *deva thakka* of the temple as well. In recent years we have withdrawn from the management of the Onkareshwar temple because it is time consuming work. We continue to hold the ritual of being the *deva thakka* of the temple. During the harvest festival we are honoured as the *deva thakka* of the temple. It entails the honour of cutting the first sheaf of the paddy and leading the *Putheri kol* dance in the fort premise. This tradition of dancing the Putheri *kol* in the fort premise was discontinued during the British period and shifted to Gadige near the raja's tomb. This was because the English *memsahibs* were upset with the blood shed that sometimes occurred during the *Pothkali* dance (a fencing dance with bamboo sticks) The custom of conducting the Putheri *kol* in the fort was revived only about seven years ago.'

Stealing of the Goddess

The troubled history of the period and the internal strife that existed is also evident in the story of the stealing of Bagavathi from Galibeedu (Poramale) the outer boundary of Madikeri and her installation in the shrine dedicated to Mahishamardini. It also indicates the role of the state in resolving the dispute: Pandira Karambiah narrates:

'A few villagers from the *ettkeri nad* got together and stole the goddess

> from Pormale. They stole the idol of Poovadi/Bagavathi because in those days people believed that only if you take the idol in a procession and performed certain rituals, it is not a festival….The people who stole the goddess believed, the goddess will come with you if you have faith in her. So that is how the Guddanna and Ponnapanda *okkas* brought the goddess. At first, they took the stolen Bagavathi to Subramanya (Subra) temple in Karangeri. On receiving the complaint from the people of Poramala, the Raja sent his troops to Karangeri to retrieve the idol. But when the troops reached Karangeri the wasps attacked them so the troops had to retreat.

The King then called the Poramale Pandira clan and informed them that the goddess had appealed to him that henceforth she would like to reside in Karavale and the people of Poramale should no longer celebrate the Bagavathi festival. Since then, there is only an Ayyappa temple in Poramale. The Raja's decision in favour of Karavale village was because those who stole the image of the goddess had observed the necessary ritual purification rites and believed in her. When the goddess as brought to Karavale, she was first placed in a forest and then installed in the shrine built for Mahishamardini. About four years ago, a small shrine has been built for Bagavathi and she was installed in it with appropriate rites. The decision to build a separate shrine for Bagavathi was because a soothsayer (*tantric*) said the two goddesses (i.e., Mahishamardini and Bagavathi) did not like to live in the same shrine.

> The goddess Bagavathi has not forgotten her old home in Poramale, During the *tere*, there is a possibility that she will escape from Karavele to return to her original abode near her brother Ayyappa. This happens when Bagavathi is taken to *Kootpole* (confluence of two rivers) for her ritual bath (*deva kulipa*) and is brought back to the temple. The priest carrying the idol, feel her pull towards Poramale and determinedly walks towards her present abode. The devotees a hold various divine weapons and prevent her escape. Over the past two years, Bagavathi has quietened because she is no longer taken out of her shrine for a ritual bath. The priest brings a pot of water from the river and bathes her within her shrine. Bagavathi does not like this decision.'

Installation of Mallanna (Virabadra)

Similarly, the destructive power of British regime is evident in the installation of Mythalappa in Kakot Paramb. As Minnanda Ganapathy narrates:

> 'The idol of Virabadra (Mythalapa) was originally in the shrine within the premise of the Madikeri fort. When the British established their dominion in Kodagu, they razed to ground the temple and built a church there. One of the Kodavas who worked for the previous ruler, begged them to give him the idol. He carried the idol of Virabadra and installed

it in Kakkotparamb. The families who are responsible for the maintenance of the temple are Chettiars, Minnandas and Napandas.'

Conclusion

The study highlights the cultural richness of Kodagu and the role of religion in fostering a sense of community among the people. It indicates the centrality of the idea of the landscape to their cultural imagining. The deities, demi-gods and spirits who inhabit the forests, the mountains, and rivers are its guardians. The religious songs discussed reveal the strong cultural influences of the neighbouring areas of Northern Kerala, Dakshina Kannada, and Mysore. However, these influences do not diminish the unique cultural identity of Kodagu which is shaped by the living experiences of its people within the terrain.

Embedded in their religious songs are historical narratives of past events. These songs recount stories of the arrival of deities into Kodagu in search of a permanent abode and fresh devotees to honour them. It is possible that these religious cults followed trade or conquest routes. For instance, it is plausible that the worship of Mythalappa is an off-shoot of the cult of Khandoba, the folk deity of the Dangars (also known as Gollas) that spread across the Deccan. Travelling along migratory path he is known by various names as Mallanna or Mallarappa (Sontheimer 1997: 286). Similarly, the veneration of mother goddesses like Bagavathi and Badrakali could be traced to the Shakta tradition that originated in Bengal since the 6 CE (Menon 2006: 504-5010). The goddess worship seems to have followed the southern route to Kerala and spread across to Dakshina Kannada. These goddesses though unmarried are visualized as mothers and are associated with abundance and fertility as observed in other studies by writers such as Eck (2012:296-7) and Ganesh (2010:73-105).

Many elements that characterize the indigenous religious traditions of Kodagu resonate on a broader regional scale. These include concepts of the sacred landscape, and the mandatory participation of the village community in the annual/biannual celebrations as well as the intensity of worship. Nevertheless, distinctions prevail. In Kodagu, these deities are the guardians of the forests. Entry into their abode in the forests is restricted by customary norms and belief systems. These sanctions continue to an extent to restrict the destruction of forests. Additionally, there are historical stories associated with the shrines and deities, such as the installation of Mahishamardini in a shrine in the seventeenth century at the outer limits of Madikeri and the stealing of the Bagavathi. These stories recounted through songs, rituals and family histories can well indicate the processes of socio-cultural and economic transitions that have shaped people's lives.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Kamala Ganesh, for their comments on the paper.

2. The field investigation was conducted between December 2020 and April 2021 with funds from the Karnataka Kodava Sahithya Academy along with B.B. Ganapath. The key informants were Minnanda Ganapathy, Pandira Karambiah and Pandira Monnappa from the Kodava community.

3. The names of the eight villages that form the ettekeri nad are Karangegeri, Karavele, Bagada, Kalkeri, Nidugane, Aorata, Hebettegeri and Madigeri.

4. The worship of forest deities annually are conducted by men, women may witness all the ceremonies, except the last when the animal sacrifice conducted at the dead of night with secret rituals. It may be noted that only male animals are sacrificed, possibly indicating the remnants of pre-historic mother goddess worship discussed by D.D Kosambi (1962:82-109)

5. For want of a better term, I have used the term 'Shamans' to explain the phenomena in the context of Kodagu. These are men from the indigenous communities who get possessed with the spirit of a specific local deity during the festival. When acolyte experiences a divine energy, he needs to visit the Bythurappa temple in Kerala so that a 'Guru' can identify the chosen deity and identify their special weapons. It is only then that these men who experience the god/goddess can speak at the festival.

6. The literal translation of the term *angola-pongola* suggests gender cross dressing. In the present context it means a kind of fancy-dress celebration.

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