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Spots of Wilderness. 'Nature' in the Hindu Temples of Kerala

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Many Hindu temples in Kerala are called 'groves' (kāvu), and encapsulate an effective grove – a small spot where shrubs and trees are said to grow 'wildly'. There live numerous divine entities, serpent gods and other ambivalent deities or ghosts, subordinated to the presiding god/goddess of the temple installed in the main shrine. The paper discusses this situation along two main lines. One is to trace the presence of these groves and of their dangerous inhabitants to religious ideas found in Kerala about land and deities, and about forests as a major source of divine (wild) power. The other is to point out recent discourses ascribing an antique ecological purpose and consciousness at the origin of temple groves, thus equating ecology with a strictly contained – and tiny – 'wilderness'.

Jagadi (Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala), 18 March 1982, 4.45 a.m.
This is the start of the yearly 'Muṭippura festival', in honor of Goddess Bhagavati/ Bhadrakālī.¹ It is still night. Our small group

¹ Bhagavati is the serene mood of the Goddess, Bhadrakālī her fighting and ferocious manifestation. For a discussion of the pantheon in southern Kerala, see Tarabout 1986, 1993. For a detailed description of the Muṭippura festival, see Tarabout 1986 (chap. 3; in this work Jagadi was given a pseudonym, Ulagam).

heads for the place where a coconut tree has to be cut for providing the foundation pillar of the Goddess's temporary temple. This auspicious time for the ritual of 'cutting the tree' (*maram murippu*) has been calculated by an astrologer. We reach the garden of a house planted with coconut trees and meet the owner's family sponsoring the ceremony, as well as the officiating specialists: a Brahman priest, a tree-cutter, and two groups of musicians.² After a cult at the foot of the selected tree, punctuated by discreet musical interventions, the tree-cutter addresses a silent prayer to the tree then climbs at the top of it. He cuts a few last leaves (most of the palms have been cut beforehand). Then, at a signal, he cuts the trunk two meters below the top, amidst sudden and loud auspicious noise: the two orchestras play simultaneously and independently from each other,³ women make high-pitched hoots (*kurava*), and firecrackers are detonated. The cut portion of the tree falls on palms stretched on the ground, avoiding contact with earth; it is then carried on the men's shoulders to the place where the temporary temple is built, accompanied all the way by *kurava* hooting by women. After another cult by the head carpenter, it becomes the foundation pillar of the temple, at its south-western corner. (description on the basis of fieldwork notes)

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Cutting a tree is a religious affair in specific contexts. In this particular case, it was not altogether clear who was thus propitiated. Various beings inhabit various species of trees; however, here, no such being was named. The cult might as well have propitiated an anonymous one said to inhabit the tree as it may have been addressed to the tree itself as a living and powerful being. As a matter of fact, interlocutors often consider the question to be rather academic.

² *Periya mēlam*, 'main orchestra', is a musical formation for religious ceremonies developed in Tamil Nadu (Tallotte 2007). *Pañcavādyam*, '5 musical instruments' is an orchestral formation proper to Kerala playing during religious festivals.

³ For such a musical superposition, see for instance Guillebaud 2008 (305ff.).

Indeed, viewing a tree as a sentient, divine being is part of the Brahmanical tradition, and similar propitiatory rituals are performed elsewhere in India (Berti 2001: 50ff.; Filliozat 2004).

This did not historically prevent deforestation throughout India, despite the 'sacredness' attributed to some trees. It has been argued that such a conception of vegetation encouraged the preservation of parts of forests in 'sacred groves', which are sometimes claimed to be 'hotspots of biodiversity'. This would be a testimony to an indigenous and ancient consciousness of the need to protect the environment. The idea is now so widespread in India that it seems to be an accepted fact, found for instance in some courts' decisions:

'Trees had their relevance recognised in Indian traditions, very many centuries before Stockho[l]m Conference of 1970. The supreme creative force, Shakti or Parvathy-as presented in Indian epics, is the grand-daughter of tree!' (Bombay High Court, in a decision against the running of a saw-mill)⁴

'The Indian society has, for many centuries, been aware and conscious of the necessity of protecting environment and ecology. Sages and Saints of India lived in forests. Their preachings contained in Vedas, Upanishadas, Smritis etc. are ample evidence of the society's respect for plants, trees, earth, sky, air, water and every form of life. [...] The children were educated by elders of the society about the necessity of keeping the environment clean and protecting earth, rivers, sea, forests, trees, flora fauna and every species of life.' (Supreme Court of India, quashing a Kerala Government de-reservation order concerning part of a Reserve forest which had been encroached)⁵

⁴ *Dharmaraj S/O Jaikumar ... vs State Of Maharashtra And Ors.* Bombay High Court, 10 March 1992. Ref.: 1993 (1) BomCR 132.

⁵ *Nature Lovers Movement Vs. State of Kerala and Ors.*, Supreme Court, 20 March 2009. 2009 AIR SCW3656.

The scholarly critique of this reconstruction has already been done and the present contribution can only propose additional material to support it.⁶ I shall take the example of the ‘sacred groves’ (Malayalam: *kāvu*) found in Kerala, envisaging them not so much in the terms of the debate about ecological preservation⁷ than as anthropological realities submitted to contemporary significant changes. This perspective is also not new and has been developed by scholars like Yasuchi Uchiyamada and Rich Freeman,⁸ to whose work I will regularly refer. Freeman (1999: 261), for instance, sets up the stage with clarity:

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 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. While not denying that some kavus may take this form, the majority of others in my experience do not.

After evoking the general characteristics of Kerala’s landscape in its social and religious dimensions, I shall present groves in their various aspects according to caste hierarchy; this will lead me to discuss temple groves, before concluding on current changes and discourses.

⁶ See for instance Narayanan 1997, 2001; Nagarajan 1998; Nelson 1998; Freeman 1999; Uchiyamada 2001; Tomalin 2004.

⁷ For a general bibliography see Malhotra, Gokhale & Das 2001. For an example of a detailed study of botanical diversity in a few groves of Kerala, see Anupama 2009 (who provides also a bibliography more focused on Kerala); also Chandrasekhara and Sankar 1998.

⁸ See Freeman 1994, 1999; Uchiyamada 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002.

Landscape as habitat

Kerala is a long and narrow land stretching between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats in three longitudinal zones: low lands and backwaters along the coast; hillocks and valleys in the mid-section; steep mountains on the eastern side. Seen from a plane the country seems an ocean of paddy-fields and trees that conceal habitations. Typically, high status castes and well-to-do other castes live on elevated land, in separate compounds where houses are surrounded by private gardens; these compounds are themselves situated amidst vegetable fields and tree plantations.⁹ (Fig. 1)

In the first two zones, such garden lands (house-gardens, fields and plantations) contrast with inundated paddy-fields, identified with marshy land, on the one hand, and with forests, on the other hand. This opposition recalls an ancient Brahmanical one that contrasts rural inhabited space with its margins, forests and marshy land (Zimmermann 1982: 63), and more generally the human regulated space of the village with forest (Malamoud 1976). This opposition is both sociological and religious at the same time. Forest is wilderness, inhabited by dangerous divine beings and ‘uncultured’ low-status people; this is more or less the same with inundated land for rice cultivation, *puñca*, where evil spirits wander and at the border of which thatched huts of poor, low-status people are often relegated (Uchiyamada 1995; Osella & Osella 2000: 30ff.).¹⁰

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⁹ For a general, ecological and sociological study, see Mencher 1966.

¹⁰ A different symbolic classification obtained in the early Tamil cultural world (to which the region that is now Kerala was a part of), which distinguished and contrasted five regions: hills, forest, seashore, pasture, wasteland (Zvelebil 1973). Though sensitive to the observation and evocation of ‘nature’ for poetic purposes, and activated in some of the oral literature of Kerala, it does not appear relevant in the present discussion.



Fig. 1. South Kerala: paddy fields in the forefront with ‘garden’ lands and houses at the background (G. Tarabout, 1991).

It is not only the margins, however, that are inhabited by dangerous and powerful divine beings or ghosts - these two categories overlap and I will refer to them as Bhūts (*bhūtam*).¹¹ The whole landscape – rocks, ponds, rivers, trees, crossroads, etc. – is marked by ‘haunted’ spots to which a ghost’s tale, or the story of a divine encounter, is attached. By highlighting specific features of the landscape, which often become the place for more or less regular rituals, such narratives create categories. For instance, a given *karimpana* tree (*Borassus flabellifer*) may be inhabited by a *māṭan*, the ghost of somebody killed in a battle; or it may be the residence of a *yāksī*, the ghost of a virgin young woman, an ogress who deceptively first appears as a beautiful lady. Not all *karimpana* are haunted. But each one may be so: *karimpana*, as a category of tree, is prone to be the residence of a Bhūt (Tarabout 1999).

Cutting a tree does not necessarily require the ceremony described except in particular religious contexts such as the one

¹¹ Tarabout 1986, 1993.

evoked. However, some specific trees do because of their privileged association with divine or ghostly beings. Beside well-known pan-Indian ‘sacred’ trees such as the pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), the banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), the Bael tree (*Aegle marmelos*) or the Neem (Margosa) tree (*Azadirachta indica*), there are also trees in Kerala which are closely identified with the possible residence of Bhūts: the *karimpana*, already mentioned; the *pāla*, and more precisely its ‘seven leaves’ [p. 27] variety, *eḷilampāla* (*Alstonia scholaris*); the *kāññīram* (*Strychnos nux vomica*); the sweet jackfruit tree, *plāvu* (*Artocarpus integrifolia*); the ‘wild’ jackfruit tree, *āññīli* (*Artocarpus hirsuta*); etc. These associations are significant in the way people relate to their immediate environment, and have to be seen in relation with conceptions about funerary practices and land rights.

House and garden

Kerala is characterized by a disperse settlement. Upper castes and well to do families live in separate houses, each in an enclosed compound – a disposition already described by Ibn Battuta in the 14th century. Patrilineal lineages (Brahmins) and matrilineal ones (other landed castes) were known by the name of their ancestral domain and tried to preserve its unity and perennial character. Positions of honour were attached to these lineages, as well as hierarchized privileges and duties, and various rights on the product of lands and trees. Following Levi Strauss (1979: 177) on other societies, I propose to call such lineages ‘Houses’ in a similar sense it may have had for the nobility in Europa.¹²

A personal account of an old lady about her childhood during the first part of the 20th century exemplifies a typical disposition, where the House

¹² For more details on this interpretation of Kerala society, see Tarabout (1986, 1991); Moore, in her extensive study (1983, 1985), points toward a similar conclusion. See also Gough 1961: 323.

stood in the huge rambling compound around the house that had coconut palms, jack fruit, mango, cashew and banana trees, and pepper vines scaling the palm trees. There was a lot of other lush vegetation that grew almost wildly all around the ‘mittam’ – the wide courtyard that extended on all four sides of the house and the well at the back of the kitchen. [...] Considering that we seemed to have several resident snakes in the compound which lurked in the vegetation around, it was good to have all that clear space around the house, where any snake that put in an appearance would be very visible! (Bakhshi 2011: 94)

Some of these gardens are cared for like botanical gardens, with a great diversity of plants, including medicinal ones and spices (Zimmermann 1989: 27ff.). What is of interest for the present discussion is the connection established between certain species of trees and funerary practices, and the significance of serpents’ familiar presence.¹³

Till recently, and still now for some, the dead bodies of members of landed castes were cremated in the House compound, and the ashes and remaining fragment of bones were put in an earthen pot which was also buried in the compound. This burial could be temporary, and the remains were later taken out and dispersed in the ocean or in a stream; or it could assume a more **/p. 28/** permanent character. In that case, a tree would be planted – usually a jack-fruit tree – where the remains had been buried, suggesting a circulation of ‘fluids’! between the dead body of the newly formed ancestor and the fruit bearing tree.¹⁴

¹³ On serpents in Kerala, see for instance the compilation made by Padmanabha Menon (Menon 1986: 457ff.) or by Raju (1991).

¹⁴ Gough 1958: 461; Uchiyamada 1995: 122ff.; 2000: 75ff.; Osella & Osella 2009. Oral literature offers similar suggestive association, for instance between forest, the jackfruit tree, the world underground, the birth of a deity, ancestry and asceticism (Koccomon 1985).

Many compounds comprise also a spot of ‘untouched’ vegetation, sometimes on slightly elevated ground surrounded by a low stone parapet, where serpents – considered to be deities – are said to reside. This is their grove, their *kāvū*, and people present serpent-deities regularly with milk and other offerings there for ensuring the protection of the members of the House and averting various forms of misfortune these deities may inflict (skin and eye diseases, or infertility).¹⁵

Each household has got its own serpent-deity possessing large powers for good as well as for evil. A separate spot is set apart in the house-compound as the abode of these deities. This reserved spot is converted into a small jungle almost circular in shape. It is overgrown with trees of various kinds, and shrubs, and sometimes medicinal plants also. [...] This spot is so scrupulously reserved, that not even domestic animals are allowed to stray therein. No trees from the place are to be felled down, nor any plant whatever for that matter with any metal or more particularly iron weapons [...] (Panikkar 1983: 145)

Serpents, who are guardians of underground treasures, are evoked in legendary accounts of the origin of Malabar as its first inhabitants. According to a Brahmin literary tradition, the *Kēraḷōlpatti* (‘Origins of Kerala’),¹⁶ the first humans to settle there – Brahmins, in this account – made an agreement with the serpents and promised to reserve a part of their compound for them, where they would be worshipped.¹⁷ Indeed, besides the serpent grove present in most

¹⁵ Serpents receive also more elaborate worship during specific ceremonies involving the possession of some ladies from the house sponsoring the ritual, under the professional guidance of a caste of bards specialized in the serpents’ cult (Choondal 1981; Neff 1995; Guillebaud 2008).

¹⁶ This comparatively late tradition (not earlier than the 15th century) was preceded by a 13th century work (Freeman 2004: 459).

¹⁷ This story is known in different versions, see for instance Uchiyamada 1995: 83, 86; Neff 1995: 153. It reminds of a more general Brahmanical perspective, according to which the founding of a new Brahman settlement requires to first clear

compounds of the higher castes, there are a few renowned temples in Kerala specifically dedicated to them (Fig. 2).

As in other parts of India, serpents are mediating with the underworld, a connection which is explicit and furthermore underlined by their frequent association with termite-hills.¹⁸ In Kerala, in the 17th century, transactions of land /p. 29/ specifically mentioned serpents residing there. In a deed dated A.D. 1620, the cession of a house and compound thus included



Fig. 2. Maṅṅāraśśāla Śrī Nāgarāja Temple. Idols of Yakṣi and Serpents (G. Tarabout, 1991).

the place from all its (already residing) ‘demoniacal’ beings while inviting serpents, on the contrary, to remain (Tripathi 1981: 14ff.). Uchiyamada (1995: 249) quotes a Nayar interlocutor similarly affirming that serpents are the ultimate ‘owners’ of the soil.

¹⁸ Termite-hills are considered to be passages with the underworld. They are found in many groves in Kerala (for instance Moore 1983: 257), so much that small groves may be called ‘ant-hills’ (Uchiyamada 1995: 115).

... the good and bad stones, stump of *nux vomica*, [...], thorns, cobras, hidden treasure and the vessel in which it is secured, and water included in the four boundaries of the said house... (Logan 1951: cxxxiii).

Groves, forest, ancestry, and social hierarchy

The Brahmins' claim to be Kerala's first inhabitants does not go uncontested, nor are groves anchoring a lineage to a compound the prerogative of the sole landed castes. Anthropologist Yasuchi Uchiyamada has shown how various oppressed castes, considered by landed ones to be of lower status, affirm their autochthony. An old lady of one of these castes, the Kuravas, claimed for instance that they 'sprouted there' (Uchiyamada 2002: 115). As the author demonstrates, such a link to specific places on which they assert traditional rights depends on the existence and maintenance of groves inhabited by the spirits of their ancestors, whose body has been buried and their spirit 'established' there (Uchiyamada 2000: 77ff.); groves include also serpent deities and a host of other deities that are considered malevolent or simply ghosts by higher status castes. Such groves may be found across the landscape and not contained in house-garden compounds, as most members of these castes live **/p. 30/** in poor, marginalized settlements. There grows 'wildly' a diversity of trees and vines associated with dangerous divine beings such as the ones already mentioned: Borassus, Alstonia, Ficus, Nux vomica, Jackfruit, etc.¹⁹ There is a sense of identity between the botanical species found in these groves, the beings residing there, their low-status worshipers, and the latter's funerary practices. This identity is claimed both by the concerned people themselves, as well as by higher status castes, which easily conflate low-status castes (and their deities as well) with

¹⁹ For a description, see Uchiyamada (1995: 119ff.; 2001: 118ff.). Anupama (2009: 70ff.) provides a detailed botanical and soil study of seven *kāvus* situated in the northern part of Kerala and covering more extensive areas than most of the groves mentioned in the present contribution; see also the list of associated deities (*ibid.*: 4).

‘demons’ (Uchiyamada 2000: 67ff.), and consider their funerary rituals (burials instead of cremation) as producing only hungry ghosts, not ancestors.

This strong association between lineage, grove, powerful beings, and traditional land rights enable members of low-status castes to stage some resistance against the oppression and regular encroachments by higher, more powerful castes (Uchiyamada 2000: 81ff.). Cutting the trees of a grove is said to provoke severe misfortune, so that the concerned lineages of low-status castes, possessing the legitimacy to conduct rituals in the grove, partially maintain some rights over it even after the latter being acquired by others; and they may create fresh groves in newly-established ‘colonies’ built for them by the Government so as to develop roots in their new residential place (*ibid.*, 82).

‘Sacred grove’, *kāvu*, is equated with wild forest, ‘untouched’ by man; actually, it may be planted anew, cut down or partly preserved. Wildness is therefore a value, which is part of a shared religious idiom throughout Kerala society pointing to divine powers, to autochthony, and to land rights. It also marks social differentiation as well as a possible contestation. Indeed, ‘the performance of ancestral cults in *kāvus* by Untouchables reaffirms their low status in the caste hierarchy’ (*ibid.*, 83), as these cults are made for deities and ancestors considered to be ghosts and errant souls by high castes; at the same time, the latter enclose their own groves and tend to restrict their access. However, lower castes’ groves are credited by higher castes with malevolent power which acts as a potential (actually limited) deterrent against dispossession.

Temples, too, have their grove, which will now be discussed.

Temples and groves

At the beginning of my stay in Kerala, in the early 1980s, I was puzzled by the fact that almost each and every temple seemed to be named ‘grove’, *kāvu*. Actually, this was the case of temples dedicated to the goddess, to god Ayyappan, to serpent-deities, to hunter gods, and to a host of other gods and goddesses deemed lesser than a few main Brahmanic ones (Viṣṇu, Śiva, Gaṇapati, Lakṣmi). Indeed, there are cases when the shrine *is* a grove. (Fig. 3)

While such a close identification is the rule for groves of lower status castes, this is less apparent in the case of structural temples sponsored by the higher status castes where, despite being called *kāvu*, their ‘grove’ usually consists of little more than a few shrubs and trees, separated from the buildings – and especially from the main shrine. However, even when ‘wild’ vegetation is reduced to the tiniest spot, it is widely affirmed that it is a remnant of a former dense forest where the divine power revealed itself, leading to the construction of the temple (Tarabout 1990) – this distant past, stated to date back several hundreds or thousands of years before the present day, is usually elaborated by astrologers through a public consultation (Tarabout 2006).



Fig. 3. Thiruvananthapuram, shrine of Yakṣiyamma. (G. Tarabout, 1999).

In the Chottanikkara Bhagavati temple near Kochi, for instance, the elaboration of the past gives the following story. Long ago, the place was a forest where lived a tribal chieftain who daily sacrificed cows. His daughter once saved a she-calf and brought her up. Later, when the daughter died, the father found that the calf had miraculously turned into stone, which he worshipped as a manifestation of the goddess. With the passage of time these events were forgotten and the tribes and their crude shrine disappeared. An Untouchable woman working at the same place happened to sharpen her sickle on a stone: it miraculously bled. Brahmins and astrologers were called and revealed the **/p. 32/** divine presence of the goddess and of the god Viṣṇu. A regular Brahmanical worship was instituted. The current disposition of the shrines in the temple complex is interpreted according to this narrative. The compound is divided in two parts. In the upper one is the shrine of the goddess and her consort, surrounded by other, secondary ones, among which is a little platform around a Jasmine tree (*paviḷamalli*, *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*) with a crude stone carving of a calf: this is said to be the place of origin of the goddess ('root-place', *mūlasthānam*), identified with the cow-shed of the story; the actual shrine, a short distance away, is identified with the tribal man's hut. In a lower part of the compound is the *kīlkkāvu*, the 'grove below', where is installed a fiercer manifestation of the goddess to which a vegetal substitute for animal sacrifice is offered: this is the place where the tribal man formerly sacrificed cows. The power of this form of the goddess enables her to chase away Bhūts possessing people, who fix the malevolent beings in a nearby *pāla* tree with iron nails (Figs. 4-5).



Fig. 4. Chottanikkara, Mūlasthānam, with Jasmine tree and stone calf (G. Tarabout, 1983).

The details of the story,²⁰ and of the temple's space, display the fundamental oppositions and associations that have been evoked: the forest, imagined to be inhabited by wild people (tribes) practicing bloody rituals for terrifying deities, gives place to an ordered world dominated – in the literal sense /p. 33/ – by Sanskritic gods and goddesses honoured by Brahmans and other high castes according to Brahminical modes of worship. The initial power arising from the original wildness is reckoned today, as it is the fierce form of the goddess who is ultimately able to overcome the most powerful Bhūts. But it is fragmented and dispatched across different enclosed places whose spatial disposition suggests a strict containment of divine and ghostly powers. Another example, the Śrī Kārtiyāyani Dēvi temple in Cherthala, south of Kochi, will make this point clearer.

²⁰ See Menon 1980; Vaidyanathan 1982: 101ff.



Fig. 5. Chottanikkara, *Pāla* with nails in the *kīlkāvu*. (G. Tarabout 1983).

Here also the place is said to have been a dense forest out of which the goddess revealed herself. The simplified layout of the temple is as follows:²¹ (Fig. 6)

²¹ See also Tarabout 1990: 216ff.; for a description of a festival there, see Tarabout 1986: 382ff.



Fig. Chertala temple (satellite view, Google Maps, accessed 1.11.2014)

The place where the self-born idol of the goddess appeared, before shifting to the actual temple, is the 'root place' (*mūlasthānam*). Adjacent to it is the grove, the *kāvu*, with a dense growth of trees and vines and where a few sculptured stones of serpent-deities can be seen. Close by are also altars for two protective Bhūts, a Yakṣi and a Brahmarakṣasa (ghost of a Brahman, a frequent guardian in Kerala temples). At the south-western corner of the compound is the 'Master of the grove', *kāvutayan*, identified with Śāstā, a mountain and forest god. Just outside, to the south, is a tree where an annual /p. 34/ 'temple hunt', *paḷlivēṭṭa*, is enacted: this is also a 'forest' and the 'hunt' consists in ritually subduing malevolent spirits living there.

What is noteworthy in this spatial organization is the replication of forest markers ('root-place', grove with serpent stones, altars for the ghosts, shrine of the mountain god, tree for the hunt) as well as their careful dissociation from the main building where the goddess is enshrined. The goddess is said to have appeared in a dense forest, but the latter is now fractioned, reduced to symbolic markers, and kept at a distance. Even the grove, where plants grow 'wildly', is contained within walls (Fig. 7).

The temple compound provides thus a vivid actuation of the control that high castes and their Brahmanic deities exert over wilderness, while acknowledging and tapping the power ascribed to it.²² The disposition of a Hindu temple is also organized according to caste hierarchy, and prior to the legislation introduced in the 20th century lower-castes could not access the compound itself: the tree where the ‘hunt’ is performed, just outside the compound wall, marks the limits of their former access and the point of articulation between them and the ritual world of higher castes. Appropriately, this is also a symbolical forest. In contrast with the open, unbounded groves of the lower castes, high castes’ temple-groves develop a paradoxical claim of encompassing both ‘village’ and ‘forest’ through the strict containment and separation of ‘wildness’ - botanical, zoological and social.²³/p. 35/



Fig. 7. Chertala, Śrī Kārtīyāyāni Dēvi temple, the *kāvū*. Photo taken 29.11.2012
© Vanischenu, License Creative Commons (the frame is here modified).²⁴

²² See also Uchiyamada 1995: 140ff.

²³ On this contrast between groves of lower and higher status castes, and on the cutting of trees linked to the Sanskritisation of rituals and deities, see Uchiyamada (1995; 2001).

²⁴ http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cherthala_Devi_temple_2.jpg

Seers, forests, and temples

In most temple-groves the grove proper is circumscribed to a tiny spot in the compound, so much that, actually, satellite views often show their compound with much less trees than their immediate residential neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the presence of a grove proposes wildness as a religious value, as a source of power however contained it may appear. Recently, ‘sacred groves’, including groves in structural temples, have gained a new meaning and a different importance by being assimilated to an ancient indigenous consciousness of ecology. This is part of a general discourse about the ecological virtues of rituals: it is widely claimed, for instance, that Hindu festivals purify the air, especially when firecrackers are fired; recitation of mantras is also deemed to procure a serene and pure atmosphere. Groves are obvious candidates for similar statements.

... the ultimate aim is preservation of the ecosystem. [...] Temple is only the central part of the *śakti* [divine power] of forest, so to say, the *caitanya* [consciousness] of for-est. [...] there are so many temples in the midst of forest. [...] Previously every temple had forest around it. Later people cleared all of these forests, unknowingly. They /p. 36/ didn't realize the importance. See, the reason why there is an open ground in front of all these temples now is the fact that there was once a forest land and many forest around. Later it was all cleared unknowingly. (K. P. C. Anujan Bhattattiripad, interview 6 April 1991)

The views of KPC Bhattattiripad, an authority on Kerala temple rituals,²⁵ may not reflect a general opinion, as he himself conceded. It expresses however, perhaps more forcefully than usual, an admitted connection between temple and groves – the very fact that

²⁵ A renowned member of one of the few Brahmin families having superior ritual rights on high caste temples, he has edited the *Tantrasamuccayam*, a reference manual for rituals in Kerala.

kāvu names both temple and grove points to the same. In the same interview, he underlines the role of ancient seers, *ṛṣi*, in an interpretation that merely personalizes a widespread statement about their ecological consciousness:

So, *ṛṣi*s, they had the realization that the threat to the ecosystem by the encroachment of settlements can be curtailed to an extent by encouraging people to maintain these many forests within their villages. This is how the temples came in existence, temple worship. [...] They had a very wide vision. They were far sighted. But we lesser persons [...] we destroyed all these forests. (*ibid.*)

However, as Freeman (1999: 262) underlined, ‘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.’ One of his interlocutors was clear about this when he declared ‘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’ (*ibid.*).

What KPC and others claim to have been ancient seers’ ecological consciousness rejoins an argument regularly made in the frame of Neo-Hinduism (Freeman 1999: 293), but which also echoes positions of some environmental historians:

Environmental historians led the charge on secular-metropolitan nationalism and its ecologically disastrous manifestations in large dams, forest policy, industrial pollution and nuclear proliferation. They were also instrumental in propagating a strategically essentialist, celebratory, indigenism (inspired equally by Gandhian ideas and romantic primitivism). This perspective has on occasion stimulated ethnonationalism, regionalism, and forms of religious nationalism drawing upon the romanticized precolonial/modern subject and society that they evoke in their writings. (Sivaramakrishnan 2003)

In another interview (14 April 1999), KPC explained that the ancient seers had foreseen demographic expansion and the need to limit forests and to develop cultivated lands. So forests were partially cut down. Bhūts were living there, but there was no problem as long as there were left enough of trees. With in- /p. 37/ creasing deforestation, seers organized the temples, preserving forests within them. The Bhūts took refuge in the trees in the temples' compounds; therefore their presence is also there in the temples.

Such a view does not fit well with observed changes which see lower castes groves taken over by higher castes, with new 'textual identities' projected onto the *kāvu* (Uchiyamada 2002); elsewhere, deities residing in groves are progressively 'vegeterianised' when they are transferred from the trees to an institutional temple (Kalam 2001: 5, 42ff.). The process is well described by Madhav Gadgil, a major scholar and an authority on environmental issues, when interviewed by Emma Tomalin:

'We have done a study relating to sacred groves to show how when the Brahmin priests take control of deities located in sacred groves they deliberately tend to replace the worship of trees, of natural objects, by idols. They want to cut down the forest and use the money to construct a temple... As you come from the more remote villages to those which have better communication ... the low caste indigenous priesthood is taken over by the Brahmin priests and when the Brahmin priests take over, and more sort of institutionalised religion comes into play, the worship of nature gives way to worship of idols in the temple and the sacred groves tend to be cut down.' Madhav Gadgil, interview 4/2/97 (Tomalin 2004: 277)²⁶

²⁶ See also Anupama (2009: 14): 'In many places, local folk deities have been replaced by Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This has resulted in the erection of temples in sacred groves leading to their fragmentation and destruction.' Conversely, some temples nowadays are 'in the forefront of the "afforestation" movements, urging

Groves may be created anew in new temples or may result from historical and social changes having little connection with KPC's top-down model of evolution. What is interesting in the latter's interpretation is the will to hold together the religious characteristics of groves with a sensibility for 'nature'.

English dictionaries (Oxford, Cambridge) principally define 'nature' in opposition to human activity. Though it may not correspond to the conceptions found in ancient Sanskrit sources (Malamoud 1985: 241), it may nowadays apply in this respect to what people in Kerala would also consider as 'natural'. However they would consider Bhūts and deities as being also as much 'natural' as humans, animals or plants. This understanding echoes early Brahmanical thought:

Domestic animals and wild game; beasts of prey and the animals with incisors in both jaws; demons (rākṣasas), ghouls (piśācas), and humans – [these are the creatures] born from an embryonic sac. (Smith 1994: 245, quoting and translating *Manusmṛti*).²⁷

'Nature' includes therefore ghosts and deities, significantly omitted in English dictionaries – in any case, the 'supernatural' would be outside the natural order. When KPC argues for the preservation of trees, he does not separate this /p. 38/ preoccupation from the preservation of Bhūts. Even though his discourse may appear to converge with the ecofriendly discourses now developing in India, his understanding of 'nature' is wider than ecological themes would have it.

devotees to plant saplings' (Narayanan 1997: 300) – which points to an ideology of a control of 'nature' while advocating ecology.

²⁷ For a discussion of some Sanskrit classifications of beings, see Houben 2009.

Final remarks

This is of course not to contest that the preservation of groves out of religious conceptions do have ecological effects. Indeed, the study made by botanist C. Anupama on seven important groves in northern Kerala, covering comparatively large areas, by contrast with the groves discussed in the present paper, leads her to conclude: ‘The general floristic composition and physiognomy of vegetation of the sacred groves are typically like the low level evergreen forest’ (2009: 2). As she writes, ‘sacred groves’

harbour many rare and endangered/endemic plants and animals and have been preserving many rare and endemic wild plant species, which potentially benefit mankind in medicine, agriculture, and industry as a source of natural products for drugs, food, fuel, fibre, etc. [...] Besides preserving rich biodiversity, they help in soil and water conservation. [...] Sacred groves enrich the soil through its rich litter and the nutrients generated by litter decomposition are not only recycled within the sacred grove ecosystem but also find their way into the adjoining agro ecosystems. (*ibid.*, p. 11)

However, and this is the point which is here discussed, the rationale for such a conservation may not have been ecological consciousness. Concurring with studies in other parts of India (for instance Kalam 2001), Freeman (1999: 264ff.) underlines 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.

As the author explains, groves, as well as forests, were part of domains of superior land-rights owners, *janmis*.

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. (Freeman 1999: 291)

One of the prerogatives of the *janmis* was to ensure that tenants did not have free access to the resources of the forest, a situation that may have been general in India as the monographic study by Gold and Guhar (2002) on a former kingdom of Rajasthan testifies. Feudal-type relationships might have been more effective in the ancient preservation of the environment, and in particular of forest areas, than any other preoccupation.

What is notable [...] is the romantic view of the contribution that the Hindu tradition has made towards the protection of the environment in the past, as well as a very /p. 39/ optimistic opinion about the role Hinduism might play in averting future environmental destruction. Moreover, there is an overly simplistic analysis of the reasons behind environmental problems in India with the appeal to an East/West dichotomy (characteristic of post-colonial critique) obscuring the class, caste or gender basis of resource exploitation and uneven access to natural resource. (Tomalin 2004: 271)

The romantic view of the ecological role attributed to Hinduism, especially in the evocation of forest hermits living harmoniously with birds and deers in a forest of utopia (Malamoud 1985: 235ff.), combines well with another romantic perception of nature as developed in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. It finds for instance public expression in some courts' decisions which offer statements not untypical of ideas circulating in an elite milieu and inspired by literary references:

(authorizing the construction of an Hotel) ‘It is undoubtedly correct that nature is beautiful. It is the “living, visible garment of God”. The unruffled calm of nature is necessary for human welfare.’²⁸

(in a murder case) ‘The hut was humble but the scene around was beautiful with a waterfall nearby and a stream meandering before it. Closeby was the Reserve Forest, where “starlight drips down the crypt of wood”.’²⁹

As Uchiyamada (2001: 131) pinpointed, ‘the irony is that precisely when ancestral ‘sacred grove’ are either cut down or transformed into Hinduised shrines and disappearing from the life world of Malayalees, the imagined ‘Indian sacred groves’ are emerging in the discourses of national ecological history and of religion and ecology.’ Ecotourism is developing, attracting town people to forests in the mountain where Malayali trekkers and members of environmentalist groups will be ‘camping in the hills, studying about environment, meeting with hill tribals, enjoying bird-watching’ (*ibid.*). Indeed, the Kerala Tourism Department promotes online an ecological image of Kerala which relies not only on the Reserve forests of the Western Ghats, but on ‘sacred groves’ as well:

When the land, religion, myth, culture and civilization harmoniously blend together in a small space replete with greenery, we call it *kavu* a unique and ancient ecological haven common to the land of Kerala.³⁰

Actually, ecological awareness has become public policy in India at the same time it developed in other parts of the world and was determined by ‘the same generic perception of capitalist development

²⁸ *Kottayam Nature Society vs Union Of India (Uoi)*, KHC, 5 March, 2003. Equivalent citations: 2003 (3) KLT 1105.

²⁹ *Kadavanathil Baby And Anr. vs The State*, KHC, 14/4/1983. Equivalent citations: 1983 CriLJ 1186.

³⁰ [30 30 <http://www.keralatourism.org/kerala-article/kavu/183>](http://www.keralatourism.org/kerala-article/kavu/183)

that sparked the environmentalist movement in the West' (Freeman 1999: 297). Protection of the environment has been inscribed in the Constitution of India in 1976 through the /p. 40/ Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976 -much debated for other reasons as it also contained political provisions linked to the Emergency, then in force. The Amendment introduced a new Directive principle of State policy, 'the State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wild life of the country' (Art. 48A), as well as Fundamental duties of the citizen, including 'to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures' (Art. 51A (g)). In Kerala, this policy is implemented through the Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department, which also monitors the current evolution of the ecosystem in the main groves of the State. Since the early 1980s, the Department organizes Nature camps, mostly for students, in order to develop environmental awareness. More recently, in 2012, it introduced a scheme for funding the conservation and the reforestation of groves as an incentive for private owners to maintain their *kāvu*.³¹

In this respect it is worth noticing the intervention of new social actors: botanists, specialists of ecology, and the State administration. These protagonists interact with land-owners, as groves are now mostly private property, and base their intervention on scientific evaluation of ecosystems and their rationalized management. In their perspective, Bhūts, Gods and Goddesses belong to the realm of culture and traditions. There lies perhaps an important shift in the conceptions about 'nature'. Bhūts and Gods were species as were plants and animals, as 'natural' as them. The new social actors, who

³¹ This policy was planned in 2009 ('Forest Dept to fund upkeep of "kavus"', *The New Indian Express* 28.06.2009, available at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/article112662.ece?service=print>), and took effect in 2012 ('Liberal funds for upkeep of sacred groves', *The Hindu*, Kochi edition, 19.09.2012, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/liberal-fundsfor-upkeep-of-sacred-groves/article3913570.ece>).

may as well personally believe in the existence of some of these beings, publicly implement a conception in which they are placed outside 'nature', in the domain of the 'supernatural': 'de-naturalized', they now belong to the do-main of culture and heritage (Anupama 2009: 3ff.). Indeed, trees and animals could possibly benefit from such a shift. Claims about antique environmental awareness embedded in Hinduism, of which sacred groves are iconic, can be seen as an effective rhetorical device for taking this ecological turn. Actually, however, Brahmanism had constructed wilderness in such a way that its value and power were best harnessed when limited to tiny spots.

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