

Negotiating World Views: Christian Koyas and their Environment



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Political map of India



<http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/india/india-political-map.htm>

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Introduction

The Indian tribe called Koya have since time immemorial been addressing their forefathers and their many gods and goddesses whenever a crises big or small, strikes them. But ever since the first Christian congregation was established with a church in 1974, the Koyas of Chintur have been confronted with a promise of free and effective healing if they only come to church and pray to the Christian god. In the beginning, Christian Koyas were so few that they could not stand up against the pressure from the elders who refused them to practice their new religion. They became afraid of being punished, and while continuing to believe they practiced their religion in secrecy, if at all. Since then, many more congregations have arrived, and the number of Christian Koyas is increasing as conversion appears to be safer than before. This growing minority is the point of departure for my thesis.

The Koyas of Chintur are presented with the healing powers of the Christian god against a background of animistic beliefs and ancestor worship. Some of the Christian congregations here seem to have institutionalized an approach where the first step towards conversion is to have the tribals convinced of these healing powers; only later do they try to wash away the old beliefs and replace them with the Christian doctrine. By focusing on key symbols such as animal sacrifice and alcohol consumption, these congregations depict the tradition of the Koyas as heathen and wrong, while the Christian alternative is presented in sharp opposition. From the condemnation of rituals and practices, Koyas learn to understand that Christianity is essentially different from the old religion, and there is a growing consciousness regarding the discrepancies between the two religions. What is problematic for the non-Christian Koyas is not the practices that are adopted at conversion, but the fact that converts usually fail to maintain their ritual obligations as a consequence of them converting: their *non*-practices are perceived as a threat to the traditional society. An environment of essentializing accounts is thus created on both “sides”, which makes the differences sharp and explicit, and polarized understandings grow stronger. It is in this environment that Christians and non-Christians alike define and articulate their beliefs for themselves and their fellow Koyas.

Apart from attempting to describe their lives and their beliefs, I see the Christians as providing a unique perspective on social change in the Koya society as a whole. Becoming Christian means that one has to make difficult choices, choices that are evaluated by the mainstream society and that have consequences for the way one is perceived by fellow Koyas.

The statements made by some of my informants and newly converted indicate that they feel conflicting loyalties: on one side there are the pastors representing different Christian congregations, on the other there are the traditional leaders, such as the *pedda* and the *pujari*. All these respected persons, by virtue of their positions, have a great influence on the choices made by the converts. They are responsible for much of the ambivalence that the converts often feel, since they all make demands on behalf of the bigger group – the congregation or the village. While the pastors are quite unanimous in demanding abstinence from alcohol, gambling and so on, the village leaders may demand loyalty through participation in communal rituals and may threaten with excommunication if Christians do not cooperate. Thus, we see that a certain type of behaviour is requested for each of the two ritual spheres. People take part, or desist from taking part, in each of the spheres for different reasons, although Christians and non-Christians may have similar goals.

I am interested in the operational space that is created for the Christian Koyas by the conflicting interests and loyalties. What do they gain and lose by converting? What rules do they live by compared to non-Christian Koyas, and are they in any way sanctioned by the mainstream Koya society for the choices they make? More specifically I will also investigate the marriage rules practiced by Christian Koyas. Do they change by conversion?

In this thesis I will argue for an approach to the study of Christianity among tribals which focuses on the conversion *process*, and not on the distinction between ‘tribal’ and ‘Christian’. I will treat the society under investigation not as a closed tribal community but as the multi-ethnic society it really is. This perspective problematises the neat categorizations made in the official censuses in which a Hindu is a Hindu, a Christian is a Christian and a Koya is a Koya. The categorizations made by the government make processes such as religious conversion seem unlikely, and this allows for an immobile concept of culture. In my thesis I will display some of the border cases, those who are not so easily categorised if we care to have a closer look, who are betwixt and between.

I will touch upon many of the themes dealt with by those employed with the anthropology of Christianity: the gender aspect in Christian conversions is often given much attention, and I follow the scholars who acknowledge the liberating effects that the new religion may have for women as they move away from more patriarchal world views; connected to this is the new form of individuality offered by Christianity, which will be examined in chapter three where I look into the central healing aspect of Koya Christianity; in that chapter, I also comment on the syncretism debate and try to find a suitable name for a Christian community originated from a tribal society. But the implications of Christianization

for indigenous kinship systems and marriage rules is something that, as far as I know, very few have investigated. This is what I will attempt to do in chapter four.

One of the reasons I consider it important to do anthropological research among the Koyas – apart from the fact that very little has been done – is the gigantic threat posed to their culture by the Indira Sagar Multi Purpose Project, better known as the Polavaram Project. This is a dam project that was first suggested by the British as far back as in 1941, and it has since then been on the agenda of different state governments in Andhra Pradesh. The aim is to provide energy, irrigation and drinking water by inter-linking two of South-India's greatest rivers, Godavari and Krishna. The project is estimated to submerge 276 villages in three districts of Andhra Pradesh, displacing approximately 200 000 people. The Koyas living in Khammam and East and West Godavari districts make up the biggest single group to be affected. It has been pointed out that Khammam district, while receiving no benefits from the dam, faces the brunt of displacement (Reddy 1996). It is here, by the Godavari and its tributary Sabari, that we find the most densely populated areas of the Koyas. Villages will be submerged along Sabari all the way into the neighbouring states of Orissa and Chhattisgarh, which means that almost all villages referred to in my thesis will be submerged. The government has long since begun the task of acquiring land for resettlement of the displaced, and some have already been resettled in demonstration colonies. Some others, who have the resources to acquire land of their own, have moved on their own initiative. All people displaced by the project are granted cash compensations, and landowners are promised "land-to-land compensation" on their new dwelling places. The size of the compensations has been subject to debate, and the state government has recently extended the rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) packages ("Rs. 2,051-cr. package for Polavaram oustees", *The Hindu* 21.11.07). Another highly debated issue is the height of the dam. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M) has demanded the height to be brought down in order to minimise the submergence area and the number of people affected ("Reduce Height of Polavaram, demands CPM", *Deccan Chronicle* 02.09.2006:5). Together with a regional political party, Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), they are opposed to the dam under the present design. There is reason to believe that the dam, with the water levels that have been projected, will cause more floods and more serious floods during the monsoon rains. As people resettle outside the submergence area, they will perhaps still be in risk of having their fields and houses destroyed.

While the discussion in the media centres around such aspects as the mentioned rehabilitation packages and the technical features of the dam, in addition to ecological and

environmental questions, the tribals facing displacement are concerned with the fundamental loss of being alienated from their *homeland* where spirits and ancestors reside. Their relationship with the nature that surrounds them is the basis of their world view, and being forced away from their natural habitat represents a disruption of this relationship. Long before the dam may be a fact, the anxiety of the Koyas manifests itself in different ways. An elderly man living by the eastern banks of Sabari is worried about what to eat and drink after his fields and palm trees are put under water. He thinks the dam is right around the corner, and he is not able to sleep during the night or eat during the day because of it. Some say that the families of marriageable girls avoid the villages to be submerged by the dam in the search for a suitable groom, thus illustrating the need for social security and the uncertain status of those to be displaced. A more dramatic consequence of the Polavaram Project is the pressure that is put on the villagers from the Naxalites, the revolutionary communist movement which is blooming in Chhattisgarh and which has ramifications also in Andhra Pradesh. The Naxalites are strongly opposed to the project. It has been reported that villagers in the affected area who give their consent to the government and voluntarily vacate their land, suffer under threats and violence (“Farmers face Naxal threat for parting with land”, Indian Express 03.10.07).

This thesis then, is also an instance of urgent anthropology, describing a society about to be uprooted and forever changed – in a way that is far more radical than the religious changes I examine here.

The field and the anthropologist

I spent six months between July 2006 and January 2007 in Chintur mandal¹ of Khammam district, Andhra Pradesh, close to Chhattisgarh and Orissa. I lived in the same village throughout the whole stay, a big village of around 500 households called Chatti.² It is situated only two kilometres from the mandal capital Chinturu³, and is separated from it by the river Sabari which is a tributary of the great Godavari.

The village is connected by roads to the neighbouring states Chhattisgarh and Orissa. Bhadrachalam is the nearest urban centre, 62 kilometres west of Chatti. The construction of a bridge across Sabari was initiated in 1969 and inaugurated in 1974, bringing in non-tribal

¹ Mandals are administrative areas within the state of Andhra Pradesh and within the respective districts of this state. In some other Indian states this level is referred to as *tehsil*, in again others as *taluk*.

² The influence from Telugu speakers is reflected also when it comes to names of Koya villages: native Koya speakers will among themselves refer to this village as Atti, as is the original name, but in all other contexts they comply with the official usage and call it Chatti.

³ The mandal and its capital carry the same name, with three or more alternative spellings. I have chosen to call the mandal Chintur and the village Chinturu.

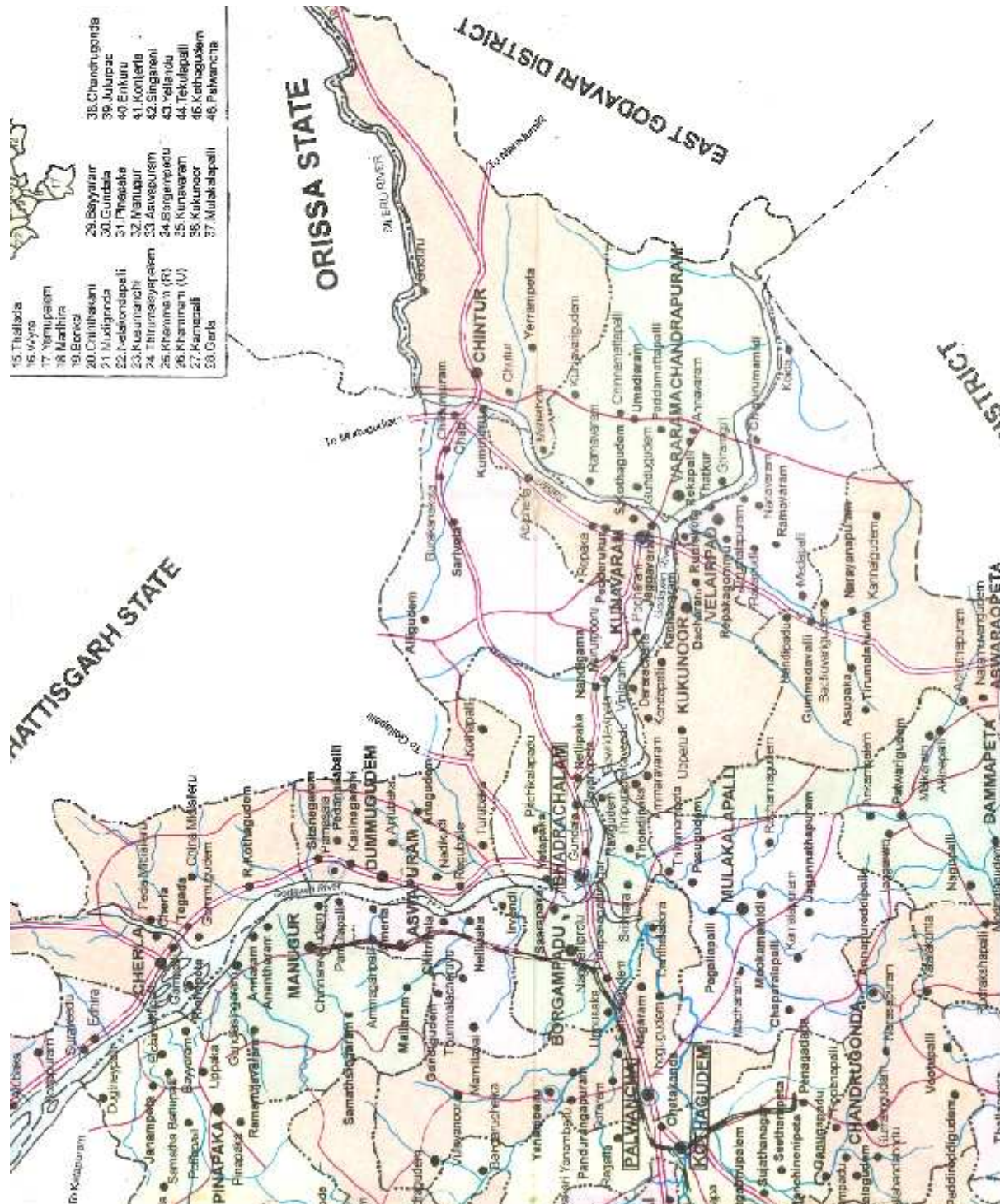


Figure 1: Map showing Chintur mandal and its position in the northeast corner of Khammam district. In addition to the area around the mandal centre, marked with pink, it comprises also the area on the other side of the river, including the villages Chatti, Sarivela and Alligudem. The mandal thereby borders to Malkangiri district of Orissa and Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh in the north, East Godavari district in the east, and five mandals within the district (though it is separated from Kukuranoor by the river Godavari).

workers and putting the tribals into contact with the larger markets of coastal Andhra (Bhushan, personal communication). The construction of roads and the bridge has increased the mobility of the local population in the area. Today, auto rickshaws bring people from the

villages to the weekly market (*santa*) in Chinturu, where in the past there was no other option but to walk. The roads also facilitate a closer interaction with relatives and affines. According to census data of 1971, Chatti actually used to be a more populous village than Chinturu before the bridge was ready (1399 inhabitants against 1326 in Chinturu). In 2001, there were 2061 people living in Chatti, while Chinturu had almost tripled its population, with 3786 inhabitants. Together with the 1000 people of the adjacent village Yerrampeta, Chinturu approximates a status of urban area or town. It may be considered both a cultural and a linguistic centre of the Koyas.

With the roads and the bridge, Chatti has seen the establishment of many new businesses. There are today around ten small restaurants mainly serving “meals” (rice and curries) and a limited variety of “tiffins” (South-Indian dishes such as idly, puri and dosa). While I stayed there, a new restaurant was established by a family coming from Tamil Nadu, and thus chicken biryani was also introduced on the menu. Some of these places also serve as guest-houses for the many truck-drivers. In addition to the eateries, there are five small kiosks, a laundry service, a barber-shop, a wine-shop and a gas station along the road in what may be called the commercial centre of the village. In spite of the constitutional prohibition against non-tribals setting up businesses in Scheduled Areas,⁴ most of the businesses are owned and run by non-tribal Hindus or Muslims. In fact, it is only the gas station and one of the restaurants that have tribal ownership. While the Hindu and Muslim families inhabit the houses near the road, most of the Koya families have their homes further north. As a result of the non-tribal influence, the Koyas have changed their food habits: rice is now their staple food, and they have become as addicted as almost any Indian to sweet milk tea (*chai*). But the Koyas in Chatti are not usually drawn to the eateries by the road; they are expensive for a farmer’s salary. Besides, it is a matter of pride to be able to provide food that has not been alienated by the market, food that has been sown, grown, harvested and prepared by themselves. This attitude is reflected in many of the important rituals of the Koyas, wherein grain from different households is brought and mixed together before the deities and forefathers so as to reinforce a feeling of group solidarity.

In order to get a general view of the area in respect to the Christian segment, I started off by visiting several villages around Chatti and Chinturu carrying a set of questions that I presented to anyone who would answer. The central questions were how many Christians or

⁴ “Article 244 empowers him [the president] to declare any area, where there is a substantial population of tribal people, as a Scheduled Area under the Fifth Schedule or in Assam as a Tribal Area under the Sixth Schedule” (Upadhyay 1991).

churchgoers there are in each respective village, what churches they visit and so on. This informal survey gave me the background information I needed to choose a few villages that I would treat as focus villages. They are all located within ten kilometres from Chinturu; only rarely did I visit villages outside this area. The typical village in the area of investigation consists of around 50 to 200 households. The focus villages are all connected by roads and lie in close proximity to the mandal capital, where the size of villages is high compared to those further into the forests (but still within the mandal borders), where only the bigger villages have as many as fifty households. Most villages in the area are inhabited by tribals alone, but in some of them Hindus and Muslims make up a small minority, usually not more than one to five families. The foremost exception is Chinturu, where non-tribal households are today in hundreds.

After the initial phase, I started working more determined to learn about the lives of the Christians. I wanted to meet as many of them as possible, to hear their conversion stories and try to understand their motivations for going to church. Questions were now mostly of the qualitative type. During this phase I associated with people whom I would re-visit several times, and some of them make central characters in my thesis.

Gaining access to the field and to informants was not very difficult; most people, Christians and non-Christians alike, seemed happy about me taking an interest in their lives. My questions usually differed from those of government officials who from time to time visit the villages in order to gather census data and, as one woman told me, it was a good thing that I, unlike the others, would come and visit several times, not just once. But the communication was of course characterized by me depending on my assistant's translations, which inevitably installs a certain distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. At times, when I managed to cross the language barrier and speak or understand some of the local Koya dialect, the field opened up for a more spontaneous kind of communication: a middle-aged woman in Mukunuru would tease me by insinuating that I used to come there only because of the girls. As if imitating me, she would say *pika, varra!* (girl, come!), whereupon I would answer *nanna igge razha nanku vattan* (I am here to do research). Women were not usually as talkative and straightforward as this woman, and it also took some time for my Koya assistant to understand that I was interested in talking to both men and women. In the beginning, he would argue that the women were not qualified to understand and answer my questions, but when I actively stated my wish to speak with people of both sexes, there seemed to be nothing in the way of that.

Even though I was careful to inform everyone I met about my project and what the questions were leading up to, many misunderstood my role and took me to be either from a donor agency or representing the church in one way or the other. In addition to missionaries and government officials, villagers sometimes receive visitors from NGOs and donor agencies. Since my fieldwork corresponded with the worst floods in 20 years, no wonder many of them thought I was there with the purpose of recording the damages. Apart from the tendency of some to focus on these damages, and not on my concerns, the misunderstandings did not have any consequences worth mentioning here, and they were soon removed.

Within the mandal there are also some 1500 persons of a tribe called Konda Reddi. They live almost exclusively in the hills, whereas the Koyas inhabit the plains. I never came across Konda Reddis living in Koya villages or Koyas living in Konda Reddi villages, and members of the two groups never intermarry. The Lambadis, a third tribe, also known by names such as Sugalis or Banjaris in different areas of the state, are represented in two of the ninety or so villages in Chintur mandal. Finally, there is an uncertain number of internally displaced persons of the Gotthi Koya tribe, recently arrived from Chhattisgarh as a result of the violent conflict there. Andhra Pradesh is relatively safer for these people than what is the case in Chhattisgarh, where tribals find themselves forced to choose side between Naxalites on one side and Salwa Judum on the other, the anti-Naxal squad formed by the government of Chhattisgarh in 2005. But when arrived in Andhra Pradesh, they are often met with condemnation and seen as encroachers on the protected forest land. As many of these people are refugees hiding from Naxalites as well as from forest guards, it is hard to say how many they are, but according to one informant, seven of the villages in Chintur mandal are dominated or exclusively populated by Gotthi Koyas. In addition, some Gotthi Koya families have settled in villages already populated by Koyas.

Conceptualizing tribes

The word tribe has been widely adopted in US anthropology as part of an evolutionary scheme of social types consisting of band, tribe, chiefdom and state, each referring to different levels of sociopolitical organisation (Seymore-Smith, 1986). But when applied in the colonial and post-colonial African context, the concept of tribe has been problematic because it has been perceived as a colonial creation hampering the development of African nation states in the 20th century. As anthropological investigations proved the concept oversimplifying in regard to the complex inter-ethnic relations of African peoples, anthropologists now prefer to

employ the term ethnicity. In the Indian context though, 'tribe' is perceived as less problematic in the sense that it is widely used and to a large degree taken for granted as a term solely describing reality as it is. This may at least in part be attributed to its vague character, refusing to be defined by anyone and being employed by all. The Indian government has nearly institutionalized this vagueness by allowing the concept of tribe in the Constitution without any proper definition.

The Koyas have been classified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), meaning that its members are recognized by the Indian government as having legal rights based on their tribal status. These rights work through quota regulations for political bodies, schools, universities and state employment. In regard to schools, for instance, ST families do not need to pay the same amount of school fees for their children as do families with other backgrounds. According to the 2001 census, 84,3 million people or 8.0 % of the Indian population are members of Scheduled Tribes. In Andhra Pradesh, the numbers are 5,0 million and 6,6 %. A simple and common definition of what a Scheduled Tribe really is, is hard to find though. The "scheduling" of different Indian communities by the government illustrates the historical emphasis on administrative control (originating in colonial times), as the tribes listed in the Constitution as scheduled, differ little from certain other groups that are not given the same status. Several scholars see the classification process as more or less accidental, which is underlined by the fact that the criteria in use have changed during the 20th century: first (1901, '11, '21 and '31 censuses) distinguishing tribes from other communities on the basis of religion, and later by the lack of caste-like features (Xaxa, 2003). By maintaining clear cut boundaries between Scheduled Tribes and those that are not, without referring to some basic definitional criteria, it could seem like the Indian government is responsible for the problems of definition.

The term *adivasi* is widely used with reference to the Scheduled Tribes, "implying that they were the early settlers" (Xaxa 2003:378). Virginius Xaxa describes a continuous conflict of interests between those who claim indigenous status for the tribes of India on one side, and the government arguing on the other that then there would be other groups as well making similar claims, and thereby it sticks to the notion of Scheduled Tribe. It is argued that because the immigration has consisted of waves, it is not appropriate to distinguish between original settlers and migrants, as is done in America and Australia. A different argument emphasizes the peaceful coexistence of tribals and non-tribals throughout history, radically different from the history of indigenous peoples in the Americas or Australia.

As mentioned, 'tribe' has been contrasted with 'caste', and this is still very much the case in the common Indian discourse. Xaxa (2003) argues that also another distinction has been central to the understanding of 'tribe', namely 'tribe' as contrasted with 'peasant'. As many of the tribal communities in India have been practising settled agriculture for generations, the distinctions made have not always reflected the fluidity of the boundaries separating the categories of tribe and peasant, and there has been a general neglect of the overlap between them. With respect to both the tribe-peasant- and the tribe-caste distinctions, an understanding of them as continuums has gained ground among scholars.

The Manchester School of Anthropology has been awarded the shift from 'tribe' to 'ethnic group' in the African context (Banks 1996). Scholars such as Gluckman, Mitchell and Epstein started investigating African societies by asking what it means to be a tribal, what significance a tribal status has in an urbanised context and so on. Fredrik Barth also contributed to the shift, by focusing on boundaries instead of the cultural content. They found that the concept of tribe could not describe a reality of multilevel identities and to be employed in a way that was not ambiguous. 'Ethnicity' on the other hand, takes into account all the affiliations of the individual or group, differentiates between ascribed and self-ascribed statuses, and makes group membership and solidarity theoretically possible in spite of only a partial fulfilment of the criteria – shared culture, religion, language, history, territory etc. It facilitates a perspective on membership where individuals may move from one group to another because of their changing ways whereas the group and its boundaries remain. In India, for instance, terms such as Sanskritization, kshatriyization/rajputization and Hinduization is meant to describe the different ways people may advance in or be incorporated into the caste system that is specific to Hinduism.

In regard to my project, it is interesting to see how Koyas are classified as if they have been through such a process and consider themselves Hindus. According to the most recent census (2001), there are 2,578,927 people living in Khammam district. 2,406,066 of them are classified as Hindus, 137,639 as Muslims, and 30,777 as Christians. The same source tells us that of the total number of inhabitants 359,582 are Koyas, making them the largest Scheduled Tribe of the district. We are implicitly told that almost all tribals here, if not all, have converted to any of the mentioned religious groups, mainly Hinduism. But in spite of this bureaucratic incorporation of tribals, which is not specific to Khammam or to Andhra Pradesh, the situation on the ground tells a different story. Koyas experience 'Koya' and 'Hindu' as two categories apart, and they do not consider themselves Hindus just by worshipping deities that are central in the Hindu religion (which is something many of them

do). Thus, religion is not necessarily a crucial factor for Koyas in negotiating their “koyaness”. Being Koya is an identity that is innate and to a large degree imperative, made explicit by the certificates held by each family belonging to a Scheduled Tribe, and this picture is complicated only by relationships between Koyas and non-Koyas and the children of these relationships.⁵ In my usage here, ‘Hindu’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘Koya’ alike, are all labels that do not necessarily represent the religious views of a person or a group, but more importantly they signify membership in a community as conceptualised by the Koyas I associated with.

What then about the *Christian* Koyas? Christians differ from Hindus and Muslims in that they do not represent a category that Koyas traditionally have seen themselves in contrast to. By turning to Christianity, Koyas do not automatically take on a new identity that is opposed to the Koya identity; this depends on the choices they make, especially in the ritual sphere. As we shall see, Christian Koyas differ in their interpretation of the religion and their own role in it, and their various practices and non-practices have implications for how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. In spite of the differences between them, their common religion is emphasised to the extent that a Christian endogamy is about to be formed within a framework of traditional marriage rules. According to Deepak Kumar Behera, who writes about a multi-ethnic context in Orissa, Christian conversions lead to a further consolidation of the ethnic boundaries between different castes and tribes – especially that between tribals and non-tribals: “ethnic endogamy, though contrary to the spirit of Christianity, is strictly observed by various ethnic groups among the converts” (Behera 1989:57). Similarly, Christian Koyas marry other Christian Koyas, but they do not marry Christians from other ethnic groups. I should point out that ‘Christian Koya’ is my own categorization. I similarly describe the great majority of Koyas, those who have not converted or been born by Christian parents, as ‘non-Christian Koyas’. This is not necessarily because they act as a corporate group from their not being Christians, but simply because the focus of the thesis is on the Christian segment of the population.

To think of the Indian empirical context in terms of ethnicity opens up epistemologically for the co-habitation and the relations that actually exist between castes and tribes. In contrast, the Indian Constitution does not seem to recognize the mobility of people as they become integrated and re-integrated into ever changing societies. Instead, it locks

⁵ I once heard of a man who approached the Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) and in one way or the other got a new certificate stating that he and his family were not Koyas but something else. The family thereby formally resigned from the Koya community, and this made for heated reactions from the fellow villagers. I do not know their reasons for making such a move, but it is not common.

people up in categories such as Scheduled Tribe while at the same time claiming that these people are Hindus. I will still though, refer to the Koyas as a Scheduled Tribe, or by notions such as ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ because these terms, although not expressing general consensus about classificatory criteria, are widely used and approved upon in sociological and anthropological literature on India, and last but not least, they often work as identity markers for the tribals themselves.

Note on reference material

There is not much available ethnographic literature that deals specifically with the Koyas. Edgar Thurston (1987) collected some data on their customs almost a hundred years ago. Stephen Tyler (1965, 1966) wrote about kinship and language among the Gomma Koyas of the former Bhadrachalam Taluq. Kornel Das (2006) has recently given an account of the Koyas living in Malkanagiri. The literature is more ample when it comes to neighbouring peoples such as the Gonds, the Konda Reddis and the Kondhs, represented by the works of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1945, 1948, 1979) and Barbara Boal (1963). As with Thurston, these are not for the most part up to date ethnographies, and to some extent they all represent the tradition of making “them”, the tribals, essentially and completely different from “us” in all respects. While reading, one cannot help thinking that the focus on exceptional practices such as human sacrifice is unproportionally high compared to the rich culture and history of these societies. But I still find it interesting and rewarding to read these accounts, since for instance some ritual practices described by Thurston may be recognized in the present Koya society and be subject to comparison. As for my own focus on the spread of Christianity among the Koyas, comparative cases are drawn from all over the world.

CHAPTER 1

The Koya Tribe

The Koya tribe has not only a large representation in Chintur and the rest of Khammam district, but inhabits also parts of Warangal, Karimnagar and East and West Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh, Malkanagiri district of Orissa, and Dantewada and Bastar districts of Chhattisgarh. They are numerically bigger in Andhra Pradesh with 362,341 individuals, according to the 1981 census.

Their name has been given them by outsiders. It suggests that they “‘do not cut’ the neck of the animal straightaway to kill” (Sudhakar 2004:964). The Koyas used to be greatly insulted when addressed in this manner, asking rhetorically “*whose throat have I cut?*” (Thurston 1987:48). Today they carry the name without protesting, but by adding the suffix *Dora*, which translates as ‘Lord’, they attach to it the pride of a people who was once a ruling tribe of surrounding tribes and castes. Talking to their fellow Koyas though, they always apply the word *Koitor*, which simply means ‘human being’. This also reflects the fact that the Koyas used to be part of the much larger tribal community called Gond, as the Gonds too call themselves by the same name.

The Koyas are associated with a language referred to as Koya, Koyi, Koi, Koi Gondi and more, but some Koyas of Andhra Pradesh must be classified as Telugu-speakers as they have more or less forgotten their mother tongue and adopted Telugu for all purposes.⁶ Both Koya and Telugu belong to the Dravidian family of languages, as opposed to the Indo-Aryan and the Munda languages that are found further north in India. Koyas of Chhattisgarh state speak Chhattisgarh-Hindi while Koyas of Orissa speak Oriya, in addition to their native tongue. Koyas are a small minority within the administrative borders of these states.

The Koyas have traditionally been practicing animistic beliefs, but in recent times many of them have taken up the beliefs and practices of either Hinduism or Christianity. This is a token of their increasing interaction with non-tribal society.

They have traditionally been a non-sedentary people who used to move frequently from place to place, clearing and cultivating the land wherever they came (Thurston 1987). *Podu* cultivation, or shifting cultivation, is still practised many places in spite of the obvious

⁶ This goes for the Koyas of East Godavari district, where the Koyas are a minority living side by side with members from three other tribal communities: the Konda Reddis, who are the most numerous, the Valmiki, and the Konda Kammaris. It applies also to the current generation of Koyas in Warangal (Bhushan, personal communication). The essay at hand is based on a fieldwork in an area where the Koyas are the majority population, and where they are bilingual with Koya still being their mother tongue.

ecological deterioration. But many families have in recent times lost their land to landlords and themselves become agricultural labourers. Today the cultivation is mainly settled. The principal crops of Koyas living by the rivers Godavari and Sabari are paddy rice, millet, sorghum and different sorts of pulses. They also make use of wild roots, fruits and tubers, and fish and prawns from the rivers make a small supplementary to their diet. Koya houses are often fenced in together with a small garden where maize, sunflowers or other seasonal crops are grown for the family's own consumption or for sale at the market. It is reported that, of the total agricultural (not horticultural) produce of the Koyas, only 0,4 % is sold (The Peoples of the World Foundation). They keep poultry, sheep, goats and pigs for food, while cows and buffalos are also utilized in agricultural operations and as draught animals. Cows and buffalos are only obtained through quite heavy investments.⁷ They are potentially profitable for their milk, but the Koyas around Malkangiri are reported not to consume milk (Das 2006), perhaps, as is suggested elsewhere about the Koyas, because "milking is considered an injustice to the calves" (Sudhakar 2004:964).

For the Koyas, the nature that surrounds them is both sacred and ordinary at the same time. The forest is for them a source of food and drink, fodder, shelter, income and employment, and a source of herbs and medicines, but it is also a medium that puts them in contact with their deities and ancestors. The *ippa* tree (*Bassia Latifolia*) and its *mohuva* flowers, for instance, provide the Koyas with an intoxicating beverage called *sara* that is important in both social and ritual settings. Whenever Koya men come together for a drink of *sara*, or possibly *kallu* (palm wine), they spill some of it on the ground as a sacrifice to the ancestors. The *ippa* tree is moreover the source from which a manifestation of the village deity is carved out whenever a new village is to be established. This piece of wood, the *gamam*, is to be found as a ritual centre in almost all Koya villages.⁸ It is a place of limited access – women are not allowed to come near it except on certain ceremonial occasions – and a place of worship. A Koya friend always stressed the point that they do not need the great temples, mosques or churches for performing their rituals; a small painting on the wall (*pelligondhi*) or a rock at the outskirts of the village (*koda*) will do for the Koyas. In fact, any place is potentially a place of worship.

⁷ The household I was part of invested in two cows for the price of 1500 rupees each, while the estimated price of a buffalo at the time was said to be 6000 rupees. The exchange rate of Indian Rupees (INR) to 1 USD was at the time of fieldwork around 44.

⁸ Exceptions may include a situation in which a newly established village lacks the ritual experts needed in order to keep and maintain a *gamam*, or there may be disputes between inhabitants concerning the distribution of political and ritual positions. In one of the villages I revisited many times, the recent floods had washed away the original village *gamam*, and the *pujari* (a religious office) in charge said they would have to replace it as soon as possible so that villagers were not to suffer misfortunes of any kind.

The Gonds

The Koyas used to be part of a much larger tribal group, the Gonds, at an earlier stage of history. Different ways of classifying tribes have over the years been reflected in the decennial censuses, and according to Stephen Fuchs, the Gonds “too, are returned under various names as separate tribes or castes, while on the other hand some tribes are being enumerated as Gond which racially have no connection with them” (Fuchs 1960:6-7). Cristoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, writing about the Gonds of Andhra Pradesh, notes as a matter of fact that “according to the Census of India, 1961, the total number of Gonds was then 3 992 905, *and to this figure must be added 275 493 persons described in the census as Koyas*” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979:3, italics mine). He seems to see language as being the defining characteristic and the basis for the practice of treating the Gonds and the Koyas as two distinct peoples. According to Fürer-Haimendorf, who speaks of the Gonds within a larger cultural context in which the Koyas are a part, one could easily address the Gonds as ‘Gondi-speaking populations’ had it not been for a few exceptions to this rule, such as the Telugu-speaking Koyas.⁹

The two groups, Gond and Koya, do not share a common territory, and they speak relatively different languages. More importantly, the Koyas themselves do not recognize the Gond connection – whether cultural or historical, or both – as particularly significant; it is not made relevant in their lives. It is nevertheless appropriate in some respects to see the Koyas as forming part of a larger tribal community, as their kinship system and their cultural practices are closely related to those of the Gonds.

Koya sub-groups

The Koya community may be divided into a number of sub-groups. In the literature (for instance Thurston 1987, Aiyappan 1948), a dichotomy is established between Gommu Koyas and Gotthi Koyas, where Gommu Koyas are said to inhabit the plains (*gommu* = river bank), while Gotthi Koyas live in the hills (*gotthi* = hills). According to Rev. J. Cain (referred to by Thurston 1987), the Gommu Koyas too once inhabited the highlands of Bastar in what is today known as Dantewada and Bastar districts of Chhattisgarh state. Today there is a new wave of migration from these areas, as the on-going conflict between Naxalites and police

⁹ Fürer-Haimendorf knows of course that most Koyas speak the language I refer to as Koya. He treats it as a dialect of the Gondi language.

forces continues to turn tribals into refugees, and many of them cross the border to Andhra Pradesh.

A different classification altogether defines Koya sub-groups on the basis of them being endogamous, vocationally specific, and practising commensality rules (for instance Das 2006, The Peoples of the World Foundation). The sub-groups represented in the area under investigation are Racha Koya, Lingadhari Koya, Arithi Koya and Kammari Koya. The Racha Koyas are by far the most numerous of these. They are known to be village administrators and to represent the tribe to outsiders. Lingadhari Koyas are known to perform purificatory rites for the Koya people as a whole. Traditionally they do not eat beef and in this they differ from the other sub-groups. Arithi Koyas are the bards of the community, originally a section of the scheduled caste known as Mala (Thurston 1987).¹⁰ Among the services they provide for the Koyas, the narration of Koya myths and lineages is most significant.¹¹ Kammari Koyas are traditionally the blacksmiths of Koya villages. Like the Arithi Koyas, they are paid in kind for their services.

The two sets of classification must be investigated further in order to grasp the natives' points of view regarding in-groups and out-groups. It should be noted that they are nowhere treated as mutually exclusive, and they are often employed together in presenting the Koya tribe. As reflected in the quote by Stephen Fuchs above, the confusion with regard to tribes and sub-tribes stems from the number of different ways they have been classified over the years. I believe there is a way out of the confusion. By paying closer attention to the way the natives themselves think about their neighbouring groups, one can gain a better understanding of the criteria underlying *their* categorizations. With a locally-based and holistic approach to the study of ethnic groups and boundaries, one is also able to make more sense of how both criteria and categorizations may change with the course of time. This approach recognizes social change as a fact, and does not uphold the romantic idea of a society where traditions are the immovable pillars. Boundaries are always being negotiated, and traditions change under the influence of neighbouring groups – so also with the Koya tribe and its sub-groups.

If we take a closer look at the four sub-groups mentioned above, they have traditionally been separated by prohibitions regarding the sharing of food and drink, and in

¹⁰ A scheduled caste (SC) is treated in the Indian constitution as a caste which gives certain rights to its members based on their caste status.

¹¹ In serving as drum-beaters for a different community and being to a large extent detached from the society at large, most significantly by the marriage rules of the dominant community, their role is similar to that of many other bards or sub-divisions in South-India, such as the Thalya of the Lambadi tribe (Thurston 1987). In being the collective memory of the community their role is the same as that of the Pardhans who provide services for the Gonds (Fürer-Haimendorf 1948, Juliusson 1974).

other social settings. A Koya friend claimed that one or two generations ago, the dealings at the market place were first and foremost regulated by the ethnic affiliations of buyers and merchants, and the presence of different ethnic groups led to routine acts of purification. Nowadays, it is the market forces that govern the choices of most Koyas at the market. The demand for purification is drastically reduced. Modern Koyas may even open their houses and share food and drink with Konda Reddis or with Muslims and Hindus.

As mentioned above, the Lingadhari Koyas have traditionally not accepted beef, while the other sub-groups have not adhered to this restriction. Edgar Thurston wrote almost a hundred years ago:

Mr. G. F. Paddison informs me that all the Gonds whom he met with in the Vizagapatam district were bholo loko (good caste), and would not touch pork or mutton, whereas the Koyi shares with the Dombs the distinction of eating anything he can get in the way of meat, from a rat to a cow (1987:38).

Compare with what Kornel Das writes on the present-day Koyas of Malkangiri district: “The Koyas were consuming beef but of recent the villages nearest to Malkangiri take objection and view seriously whenever they are asked about beef consumption. It may be one modern influence on them by neighbouring society” (2006:67). In Mukunuru village, which has a population consisting of mainly Lingadhari Koyas and Racha Koyas, I discovered that people do not see any significant difference between these two groups, and marriages cut across sub-group boundaries without causing debate or bad feelings among the villagers. Talking to the *sarpanch*¹² about the subject, I learnt that what used to be the difference that makes a difference, namely the food restrictions of the Lingadhari Koyas, is no longer maintained as a boundary marker as many Lingadhari Koyas today accept beef. The fact that food restrictions were being lived out used to be manifested in the maintenance of strictly endogamous groups. What has happened is that not only have a great number of Lingadhari Koyas begun to consume beef, but sections of other sub-groups have given up beef or other kinds of meat along the lines of a classical sanscritization process. In fact, according to a religious leader in the village, four out of the total seven clans represented in the village that at the time of fieldwork were said not to consume beef, were not Lingadhari Koyas. Three of them were Racha Koyas while the fourth was a household of Kammari Koyas. This was not in any way related to marriageability. Instead, I was told by the *sarpanch*, it has practical consequences in

¹² A *sarpanch* is the democratically elected leader of a cluster of villages and the head of the gram panchayat, the local self-government.

a marriage ceremony taking place in the house of the bride, where only those who do not consume beef are allowed to take part. Also in other ceremonial contexts, at all community dinners in fact, the Koyas emphasize the distinction between beef eaters and non-beef eaters. The distinction goes between the *koda*, non-beef eaters, and *koda kalliondu* or *koda gallitodu*, beef-eaters, and sanctions are imposed on those from the *koda kalliondu* section of the party who cross the boundaries and sit with the *koda* section. I was told that this may happen because of “confusion” or drunkenness. The penalty for crossing the boundaries may be to provide a chicken or two for the next community dinner.

Another distinction with regard to food restrictions goes between those who eat sacrificial meat and those who do not. Among Christian converts, only a few take part in the traditional Koya rituals at the *gamam* or at the *koda*. They may not be vegetarians, but those who do take part in the rituals desist from eating the meat that has been sacrificed to their old deities. Christians I have talked to in Veerapuram village and Madkamgudem hamlet of Narasapuram village say that they still make financial contributions for the accomplishment of the rituals (and so also for the slaughter of animals as sacrifice to the deities), but they either choose to stay at home on such occasions, or they sit with the rest of the party without eating at all or eating food they have prepared themselves. Their role is ambiguous as they strive to be true to the biblical monotheism they are taught in the church, while at the same time they wish to stay on good terms with the political and religious leaders of the village. The significance of them desisting from eating the sacrificial meat was reflected when I asked one of the non-Christians of Narasapuram whether there had been any changes after people started converting to Christianity: “We [the villagers] live together, but we [the non-Christians] have our traditions while they [the Christians] eat their own food”.

All the four sub-groups are said to be endogamous; that is, members do not marry across the sub-group boundaries, nor do they marry outside the tribe. The idea of pure and polluted genealogies affects the choices of families entering into marriage alliances, but rules to ensure sub-group endogamy are challenged by diverging marriages. One exception is already mentioned: members from the Racha Koya and the Lingadhari Koya community sometimes marry, and this has, as far as I can see, no serious implications for themselves or their kin. There is no demand for purification after such a marriage, as is the case with other instances of sub-group exogamy.¹³ A Racha Koya will still be regarded an outcaste of the community if he or she marries a Kammari Koya or an Arithi Koya. If a man, he will not be

¹³ The purification may consist of a ritual bath or the sprinkling of turmeric water.

able to participate in rituals that would normally gather the male members of the lineage or the clan. Some Racha Koyas think less of Arithi Koyas and Kammari Koyas as they are paid in kind and depend on the Koya community for their survival. In the case of Arithi Koyas, this is evident from the word *arithi*, which translates as “to beg” or “to ask for”. Even though these communities are relatively small and spread over a vast area – on an average the two groups are represented with, respectively, one to three families in each village – they usually marry within their own community. The Lingadhari Koyas on the other hand, have a different settlement pattern: in some villages they are present in great numbers while in some areas there are none. Unlike the Arithi Koyas and the Kammari Koyas, they do not depend on other communities for their livelihood. Only rarely, on the occasion of the mentioned intergroup marriages, are the purificatory rites of the Lingadhari Koyas in demand. This work is seemingly not experienced as a defining feature by most Lingadhari Koyas, and like the Racha Koyas they may take all kinds of work.

In chapter two, I will examine more closely the freedoms of Arithi Koyas regarding the choice of occupation, as also the traditional “low-castes” of the community,¹⁴ the Arithi Koyas and the Kammari Koyas, experience a change in the demand for their services.

With the immigration of Gotthi Koyas from Chhattisgarh to Andhra Pradesh, there is one more reason to dwell on the defining characteristics of Koya sub-groups. Koyas of Chintur mandal see Gotthi Koyas as very different from themselves. They emphasize the significance of them speaking a different dialect, their way of cultivating the land (Gotthi Koyas are said to employ the devastating slash and burn cultivation (*podu*) to a much greater extent than the Gommu Koyas), and they are, as one informant once accused them of, said to be marrying within their own phratry and so to break the exogamy rule characteristic to phratries. As mentioned above, some Gotthi Koyas establish new villages in Chintur mandal and make a livelihood there, or they settle in the villages of Gommu Koyas. There are marriages taking place between members of Gotthi Koya and members of other communities, just as there are marriages that cut across the other sub-group borders, but the ideal is also with them group endogamy.

I believe that in this context, caused by recent migration, the dichotomy Gommu Koya (= Koyas living by the rivers) – Gotthi Koya (= Koyas living in the hills) does not necessarily have much relevance. Within this environment Gotthi Koyas make up a new endogamous

¹⁴ According to Bhushan, who lived and studied among the Koyas in the eighties and nineties, it makes sense to refer to the Koya society as an equivalent to the Hindu type, with Lingadhari Koyas being the Brahmins, Racha Koyas the Kshatriyas, and Arithi Koyas and Kammari Koyas the Dalits or untouchables (Bhushan, personal communication).

group and may be classified together with Racha Koyas, Lingadhari Koyas, Arithi Koyas and Kammari Koyas.

The Koyas, then, as well as having affinities to neighbouring tribes, have internal subdivisions of many kinds in addition to the emergent division between Christian and non-Christian Koyas, which will be the main focus in this thesis. The next chapters deal specifically with the Koyas of the Chintur region, beginning with the section of the group who still subscribes to the traditional religious world view, and who have not (or not yet) been tempted to substitute it with a Christian one.

Non-Christian Society: Change and the Response to Change

The Koyas traditionally believe that the nature that surrounds them is animated by spirits and ancestors. Most of their festivals are related to agricultural operations, and in these festivals they call upon their ancestors, spirits and a hundred or so deities in order to achieve good rains and a plentiful harvest. On these occasions, ritual experts are responsible for the communication with the other-world and the accomplishment of rituals aimed at benefiting the whole village. In addition, all Koya families maintain a small shrine in their house for the worship of deceased members of family and clan.

This chapter is about the traditional Koya society and its ability to adapt to changing conditions. It may be read as providing the context for the next chapter, which deals specifically with the Christian segment, and which argues that Christianization is a process which is central in the present articulation of tradition among the Koyas. Still, in some of the examples that illustrate changes in the political, economic and ritual spheres, Christian Koyas are the innovators so to say, triggering these changes. This reflects the main focus of the investigation, but it is also an expression of the impact Christianity has made on some of the old institutions of the society. I shall discuss the traditional offices of *pedda*, *pujari* and *dholi*, and try to make sense of the structural changes that are manifested in these offices. I will refer to a village festival called *Pacha Pandum*, and suggest that both the form and the content of the festival has been going through some major changes in recent years. I am interested here in the way tradition is articulated, and how the same tradition forms part of a mental order wherein a dichotomy between the old and the new society is established.

I hope that I manage to show that the traditional Koya society, while being sensitive to change is also able to adapt to changing conditions, and that its members are not passive or uncritical but able to act upon the world.

The kula panchayat and its members

The head of the first family to settle down on a specific site and establish the village shrines called *gamam* and *mudupu*, is considered to be *pedda* of the village that is thereby established. The title can be assumed by men only, and traditionally there is only one *pedda* in each Koya

village. He is usually succeeded by the eldest son. In case he has no sons, or the son is considered unfit for the office, the *pedda* may be elected among other members of the same clan. The responsibilities of the *pedda* come with his rank, seniority and experience. They usually include representing the village and its people towards government officials and other important visitors, and serving as a uniting force within the boundaries of the village; the *pedda* is guest of honour in any wedding because people feel they depend upon his cooperation and assistance.

But his most important task is as a member of the village council, the *kula panchayat*, where he exercises judiciary powers and makes decisions concerning the welfare of the village together with the other members: the *pujari*, the *pina pedda*, and the *veapari*. The meetings of the council are public, that is for the male members of the village, and normally held under a big tree. This place is called *rachabanda*. The decisions are made through consensus; this ensures that they are respected by all. A case is initiated when a village dweller approaches the *pedda* with a complaint concerning anything from property issues to infidelity, and it is considered closed after the accused has agreed to the penalty set by the council. The penalty is never in cash, but usually consists of providing a feast for the community, the dimensions of the feast depending on the graveness of the offense. If the offense is considered grave, the culprit is sentenced to pay with the slaughter of a cow that is to provide the food for any upcoming village festival, like the *Pacha Pandum* or the *Bhoomi Pandum*. If the offense is less grave, which is usually the case, the matter is solved by the sentenced offering a drink of *toddy* (palm wine) or *sara* (a strong licquor made from the mohuva flower) to all those assembled. In such cases the trial may be closed in a day or two, counting from the moment when the offense was reported to the *pedda*.

The council also comes together in connection with more festive occasions. As soon as a wedding is arranged it is up to the four members of the *kula panchayat*, together with their counterparts in the other village – if the marriage is between people of two different villages – to set an auspicious date for the wedding, to agree on the number of people to invite, and to make sure that invitations are communicated.

The *pujari* is first of all a religious status. The title has its origin in Hinduism where a *pujari* is “the brahmin priest responsible for the worship (*puja*) of the deity” (Eck 1998:106). As with the *pedda*, this is for the Koyas a hereditary position which can be held by men only. In fact, the two offices used to be held by the same person, the founder of the village, but today they are almost exclusively separate. In all village festivals marking agricultural cycles, the *pujari* has the responsibility of performing rituals that will allow villagers to harvest and

to eat certain crops; i.e. the *Chukudu Pandum* (*chukudu* = beans) marks the beginning of the beans season, while the *Marka Pandum* (*marka* = mango) marks the beginning of the mango season. No one, not even the non-tribals of Koya villages, start to consume these crops before the rituals have been performed. Failure to oblige to the rules connected with the festivals, leads to ritual impurity of the village as a whole. The same preoccupation with purity and impurity may be seen also in the other dealings of the *pujari*. The *Pacha Pandum* festival in Chatti in 2006, for instance, had to be postponed twice or thrice, the reason being that the wife of the *pujari* had her period at the time, and in addition, an adolescent girl of the village had her first menstruation. The wife of the *pujari* had to be ritually pure and the maturity function of the girl had to be held before the festival could start.

The other two positions making up the *kula panchayat* are the *pina pedda* and the *veapari*. As members of the council they are in theory vested with the same authority as the *pedda* and the *pujari*. In all other matters, the *pina pedda* is merely a stand-in for the *pedda* (this is not to say he is not respected) and the *veapari* is a messenger. His most important task is to inform the men of the households whenever there is going to be a meeting at the *rachabanda*, and to send people out to communicate wedding invitations to people of other villages. *Pina pedda* and *veapari* are both hereditary offices and are always held by men.

In some villages, all the *panchayat* positions are held by men belonging to the same clan, while in others they were in the beginning distributed equally between members from different clans.

Division and adaptation

It was only at a late stage of the fieldwork that I discovered that the political and religious life of the villages was marked with more controversy than my informants first made me realize. The changes that have taken place in these spheres are very significant, and they are subject to much debate among the villagers, especially among the elders.

The offices of the traditional *kula panchayat* have in recent times been subject to the influence of different political parties making their entry into the tribal villages. This is one of the reasons why, in some villages, there are now more than one *pedda*, *pujari*, *pina pedda* and *veapari*. In many villages, each of the councils represents a political party, and in many cases they represent a single clan or a small conglomerate of clans. With the integration of Koya villages into the *Panchayat Raj* elections, the all-India system of governance, clan affiliations are today manifested in collective voting strategies. Politics and clan affiliations are not the

only dividing lines between people of Koya villages, but they often work together with other aspects and create fission.

Let us have a look at three examples of how village communities have been structurally divided under the influence of outside forces. In Timirigudem there are two hamlets. One is bigger than the other with almost 40 of the total 55 households. All people from the eight clans represented in the village vote for the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Three years back the river Sabari overflowed its banks and damaged some of the houses in the village. A government official came in order to collect details about the damages, so that relief work could be initiated based on the extent of the damages. The problem, according to the people of the biggest hamlet, was that this official received false information about the houses in the other hamlet. Only some of the houses in the small hamlet had been damaged, and they were only partially damaged, while many houses in the big hamlet were fully damaged. As a consequence of this failure, the distribution of relief packages from the government was carried through on an equal basis, most families receiving an equal amount of money and other goods. This left the inhabitants of the bigger hamlet with a feeling of being cheated by their fellow villagers, and a conflict arose which created new and, seemingly, lasting divisions. The people of the smaller hamlet ended up establishing their own shrine – of the female kind, the *mudupu* – and they selected representatives for a new *kula panchayat*. Thus, they obtained ritual independence in the sense that they do no longer depended on the *pujari* of the bigger hamlet. The two hamlets, although they now have separate ceremonial sites, organise important festivals on the same day. But according to the *pujari* of the big hamlet – the original *pujari* – the others do not have the experience and traditions, and that is why they only sacrifice fowl, while in his hamlet they see it as necessary to sacrifice goats, cows and buffalos on festive occasions. The *pujari* also did not seem to approve of the choice of establishing only a *mudupu*. Without the male shrine, the *gamam*, people in that hamlet will not be able to go through with all the necessary rituals. This said, the establishment of the *mudupu*, wherein the goddess Mutyalammah is manifested, must be seen as a most important step towards division not only in ritual matters but also politically, as Mutyalammah is considered a village guardian.

Veerapuram was established around 50 years ago when one man from the Turram clan, Nagaiah, and another from the Pisam clan, Boggi, moved from Chatti and settled down two kilometres further north.¹⁵ They found a good spot for the *gamam* and the *mudupu*, and

¹⁵ All personal names referred to in this thesis are pseudonyms.

they agreed that the Turram clan would have the *pedda* title, while the *pujari* would always be a Pisam. Today we find three different sets of shrines, three different *peddas* and three different *pujaris* in Veerapuram. According to Turram Nagaiah, one of the two original inhabitants of the village, and the only one still alive, the splits occurred because of disagreements regarding ritual practices and the consumption of alcohol. Party politics was not part of the disagreement, he told me. After the first split he joined hands with another man of the Pisam clan, and these two families now perform the rituals together. Pisam Boggi's son Muttaiah continues to operate as *pujari* after the death of his father, but now only in two and a half hamlet. The disagreements are no more, he says, and the rituals performed in the three *gamams* are almost the same. Pisam Saneshrao is the third *pujari* in Veerapuram today. He operates in only one of the hamlets.

My assistant Rajaiah from Chatti, a village which is itself divided on the lines of party politics, would not accept the explanations I got in Timirigudem and Veerapuram, and he said the primary cause of the splits was for sure to be found in politics. During a festival called *Bhiminpelli* in Kalleru, I realized the present connection between political affiliations and the ritual life of the Koyas. Rajaiah made me aware that all participants in the festival were followers of the Congress Party; the rest of the villagers voted for either CPI or CPI (Marxist) and none of them ever took part in traditional festivals. The communist parties have gained a considerable number of followers among the tribals, and their rhetorics encourage people to distance themselves from animistic beliefs and rituals. In Kalleru, these followers were among the large group of spectators who followed the rituals and the drumming and dancing from a distance. In the same group were also a few elders not able to take part in the physical performances, menstruating women debarred because of their ritual impurity, and Christian families who had *their* reasons not to participate.

Whether the root cause of the fission is found in party politics or internal disputes over relief packages, alcohol consumption or ritual practices, it has come about as a result of conflict, and it shows that men do not always succeed each other but are sometimes appointed for the traditional offices. The fact remains that there is only one *pujari* and one *pedda* of each village who has inherited the position from the original settlers, while the rest have been selected by their kin and allies at a later stage. The lack of tradition behind their titles may have consequences for the handing over of ritual knowledge and, in turn, this may have serious implications for the unity of the tribe. The status of the *pujari* as a guide to religious matters is threatened by this fragmentation, while at the same time it is challenged by the authority and influence of the Christian priest. The future will show whether the offices will

assume a more contract-based form, or whether they will still be based on the principle of succession. I am not suggesting that this principle has always been exclusively representative of the political organisation of the Koyas – people have through all the years migrated and established new villages with their own leaders, and I believe there is always an element of “peace in the feud” (Gluckman 1956). Still, the social structure may be more threatened than ever before as migration is on the rise and as foreign power structures are imposed.

There are examples though, of successful adaptation to such structures. I shall refer to one instance which shows that the role of the *kula panchayat* has changed with the introduction of police, but that it still has a role to play.¹⁶ The incidence took place at the end of the fieldwork and was related to me by leaders of the girl’s village.

A Koya girl and a Muslim boy from two neighbour villages had been having a secret affair for a while, and the girl could no longer hide the pregnancy. Knowing what would happen if she gave birth to a child without being married, she told her parents that she wanted to marry the boy. As this was not the kind of solution the boy had in mind, the girl’s father went straight to the police station in Chinturu and informed them about the situation and the girl’s wish. The police sent him back to the village and told him to discuss the matter with the *kula panchayat*, and to come back when the couple was ready to tie the turmeric thread, as the wedding tradition is among the Koyas. The father was assured that the police would press charges against the boy if he did not agree to marry the pregnant girl, and when presented with this ultimatum the boy gave his consent. After he had discussed the matter with one of the *panchayat* members of the village, got the consent of the boy, and the girl confirmed that she still wanted the marriage, the father could go with the *pedda*, his daughter and the rest of the family to the police station, for the ceremony was to take place there. As it turned out, they had to return unsuccessful this time. Not only was the police sub-inspector on vacation; the boy did not show up as promised. He was reportedly afraid of the reactions from the

¹⁶ Stephen Tyler wrote that “the largest current political unit is the *samutu* – a juridical unit consisting, according to tradition, of 25 villages under a headman and two ministers” (Tyler 1965:1429). A different source tells us that “intervillage disputes are settled by the traditional institution called *samuthu*. Ten to 15 villages are included in each *samuthu* and the *samuthu dora* presides over this council, assisted by the *simatti*” (Mohan 2004:979). The fact is that this institution plays almost no role in the Koya society today, at least not in areas as exposed to non-tribal society as Chintur. The introduction of police in the Koya habitats has reduced the importance of traditional institutions like the *samuthu* and the *kula panchayat* and to a certain degree “de-tribalised” judiciary powers. The *samuthu dora*, or *samithi pooye*, has very little or no power today, but he may still have a significant symbolic status in some areas. A Koya friend in Chatti, who was around 44 at the time of fieldwork, could still remember the last time the *samithi pooye* visited his village. My friend was then a fourth grade student, and the visitor attracted a lot of attention from the villagers. He could not remember the name of the present *samithi pooye* and said that this man would be *samithi pooye* only in the name; he has no particular functions anymore.

fellow villagers of the girl, and said he would only join them if he was given a notice by the police beforehand. When I left Chintur, the *pujari* who was among those arranging the marriage, told me they were still waiting for the sub-inspector to return so that they could go through with the ceremony. He did not expect there to be any problems and said the wedding would surely take place.

This is not the only instance of marriage being arranged by the *kula panchayat* and the police after a relationship considered illegal has been discovered. The crime in this case was not only that of the boy who refused to take responsibility for the child to be born, but the whole idea of a pre-marital relationship between a tribal girl and a non-tribal boy. When such relationships are discovered, those involved are as a matter of course met with condemnation from the Koya community, who places the blame between them even in cases where there is obviously an element of exploitation in the relationship. Previously, the Koya girl would be left with almost no opportunities in life if her non-tribal lover fled the scene: while the boy would usually be able to obtain a suitable marriage within his community – that is without being hampered by his history of pre-marital affairs, the girl would be left with a stigma so strong that she would find it extremely difficult to find a Koya man to marry, especially if the affair resulted in a child being born. The girl in the story above probably knew well the prospects of living her life as a single mother, while probably being dependent on the economy and the goodwill of her father, and she acted accordingly. But she did not act in a void. In spite of the condemnation, which seems to be the same today as it was before, she was empowered by the institutions of police and *kula panchayat* to the extent that she was able to affect her destiny in a positive manner. It seems that, with such a course of events, transparency and awareness regarding the possible implications of tribal-non-tribal relationships is created. The stigma inherent in such relationships is officially removed as the relation is formalized and a fine paid to the *kula panchayat* for breaking the endogamy rule.

In such ways, the traditional Koya society, represented by the *kula panchayat*, has made necessary adjustments in order to protect their women from being exploited, and although reluctantly, it formally recognizes marriages between Koya women and non-tribal men.

Christian conversions took place already in the nineteenth century, and when the *pujari* in Pedda Nallapalli converted to Christianity, the small mud shrine of the village fell into ruins, and there was at the time no other shrine in any of the villages near Dummugudem (Thurston 1987). More than a hundred years later, when I ask village people of Chintur about the possibility of a *pujari* becoming Christian, most of them laugh and say that it is

impossible, while some Christians acknowledge the chance that also a *pujari* may experience healing and thus be drawn to church. In Veerapuram, I was told that *pujaris* and *peddas* sometimes go to the local church but that they never enter the hut itself. The Christian man who told me this said he had never heard of any *pedda* or *pujari* who had become Christian. But I only had to go to a neighbour village, Gorrelagudem, to find a situation where the *pujari* had actually converted and joined hands with the rest of the people and clansmen of his hamlet. In the other hamlet of this small village of only 14 households, there are no Christians, and therefore, when the *pujari* converted a few years ago they took action and selected their own. Today, they maintain a small shrine in their hamlet. As in many other villages the Christians do not take part in the rituals connected with the shrine.

The situation is different in Veerapuram, where they have three sets of *peddas* and *pujaris* and where none of them are Christians. Some of the Christians of the roadside hamlet, where there is a church and where the Christians are in majority, choose to maintain relations with the *pedda* and the *pujari* of their own hamlet through participating in the traditional festivals. Their participation is not complete though, as they desist from eating the sacrificial meat that is prepared on such occasions. Still, by being present at the site of the communal meal, the *koda*, together with other men of the village,¹⁷ and by paying an equal share for the feast, they manage to stay on good terms with the *pedda* and the *pujari*, and they may expect their goodwill in times of need. It is obvious from this example that Christianity has the potential of creating insiders and outsiders on the basis of the degree of loyalty towards tradition, and that the Christians are aware of the possible sanctions from the men of the *kula panchayat*.

The consequences of a *pedda* becoming Christian are seemingly not as great as in the case of a *pujari*. In Kannapuram, the *pedda* converted to Christianity about three years ago after being cured from sickness. He has kept the *pedda* title in spite of there being only two Christian households in the village, and there seems to be no problems regarding the combination of the *pedda* office and his personal beliefs. In Ratnapuram, the *pedda* converted to Christianity as far back as in 1983. At that time there were some disputes over the few Christian conversions taking place, but today people are tired of arguing with each other, the ex-*pedda* told me. He claimed to be very much wanted as *pedda* by the villagers, also after his conversion, but he chose to resign from the office on the grounds of having a different god

¹⁷ Even though Veerapuram has three sets of *peddas* and *pujaris* and three sets of *gamams* and *mudupus* as a consequence of the fission that took place around 20 years ago, the villagers maintain their relations at the *koda* where communal dinners are for all male members.

than the others; understood that he could not continue to be part of the village festivals and support the *pujari* in his ritual work. In some villages, the *pedda* co-operates with the *pujari* in performing the rituals, and this may explain the fact that the *pedda* in Ratnapuram discontinued serving as *pedda* while the one in Kannapuram hung on to the office. Otherwise, as the conversions of the two *peddas* took place at different points of time – the *pedda* of Kannapuram converted only about three years ago – it may be that the different reactions illustrate a change in the general attitude towards Christianity and Christians.

Pacha Pandum and ritual change

Pacha Pandum is a yearly festival that marks the beginning of a new agricultural cycle. The last day of the festival is the first day of harvesting and consuming certain crops, like maize, sugar cane and dry rice. As is the case with all major festivals of the Koyas, it is also a time for worshipping the ancestors and deities. It normally takes place during three days in September/October. When the crops of the *kharif* season are in ripe, the *kula panchayat* of each Koya village will set the date of the festival while considering the ritual purity of their village.

While the first day is about visiting and the men having their late night eating and drinking sessions, the second day is the day of the ritual led by the *pujari*, and the following communal meal. The dinner is “communal” only with certain restrictions; women and children are not allowed to take part, and Koya men must go through an initiation rite called *kodagalvadam* in order to gain access to the site of the dinner, to be allowed their equal share of the sacrificial meat and thus to be regarded members of the village.

The *pujari* performs the ritual with assistance from male members of his kin, called *menaledu*.¹⁸ There can never be anyone else filling the functions of the *pujari* and his *menaledu*, although other men may be present. The ritual is performed at the same place every year. In Chatti, where I witnessed this ritual, it was performed next to a big tree and some rocks forming an island in the cultivated land just outside the political centre of the village. The site of the ritual was called *koda*, while the rocks upon which the food is prepared and eaten was called *kodabanda*. The site was chosen because of its proximity to fertile land and because the rocks are suitable for community gatherings as the one in *Pacha Pandum*. The same site is also used at the time of *Bhoomi Pandum* and *Chukudu Pandum*, two other yearly festivals marking agricultural cycles.

¹⁸ I was not able to identify the range of this term, but in one case it was apparently used about WBS and ZS.

After having cleaned the rocky ground at the *koda* and prepared all the items to be used in the ritual by smearing and decorating them with turmeric, the animals were brought forward. A pig, two hens, a cock and a small chicken were to be sacrificed. The *pujari* held the hens over a model of the village shrine, painted in turmeric on the ground, while presenting a mantra. The procedure was repeated with the pig and the chicken, and in the end all the animals were offered rice for them to eat. The hens were lowered down to the ground, and one of them started eating immediately, while the one held by the *pujari* refused. This made him start over again with the mantra, more loudly this time. In the end, after the reluctant hen had caused some chuckling among the assistants, it finally ate and the *pujari* seemed relieved. The pig also refused to eat, and it made a noisy protest. The assistants had a hard time holding it down while the *pujari* dropped seeds of rice in front of it and continued to shout his mantra.

The refusal is not perceived as a bad omen, I was assured, but rather as a signal to the *pujari* that he failed to mention all the names of Koya clans and the names of their gods and goddesses, as he is supposed to during this ritual. As he performs the mantra and tries to remember all the names, the forefathers are believed to be listening. They respond to the performance through the animals used in the ritual, by accepting or refusing what is offered them. The refusal, as it happened in these cases, led the *pujari* to repeat what he had already said and to try to remember the names that he forgot the first time. But the pig and the chicken never ate before they were sacrificially slaughtered, and the *pujari* stood for some time on the ground of the *koda*, asking the forefathers how they were feeling.

An account from a *Chukudu Pandum* festival of the late 19th century gives a somewhat different interpretation of the rituals at the *koda*. Notice, in addition to the emphasis put on the actions of the sacrificial animals, the number of men who take part – “all the men of the village” – and the number of animals sacrificed.

All the men of the village accompany the pujari to a neighbouring tree, which must be a 'Terminalia tomentosa', and set up a stone ['koda pinta'], which they thus dedicate to the goddess Kodamma. Every one is bound to bring for the pujari a good hen and a seer of rice, and for himself a cock and half a seer of rice. The pujari also demands from them two annas as his sacrificing fee. Each worshipper then brings his cock to the pujari, who holds it over grains of rice which have been sprinkled before the goddess, and, if the bird pecks at the rice, good luck is ensured for the coming year, whilst, if perchance the bird pecks three times, the offerer of that particular cock can scarcely contain himself for joy. If the bird declines to

*touch the grains, then ill-luck is sure to visit the owner's house during the ensuing year (Thurston 1987:66-67).*¹⁹

Pujari Venkaiah would uphold his view the day after, saying that the refusal is *not* a bad omen, and that nothing in the ritual went wrong; all went according to the tradition. He excused himself though, because, as he had not eaten for 24 hours prior to the ritual, he felt he had been a bit grumpy during the performance.

The conversation I had with the *pujari* and my assistant this day was interesting as it brought to light some of the confusion and disagreements regarding ritual practices. The *pujari* told me that he often engage in conversations about the rituals for which he is responsible, and that he is regularly confronted with diverging interpretations and fellow villagers who are opposed to the way he performs them.²⁰ He has relatives who function as *pujaris* in other villages, but they rarely come together and exchange information about ritual content. What is important to *Pujari* Venkaiah is that he goes by tradition as it was laid down by his forefathers who used to occupy the position before him. According to him, nothing has ever changed in the ritual performance which is the pivotal ingredience of *Pacha Pandum*, *Chukudu Pandum* and *Bhoomi Pandum*. The *pujari* knows how to read and write Telugu, but at the *koda*, as he is reeling off the names of a hundred or so deities, and as many clans, he relies on his ability to recall the knowledge he once received. As he performs the ritual only thrice a year, it is not surprising that he forgets some of them and has to start over again in order to please the forefathers. But there is apparantly a discrepancy between the emphasis on *traditional* ritual performances, meaning *same as in the past*, and the lack of certain knowledge about the symbolic meaning of the practices. More than once did I ask the *pujari* why he does so and so when performing the rituals, only to be answered “I don’t know – our forefathers did the same”. For example, while he claimed that the fast prior to the *koda* ritual is imperative for him as *pujari*, he did not have any idea why this is so. That the forefathers used to do the same is usually reason good enough; most Koyas are anxious about their ritual

¹⁹ Fürer-Haimendorf offers a slightly different interpretation of a similar ritual among the Konda Reddis, on the occasion of the mango festival: “It is believed that if the chicken pecks up the grain, it is a sign that that particular chicken is acceptable to the gods, but if it refuses, it must be substituted by another fowl, which is subjected to the same ordeal” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1945:183).

²⁰ The *pujari* seemed to appreciate these conversations in a way, as he realised the value of remembering and maintaining Koya culture and traditions. For the same reason he was happy about me showing an interest in his work. He found it particularly important to educate people who move away from the village, for marriage, in search of work or for other purposes, about the history of the village and the respective clans: they should always remember where they came from and who their ancestors were.

performances and believe they will be punished with drought and disease if they do not follow tradition.

In fact, the *pujari* in Chatti does not always go by the prescribed rules, even when he knows well what the tradition says. My assistant, himself a proud Koya and a good friend of *Pujari Venkaiah*, reacted with disbelief when the *pujari* revealed to us that he does not follow the prescribed commensality rules on occasions such as a maturity function, where he, just as he still does in the village festivals, should eat auspicious food in solitude. The *pujari* admitted that it was he who had broken the tradition, and this made my assistant at first very upset and disappointed. Then he said half jokingly that the *pujari* must have developed into a non-tribal. The example may serve as an illustration of the creativity that ritual experts in any ethnographic setting are subject to. The way these experts go about with their ritual tasks involve processes of subjectification and reobjectification, as shown by Fredrik Barth (Barth 1987). The creative aspect sets in at every attempt made by individual experts of reproducing or handing over the ritual expertise, and the anxiety felt by the the Koyas in general and the *pujari* in particular, resembles that of the Baktaman of New Guinea, described by Barth, who have seven complex initiation rites and a myriad of rituals that the experts are left to remember by heart.

Christian Koyas employ different strategies in their dealings with the *pedda* and the *pujari*. While some choose to discredit their leadership through non-participation in the political and the religious sphere, others continue to see them as important village leaders. Again others maintain their relations with the *pedda* and the *pujari* in spite of their loyalty being with the Christian congregation. These people do as the Christians of the Kondh Hills where "money is [...] given in lieu of participation, ostensibly 'not to cause offense'" (Boal 1963:115).

It is not only in connection with village festivals that loyalty to the leaders is expressed through donations of money. While in these cases the money is used for ritual purposes – that is in rituals that are to gain the village as a whole, contributions consisting of money and small gifts are part of the everyday dealings with the leaders. Loyalties are thus continually manifested in such transactions. For instance, my assistant saw it as appropriate to offer a small bottle of whisky every time we invited the *pujari* to sit down and answer some questions. Whisky from the wine-shop is by most people considered a luxury item, but in the context of an organised interview where the subject was the *pujari* and his work, the transaction was perceived to be necessary.

Transactions also take place when people get sick and go to see the *vadde*. A Christian in Narasapuram expressed relief over the fact that he no longer has to pay with money, goats and fowl whenever someone in the family gets sick; now they go to church and do not have to pay anything, he said.

In villages containing several shrines and religious leaders, such as Veerapuram and Timirigudem, there are disagreements regarding the number of animals to be sacrificed during festival times. Whereas one *pujari* finds it appropriate on the occasion of *Kolupu*²¹ to sacrifice two or three goats, the next would say this is not sufficient and that he on the other hand would sacrifice a buffalo, two cows and twelve fowl on the same occasion. He would then go on to say that the other *pujari* lacks the traditions and the knowledge needed, and that the hamlet or village will suffer because of his failures. There is reason to believe that the development of Christianization may have caused, at least in part, the reduction in animal sacrifice that we see in some villages today. This reduction is again logically connected to the decline in the number of men participating in the communal meals, as tradition says that the meat is to be consumed at the site of the ritual slaughter and not to be brought home and eaten by non-members. I was told by an informant who is also a *sarpanch*, that this is a recent development that is partly caused by Christianization. If Christian men do choose to show up, they never touch the meat but only have vegetarian food, he said. While in the past, most male members of the village would join the communal meals, today it is only on the occasion of *Bhoomi Pandum* that one may expect a good number of people to participate. Unlike *Pacha Pandum* and *Chukudu Pandum*, a greater part of this festival is open also to women and children. *Pujari* Venkaiah said after the *Pacha Pandum* in Chatti that all adult men of the village used to show up on this occasion, and that there had been a steady decline starting about 20 years ago. When I witnessed the festival, only 24 men were present at the meal following the rituals – in a village of around 500 households. The *pujari* said there had been more people last year, and that the market in Chinturu which was held earlier this Wednesday was to blame for the low number of participants.

The refusal of the majority of Christians to eat sacrificial meat is perceived as very significant. An extract of Barbara Boals account of the Christian Kondhs illustrates the point that the refusal may be taken as a hostile act against the village as a corporate group. I have myself never witnessed or heard of similar incidents taking place in connection with Koya rituals, but I believe it may give an idea of the degree of solidarity and commitment that was

²¹ A village festival held every three years.

once inherent in the rituals, and of the anxiety following non-compliance in ritual performances.

The climax of the long-prepared 'kedu' sacrifice had fallen due only six weeks after two houses had declared their newly-adopted faith. Persecution by both priest and people rose to its greatest intensity when the Christians not only refused to take part in these final ceremonies but also refused their share of the offered meat. Throughout the night they sat quietly while drunken hordes surrounded the house, drumming and shouting threats which increased in intensity as genuine fear that the spirits would make reprisals on the whole community gave way to sheer mob excitement. However, the Christians held out and, finally, the crowd, exhausted by three days' continuous celebration, threw the Christians' portion of meat violently at the barred door, shouting aloud their innocence if calamity befell their village (Boal 1963:111).

In chapter three, we will see that the Naskapi of the Labrador Coast found in Holy Communion an equivalent to their own *mokoshan*, described by Georg Henriksen as a communal meal aimed at securing luck in hunting and furthering their relationship with the animals and the animal spirits (Henriksen 1973). For the Naskapi, caribou meat is essential in their diet; caribou is the main target of all hunting expeditions and other types of food are considered merely as snacks. There are implicit rules for the sharing and distribution of caribou meat, and the importance of it is reflected in *mokoshan*. The handling of the meat and the other insides considered edible, is marked with ritual precaution:

The Naskapi claim that they hold 'mokoshan' to ensure good luck ('nemennawpaw'). To obtain this, it is of crucial importance to handle the fat and marrow in the right manner, notably without wasting any of it [...] At one time, there was a mild epidemic of a stomach disease in the camp. After having eaten the food of 'mokoshan', one of the men suddenly started to vomit. He managed to get hold of a container just in time, so that no vomit was wasted but immediately thrown into the stove. In the short discussion which ensued, it was stressed how much worse the incident could have been (Henriksen 1973:38).

Most important here is the element of sharing and that “the ritual is a communal affair from which nobody in the camp is excluded” (1973:36). That is, Christians do take part, but not without intervention from the missionary. His teachings alone has led the Naskapi of Davis Inlet into giving up the drumming and dancing that always used to follow the *mokoshan* ritual. In addition, his presence has divided the community into drinkers and non-drinkers as he is violently opposed to the heavy drinking of the Naskapi during the summer. He has a

considerable influence, also with the non-Christians, and is respected in the role of “master of ceremonies” in the church and in the role of intermediary between the Naskapi and the white man’s world.

The Koyas of Chintur are bi-lingual and part of a multi-ethnic society with many links to the outside world. Thus, there is no missionary who is close to having the same position as the one in Davis Inlet. But the restrictions on ritual practices and alcohol consumption are the same, and since alcohol is an important element in all rituals, and rituals are a communal concern that a great section of the community (the Christians) is not particularly concerned with, the teachings of the church affect also the lives of non-Christian Koyas.

There is traditionally a segment of non-beef eaters in the Koya tribe, and that is the Lingadhari Koyas. Today, most people agree that this is not a characteristic apt to differentiate the Lingadhari Koyas from the rest. While many of them have started to eat beef, a considerable number of people from the other sub-groups have taken up practices of vegetarianism or other restrictions on food. In Mukunuru, which is a village inhabited by a majority of Lingadhari Koyas, I was told that the ceremony held in the bride’s house on the occasion of a wedding was only for non-beef eaters. Among these, figured names of families belonging to both Racha Koya, Kammari Koya and Lingadhari Koya, while some families of Lingadhari Koyas were excluded.

Thus, we see that the refusal on the part of Christians of eating meat is not exceptional in the Koya society as a whole, though their refusal applies only to *sacrificial* meat. But as the refusal is contextually based on their opposition towards animal sacrifice and sacrificial meat, we should consider the chances of them becoming integrated into the ritual sphere *in spite of* this opposition.

Let us return to the 24 men at the *kodabanda* after the *Pacha Pandum* ritual. The meat from the fowl and the pig was used together with other ingredients to prepare a stew. While the preceding ritual was of necessity performed by the *pujari* and his assisting *menaledus*, cooking was the responsibility of those assembled for the dinner. Also the *pujari* would eat from the stew, but he would sit a few metres away from the others while eating. His assistants during the ritual were also segregated from the rest while drinking their *sara* from a shared bottle. Afterwards, they ate with the others. But the seating arrangements were peculiar also among the other men as they were physically divided into two groups. Six or seven men sat in a circle while having their food from a stewpan that stood in the middle, while another group of the same size sat on a line while having theirs from a different pan. The men who did not eat sat dispersed outside the circle and the line. The men forming the circle were called *koda*

as they did not have meat, while the men in line were called *koda kalliondu* or *koda galittodu* because they had meat. The distinction applies for all community gatherings where there is eating involved, and sanctions do apply: if a man from the *koda kalliondu* group crosses the boundaries and sits down with the people who do not accept meat (this may happen, I was told, in confusion or in drunkenness), he must slaughter a chicken for the next communal dinner. There are no restrictions the other way around: *koda* people may sit down with *koda kalliondu* people without being subject to sanctions.

Unfortunately, my notes are insufficient in deciding the identity of all the men assembled for this dinner. I cannot say whether or not any Christians were present, although it is unlikely given the relatively low number of Christians living in Chatti. That said, the distinction between *koda* and *koda kalliondu* gives the Christian Koyas an opportunity to desist from eating sacrificial meat and still in a way be part of the ritual efforts of the village community, just by being present. Even the choice of not eating anything at all seems at present to offer an acceptable role at the *kodabanda*: among the 24 men there were several who did not eat, and among them were both the *pedda* and my assistant. It is obvious then, that the occasion of sharing the sacrificial meat has lost some of its meaning as a collective rite, especially if compared to the quotations of Thurston, Boal and Henriksen above. As long as each household contributes with their share of money for the animals to be sacrificed, there seems to be no further obligations constraining the villagers regarding these matters. And since the cost of the rituals have come down with the reduction in the number of animals sacrificed, we may understand the choice of Christians as they take the middle road and donate money while staying clear of the sacrificial meat.

The *dholi*

Indian tribes have through the years developed strong ties with other castes and tribes, and many of these castes and tribes are considered bards as they provide certain services to the members of the tribe. The services are usually connected to the ritual life of the community. Examples include the Thalya bard of the Lambadis (Thurston 1987:209) and the Pardhan bard of the Gonds (Fürer-Haimendorf 1948:47, Juliusson 1974:121). The bard of the Koyas goes under the name Arithi Koya, although they are originally members of the Mala caste. Services are provided by men known as *dholis*. The *dholi* status is hereditary and always occupied by a man. Each *dholi* is responsible for providing services to a specific clan or a conglomerate of clans within the same phratry. Arithi Koya families live in the villages of Koyas, but they do

not traditionally engage in marriage alliances with them. Some Koyas think less of the Arithi Koyas as they are paid in kind and depend on the Koya community for their survival. This is evident from the word *arithi*, which translates as “to beg” or “to ask for”.

The *dholi* is called upon on the occasion of the yearly clan festival, with a common denomination called *Paen Pandum*, mortuary rites called *dinal*, and occasionally for any festival where people are seeking to become possessed. He will bring an instrument to all of these occasions, a drum, which is used to establish a temporary link between the living and the dead.²² When the monotonous drumming of the *dholi* is heard throughout the village, in most cases it is followed by the news that somebody has died. The *dholis* – there are usually two or three of them working together – will keep on drumming through the whole day and through the night as well. Their work is considered done only when the dead body is cremated, usually less than 24 hours after the time of death.²³

Just as the *pujari* is traditionally a repository of information regarding the deities of the Koya tribe, the *dholi* is supposed to have specific knowledge about the clan: *purbham* is to be understood as the knowledge about kinship relations within the clan or the conglomerate of clans that the *dholi* provides services for. On the occasion of *dinal* and *Paen Pandum*, the *dholi* will be reciting the story about the ancestors of the clan. In the case of *dinal*, he will give honour to the deceased by talking about his or her life and that of the ancestors of previous generations. All clans or clan conglomerates are represented by two flags called *paenkarra deara* that are treated with the utmost care and kept hidden most of the time. The first shows people what clans and phratries (*gattus*) they may marry into – their *menavaru* or “marriage people”, while the second tells them about the *gatta* they themselves are part of and the other clans represented there – their *kannavaru* or “birth people” (Tyler in Trautmann 1995). The *dholi* has a responsibility to educate people about the marriage rules that are laid down and symbolized through these flags. The flags connect people to their respective clan centres, usually located in Chhattisgarh or Orissa. It is the *dholi* who on the occasion of *Paen Pandum* brings the flags out to the clansmen wherever they live, given that they are not able to take part in the festival at the clan centre itself. His role as a uniting force, bringing clansmen together under the symbol of the *paenkarra deara*, should not be underestimated. As Fürer-Haimendorf puts it: “the social and ritual organization of the Koyas cuts across

²² Rodney Needham (1967) has shown, through cross-cultural comparison, how *percussion*, the striking or shaking of drums, bells, cymbals, tambourines etc., is defining of the method used by a large number of people to communicate with the other world. Says Needham: “There is no doubt that sound-waves have neural and organic effects on human beings, irrespective of the cultural formation of the latter” (pg. 610).

²³ The bodies of children up to a certain age, around four-five years, are buried.

political and geographical boundaries”, and “their hereditary bards and chroniclers keep alive the old traditions and myths, and wandering from village to village prevent a cultural isolation of small groups” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1945:239). The role of the *dholi* becomes even more central in the light of the ongoing re-orientation in marriage rules and practices (see chapter four).

Their knowledge is not *only* clan specific though. The *dholi* also has a responsibility to recite the story that is, at least in theory, common to all Koyas, a story that explains the world order and who the first Koyas were. This story is also symbolized through illustrations on the *peankarra deara*. A *dholi* in Veerapuram said it would take him two-three days to finish the whole story, and that they only would narrate parts of it on the occasion of *dinal* and *Paen Pandum*.

Dinal may be any of the three ceremonies that are traditionally organized after the death of a Koya. The first one is initiated at the time of death; the *dholi* usually arrives at the house of the deceased after a short time. The tradition of the Chintur Koyas calls for another ceremony after three days and a final ceremony to be held 21 days after the death. In fact, Edgar Thurston (1987) says nothing about the 21-day ceremony but reports instead that the funeral feasts, as he calls them, should be held after three, seven and fifteen days, in addition to the one initiated at the time of death. Local variations may explain the different practices, but they are naturally also subject to the evaluations made with the passing of years and adaptations may have taken place. Thurston is very clear about the importance of these ceremonies:

All believe that these feasts are necessary for the repose of the spirits of the deceased, and that, if these are not thus duly honoured, they will wander about the jungle in the form of pisachas (devils) ready to avenge their friends' neglect of their comfort by bringing evil upon their children or cattle (Thurston 1987:54).

Normally the services of the *dholi* are not requested for all the ceremonies. A *dholi* from a village close to Chinturu, Dugula Lachaiah, let me know that most people consider it a financial question – for mortuary rites, the *dholis* are not paid in kind but in cash. Also in the past it was a question of economy: Thurston writes that while the third-day ceremony was “frequently held”, the ceremonies of the seventh and the fifteenth days would be held only “if means are forthcoming” (1987:53). In present Chintur, I was told that the third-day ceremony is almost never organised anymore, and if it is, the family of the deceased does not care to pay

for the services of a *dholi*, but chooses someone else to do the storytelling. Nobody is there to perform the drumming. Also for the 21-day ceremony, there is always a concern about money, but most families are willing to pay the price. Those who simply have no money to spare, either do not go through with the ceremonies at all, or they may postpone the 21-day ceremony a week or two, or as much as a year, and have it performed when they can afford to pay for the *dholi* services.

Nowadays, says Dugula Lachaiah, it is only those who still have respect for their ancestors and who have enough money who call upon the *dholi* when someone has died. In previous times, when Lachaiah's father and father's father went around and performed *dholi* services, they were met with respect. Now, as more and more people choose not to make use of their services, the *dholis* themselves lose interest in the work. "We have our own land now", says Lachaiah, "so we don't depend on others anymore". Besides, the younger generation of Arithi Koyas takes education and does not show any interest in carrying the tradition further.

I also came across an instance of a *dholi* who converted to Christianity. It was after he fell ill with tuberculosis that he started going to church. When he got baptized, all of his *dholi* functions were handed over to his brother who used to share the responsibility with him. As a Christian, and with a failing health, he could not possibly continue to work as a *dholi*.

Conclusion

The status of the *dholi* and of the *pujari* is crucial with regard to the culture and identity of the Koyas. I have described them as repositories of information regarding ritual practices, deities (the *pujari*) and kinship relations (the *dholi*). They are the joint memory of the tribe, and their functions articulate the Koyas' relationship with ancestors and *homeland*. Their practices, especially those of the *pujari*, are *practices of tradition*, that is, they were passed on by the ancestors and are important to the welfare of the village, as opposed to the *practices of healing*, which are important to the individual and the family here and now (see chapter three).

As noted in the discussion about the *pujari* and his ritual performances, most Koyas are anxious about the consequences of not following traditions: to live like the ancestors did and to honour them with the appropriate rites is to act responsibly; the opposite gives room for magical explanations of unfortunate events and calls for ritual redress. The *pujari* and the *dholi* have the methods for acting upon the world as they control institutionalized mechanisms

of redress that are ordered towards the maintenance of the social structure (Turner 1968). The mortuary rites discussed above are aimed at maintaining the order of this world as well as the other-world and, according to Thurston, the Koyas' concern about the spirit of the deceased does not necessarily end with the prescribed rituals.

If they are not satisfied as to the cause of the death of any of their friends, they continue to meet at intervals for a whole year, offer their sacrificial feasts, and inquire of the diviner [the 'pujari'] whether he thinks that the spirit of the deceased has been able to associate with spirits or its predeceased friends, and, when they obtain an answer in the affirmative, then and then only do they discontinue these feasts (Thurston 1987:54).²⁴

But as we have seen, there has been a decline in the demand for *dholi* services since Thurston's days, and a great majority of villagers no longer take an active part in the seasonal festivals. Also, the number of seasonal or crop based festivals has been reduced as more and more people have started to cultivate commercial crops instead of the traditional ones. Is this evidence of a cosmological re-orientation or is it simply a beneficial adaptation of ritual practices that does not change the basic beliefs? There are significant economic benefits in not using the services of the *dholi* and not contributing with money or animals to the festivals, but these choices raise the question of what this does to the villagers' sense of ontological security and their feeling of belonging. At first sight, it seems plausible that the choice of discrediting the *dholi* has ideological reasons: people may feel that his specific knowledge is no longer needed and that his functions, if required, may be filled by someone else. About the village festivals, I was assured both by *pujari* Venkaiah and by the statements of villagers that participation is never required; the important thing is that the *pujari* performs the rituals *on behalf of* the villagers. But the *pujari* also said there used to be a lot more people present on these occasions, and this is supported by Thurston who writes that "all the men of the village" used to participate and that all of them brought sacrifices (1987:66). We may thus assume that the communal aspect of the festivals was stronger in the previous days. In the next chapter, the choices made by the Christian Koyas will shed some more light on this point.

²⁴ I believe that the sacrificial feasts that are mentioned here are those of the *pelligondhi*, a small family shrine where the respective ancestors are honoured.

Healing and Tradition among Christian Koyas

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

Book of Acts 15, 19-20

Christianity has been around in India since the 1st century AD, as Saint Thomas the apostle is said to have spent his last years there, establishing a group of followers in Kerala known as Syrian Christians or Saint Thomas Christians. Today there are more than 20 million Christians in the country, belonging to different denominations. The Roman-Catholic church is numerically the strongest, while the union of Protestant denominations known as Church of South India (CSI)²⁵ has a strong position in the south. Pentecostalism is on the rise, as in other countries of the so-called third world.²⁶ Different forms of evangelical movements are especially focused on gaining believers among the tribal peoples.

Rowena Robinson points out that the popular theories about the low-caste origin of Christians in India are contradicted by the high-caste origin of the early Saint Thomas Christians (Robinson 2003). But after the British rule was initiated, and the civilisatory project got more intertwined with the missionaries, the low castes, today referred to as Scheduled Castes (SCs), were conceived as suitable targets for evangelical efforts.²⁷ For the members of these castes, on their side, Christianity was a means of disengaging themselves from caste structures, and the mid-19th century saw several mass conversions of kin and caste groups. In Andhra Pradesh, groups of Malas and Madigas converted *en masse*. Their social standing in the caste system has through the years been about equally inferior. About the Malas it was said they were “the Pariahs of the Telugu country” and that they were “debarred

²⁵ The union was established in 1947 and consisted of Presbyterian, Reformed, Methodist, Congregational and Anglican churches. A few Baptist and Pentecostal churches have later joined the movement.

²⁶ Joel Robbins calls the spread of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity “one of the great success stories of the current era of cultural globalization” (2004a: 117).

²⁷ In the beginning, the English East India Company would not allow much missionary activity on the grounds that evangelism could harm commercial interests and create political instability (Robinson 2003).

entrance to the temples and the use of the ordinary village wells, and have to serve as their own barbers and washermen” (Thurston 1987:330). For these people, converting to Christianity was one among a number of strategies available for the purpose of gaining a new social mobility: “Conversion to Islam, Sikhism or the reformed Hinduism of the Arya Samaj were other modes, adopted by some” (Forrester, referred to by Robinson 2003:60). Today, their social mobility is reduced by a constitution that excludes Christian Scheduled Caste members from the rights and reservations given to non-converts of the same castes.²⁸ While SC converts to Sikhism and Buddhism have later been included within the reservation quotas, “no one has explained why Muslims and Christians are still excluded” (Akbar In Deccan Chronicle Dec. 17 2006:6).²⁹

Most tribes are also given certain rights in the Indian Constitution, where they are referred to as Scheduled Tribes (STs). Tribals converted to Christianity are not affected in the same way as are converted members of Scheduled Castes; they are not excluded from representation, economic privileges or other rights based on their religion.

The tribal habitats that had previously not been much exposed to the colonial rule, attracted more and more missionaries during the 19th century. Especially the hilly regions of the north-east, inhabited by a number of different tribes, became important sites for their evangelical work. This is reflected by the fact that the majority of people in the north-eastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya are today Christians. The conversion of tribals was, like with the low-caste Hindus, most significantly a process of assimilation and nation building. But the tribals proved to be a greater challenge for the the British and their civilisatory project, and “it was hoped that missionaries, through evangelization and education, would be able to civilize and domesticate the unmanageable tribes in terrain hard to administer and govern directly” (Robinson 2003:57).

By 1931 Christians in India totalled 6,2 million people or 1,8 % of the total population and had become the third largest religious community in India. In the 2001 census the number was 24 million or 2,3 % of the total population, and their position behind the Hindu and the Muslim communities seems thereby consolidated. But as illustrated by the SC Christians and the challenges they face today, post-independence India has not yet come to terms with its

²⁸ The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order of 1950, as amended in 1956 and 1990 (in favour of the Sikh and the Buddhist converts, respectively), was a re-evaluation of the provisions made for the “Depressed Classes” in the Government of India Act 1935. Paragraph 3 reads as follows: *Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste.* Christian SCs normally fall into the category Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The benefits they receive as OBCs are not as generous as those for the SCs.

²⁹ Akbar, like Robinson (2003), makes the point that the legislation discriminates against all members of religions that originated outside India.

minorities. J. H. Beaglehole indicates that the confrontation between Hinduism and Christianity was bound to be difficult, and that Christians converted from the Hindu religion by necessity are an anomaly, betwixt and between: “Conflict between Christianity and Hinduism was fundamental to the nature of the two religions. The syncretist character of Hinduism denied the claim of the uniqueness of Christianity” (Beaglehole 1967:68). As a result, Jesus Christ is not portrayed as *the* saviour, but as one prophet among many. In the homes of Christians, he is often put up on the wall together with Lord Shiva or Ganesha, with Ambedkar or Gandhi, or even with famous Bollywood actors and actresses.

Hinduism has always tended to incorporate elements of other religions and traditions. The way certain tribal deities have been introduced and worshipped by sections of the Hindu population make good examples. In Warangal District, a tribal village called Medaram attracts millions of devotees from Andhra Pradesh and the neighbouring states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Maharashtra once every two years. It was originally a tribal festival celebrating the courage of the Koya girl Samakka who was found in the jungle playing with tigers and adopted by the head of the Koya tribe. She later stood up against the Kakatiya dynasty and became immortalized as a unifying symbol for the Koya people. Today, Samakka and her daughter Saaramamma (known as Saarakka) are worshipped not only by Koyas, but also by pilgrims from other tribes and castes of the said area who come to visit Medaram at the time of the festival. The significance of the myth about Samakka is naturally re-interpreted by the growing numbers of devotees, and there is reason to believe that tribal Koyas and non-tribal Hindus add different meanings to the happening in Medaram village.

It is fair to say that Christianity in India cannot be fully grasped by the reference to Scheduled Castes on the search for improved social status, or by any other form of mono-causal explanation. Since people from different social standings convert, individually or collectively, and since Scheduled Castes experience caste discrimination also after conversion, conversions must be interpreted by acknowledging a number of different motivation factors. In my studies among the Christian Koyas, I have collected a number of conversion histories that may tell us something about the hopes and aspirations of those who choose to convert, and what Christianity has to offer them. They may also serve as an alternative viewpoint from which the Koya community as a whole may be investigated and understood.

The local congregations

Missionary activity in the Koya habitat can be traced back to the 19th century. Rev. J. Cain lived and worked among the Koyas of Bhadrachalam Division for several years at the end of that century and left behind some early accounts of the Koya culture. Conversions were taking place already then, as Thurston argues in the following passage: “Some time ago there was a small mud temple to the goddesses Sarlamma and Kommamma at Pedda Nallapalli, and the head Koi [Koya] of the village was the pujari, but he became a Christian, and the temple fell into ruins, and soon melted away” (Thurston 1987:61).

Today, there is a myriad of congregations in Chintur mandal only. There are Catholic churches, Protestant churches, Pentecostal churches, and churches that are more or less independent, often established by people without any theological background. Many of them, except from the independent ones that are usually based on collections and volunteer work, are constructed with funds from overseas or by a network of sponsors within India. The Protestant CSI-churches (Church of South India), belonging to Dornakal Diocese, are found in several villages, even the smaller ones. They have been attracting people ever since the first church was established in Chinturu in 1974. The church still stands in the very centre of the village. The congregation consists mostly of converted non-tribal Hindus. There is also a CSI-church at the outskirts of the neighbour village of Chatti, where members are exclusively tribal Koyas from surrounding villages. It was established in 2002 in a large building which was constructed in 1987 by the Red Cross. It is still in use by the organisation; last year it was the centre for distribution of relief packages to those affected by the floods. The CSI-church is the only church in Chatti.

In Chinturu on the other hand, with a population of no more than 3800 people, there are around ten congregations in addition to the one already mentioned. Most of them assemble in separate, newly constructed church buildings. Interestingly, while the construction activity on the whole has declined with the threat of the village being submerged by the Polavaram dam, churches are still being constructed. The United Christian Interrial Ministries (UCIM) for example, a small denomination represented in the border areas between Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, have been present for a long time, and after a period of holding services at the homes of the members themselves, a church is now under construction in Yerrampeta just outside Chinturu.³⁰ Another small and autonomous denomination, Nazareth

³⁰ By using the term 'denomination' I emphasise the doctrinal autonomy of the smaller denominations, as this is stressed also by the local leaders themselves. The affiliations of the these denominations, both regarding doctrine, leadership and funding, are unclear.

Evangelical Society (NEST), was at the time of fieldwork busy collecting money for the reconstruction of a church in Chinturu that was damaged in the floods. The founder of the society was proud to inform me that he had “planted” 20 churches in Chintur, Kunavaram, Kukunoor and surrounding mandals since he received his calling 25 years ago. Most of them were financed by collections and business enterprises taken up by the society itself.

While some of the congregations and denominations have uncertain or weak affiliations with bigger church communities, others are connected through doctrine and funding. The CSI-churches are obvious examples. They are financed via the administrative centre in Chennai, and a network of pastors in Chintur and surrounding mandals operate with a common understanding of the Scripture. Gospel for Asia and Indian Evangelical Mission are also represented with churches in Chinturu. They are characterized by evangelism through the establishment of churches among the unreached and through the help of native missionaries, as it is presented on their respective web-sites. In Veerapuram, three kilometres from Chatti, there is a small church that was constructed two or three years ago with the financial help of German and American sponsors. It is called Good Samaritan Evangelical Lutheran Church (GSELC). This is a local denomination that was established in 1974, and it includes a network of around 80 pastors operating in Chintur and in the neighbouring mandals.

The most popular church in Chinturu is an independent charismatic church where the pastor is herself a Koya. Ramalammah Mosam’s personality and her conversion history, which is told to visitors over and over again, inspires people from the Koya community to come to church.³¹ She became a Christian in 1995 after having prayed for the recovery of her son, who was sick but became well. She was baptized and given a Christian name, and in 2001 she constructed a church together with her husband the priest, with assistance from the local Christian community and financed by collections. Parallel to the usual church activities, the pastor and her many assistants run a small health clinic on the premises of the church.³² They offer food and care to the poor and the sick. Though the patients are only rarely given medicines, many of them recover from the treatment; Ramalammah says it is because of the

³¹ All personal names are pseudonyms. Although Ramalammah took a Christian name when she got baptised, most Koyas, even the Christian Koyas, know her by the old name. She once showed me some old photographs of herself, and as if she was illustrating the change in personality that had taken place with the baptism, she constantly referred to her depiction as ‘Ramalammah’ and not by her Christian name.

³² Just like Boal (1963) shows that ‘village health’ was a natural part of the training programmes held by missionaries in the Kondh Hills, together with worship and Bible study, health work is an activity which is well integrated in the religious work in the church.

power of prayer.³³ Among the Koyas of surrounding villages, her name – the old Koya name – is forever attached to the church and vice versa. She is a good person, they tell me in Mukunuru, because she is not interested in money, and she takes good care of the people who come to visit her church. The pastor who is supposed to hold the services in their own village church does not always show up, and many Christians here choose to walk five kilometres every Sunday to visit “Ramalammah’s church” in Chinturu instead.

The following is a description of my first meeting with Ramalammah and her church.

I met Ramalammah outside the church about two hours or so before the service was to start. She was dressed in a plain white sari with blue embroideries. Her long black hair hangs free, but she is careful to put it on top as soon as I ask for permission to take her photograph. She is married, but just now she is not wearing any rings or bangles. I must have come at a bad time, I think to myself, but Ramalammah sits down and seems happy to answer my questions.

In front of us is the church, a white cemented building with tiled roof, about 9 metres wide and 18 metres long. A few metres away is a small *kachcha* hut, with mud walls and roof made from palm leaves, used for accomodation and treatment of patients. Next to it lies a man on a *charpoy*, seemingly lifeless as he is lying stretched out on his back and covered with a blanket from head to toes. Behind the church there are three more buildings that are used to accomodate the many volunteers working for the church or the health clinic. One of the buildings, a bricked *pucca* house, is still under construction and is going to become a hostel for the elderly.

While Ramalammah tells me her story, I observe some of the patients around. One woman is obviously mentally disturbed as she is running around on the premises of the church while sometimes laughing uncontrollably and sometimes arguing with the others. Ramalammah points out another woman who comes walking by, and she explains that this one was not able to walk until prayer helped her on her feet. A boy is sitting by himself a few metres away from everybody else. He has been howling silently since I came. A girl, who must be younger than the boy, walks up to him and asks him teasingly what curry (*kussir*) would make him stop crying.

Inside the church, I notice a lengthwise division of the room marked by the mats that are laid out only on the left side. This is where the men are to be seated. Except from the mats, the floor is empty where the congregation is to be seated. In the front section of the church, there is an altar dressed in a white cloth decorated with a red cross and with several small objects on it; one is a crucifix. A much bigger cross is hanging on the wall behind the altar. The pulpit stands on the left side with a microphone attached to it. Except from the many Bible passages that are painted in blue on the walls, there are two images of Christ and two clocks. The image hanging on the second frontmost pillar has the inscription “I am the way, the truth, and the life”. One of the clocks plays a tune every hour. Colourful decorations are hanging from the ceiling. A bell is also hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room. One minute to eleven, the priest rings the bell and the service begins.

³³ A physician whom I once met on the premises of Ramalammah’s church made the point that any person coming from poor economic, dietary and sanitary conditions in the villages, will experience improvement in health with the treatment offered by the church.

As people, especially women, enter the church, they sometimes approach the altar and leave a bag of rice or a few rupees in the small tin pail standing there. All adult women are careful to veil themselves before they sit down and take part in the service. While there is plenty of space on the left side, the women on the right side find themselves increasingly packed together, and at one point Ramalammah stands up and tells them to make room for the women who continue to enter the church long after the service has started. After a while, when there is no more space to the right, women sit down on the left side, a few metres behind the men. I am also asked to move myself, further away from the pillar, so as to give way to the people who come forward to offer gifts. The mentally ill woman is in the end allowed to stay seated in front of the men and next to the priest.

The priest begins with a prayer that is repeated by the congregation. Many stand up on their knees and raise their hands or keep them folded by their chest. The prayer gains in intensity and people get more and more loud, but as the climax approaches the priest finishes, people sit back, and a woman from the congregation takes the word. Still seated and faced towards the altar, she speaks, first silently and controlled, then more and more intensely until she is ecstatic. Most people remain calm, but some respond to her words. While the woman shouts out, Ramalammah walks around and keeps an eye on everything and everyone. She lifts up a child lying on the floor in front of me, seemingly very bored and totally unaffected by the atmosphere. The same goes for the rest of the children, whether they sit with their father on the left or with their mother on the right side. After another prayer led by the priest, another woman starts to speak from the crowd. Her performance follows the same pattern as with the first woman: increasing intensity and with more and more response the closer to ecstasy she gets. Women from the congregation continue to play prominent roles in the service, now also as leaders of the singing. The songs are accompanied by a drum and a tamburine, and by clapping. Both men and women take an active part in singing the hymns and in clapping the rhythm. The hymns are concluded with the priest's "hallelujah!" followed by the same from the congregation. While the singing goes on, a woman sitting on the front row keeps her hands waving over her head and lets herself be carried away by the music. Ramalammah goes in and out of the church all the time, welcoming the latecomers and talking to everybody she meets. She also hands out small pieces of paper to some of the people. I later understand that they are Bible passages and that those who are fortunate to hold a Bible and who knows how to read are asked in this way to read aloud for the whole congregation. A man sitting next to me receives such a note, he then opens up the Bible which he carries in a plastic bag, and later he shares the passage with the rest of the congregation from the pulpit. After more singing and more Bible reading, the priest enters the pulpit and delivers a sermon.

The service has lasted for an hour and fifteen minutes when I say goodbye to Ramalammah and leave the church to the words of the priest. As I walk towards the centre of Chinturu I can still hear his powerful voice from the speakers on the roof.

Apart from the objective that some of the members have of being filled by the holy spirit – hence the ecstasy – this course of events is quite typical for church services also in the other congregations of the area.

The Roman-Catholic church has not penetrated the interior areas in the same manner as has the Protestant CSI-church. It is represented though, in Kadu Kopalli, about 25 kilometres away from Chatti, on the way to Bhadrachalam. Here, Jesuits and nuns from

different parts of India run a centre called Loyola Integrated Tribal Development Society, or LITDS. It was established in 1992 and is sponsored by “our brethren overseas”, as I was told by one of the Jesuits. Even though, among the local people, it goes under the name “the church”, the Jesuit leaders claim to be working merely for the general progress of the tribes, especially within areas such as education, health and women empowerment: “we do not officially propagate”. It is my impression that LITDS has gained a good reputation among the Koyas, and this is reflected by the great number of tribal children, especially girls aged 9-14, enrolled in the school that is run by the centre.

But “indoctrination is taking place on both sides”, the Jesuit told me.³⁴ He was answering my question about differences between the Protestant and the Catholic approach to evangelical work. There is one important difference though, he let me know: the evangelism advocated by the Jesuits and the nuns at the centre is more “indirect, subtle and remote” than that of the representatives of the Protestant churches in the area. Whereas at LITDS the main object is to convert people from “superstitious beliefs” to “scientific thinking” – “evangelization through development, motivation, education and environment” – the Protestants, according to the same Jesuit, are only interested in gaining as many converts as possible, while exploiting the mindset of tribals on their way, so that the end product becomes a kind of Christianity which accommodates animistic beliefs.³⁵ A few days later, I spoke with a Christian man in Chatti about the CSI-church he regularly attends, and his views on evangelization among the tribals. Joshua is himself originally a Hindu and a member of a Scheduled Caste. He has three Koya wives and is a teacher by profession. When I told him about my visit at LITDS, he presented the same dichotomy as did the Jesuit before him, but in favour of the Protestant approach. He said the Catholics make it too difficult for people to convert. They have a different way of translating the Bible, he claimed, a way that makes it less comprehensible to the tribals. Protestants are more flexible as they spread the Gospel by

³⁴ The Jesuit spoke English well, so there was no need for a middleman. I should add that he said this half jokingly, but the choice of words was enough to make a listener who was also working at LITDS, visibly uneasy.

³⁵ It was obviously important for the Jesuit to convince me that the purpose of the centre is not evangelisation *per se*; the social work done by the Jesuits and the nuns is motivated by a desire to eradicate “superstitious beliefs” among the tribals. They see it as important to create an “awareness of the effects of superstitious beliefs”, including “witchcraft problems” and the “worship of natural objects”. In addition, they speak against child labour and child marriages, and engage in issues of importance to the general welfare of villagers. Only after doing away with the animistic beliefs and certain practices considered sinful, like drinking and adultery, people may choose to convert. Whether they choose Hinduism or Christianity is not that important, according to the Jesuit. In order to fully convince me of the sincerity of his words, he claimed they often deny baptism to school children and others who are attracted to the Christian religion; if they are not ready to leave their old lives behind, they are seen as unfit to receive Jesus.

reading (in Telugu) for the illiterates of the villages, and then talk (in Koya or Telugu) about the passages, thereby making them relevant for the people concerned.

Representatives from the Roman-Catholic church and the Protestant church thus seem to see the two as opposite poles when it comes to evangelization. Whereas the Jesuit accused the Protestants of exploiting the innocence of the tribals, Joshua claims the Protestant approach take precedence because they reach more people.

These opinions may only express local variations of evangelization policies. Barbara M. Boal (1963) says about the Kondhs, a neighbouring tribe of the Koyas inhabiting the southern and western parts of Orissa, that some Protestant Kondhs defected to the Roman Catholic community after the arrival of Spanish missionaries in the 1940s and -50s. The reasons for doing this was apparently their attraction to “the more colourful form of worship and [...] the fact that the Roman Catholic community has demanded fewer changes from the old life and its ways” (1963:64). She refers to the lack of restriction on the habit of toddy- and spirit-drinking, which at the time was prohibited for followers of the Baptist Missionary Society that had been present in the Kondh Hills since the end of the 19th century.

In general, when confronted with the Hindu caste system, missionaries of the two denominations employed differing strategies, and, according to Rowena Robinson, the Catholic church proved to be more dynamic in meeting with the hierarchical structures of India: “Catholic missionaries, by not discouraging group conversions, quite frequently ended up working within the framework of caste. Protestants seem to have much more consistently regarded the caste system as an obstacle to evangelization and attempted to foster individual conversions” (Robinson 2003:71). Even though missionaries spoke against the caste system and defended Dalits, thereby contributing to the reformation of the whole system, caste differences are still nurtured within the Christian community.³⁶ Robinson points out that most

³⁶ A church in Chinturu was around Christmas the centre of a feud between church people of different caste backgrounds. The new pastor decided soon after his arrival that the vegetable stalls next to the church building had a negative effect on the presentation of the church. He claimed that the vendors were occupying land that belonged to the church and gave them one month to vacate. The vendors were three women who, according to themselves, had been selling vegetables there for a long time – one of them had been there for 18 years, she said – without experiencing any problems with the church. Before the arrival of the new pastor they had all been going to the church next to their stalls, but now they were not welcome anymore. They refused to vacate and claimed the land belonged to the Gram Panchayat, or town council. On the day of Christmas Eve, they were attacked and beaten by people who wanted them to leave. A week later I spoke with the pastor. In the meantime, the controversy had become a political issue: the Communist Party of India in Bhadrachalam publicly supported the vendors in their struggle. It was the pastor who said that the whole issue was really about caste. While most of the church members, including the pastor himself, were members of Scheduled Castes, the vegetable vendors were so-called OBCs (Other Backward Classes). The problem, said the pastor, was that the vendors gained support from their own caste people, and that these were the same people who did not want to be in physical contact with Scheduled Castes people, or to visit them in their houses.

Christian marriages are caste endogamous and that spatial segregation often is maintained in the church through implicit rules.

Invitations to Christianity

So who are the Christian Koyas and why do they convert? First, the word conversion may be misleading as most people do not convert in a formal manner, for instance by being baptized, and those who go to church every now and then do not necessarily see themselves as Christians. For the purpose of conducting a survey, I chose to treat as Christians or converts those who went to church with some regularity (more often than only on the festive occasions) and who had been going for some time. Table 1 shows the representation of Christians in the sample villages and hamlets.

Village	Households, total	Christian households	Christian households %
Mukunuru	101	12	12 %
Veerapuram, one hamlet	25	11	44 %
Narasapuram, two hamlets	18	14	78 %
Gorrelagudem	14	7	50 %
TOTAL	158	44	28 %

Table 1: A Christian household is here defined by at least one adult member going regularly to church. The sample villages and hamlets were chosen because of there being a significant number of Christians, and the figures presented should not be seen as showing the prevalence of Christianity.

In both Mukunuru and Veerapuram, people started going to church about 10-15 years ago. In Narasapuram, no person has been going to church for more than five years, while in Gorrelagudem they started converting after a small church was set up on the outskirts of the village about ten years ago. This church is no longer in use and all Christians of Gorrelagudem now visit Ramalammah's church in Chinturu.

15-20 years ago, going to church was associated with a considerable risk for the average Koya. Most villages in the area had only a couple of Christian families or no Christians at all. Sanctions for turning Christian were usually both formal, as in the judgements made by the *kula panchayat*, and informal, as people were cut off from social interaction with neighbours and kin. Stories are told about people who got their tongues burnt

and who were beaten on a regular basis. The first woman to become Christian in Mukunuru, Bajammah Pujari, experienced harassment and was beaten by her own relatives in the village. She resisted their methods, and today Bajammah is the president of the church committee in the village and is no longer the only Christian. As time passed, more and more people started going to church, and the oppression that Bajammah suffered in the beginning decreased proportionally. Though her non-Christian relatives are still not happy about her choice of leaving the old deities behind, she claims to hold nothing against them, and every year she invites them to Christmas dinner together with the rest of the villagers. Bajammah's story resonates well with what Boal wrote about the Christian Kondhs some decades ago:

In most cases of conversion leading to entry into a minority group of Christians, tensions arise either within the extended family or with the village community [...] If the number of Christians is small, it may lead for a time to total ostracism, which dissociates the Christian catechumen from all privileges of the village, refusing participation in labour (thus causing economic loss), refusing access to the local water supply, or comfort in times of sorrow, and even withholding help in death rites (Boal 1963:109).

Christian Koyas of Chintur have been through the same process, only later. About 15 years ago, after the death of the first Christian man in a small hamlet called Madkamgudem of Narasapuram, the family of the dead experienced the problems mentioned by Boal. The other villagers refused to go through with the death rites that usually demand the participation of the whole village, in addition to kin from other places. The family had to promise not to return to church, only then would their husband and father be cremated and honoured with the rites. And so they did. But as soon as the first mortuary ceremony (*dinal*) had been performed, due to financial problems the family chose to go back to church. This led again to condemnation by their fellow villagers, and the ceremony which is traditionally held 21 days after the death occurs was never performed.

In many villages though, people are still not certain about what to make of Christianity. People differ widely in their expectations of the impact that Christianity may have on their lives or on the social arena made up by both Christians and non-Christians. I will return in chapter four to a more thorough discussion of the implications of conversion on marriage rules and the kinship system. Suffice it to mention here that my data shows that Christian Koyas have a clear tendency to form new endogamous groups within the old ones. They are thus actively drawing new boundaries between themselves and the non-Christian Koyas. As a woman in Narasapuram concluded after the marriage alliance between her brother and a non Christian woman proved unsuccessful: such a relationship would never

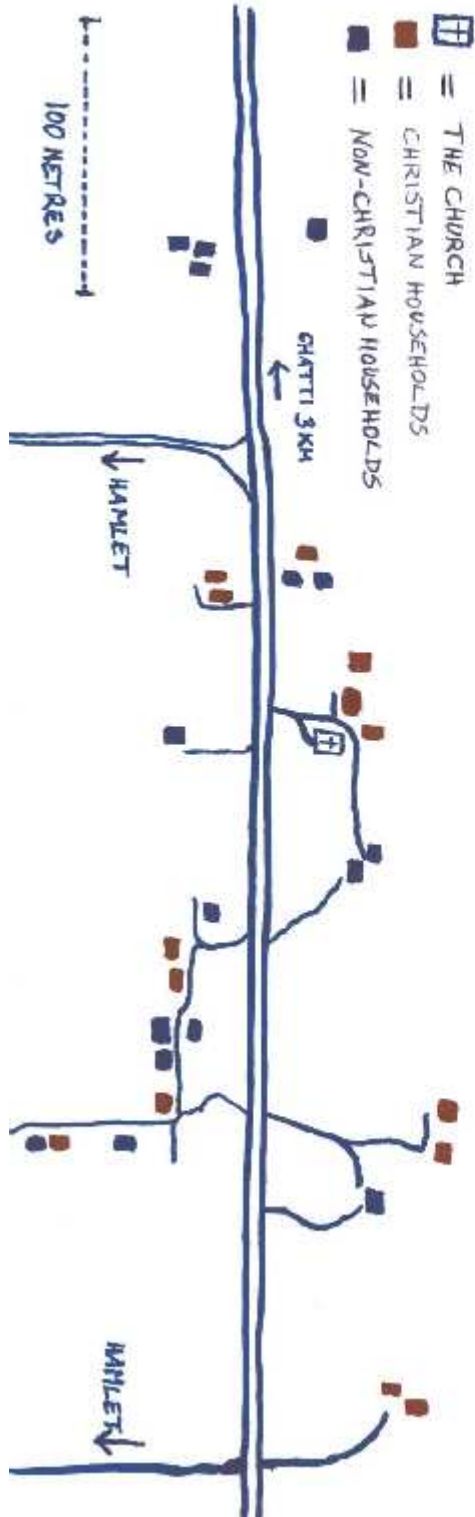


Figure 2: Village map showing the distribution of Christian and non-Christian households around the church in Mettagumpu or “Roadgumpu” hamlet of Veerapuram, and a photograph of the Good Samaritan Evangelical Lutheran Church (GSELC), which is situated by the *pucca* road between Chatti and Konta (Chhattisgarh), as marked in the map. The high proportion of Christians here may suggest the importance of proximity to churches, as there are very few Christians in the other hamlets, located about half a kilometre away. At the same time, there are people who on a regular basis come to this church from villages several kilometres away, thereby choosing away churches that are more easily available to them.

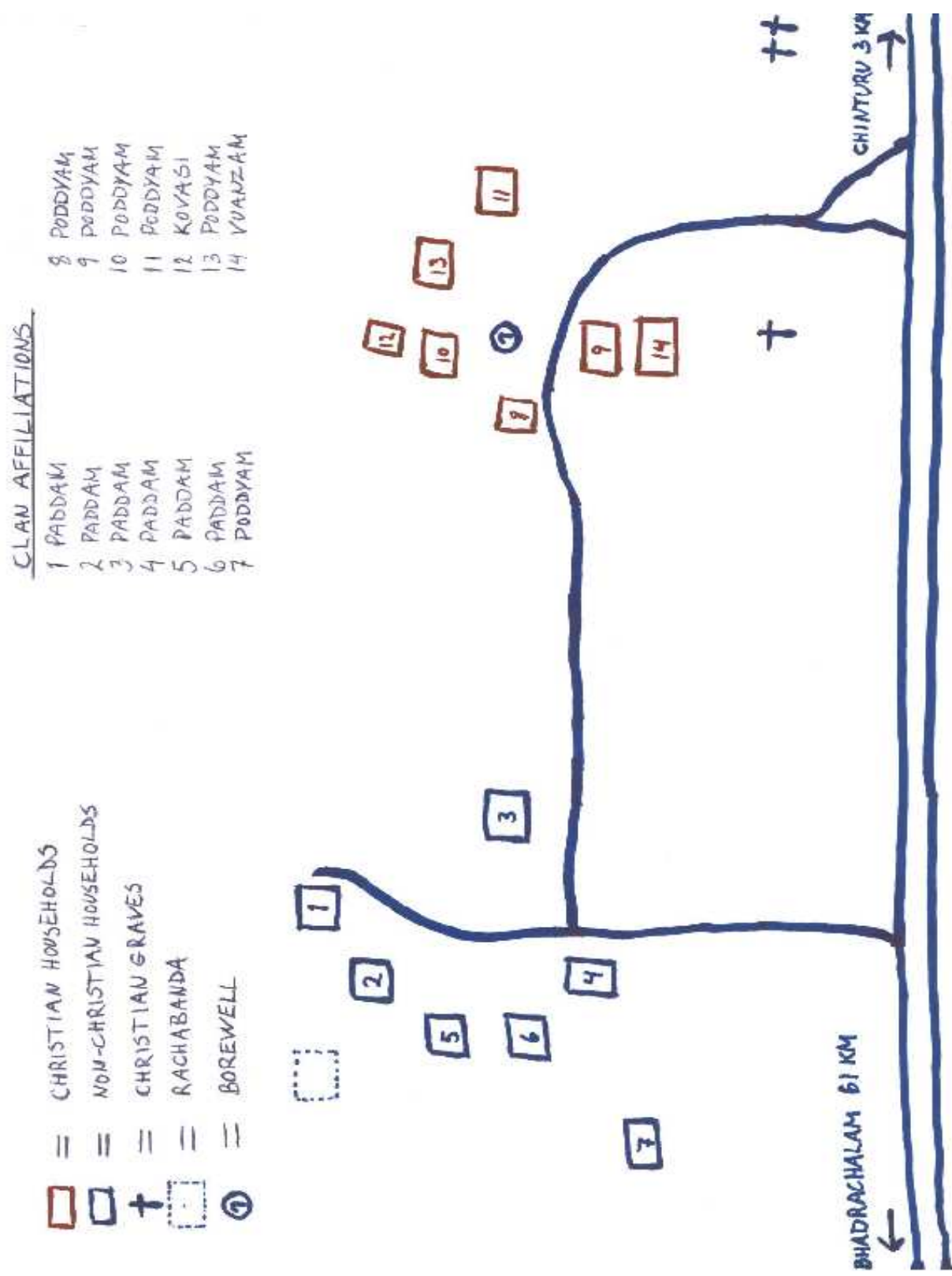


Figure 3: Village map of Gorrelagudem illustrating the tendency of group conversions. A modest church that was built around 1996 and located between the two house clusters was torn down only six years after, reportedly because the pastor in charge stopped showing up. The village is located by the *pucca* road leading to Bhadrachalam. The two house clusters are connected by a path.

work unless the non-Christian takes an interest in and adapts to the Christian way of life. I have already presented examples of the possible implications of participation and non-participation in traditional rituals (chapter two). Whereas the Koya people as a whole once was able to use these rituals as identity markers against any non-Koya elements, identities are today re-negotiated as the Christian section of Koya villages normally choose not to be part of them any more.

I once attended a wedding reception together with my friend and assistant Ramaiah. He had received an invitation because of his friendship with the bride's father. The wedding stood between two Christians, and the reception was held in the groom's village, Ratnapuram. Ramaiah made me realize that an invitation, whatever it is about, always implies an obligation to make arrangements so that at least one member of the family is present at the occasion. It is usually a woman who is assigned such a mission; his wife had been in Christian weddings before, while Ramaiah had not. The obligation is fulfilled by the consumption of a meal. This was especially evident in Ratnapuram, where the Christian ceremony, including readings of Bible passages and singing of hymns, postponed the meal, leaving a number of non-Christian men from different villages hungry and impatiently waiting. When the ceremony was over, the groom's father turned to the men and apologised to them for the inconvenience. Ramaiah and I ate our food and went straight home. Ramaiah was upset with the treatment at the reception. While he had a good time making fun of the advice the pastors had given to the newlyweds, he was very concerned about the people who had come to the reception by foot from villages far into the forests. Some of them had left already before the serving of meals, he said.

Wedding celebrations among the Koyas traditionally lasted for three days. Nowadays, it is custom to celebrate for one day only, and this applies to both Christian and non-Christian weddings. As it is not common on these occasions to accommodate friends and distant relatives, but only close kin, the one thing invitees seem to demand is a proper meal before they return to their own villages.

The reactions following the failure of the groom's father to serve the meals in time and thus to reciprocate the visit of friends and relatives, illustrate the obligations attached to an invitation in the Koya culture. The significance of invitations was revealed to me in a different fashion a week later. I had been spending the day visiting people in Mettagumpu hamlet of Veerapuram, and I had reached the last house. There lived a Koya family of five. The husband gave me all the details I asked for, mostly quantitative information, and in this the household did not differ from the other households of the hamlet. A question I asked in all

households was whether or not any of the members visit church. This family did not go to church and they never had. As Christmas was around the corner, I asked whether they were planning to go to the local church for Christmas dinner, as both Christians and non-Christians of the village gather there on Christmas Day. The man became annoyed and said he had never received an invitation, so how could he possibly show up in the church? If he ever received such an invitation, he would surely go.

Most Koyas who go to church do so because they were once recommended to go by a friend, neighbour or relative. It may also be that the pastor of the church look people up in their homes and convince them to come to church. In Mukunuru, this kind of missionary activity is enthusiastically carried out by Ramalammah Mosam, the pastor from one of the churches in Chinturu. She travels around in all nearby villages in an auto rickshaw broadcasting her message through loudspeakers attached to the roof. She also talks directly to the villagers, and every year before Christmas she gathers them for a small candle light ceremony. Venkatrammah is one of those who listens to what Ramalammah has to say, and, whether out of respect, loyalty or necessity, she tends to show up in “Ramalammah’s church” after such field trips. Other than that she never goes to church. Her friend Bajammah, who has responsibilities in the local church (see above), is not only happy about the missionary from Chinturu; the more people she attracts the less people visit Mukunuru’s own church. On the other hand, it is obvious that the church in Mukunuru could have had more visitors if only the pastor, who is based in Bhadrachalam, had not been absent from every other Sunday service. The fact that most churchgoers from Mukunuru choose to go, by walk or otherwise, five kilometres every Sunday instead of visiting “their own” church, shows that while Ramalammah invites and keeps her word by taking good care of her visitors, the pastor from Bhadrachalam does not meet the expectations of the Mukunuru people. Clearly, by being a native Koya herself, Ramalammah has an advantage compared to the non-tribal pastor from the city, as she has no language gap to bridge and, most importantly, as she speaks from her own experience as a Christian against the background of her being a Koya like all the rest.³⁷

Motivations

Bajammah’s daughter must have been around three years old (now she is around 18) when a man came to their house and advised them to visit a church in order to cure the daughter from the sickness she suffered from. They

³⁷ Even though Koyas in the area can understand Telugu perfectly well, their attitude towards a non-Koya is sometimes related to whether or not they are addressed in their own language. At the end of my stay I was assisted by a Muslim man who is fluent in Koya, and the way we were welcomed and trusted with information – pretty much the same way as I was with a Koya assistant – illustrated this point to me.

started going to the CSI-church in Chinturu, and since the daughter was cured they have kept going to church ever since, only now in Mukunuru. The daughter, who suffers from a paralysis of some kind, has later had setbacks and she is disabled to the extent that she cannot contribute to the household economy by doing physical work in the fields. But Bajammah insists that prayer heals. In addition to a general improvement in health due to prayer, she claims that blessings from the pastor help keeping snakes away when she moves around in the fields. The protection is manifested in a small bottle of natural coconut oil that she first brings to church, then keeps at her side whenever she is out working.

Venkammah and Veeraiah Pisam, a couple in their thirties, are both natives of Veerapuram. They live in a house by themselves; their son and two daughters all died within their first years. The house next to theirs used to belong to Venkammah's father, but he died shortly after my first visit. The two daughters had already been taken away from them when Venkammah herself became seriously ill six or seven years ago. She feared for her life. A pastor, who is well-known in the area because of his evangelical work and as having given his name to a college in Bhadrachalam, encouraged her to go to a church in Kunavaram Mandal, tens of kilometres away. She stayed there for about two weeks and fully recovered. Venkammah and her husband continued frequenting the same church until the same pastor established a church in their own village about two years ago. They now visit this church every Sunday, and every Friday too if the pastor is there. As most other Christians in Veerapuram, the family has stopped going to the seasonal Koya festivals, but Venkammah says there is no tension between Christians and non-Christians because "we support them [with money for the sacrificial animals] whenever there is a festival". They have stopped visiting the *vadde* (medicine man/woman) too; when they get sick they go first to the church, and if still not well they go and visit a doctor in Chinturu.

Pullaiah Mosam, another resident of Veerapuram, only rarely goes to church. But eight years ago, because of the sickness of his oldest daughter, he went to visit the church in the Red Cross building in Chatti. He prayed and the daughter recovered. Since then, whenever anyone in the family gets sick, they always go to church for prayer instead of visiting a doctor or *vadde*. They once went to a hospital for treatment, but as the treatment did not work, they never returned. Today he has two daughters, seven and 15 years old, and they are both encouraged by their father to visit church. Pullaiah says he would go to church more often himself, had it not been for all the agricultural work. But on Christmas Day the whole family, including his wife, are present at the Christmas dinner in the church. Pullaiah also takes part in the traditional Koya festivals.

In all the examples above, people are motivated to go to church by the pursuit of good health. For most Christian-turned Koyas, Christianity represents a possible remedy for sickness and suffering. In this, the church is no different from other sacred places, like Hindu temples or the river Ganges, and places perceived as beneficial are seen as centres of their religious universe. Koyas are not spiritually motionless; they are constantly seeking to be in the presence of the divine and to be receptive to it. In Hinduism, *darsan* is the act of seeing the gods and being seen by them (Eck 1998). Koyas, like Hindus, are attracted to the concept of

pilgrimage, to go places where they can see and be seen, and their religion is by tradition polycentric and pluralistic, like Hinduism.

In Sarivela, a village by the road to Bhadrachalam, this pluralism was expressed by the reeling off of sacred places – both churches, temples, mosques and natural places like rivers – as a mantra performed by a female *vadde*. She had received a patient with stomachache, and the procedure was said to be standard. A *vadde* in Koya society is a person who offers treatment of simple diseases by performing mantras and by using herbs and a variety of items in a symbolic display. There is traditionally at least one *vadde* in each village. One can find both male and female *vaddes* – in Sarivela, all five are women – and there is apparently no differentiation of patients because of their sex. People typically turn to *vaddes* when they suffer from fever or with stomach- or headache. Because of their claimed knowledge of herbal medicines, *vaddes* are trusted also by those who are literate and who sometimes go to the allopathic doctor.³⁸ They do not see anything contradictory about this, as the doctor and the *vadde* offer different types of treatment. Interestingly, both treatments, not only the traditional one, are usually discredited by Christian Koyas. Those who continue going to church after the first invitation do so whole-heartedly, convinced by the stories of healing to the extent that they, if they ever have, no longer believe in the biomedicine represented by the physician in Chinturu. The choice of discrediting the *vadde* is not surprising given that it is a strong injunction from almost all congregations, together with non-participation in the Koya festivals. The command of living a decent life, as defined by the congregations, implies a full re-birth where the choices made have consequences for the social life within the Koya community, and not only for the life of each individual. Apart from the absolute demand of monotheism, there are concrete injunctions of staying away from alcohol, gambling and adultery. While establishing these rules of conduct, the pastors know too well that most Koyas expect to benefit from visiting their church, if not in health then in economy and general welfare, and that in many instances “Jesus Christ is the last step”, as one pastor told me. The injunctions or demands for membership in the church and for being considered for baptism, are very much subject to personal interpretation among believers.

In Barbara Boal’s (1963) account of the Christian Kondhs, she does not put this much emphasis on the aspect of sickness and health. In her description, what seems to be the most crucial factor for Christian-turned Kondhs is the expense of traditional rituals including animal sacrifice: “*We have no money left for more sacrifices*’, ‘*we can’t pay the priest’s*

³⁸ My Koya assistant, for instance, claimed that he did not believe in the effect of the mantras, but he was certain of the great knowledge of the *vaddes* when it comes to herbs.

fees', or one man, *'I have used up all the pigs in the village and still he (the priest) says, 'sacrifice a pig', 'we are being destroyed' (economically)'* (1963:107). Apart from sheer economic pressure, or probably working together with it, comes the loss of faith in the non-Christian priest, and the social security offered when the majority in the village have become Christian. All these aspects are highly relevant to the Koya case as well. The cost of the animal sacrifices is a matter that is subject to debate among both Christian and non-Christian Koyas, since most Christians do not participate in the festivals and the consumption of the meat but still contribute economically. The fact that animal sacrifice has been reduced in some of the villages on these occasions, may be due to the presence of Christianity.

In the Koya society, more women than men go to church. Through an informal counting of men and women present at church services in different congregations, I concluded that around 70 % of Koya churchgoers are females. This estimated number seemed surprisingly stable from church to church. It is especially visible in churches that practice a strict gender-based segregation as for instance "Ramalammah's church", where on Sundays there is plenty of space on the left side, where the men are seated, while on the right side women sit packed together. Most congregations practice the same kind of segregation, but usually to a lesser extent, something that is often illustrated by the more accidental positioning of children and adolescents of both sexes. The invisible borders are strengthened through the veiling of women, which is practiced in almost all congregations, and which is another direct manifestation of biblical orders (1 Corinthians 11, 4-6), like the refusal of eating sacrificial meat.

In Veerapuram, many men do as Pullaiah Mosam from the story above and go to church only on special occasions and when meals are served. The pastor does not see anything wrong about this. He says the men are tied up in their work and do not have time to visit church. Besides, they get drunk: "many of them are probably drunk already", he told me before the service started one Sunday morning in the beginning of the toddy season. Whether the pastor was simply referring to the men's priority of palm wine before church service, or whether he was stating that drunkards are not welcome in his church, was not clear from the conversation.

We should acknowledge the possibility that women differ from men in their reasons and motivations for going to church. In discussing women and religion, Linda Woodhead argues that "women participate in religions because these offer social spaces for the articulation of their lives, fears and desires" (Woodhead 2002:352). In any society, heavy drinking may lead to economic marginalisation and other social problems, and women may

find in Christianity “an authorized discourse with which to check any womanizing, drinking and gambling on the part of their husbands” (Stewart 1994:18-19). The quotation refers to the situation of Jim Kiernan’s (1994) Zulu Zionists, but it could have referred to a number of Christian-Charismatic movements around the world as well. Following Kiernan, we see that forms of Christianity represent a moral code that women may find more attractive:

The prescriptions of the Puritan code place no additional burden on women but place a shackle on characteristically male pursuits. Thus Zionist men are confined to monogamous marriage, they are restrained from squandering their earnings on typical male activities such as drinking, gambling and the promiscuous chase, and they are enjoined to invest their income in the support of home and family (Kiernan 1994:79).

Alcohol consumption on part of the men is thus one possible factor that may explain the higher participation of Koya women in church.

From the many stories that Koya people have shared with me on their becoming Christian, some tendencies may be seen. First, the conversions taking place are mainly conversions of whole families or households; secondly, the family or household is more often represented in church by a female than by a male member; and thirdly, going to church and praying are perceived by churchgoers as acts of caring for themselves and their families. If we for a moment consider these assertions as being true about the Christian Koyas, they do not seem to fit with the idea of Koya society as a male-dominated society. We must assume that, in the case of family or household conversions, the decision to convert is very much dependent on the consent of the household head, who is usually a male. If the decision is based on the argument of improved health, improved economy and so on, why would the household head leave the task of gaining insight into the religion offering these things to his wife or anyone else? While non-Christian Koyas maintain prohibitions against women participating in or even coming close to the rituals at the *gamam* or at the *pelligondhi*, the women have taken a prominent position among Christian Koyas. The most important reason for this is probably that the ritual aspect is not emphasised in most Koyas’ understanding of Christianity, and that they rather give weight to its power of healing disease – a more instrumental interpretation. While, as we have seen, there have been internal disputes over the spread of Christianity among the Koyas, Christian Koyas today may use the argument that prayer heals in order to keep their religion apart from traditional beliefs, in a different sphere. By doing so, they may practice their religion and still stay on good terms with the *pedda*, the

pujari, and the non-Christian majority. But as Christianity is seemingly essentialized in this manner, Koya men, who enjoy the secrecy and the fraternity of traditional rituals, do not feel attracted to church activities that are open to all, and whether going to church is seen as a sacrifice for the family or as a choice based on personal interest, female churchgoers create a sense of community where traditional statuses do not apply and where all are equal. Where procurement of good health is the pivotal motivation, which is usually the case, families and households seem to calculate the gain and loss of going for a Sunday service. Where a choice is made, the wife usually attends the service while the husband stays at home or keeps himself busy with work.

An important distinction goes between seeing the act of going to church as an expression of individual belief or as an expression of the intentions of a corporate group – the family or household. Are Koya women simply more attracted to Christianity than Koya men? And in that case, for what reasons? I thought for some time that the prevalence of single Christian women might help to shed some light on the distinction between personal interests and collective gains, and that this group might explain the high percentage of women going to church. But I found that only a few widows and unmarried and divorced women had taken an initiative and started going to church by themselves. There is usually a man behind the decision, whether the Christian belief is inherited by birth or adopted at a later stage. And where the single women had apparently adopted Christianity on their own initiative, the reasons stated were the same as in the other cases.

The fact that most people refer to sickness and health as the prime motivation for becoming Christian or going to church, should be interpreted through a wider understanding of the need for social security. In a society where the vast majority still depends on a small surplus from agricultural operations, physical disability and alcoholism leads to economic marginalisation. A widow from Mukunuru illustrated the point in a way that took me by surprise. When I asked her what kind of people go to the same church as her, she said that “*both sick people and employees go there*”. She thus introduced me to a dichotomy that spelled out the wish for good health and social security in a fresh and expressive manner. By comparing herself and her peers with people who make money – be they Koyas or non-Koyas, she made it painstakingly obvious that sickness is the defining characteristic that turn

people into Christians; but at the same time, there are others who go to church for other reasons – reasons that do not apply to the sick.³⁹

Is Koya Christianity a religious syncretism or a Koya religion?

Syncretism, according to *Palgrave Dictionary of Anthropology*, is “the combination or blending of elements from different religious (or cultural) traditions” (Seymour-Smith 1986:274). To this, Niels Mulder adds that the blending takes place “without resolving basic differences of principle” (Mulder 2000:7). Originally conceived by Plutharch, the term was coined with negative connotations with the so-called “syncretistic controversies” of the 17th century, where the unification of the Protestant denominations and reunion with the Catholic Church was advocated (Stewart 1999). The term was to be heavily employed in the missionary fields of Africa during colonisation, as different interpretations of orthodox Christianity gained ground among the local populations – interpretations that were considered illegitimate by the missionaries. According to Charles Stewart, the anthropologist left all definitory power regarding this concept to the missionary:

Anthropologists could describe the sociocultural form of religious beliefs, but they were not in a position to judge the validity of these beliefs. Apparently, anthropologists implicitly accepted that syncretism was a theological concern. The term was thus surrendered to theologians and missionaries, who preserved its negative connotations. And these could never be kept entirely out of anthropological discourse (Stewart 1999:46).

This is why a number of alternative terms have been suggested at different points of time. Stewart himself, although initially claiming to take into account the reservations that many anthropologists have about the term, and although admitting that anthropological assessments of syncretism may affect the social context under scrutiny, ends up keeping the term as an analytical concept including in itself the distinctions of “synthesis, evolution, harmonization, disintegration, absorption, equivalence, amalgamation, and so on” (Stewart 1999:58).

According to Rowena Robinson, Christianity in India has typically been treated as un-authentic and syncretic, especially because of studies of caste among Indian Christians (Robinson 2003). Against the background of the Hindu religion, which has proved its ability to incorporate elements of other religions, in addition to the all-encompassing influence of

³⁹ A similar distinction was implied in a conversation with the pastor in one of the congregations in Chinturu. I was told that the congregation had both tribal and non-tribal members – “yes, job-holders too”, as if describing a segment of the non-tribal section.

caste, this may not be surprising. Christians living in India negotiate their identities within a social and political context that is dominated by the Hindu majority, and claims of self-ascribed Christian identities are thus confronted with scholarly claims of syncretism.

As we have seen, the practices of Christian Koyas depart from doctrinal Christianity in significant ways as they reflect the animistic beliefs of traditional Koya society. While the practice of caste brands the Christian-turned Hindus after *their* conversion, it is the belief itself which is questioned about the Koya converts, as did the Jesuit when speaking of the Protestant congregations and their inclination to nurture Christianity by exploiting tribal beliefs. And while Christians in Hindu society explain their parallel worship of Hindu deities by saying they are merely “appealed to for mundane, ‘this-worldly’ ends such as gaining prosperity or curing illness” (Stewart 1999:57), Christian Koyas are aware that *their* old gods and goddesses are not welcome in the new religion, and they are worshipped only in secrecy, if at all.

The problem of how to refer to the section of Koya society that goes to church has already been addressed, as I have chosen to treat as Christians those who go regularly to church and who have been going for some time. What follows is a discussion of the theoretical implications of identifying a Christian community originated from a tribal society. I have taken the term syncretism as a starting point for the discussion, a term that, for most scholars, has negative connotations. Those who are able to articulate their objections refer to syncretism as “a pejorative term, one that derides mixture”, and/or they claim that it “presupposes ‘purity’ in the traditions that combine” (Stewart 1999:40-41). The question of whether or not the use of *syncretism* may be defended as a description of religious or cultural mixture, is put in perspective by the objections from people who themselves have been embraced by the term, for instance the Zionist congregations of South Africa (Comaroff 1985). Even though they may accept the influence of different traditions, as people learn what the term syncretism means they defend the existence and the practice of their religion in its own right.

Some of the alternative concepts that have come up, like hybridisation and creolisation, have at times been juxtaposed to syncretism as descriptions of the products of globalization. Most anthropologists are reluctant to use them, as they too came into existence through eurocentrism and racism. Mulder writes about the Filipinization of Catholicism as a case illustrating the *localization* of foreign elements in a new context. By using the term localization, he appreciates the need for a “local root, a native stem onto which they [the foreign elements] can be grafted” (Mulder 2003:8). This is similar to glocalization, which is a

term that has been employed to emphasise the way globalised elements are being re-negotiated and re-stated in the local context wherever they appear.

Since what I am trying to analyse is the Koyas' conversions to Christianity, we should look more closely at how Christianity has been adopted elsewhere in order to make comparisons.

Jean Comaroff's *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985) presents South African Zionism among the Tshidi of southern Tswana as a unique sociocultural phenomenon and as "a product of a dialectical interaction between indigenous social forms and elements of more general currency in the culture of colonialism" (1985:194). Already in the early years of the 20th century, while the construction of apartheid policy was initiated, African Independent churches that rejected the political hegemony of white orthodoxy were established. They came to life, says Comaroff, as a reaction to conquest. But the resistance was articulated on the background of conditions that had been laid down by the missionaries and the colonialists: "Protest was framed in terms of the orthodox Protestant categories" (1985:176). Evangelical Methodism, which had facilitated the extension of a colonial administration, had provided the people with a *lingua franca* through which the hierarchical relationship between coloniser and colonised was moulded and the proletarianisation of the black population made possible. With Zionism, the articulation of resistance took a new form.

'Zionism' was to construct a symbolic order in direct opposition to that of Protestant orthodoxy and the rational, dualistic worldview it presupposed. Through its key metaphor of healing, it emphasized the reintegration of matter and spirit, the practical agency of divine force, and the social relocation of the displaced; in short, it drew together everything that had been set apart in the black experience of colonialization and wage labor (1985:176).

Whereas the Methodist congregations were founded on the Calvinistic dogma of working one's way to salvation, the Zionist movement, which originated in Chicago in 1896, came to replace salvation with health. The movement was based on the reunification of spirit and matter, and the world was to be acted upon, healed and cleansed by faithfuls able to control themselves and their material surroundings. Bodily metaphors provided a model that reconstituted man's relationship with the surroundings; "in the Zionist scheme, the consciousness of marginality was framed in terms of the loss of 'original' integrity; and the sense of loss entailed in alienation was described as the uncoupling of man and God, body and spirit, self and other, and church and state" (1985:181). Such an explanatory model could

never be provided by the dominant ideology of Protestant industriousness and utilitarian individualism, and when Zionism entered South Africa, the marginalised black migrant workers became especially susceptible.

Articulation, dialectics, symbolism and *bricolage* are key terms used by Comaroff to describe the environment in which Zionism made its appeal. She defines articulation as “the joining of systems”, a concept that is to make sense of the “multilevel process of engagement which follows the conjuncture of sociocultural systems” (1985:153-54). She refers to the resultant ritualized resistance from the articulation between the Tshidi world and the colonial order as a *bricolage*, a term that she has borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss. In Comaroff’s usage, *bricolage* is an inherently contradictory set of symbols and practices originating in two distinct sociocultural systems, and serving as the means through which a message of protest and resistance is carried. Referring to Lévi-Strauss, she claims that “all symbolic innovations are *bricolages*, concoctions of symbols already freighted with significance by a meaningful environment” (1985:197).

In spite of the inability of the Tshidi to construct a suitable language for expressing their resistance and their subjectivity, Zionism has, in Comaroff’s eyes, proved remarkably durable among them.

To say that the Christian conversions taking place among the Koyas is a “reaction to conquest” would be wrong, as there is no easily identifiable conqueror such as a colonial power. But just as the restrictions on land ownership for the black were introduced in the beginning of the 20th century, and the necessity of taking up wage labour marginalised the Tshidi in the South African economy, the Koyas too have a history of land alienation and marginalisation. Their land has in recent times been taken away from them by non-tribal landlords who exploit their illiteracy and their lack of knowledge about bureaucracy and business. There are numerous examples of so-called *benami* transfers where land records are manipulated and land is taken by force. In the process, Koya families are turned into agricultural labourers on what used to be their own land. A quick review of my own data shows that the numbers of land owners and agricultural labourers are about equal, while *kuli* workers (doing low status jobs such as sweeping) make up a third large category. Being deprived of inherited land is especially painful to a people who believe the nature around them is animated by spirits and ancestors. Land alienation in the case of the Koyas is certainly more than being deprived of land; it is experienced as a disruption of their relationship with the spirit world and thereby as a breach between themselves and their *homeland*. The greatest trial will be the displacement of people following the building of the Polavaram dam.

The feeling of alienation is further due to the general and hastened integration of Koya society into the greater society during the last few decades, including the construction of roads and the bridge across Sabari, the establishment of business enterprises, and the extension of monetary transactions into traditional spheres of society. The ethnic diversity is causing distress because of the resultant mixed marriages. And it is not only the non-tribals who at times are seen as invaders. Also the Gotthi Koyas, coming as refugees from the Naxalite conflict in Chhattisgarh, are sometimes pictured as occupants, especially because their cultivation methods are said to be exhausting the soil, thus creating a further pressure on land resources.

In these times of distress, it may be even more true that Jesus Christ, as the pastor said, is “the last step”, and that Koyas turn to Christianity in search for a remedy that may not only cure themselves but also the society at large. As we have seen, the concerns of Christian Koyas are most importantly here among the living. As with the Tshidi Zionists, their aim is not to achieve salvation and to secure the afterlife, but to gain good health, security and protection from danger and misfortune here and now. If they do not experience any palpable results from their prayers and church-visits, they are likely to either start going to a different church with a different pastor, or they quit going to church altogether and discount Christianity as a solution to their problems. This is not to say that Koyas are unable to develop a Christian faith with ideas about Heaven and salvation. The pure instrumentalism applies only to the initial stage of the conversion process, where one is invited to the church while knowing little or nothing about it; if one continues to go, a bond is established to the congregation and its leaders and members, Christian practices become more and more meaningful to the individual, and his or her world view may change.

The symbolic construction of the Christian Koya community is only in the making, as is illustrated by their differing responses to mainstream Koya society: most of them refuse to take part in the traditional rituals, but many of them pay their share for the ritual sacrifices, and some even choose to participate in the rituals while still going to church every Sunday. Such a choice is experienced as very significant by the Koyas themselves, be they Christians or non-Christians. While recognising that healing is an important metaphor also in the traditional rituals, I would like to propose that the central distinction for the Christian Koyas in articulating their world views goes between tradition on one side, represented by the loyalty to the *pujari* and the *pedda*, and healing on the other, represented by the loyalty to one of the Christian congregations.

I am not suggesting that converted Koyas turn down tradition altogether, but as they learn to know how the church regards their traditions, they adopt a polarised understanding of the relationship between Koya culture and Christianity. This new consciousness is moulded by the experience of being continuously confronted with two options, where one is always regarded as heathen and wrong in the representations made by the church: polytheism or monotheism, polygyny or monogamy, drinking or abstinence, and so on. But even though these choices provide the Christian Koyas with the symbolic material to build a community with norms and conventions, their motivations for becoming Christian are obviously rooted in their old life-styles. In Mulder's understanding of localization, there is always a "local root" or a "native stem" onto which the foreign elements are grafted. In the case of Christian Koyas, the context of land alienation, immigration and economic marginalisation have made their traditional rituals less meaningful; *homelessness*, the feeling of losing their *homeland* where spirits and ancestors reside, may be the local root explaining the ideological re-orientation and their attachment to the church. Thus, while recognizing that Koya traditions and rituals may have changed during the years, there is today a dialectical interaction with Christian beliefs and practices wherein (the practices of) healing and tradition are the important identity markers between Koyas and Christian Koyas.

By making use of Jean Comaroff's vocabulary originally employed on the case of South-African Zionists, I have indicated that there are continuous negotiations taking place between two widely differing traditions. We may well call the practices of Christian Koyas a syncretism or a *bricolage*, as they are products of a dialectical interaction involving two traditions that do not resolve the contradictions between them. But we should also acknowledge the possibility of two separate cultural systems existing side by side, as Joel Robbins shows with the Christian Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004b). He holds the view that a people guided by two cultural systems such as the Urapmin, will develop a distinct hybrid culture that is systematic in the sense that a certain predictability may be expected. The Christian Urapmin do not lead harmonious lives as they are troubled by two conflicting moral systems. Christian morality, as the Urapmin understand it, condemns the free will, and as people talk about their will and the problems resulting from it, they become convinced of their own sinfulness. Robbins writes of this troubled state as a cultural expression, not as culture in the making. He does not treat the Urapmin as cultural commuters or as unfinished products of globalization, but as representatives of a culture in its own right. Referring to Friedman, he claims that "it is not the origin of its elements but the way they are

synthesized that is the specificity of a culture'. Once this is recognized, it is clear that the hybridity theorists are attacking a straw man" (2004b:331).

Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, while defending the use of the term syncretism, argue against the tendency of Western scholars on globalization of ironizing over "the others". I allow myself an extensive reproduction from the introduction of *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (1994).

We have recently acquired an englobing appetite for the irony of apparently incongruous cultural syntheses, which have in many ways become icons of postmodernism – 'Trobriand Cricket'; the Igbo 'White Man' masquerade on the cover of 'The Predicament of Culture' (Clifford 1988). One reason we find these so attractive, we suppose, is because we can perceive them as already broken into parts, as deconstructed in advance. 'Invention of culture' writings have demonstrated the strong political significance of syncretism and hybridization in their emphasis on the challenge that such reconstruction poses to essentialized colonial representations and to Western modernist forms of consciousness in general. But they also suit our current taste for the ironic and, far from posing a challenge to us, confirm our totalizing postmodern paradigms. And just as colonial power entailed the categorizing of people into essentialized 'tribal' entities with fixed boundaries ('you are the Igbo'), anthropological hegemony now entails taking apart practices and identities which are phenomenological realities for those who use them ('your tradition is invented'). In our enthusiasm for deconstructing syncretic traditions we may have invented another kind of intellectual imperialism (Shaw and Stewart 1994:22-3).

To acknowledge a culture that is founded on two or more incongruous traditions is not the same as throwing 'syncretism' overboard. The theoretical perspectives of Robbins (2004b) and Shaw and Stewart (1994) do not contradict the 'dialectics' and 'articulation' approach of Comaroff (1985). As the Christian Koyas continue their negotiations with tradition, the predictability grows stronger and a cultural system may be recognised. But even today, although Christian Koyas have extremely diverse ways of making sense of their lives and their deepest beliefs, they should not, in an academic exercise, be deprived of being part of a culture.

The Christian Koyas as a community

In the Koya context, where religious rituals are considered statements about the community, the presence of Christianity has the potential to create new boundaries from the degree of loyalty towards tradition. Only after the initial phase, in which Christianity normally is practised in secrecy by a handful of villagers, the symbolic construction of their Christian

community begins as more villagers join in; the secrecy of the first Christians comes to an end and sanctions from the non-Christian villagers become fewer. But Christians do not agree on the drawing of boundaries between themselves and the rest of the Koya society. Sometimes a clear choice is made between tradition and the new religion, but very often people end up in ambiguous positions and the symbolic boundaries of the Christian community remain vague.

Christianity in Koya society is a symbolic innovation that is “already freighted with significance by a meaningful environment” (Comaroff 1985:197). What does this mean to the people who are trying to assert a Christian faith in the midst of an animistic society? It means that the authenticity and the rationality of their beliefs may be questioned; their Christian beliefs are compared both with the traditional Koya beliefs and with the “true” biblical dogmas. Edmund Leach overrides the discussion about the difficulties of the content of belief altogether: “To ask questions about the content of belief which are not contained in the content of ritual is nonsense... Ritual action and belief are alike to be understood as forms of symbolic statements about the social order” (Leach in Needham 1972:6). To this, some may say that ritual as collective representations loses meaning if the individuals do not adhere to the same interpretations of it – the outsider expects the beliefs expressed by the ritual to be more or less the same. Commenting on the position of Leach, Rodney Needham states that we need evidence that people actually believe in collective representations (Needham 1972) and, if I may add, we need evidence that their beliefs are the same. As is perfectly illustrated by Anthony Cohen in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), any ritual may represent a variety of meanings. With this in mind we may understand the different choices that Christian Koyas make in their orientation between tradition and the new religion, and despite (or because of) the differing interpretations of ritual practices (both animistic and Christian) we see that their beliefs are genuine. But as we accept that collective representations are symbolically constructed and manipulated by each and every individual, the study of belief and ritual becomes seemingly meaningless. How can a ritual be used for collective purposes if there are as many interpretations of it as there are individuals; and how can a small religious segment like the Christian Koyas act as a corporate group if they agree neither on the content of ritual nor on the drawing of boundaries between themselves and the non-Christian Koyas?

People have different ways of “symbolizing the boundary” (Cohen 1985), different ways of manifesting their beliefs ritually. What we are dealing with here is the social implications of diverging interpretations of the same rituals and symbols, and the question of whether or not a group can maintain its boundaries under such conditions. We are studying borderline cases – it should be clear by now that Christian Koyas act on a very thin line

between accept and condemnation – because it is here that the meanings of ritual acts, as they are interpreted by people observing and taking part in them, are best exposed.

We have seen that Christianity offers Koyas a new way of dealing with old problems. They are given an ideological framework within which they may articulate their meanings and gain healing. As such, the introduction of Christianity has not fundamentally changed the way that Koyas look at the world order: for them, becoming Christian has implications only in this life, and while changing some of their old beliefs and practices, they hang on to others. The vagueness and the ambiguity in the assertion of their Christian faith is partly due to the fact that most congregations, even though they are in a constant battle with “superstitious beliefs”, accept a certain degree of animism, and that they accept the fact that most Koyas are attracted to church by the promise of effective healing. In this way, Christianity presents itself to the Koyas as juxtaposed to other sources of healing, and as they are presented only with this pragmatic side and not with the ideology,⁴⁰ they are as likely to try going to church as pretty much anything else.

Is it possible then, that the forms of Christianity may in fact accommodate and encompass animistic beliefs in the long run? The Naskapi Indians of Davis Inlet on the coast of Labrador is a fascinating case in this regard. The anthropologist, Georg Henriksen, shows that the Naskapi, under the influence of a Catholic missionary, turn “alien structural influences to the services of their indigenous symbolic systems and thereby symbolically reinforce their customary boundaries” (Cohen 1985:75):

Holy Communion, which is by far the most important church ritual for the Naskapi, is very similar to ‘mokoshan’. In fact, the Naskapi say that Holy Communion is the same as ‘mokoshan’. This is a reasonable equation, as a comparison between the two rituals shows that they consist of similar elements: both take place within one tent/house, one man being chief of the ritual; in both, there is a small amount of sacred food that must be handled and eaten with the utmost care: in ‘mokoshan’, it is the raw marrow of caribou bones that is the vehicle of communication with the Caribou Spirit, while the bread and wine unite the communicants with the body of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion (Henriksen, referred to by Cohen 1985:47).

I have not discovered any congruence of this kind between the traditional Koya rituals and the ones of Christianity. But this does not mean that the cosmological order that most Koyas adhere to does not survive the structural influences of Christianity. Given the immediacy of

⁴⁰ We remember that most Koyas hear about the Christian religion from their friends, neighbours or relatives, and that they are primarily motivated by the stories told of its healing powers.

their Christian beliefs and practices, and the contradictions between the two traditions, it is hard to see that a full evaluation of the cosmological ideas takes place in the initial phase of the conversion process. Turning to Christianity does not automatically call for such an evaluation as the act is driven by purely pragmatic motivations. Only later is the convert confronted with the wider ideological and not least the social implications of becoming Christian.

The introduction of Christianity among the Koyas has been followed by negotiations over the Koya identity. I have in the preceding pages illustrated these negotiations by the practices and non-practices of the converts who claim a new identity as Christians or Christian Koyas. These claims have further ramifications for the identification of the Koya tribe as a whole, as opposed to Hindus, Muslims, Konda Reddis and other communities living nearby. Confronted with a growing segment of Christians within their lines, the Koyas find themselves increasingly conscious of the cultural content that separates themselves from the others. This leads to questions of what it means to be a member of the Koya society, and whether or not converts may be part of it. Christian Koyas may be seen as entrepreneurs or innovators in the sense that they introduce to the society opportunities that used to be concealed (the gifts of healing), but at the same time they threaten the unity of the tribe. In the long run though, Christianity may in fact trigger an ethnopolitical project: as the Koyas are being further integrated into the greater society, they may begin to seek ways to re-assert their identity as Koyas, to re-claim their culture in a politicized context. The result may be a revitalization of Koya culture – in one form or another – *or* Christianization may prove to be a process of further segmentation. The Polavaram project is the most expressive example of the fact that the Koyas already find themselves in a politicized environment, and the way they choose to respond to it may tell us a great deal about the future of the Koya tribe as a whole.

Conclusion

These are some of the insights of this chapter: First, Christianity represents to the Koyas a potential problem solver in a very pragmatic fashion; converts are initially motivated by stories of healing and of economic upliftment. Secondly, when entering the ritual sphere of the Christian religion, they are forced to make difficult choices, and they are often sanctioned by the mainstream Koya society if they choose to live out their Christianity while declining to be part of the traditional ritual sphere. And thirdly, as a consequence of the choices made, and of the great variety in ritual practices that follows, the Christian Koyas have not yet managed

to create a meaningful community within the Koya society and, at the same time, their ambiguity is perceived as a threat to the traditional way of life. The ambiguity represented by the practices and non-practices of Christian Koyas shows that traditional ritual practices to a large degree are internalised or embodied; they are not easily done away with. These practices and non-practices are also illustrations of the influence that important persons within the village communities have upon their behaviour. Loyalty towards tradition is seen in people's loyalty towards the *pujari*, the *pedda*, and other respected non-Christians of the village.

Old ideas, new marriages

In this last chapter, I will explore the kinship system and the traditional marriage practices of the Koyas, and try to gain an understanding of how Koyas perceive changes in these spheres in the context of Christian conversions. I will argue that the ongoing Christianization of the Koyas is beginning to produce an endogamous section within the Koya tribe. The formation of an endogamous group of Christian Koyas confronts a kinship system where the inherent logic is connected to a number of myths, which are used in everyday negotiations over roles and identities in the Koya society. The flexibility of the system, illustrated by the creation of a number of new kinship groups during the years, offers to the Christian segment an opportunity to inscribe themselves into the mythical reality and thus to strengthen their position and their unity within the Koya society.

I originally planned to focus more on the kinship system and the marriage institution in the light of Christian conversions. But when in the field, I soon realized that there was not enough time for a study based on genealogical information, and the empirical data I present in this chapter is for the most part based on qualitative interviews. While I treat the Christian endogamy as a clear tendency – that is, not without exceptions – there are more specific questions I cannot give a straight answer to, such as the influence of Christianity on the rule of cross cousin marriage.

The mythical past and the kinship system

According to a *dholi* I talked to in Kummuru, the first Koya was a man called Koya Bunka Raju. He settled down and started working the soil in what is today Warangal district, bordering to Khammam district in the east. He had five sons who became the respective forefathers of the five patriphratries (*gattus*) that make up the most important ordering principle in the social structure of the Koyas: Mudugatta, Paredigatta (or Nalugugatta), Bandansekha (or Aidogatta), Arugatta and Yedugatta. The names reflect the believed existence of a certain number of original sons belonging to each of the phratries (Mudu = 3, Nalugu = 4 etc.), and they are thus identical to the phratries of the Gonds, except from the additional “three-brother phratry” which must have been integrated into the myths of the Koyas at a later stage because of confusion resulting from migration (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979). The forefathers established a distinction between “birth people” (*kannavaru*) and

“marriage people” (*menavaru*), which prescribes strict phratry exogamy. Each phratry is associated with a unique set of deities which may be worshipped only by the male members.

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who wrote extensively about the Gonds both during and after his involvement as advisor for the Nizam’s government of Hyderabad state, reports that, as a rule, the phratry and clan levels of organisation are fixed: “*Saga* [phratries] and *pari* [clans] are the main structural elements of Gond society such as shaped by events in the distant past whereas the *khandan* [sub-clans] are the flexible products of recent organic growth” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979:111). As far as I have ascertained, however, Koya kinship is more flexible with regard to these concepts than what is described by Fürer-Haimendorf of the Gonds. As a result of migration and the related difficulty of coordinating actions based on the solidarity within the clans (*lootepedderi*)⁴¹ or phratries, there is evidence of segmentation on both levels. The Koyas have developed new interpretations of kinship categories, and the assertion that all but two phratries may intermarry (Tyler 1965) may be confronted with examples of present-day alliances between certain clans within different phratries, and between two phratries in moiety-like relations. Thus, I was told by a lineage expert of the Sodhi clan of Aidogatta phratry that his people marry members of Arugatta phratry in addition to members of certain clans belonging to Pannendugatta phratry (a “12-brother folk”), namely Soyyam, Poyi and Birraboyne. In fact, only members of the so-called Rendugatta phratry (a “2-brother folk”) are said to be marrying into all other phratries.

Rendugatta and Pannendugatta phratries are not mentioned in the accounts of the original phratries, and it seems that people are aware that phratries must have originated at different points of time from the encounters between people not familiar with each others’ identity. While many people in Chintur say they belong to one of the two mentioned phratries, I did not meet anyone who claimed to belong to neither Aru- nor Yedugatta phratries. Aidogatta phratry is moreover known only as Perramboyne among the Chintur Koyas. This reflects the local variations and the fact that phratry identities are shaped locally and take different names at different places. On the other hand, some of the clans in the area have been divided into sub-clans and are so large and concentrated that they are treated as phratries in everyday speech. This applies to the Pussam, Madkam and Birraboyne clans. The division into sub-clans also offers an explanation to why the same name is sometimes associated with two or more different phratries. Marriages and migrations have through the years challenged the exogamy rules and created new alliances which have manifested themselves as lasting

⁴¹ “Literally ‘house names’” (Tyler 1965:1429).

structures. All this shows the complexity, the dynamics, and the vulnerability of the Koya kinship system, and the significant local variations inherent in it.

Though many Koyas apparently do not know which phratry they belong to, phratry membership is the most important subject in marriage negotiations. This illustrates again, as did chapter two, that knowledge about kinship relations is highly valued by the system itself. But the knowledge is often contained by a few experts, mainly the *dholis*. The general ignorance regarding phratries is also an expression of the lack of corporateness related to this level of organisation. As the members of each phratry are widely distributed, any general coordination of action is out of the question. Thus, Stephen Tyler concludes, “aside from common ‘ownership’ of a god-group, phratries are non-corporate” (Tyler 1965). The figure below does not therefore illustrate a number of corporative units that come into play in various contexts depending on the scale, as is the case with the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940). It is rather an illustration of the ideal organisation of the Koya society as established by the mythical forefathers: from the tribe came the phratries, from the phratries the clans, and clans are acknowledged to have produced sub-clans. I should add that, in spite of the difficulties of relating themselves to a specific phratry, all people are very much conscious of these levels of organisation and their consequences in real life.

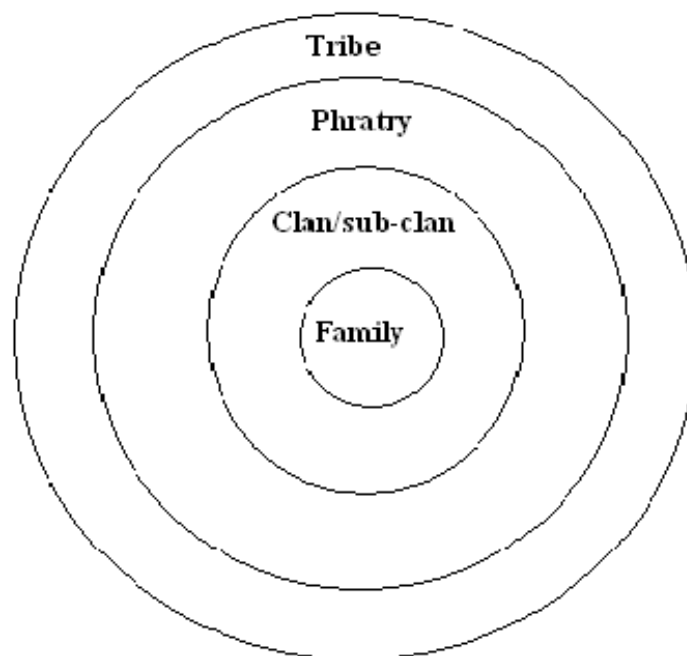


Figure 4: The organisation of the Koya society as established by the myths and as seen from the individual’s perspective.⁴²

⁴² One should, in general, be cautious about putting the mental constructs of “the others” on a piece of paper. Such an illustration may only express my own interpretation of the social organisation, and it is doubtful whether a member of the Koya society would have offered a similar presentation.

It has been argued that almost all peoples within the Gond family share the same myth of origin (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979, Gell 1992). This myth presents the background for the phratry system. But it appears that not only do the Koyas of Chintur have more phratries than the original four of the Gonds, they also seem to be more creative in the accounts about their mythical past than what is suggested by Fürer-Haimendorf: although they may acknowledge the Gond connection, they do not make it relevant in their storytelling but choose instead to emphasise their unity as Koyas or Racha Koyas. The complexity of their kinship system as it presents itself today needs somehow to be explained, and it seems that the complexity leaves people with an opportunity to re-invent the past and to emphasise certain traits so as to support or oppose the prevailing social structure. In chapter two, we saw that *dholi* Dugula Lachaiiah considers the position of *dholis* and Arithi Koyas as being weaker than what it used to be in the times of his father and his father's father. As the services offered today are less in demand, he blames his clients in the Koya society for not giving *their* forefathers the respect they deserve, and thereby to respect the work and the position of the *dholi*. While members of other sub-groups are eager to point out that Arithi Koyas are as a matter of fact inferior to them, Dugula Lachaiiah emphasises the importance and the centrality of their work in the ritual life of the Koyas.

Another example is the following story, related to me by a *pujari* – a Racha Koya, which neatly advocates the superiority of the Racha Koyas over all the other groups, but which is contradicted by historical facts.⁴³

1500 years ago, a giant tsunami flooded India and left it deserted, with the exception of a brother and a sister who survived by clinging to a big *burka*, a wooden implement which is normally used to store palm wine.⁴⁴ They were Racha Koyas. They used the *burka* to look for other survivors, but they soon realised they were all alone. As time passed, they had five sons and five daughters. The sons were called Luddam, Paddam, Murrām, Sodhi and Birraboyne. Each of the sons had children with a respective sister, and each sibling couple became the origin of the present Racha Koyas, Manne Koyas, Gotthi Koyas, Lingadhari Koyas and Arithi Koyas, respectively. From the beginning, the Lingadhari Koyas were responsible for ritual purification, the Arithi Koyas were drummers and storytellers, while the Racha Koyas were village administrators.

⁴³ Mohan (2004) notes that members of the respective sub-groups no longer pursue their traditional occupations and that as a consequence, Koyas belonging to various sub-groups claim the status of Racha Koyas.

⁴⁴ The dating of the incident is accidental; the crucial point was that it took place in time immemorial. The reference to the giant wave as a tsunami is interesting, but it should be mentioned that the word probably came up in the translation and was not used by the *pujari* himself.

From what we have seen so far, it does not make sense to classify sub-groups by relating them to the same mythical origin. Arithi Koyas are originally of the Mala caste and were integrated into the Koya tribe at a later stage to act as bards (Thurston 1987), while Manne Koyas, whom I have thus far not made any reference to, according to my assistant are “as the Racha Koyas”, only they live in Chhattisgarh and speak a different dialect of Gondi. The Racha Koyas too used to inhabit the Bastar plateau of present Chhattisgarh until about three hundred years ago when they were driven away by famine and disputes. Rev. Cain reported that this version is acknowledged also by the Gotthi Koyas, who inhabit the same hills today (Thurston 1987). Thus, the story of the *pujari* fails to consider migration and incorporation of new groups as having shaped the reality of the Koya tribe during the years.

The marriage institution

Stephen Tyler, writing about the Gomma Koyas of Bhadrachalam Taluq⁴⁵ 42 years ago, claimed that “villages are semi-nucleated settlements organized on an implicit moiety basis” (Tyler 1965:1429). This might have been the most frequent marriage pattern when Tyler did his study, at a time when villages to a larger degree were populated by people from the same clan. But today a village is usually connected by marriage relations to a number of villages, some of them far away like in Dantewada or Malkangiri across state borders. Moreover, “the organic growth” that Fürer-Haimendorf relates to the sub-clan level, must be interpreted against a background of historical processes, such as tribal and non-tribal migration and the increasing presence of Hindu, Muslim and Christian elements. As we have seen regarding the clan and phratry levels, there is a variety of marital relation types that challenges the ideal organisation based on inherited principles of marriageability. The Koya kinship system is further altered through marriages across ethnic boundaries: for instance, non-tribal men usually take the family name of the Koya woman when married (in order to gain economic advantages such as land rights). Apart from the unequivocal opposition against tribal-non-tribal marriages within the Koya community, this practice leads to a mix-up of names and affinities in the strictly patrilineal Koya tradition and creates considerable confusion regarding the marriageability of certain people. Besides, as these relationships are often marked with exploitation, the children resulting from them find themselves in a vulnerable position as the father is sometimes totally absent from their lives. This is again a token of the vulnerability of the whole kinship system.

⁴⁵ Taluq is an administrative term equivalent to what is today known in Andhra Pradesh as mandal.

The preferred marriage is the cross cousin type: mother's brother's daughter (MBD) marriages and father's sister's daughter (FZD) marriages are equally preferred, while genealogical cross-cousin marriages are preferred before classificatory ones.⁴⁶ Statistics show that around half of the marriages among the Koyas of East Godavari are consanguineous, between uncle and niece (sister's daughter marriage – ZD) or between cousins (Bittles 1998). My own observations in the villages of Chintur Mandal show that this is true also here (see Table 2 below). In the Dravidian kinship system, of which the Koya system is a variety, the rule of cross cousin marriage is an ordering principle usually dividing kin from three generations – ego's, parents' and children's generation – according to a cross/parallel distinction. The Gomma Koyas, together with the Hill Maria and the Muria Gonds of Bastar, actually differ from this rule as they apply this distinction also with respect to the generations of grandkin (Trautmann 1995, Gell 1992).⁴⁷ The preference of cross cousin marriage over parallel cousin marriage is illustrated by the fact that the kinship terms used to designate parallel cousins are also used for brothers and sisters respectively, making relationships between parallel cousins incestuous.

Koyas generally marry when adults; the age at the time of marriage has increased both for men and women and child marriages occur only exceptionally. At a time when villages used to consist of only one clan, Koyas, as a consequence, practiced exogamy at the village level. Today, villages consist almost exclusively of more than one clan and people may choose between marriageable partners from within their own village. Koyas recognize descent through the male line only. As a rule, they are virilocal and live in nuclear families. But there are several contradictory cases of uxori-local residence, and households are often patrilineal, agnatically or affinally extended, usually through parents or siblings following divorce, sickness or the death of a spouse. There are examples of polygyny, but they are quite rare; typically there are one or two polygynous marriages in each village. The practice of levirate is accepted in the form that a woman may marry a younger brother of the deceased husband. Divorce is common and remarriage is possible for both men and women, but usually it is much more difficult for women to find a new spouse after being widowed or divorced. This happens only in rare cases. My own data from Mukunuru, for example, shows that 12 people in this village live by themselves – all of them are women. Extra-marital relationships with

⁴⁶ "For marriages recorded in genealogies, 'real' cross cousin marriages account for only 17 % of the total. Marriage with a classificatory cross cousin totals 60 %" (Tyler 1965:1430).

⁴⁷ This may serve as an explanation to Table 2, where the categories do not make an explicit distinction between genealogical and classificatory cross cousin marriages: the distinction between first and second cousins is lacking in the emic vocabulary.

non-tribal men make it almost impossible for Koya women to obtain marriage with a Koya man as they are stigmatized by the rest of the community. Koya village councils have, as an alternative to excommunication, introduced fines for those who marry or have relationships with non-Koyas. In fact, both parties, either the boy and the girl themselves or their parents, are made to pay such a fine. Das (2006) reports that the size of the fine may be around 200-300 rupees. The money is spent on a communal meal on a later occasion. When the fine is paid, the stigma is officially removed, the relation is accepted and the couple is integrated into the village society. Relationships within the clan or the phratry are so rare that the consequences may vary considerably from village to village. According to Fürer-Haimendorf (1979), all Gond peoples are extremely conscious about the characteristic of the phratry as an exogamous unit, and most of them would say that excommunication is the penalty for phratry incest. Nevertheless, he refers to a case where a boy and a girl of the same phratry, the “6-brother folk”, were only separated by the *kula panchayat* after having eloped together; no fine was given and purificatory rites were not called for. Given a fresh opportunity the couple eloped again, and this time they could not be traced.

Type of marriage	Prevalence	Prevalence %
FZD	7	14,6 %
MBD	12	25,0 %
ZD	4	8,3 %
Total consanguineous marriages	23	47,9 %
By negotiation	16	33,3 %
Love/by elopement	4	8,3 %
By capture	5	10,4 %
Total non-consanguineous marriages	25	52,0 %
TOTAL MARRIAGES	48	99,9 %

Table 2: The material was collected from households in three different villages of Chintur mandal: Veerapuram, Narasapuram and Mukunuru. The numbers presented include only present-day monogamous marriages and are based mainly on interviews with the couples themselves. Questions did not differentiate between genealogical and classificatory cross cousin marriages. ‘Consanguineous marriages’ are differentiated from ‘marriages by negotiation’ in spite of there being an important element of negotiation in all consanguineous marriages as well.

We may differentiate between a number of different types of marriages in addition to those already mentioned. As reflected in Table 2, marriage by negotiation is the most common type. It is known by a number of different terms among the Koyas: *pillatini*, *talipipel*, *tungatam*, or

simply *PELLI* which means 'marriage'. Negotiations are generally initiated by the boy's family. Accompanied by members of the *kula panchayat*, representatives of the family visit the house of the girl and approach the subject in a most delicate manner:

... the purpose of their visit is revealed, using a customary phrase, 'pappu annam thinataniki vachamu' (we came to eat feast) indicating that they came for a marriage alliance. If the bride's party is willing, they reciprocate with due regards by a similar symbolical phrase 'pappu annam thinavachu' (you can eat feast). If both parties agree for the proposed match, they enjoy the liquor ('kalakalupu sarai') (Mohan 2004:976-77).

Love marriages are often distinguished from negotiated marriages by the lack of consent from the families involved. The union is sometimes secured by the boy and the girl running away. This is referred to in the table as 'marriage by elopement'; the Koyas themselves call it *theadaptoru*. In some of these cases, especially if the parents never give their consent, there is no ceremony to make the alliance official, and the couple settle down wherever they can obtain a piece of land and make a living. In others, they go through a very simple ceremony wherein water is poured over the head of the boy and then onto the head of the girl. Either way they will have to pay a penalty to have the union accepted and legitimised by their kin and fellow villagers. Elopement is a strategy which is utilised so often and with success, that it must be considered a custom and not a crime.

'Marriage by capture' is also to a certain degree a customary practice, even though objections are usually and naturally much stronger than with elopements. This is called *lagitata*, also known by terms such as *poyi thor*, *kaipoyithond* or *poyistotor*. It is a practice where the girl is taken by force, usually by a party representing a boy from a different village. More often than not, the boy makes the decision of capturing a bride together with his parents and elders of his village. He sometimes also gains the support of someone in the girl's village, so that he knows the movements of the girl and when she is alone. If a girl is captured in her own village the party will be met with violent objections and her parents will be alarmed. The boy's party will instead try to carry off the girl at the occasion of the weekly market or when she is alone fetching water. "When this happens, the girl, of course, is expected to make a great deal of fuss – she weeps, screams, but somehow she usually fails to make a very effective resistance and is taken directly to the bridegroom's home" (Das 2006:85). As in the case with marriage by elopement, there is no elaborate ceremony to formalize the marriage; pouring water on the head of the boy and onto the head of the girl is sufficient also here. But

the parents of the girl, after they have been informed about the capture, will bring their protests to the boy's village, and after negotiations with the boy's parents and village representatives, the marriage might be accepted and legitimized with a fine paid by the boy or his parents to the parents of the girl.

The practice of capturing brides is explained by Edgar Thurston as an option for young men who cannot afford to pay the brideprice: "If the would-be bridegroom is comparatively wealthy, he can easily secure a bride by a peaceable arrangement with her parents" (1987:48). Today there is no demand for bridewealth when two Koyas marry. The apparent change is possibly a result of the influence from Hindu society, where dowry is practiced. Otherwise, it might just be that Thurston's definition of brideprice embraces a vaguely defined set of resources that any Koya boy has to show for when asking for a girl's hand. In order to get the necessary consent of the girl's parents, the boy normally needs to be able to establish a household and make a living for his new family. If this ability is missing in the eyes of the girl's parents and they go against the marriage, the boy might resort to the possibility of marriage by capture. As already mentioned, there are several cases of uxorilocal residence, and these cases illustrate the fact that there is no one-way flow of resources when a marriage is entered; expenses are probably more equally shared today than before.

Christian Koyas – an endogamous unit in the making

After having converted to Christianity, a family may choose to undercommunicate religious differences in marital affairs, or they may enter into affinal relations with other Christian Koyas.⁴⁸ By choosing the first option and marry a Koya with a different world view, perhaps one adheres to the traditional marriage rules, but at the same time one may face identity issues that used to be non-existent before the advent of Christianity. A substantial number of people chooses the second option, thus confronting traditional marriage rules with the establishment of a new endogamous unit consisting of Christian Koyas. Christian tribals marrying other Christian tribals represents the effects of conversion on marital practices. Such novel relations teach us something about the ideological (re-) orientation of the community.

In Mamillagudem, according to one of the Christians there, as many as 40 of the 115 households are Christian households. People started frequenting the churches in Chinturu about 10-15 years ago, and the man we spoke with saw the presence of Christianity as having already caused fundamental changes in the local community: "everything changed when

⁴⁸ As we saw in chapter three, conversions of groups such as families or households are more frequent than individual conversions.

people started going to church”. Especially with regard to marriage practices, the changes were obvious. He said that this year there had been six marriages between Christian Koyas from Mamillagudem and Christian Koyas from elsewhere. No marriages had taken place where one person was Christian and the other not. Moreover, there had been no marriages between a Christian Koya of Mamillagudem and a Christian non-tribal. In the neighbour village Kummuru, I heard of one such marriage.⁴⁹ That was the only time I heard of a marriage alliance between a Christian Koya and a Christian non-tribal.

But even though most Christian Koyas prefer to marry people (Koyas) of the same faith, which perhaps is not surprising, the implications of such alliances are not given. Because these new alliances are by no means breaking any of the traditional marriage rules, they are not perceived as posing a threat to the community boundaries. The Christian endogamy takes place within the framework of the traditional endogamy of the tribe, and the exogamy of clans and phratries. Thus, in Madkamgudem hamlet of Narasapuram village, where seven of the eight households consist of people of the Madkam clan and where all are Christians, spouses are still mainly searched among people of the Mutski, Madivi, Karam, Vuanzam, Midiam and Podiam clans. I was assured that there is no change regarding marriageable partners, only that partners should preferably be Christians. The fact that most of the inhabitants in Madkamgudem converted very recently, makes it difficult to trace any changes in marriage practices. We must assume though, that the preference for Christian partners represents a narrowing of potential partners and that this may increase the physical distance they must travel in order to find a good match.

This was illustrated in a conversation I had with an unmarried woman of about 25, whom I will call Subammah. She lived in Madkamgudem together with her mother, three sisters and a brother, and as the brother was reaching a certain age and being the only male of the household, the whole family was preoccupied in finding a suitable woman for him to marry. As it happened, she told me, a woman who had married her brother and who had been living in their house since May (this was December) had packed her things and left only the day before my visit. It was the second time that she had left, but this time it was probably for good, thought Subammah, and her brother was not planning to go after her. She had left for her native village in Vararamachandrapuram Mandal. An argument had been the triggering cause, but Subammah did not doubt that the *real* cause of the problems was the fact that the woman was a non-Christian: she rarely prayed after she moved in and only reluctantly did she

⁴⁹ In many respects, Mamillagudem may be considered a hamlet within the bigger village called Kummuru.

agree to be baptized. She did not show any interest in their way of life; not only was she not a believer, she was also not used to the hard physical work on the fields – her family were not farmers like Subammah’s family. All this made Subammah conclude that any marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian would not work out unless the non-Christian adapts to the Christian way of life.

There is of course a gender aspect to consider when we discuss Christian-non-Christian alliances. As I maintained in chapter three, in spite of the predominant position of women in the different congregations, the decision to convert is very much dependent on the consent of the household head, who is usually a male. In general, men must be considered to have more influence over the religious life of the family or household, as is illustrated by the following case which was shared with me by an inhabitant of the village in question. The case may also illustrate the possibility of a conversion process being reversed in the context of a Christian-non-Christian marriage. Five years ago, a wedding was arranged between a non-Christian man of Vegithota and a Christian woman of a different village. At the time when the marriage was entered, the woman had been going to church for as much as ten years. Reflecting the religious differences between them, a wedding ceremony was first held in the church that the woman used to visit, the day after a more traditional ceremony was held in Vegithota. But in spite of this entrance to married life, as soon as the wedding was over and the couple had settled down in Vegithota, the woman stopped going to church. The couple still lives there, I was told, and they have no children.

Bajammah Pujari from Mukunuru displayed some of the same attitudes to marriage as Subammah. Having herself a daughter in marriageable age, she finds it foolish to marry a person who does not believe in the same god. This is why, she said, all marriages involving Christian Koyas of Mukunuru, have been with other Christian Koyas. Interestingly, none of these marriages were cousin marriages.⁵⁰ When I asked her why this is so, my assistant burst into laughter at her reply, for as she said, “I am not interested in cousin marriages – only the Bible is important to me”!

I only registered one case of cousin marriage entered between two Christian Koyas. It was an arranged MBD-marriage and the wedding took place in the church in Veerapuram about three years ago. The couple now lives in a patrilineal extended household in Veerapuram. They have one daughter. I should add that my material on this subject is limited to Veerapuram and Narasapuram, where very few marriages have been entered after the quite

⁵⁰ I have not been able to falsify this information, but given Bajammah’s position and the small size of the Christian population in the village, I have no reason to doubt that this is the case.

recent conversions. I have therefore not enough data to suggest that cousin marriages are less frequent among Christian Koyas than among non-Christian Koyas, but we may assume that they are, given the preference for Christian partners, which represents an ideological change.

These accounts give the impression of a faith that is based strictly on the Bible and its commands, and it seems that both Subammah and Bajammah see an unbridgeable gap between Christianity and animism when it comes to marriage; only the non-Christian must adapt – the Christian has already made a commitment to God and will live accordingly. But as we saw in the account from Vegithota, there may be a gender aspect to this. Talking to these women leaves no room for doubt that their faith is strong and real, even though they are initially motivated by the same reasons as is the whole Christian Koya population. It should be noted that both of them have manifested their faith in a way that is not typical for the average Christian Koya, namely by doing work in their respective congregations. While Bajammah, as mentioned in chapter three, is president of the local church committee in Mukunuru, Subammah assists as an (untrained) nurse at Ramalammah's church in Chinturu.

The reasons for marrying other Christian Koyas before non-Christian Koyas are to be found in the concrete ramifications of conversion in people's lives, as discussed in chapter three. The biblical commands, as they are presented in the words of the church leaders, oppose the traditional life of the Koyas with the morally good Christian life. While keeping the syncretism debate in mind, we should acknowledge that many Koyas, as the two women above, have embraced the new religion wholeheartedly and not just fragments of it. They do not choose to ignore the elements that may impose sanctions on them, and they perceive sinful behaviour in the forms of drinking, gambling, animal sacrifice and so on, as being important to the extent that it creates obstacles for marriage alliances. They have not then, adopted Christianity in bits and pieces, but as a meaningful whole. The fact that sin is related so closely to their pre-Christian lives, thus drawing a boundary between themselves and those who still adhere to the old religion, helps explain the new endogamy practice of Christian Koyas. But even though Christianity came into existence through a dialectical process which articulated old ideas in a new idiom, their everyday preoccupation with sin and morality and its concrete manifestations in the marriage sphere, makes their religion difficult to brand as syncretistic in the meaning of "combination or blending of elements". In a similar fashion, Jim Kiernan, writing about the Zulu Zionists of Wakkerstroom in South Africa, claims that these people may constitute "an exception to the general principle that all religions are syncretistic. Having initially borrowed a package of ideas from elsewhere, these Zionists have sought to preserve that heritage without substantial addition, further mixing, or significant

alteration” (Kiernan 1994:82). My impression of the Christian Koyas is that they are more than willing to adapt to what they believe to be the Christian way of life. While being initially influenced by pull factors such as the testimonies of Christian friends, and push factors such as disease and financial problems, as soon as they have taken the first step and gained a positive experience by going to church, their willingness to adopt Christian practices and to let go of the old ones is evidence of their dedication. And while the continued contributions to traditional festivals – despite unequivocal church opposition, thus being a breach of rules – illustrates the importance of being loyal to village leaders, the choice of Christian marriage partners is one that is made on a more independent basis, and it is thus one of the strongest expressions of unity between Christian Koyas.

Conclusion

To sum up, while the Christians themselves tend to perceive their endogamy as a natural consequence of their faith, in the eyes of most non-Christian Koyas it is neither problematic nor especially significant. This is explained by the fact that most marriages between Christian Koyas respect the old dividing lines of the society. At the same time, as shown in previous chapters, Christians usually continue to nurture their relations with traditional village leaders, and this adds to the normalisation of endogamous relations. The Christian endogamy has not yet had any serious implications neither on the kinship system nor on the traditional marriage rules. But if the tendency is prevailing and Koyas continue to convert in the same rate, the generations to come will perhaps be oriented towards a different set of rules and norms concerning marriage. It would be interesting to see, for instance, whether the rule of cross cousin marriage will remain, a rule which is and has been securing close bonds between affines. Will the Koya Christians start to marry non-tribal Christians and by that lose their tribal identity, or will they in one way or the other inscribe themselves into the traditional myths and achieve recognition as a unitary subdivision of the Koyas? Future studies may try to answer these questions after Koya Christianity has matured.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to show how the Christian section of the Koya tribe perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, especially by the non-Christian Koyas. I have presented a number of conversion stories which were related to me by the converts themselves. Almost all of these stories share the characteristic of starting off at a point of time in the pre-Christian life of the convert, when disease and suffering led to the decision about going to church, usually triggered by recommendations from friends or relatives. Healing is achieved, and from this point on they are confronted with a number of choices which they respond to in different ways. Anything from the choice of marriage partner – Christian or non-Christian – to the choice of continuing or discontinuing their role in connection to festivals involving animal sacrifice, say something about their ways of expressing their new religion. This is so because Koya Christianity is seen by most Koyas as being in direct opposition to the traditional animistic beliefs, and the actions of the converts are monitored by the mainstream non-Christian society.

In chapter three, I established a distinction between healing and tradition and claimed that this distinction is central in the negotiations over identity among Christian and non-Christian Koyas alike. The world views and the ritual manifestations of the Christians are mediated by their old beliefs and practices, and the lifestyles of the non-Christians are likewise mediated by the choices made by the converts. There is an ongoing articulation of beliefs on both “sides”, and the polarization is strengthened through essentializing accounts from pastors and village leaders, as there is a lack of certain knowledge about the people who represent the other “side”. As may be expected, since the Christians are still a minority within the Koya society, they are the ones who face the most serious identity issues while articulating their beliefs. But as I have tried to show, the Christian conversions have implications also for the non-Christians who increasingly question and evaluate their beliefs and practices in the light of the Christian alternative.

What do the practices of tradition represent in a deeper sense and how are they different from the practices of healing? In chapter two, I concluded that the communal aspect of traditional festivals has become weaker with the decline in the number of participants. In the old days, all the men of the village were expected to take part and to contribute with animal sacrifices. Nowadays, the traditional village priest, or *pujari*, makes the sacrifices on behalf of the villagers. The sharing of sacrificial meat is still an important element, but as long

as only a fraction of the villagers play an active role it is doubtful whether the ritual promotes community as a value in the same way as it used to. In contrast to the practices of healing, the traditional rituals in connection with the village festivals are in all cases pointed towards the welfare of the village as a whole and not that of the individual villagers. The rituals call upon gods and spirits so as to achieve good rains and a plentiful harvest – matters that used to be of interest to all Koyas at a time when all families were agriculturalists with a limited range of crops. Today, there is a wider variety of crops grown, and not all Koyas depend on fertile land for their survival. Thus, as participation on part of the average Koya household and the number of crop-based festivals has come down, the feeling of community and the feeling of being part of a destiny shared by fellow tribesmen is increasingly lacking. The community carved out by such rituals depend upon village leaders such as the *pedda* and the *pujari*.

The practices of healing on the other hand, are much more individualistically oriented. The aim is to achieve healing for oneself or for ones family here and now. These practices promote independence from traditional leadership as they are centered around a direct and in many cases intimate relationship between the individual believer and God. Believers are equal and have the right to self-determination in the sense that they are free to make choices in order to affect their own destiny, as opposed to a hierarchical tradition where accusations of witchcraft still occur.

The polarization tendencies rests on the idea that Christianity is essentially different from the old religion. This idea is in part a cultural construction and an expression of resistance on the part of the non-Christians. But in my interpretation, the differences are in fact essential, and such dichotomizing (individualism versus collectivism, independence versus dependence etc.) is done also by the Koyas themselves. They use ‘sharing’ as a metaphor to define the society of the ancestors, while theirs is one of ‘greed’. It seems that while many people are tempted by the material progress made possible by the commercial establishments of towns and villages, there is an ambivalence towards anything that may disrupt their relationship with ancestors and *homeland* – anything new. Christianity goes hand in hand with this modernity as it (through the stories of converted Koyas) promises healing and prosperity to those who believe. It represents a potential problem solver and a new order which is in conflict with the old one; most Koyas seem to be aware of the contradiction. With this in mind, people calculate the gains and losses of conversion; the cultural ambivalence towards anything new is more easily overridden by the poor and the sick, for whom Jesus Christ really may be “the last step”. For those better-off, turning to Christianity is a bigger step since they are influenced more by the moral obligations towards the ancestors than by the

hopes of healing or material prosperity. Morality is therefore a key word. We have seen how the Christian Koyas are torn between the loyalty towards the Christian congregation and the loyalty towards the village leaders, and that this sometimes results in religious elements that one may call syncretistic. The Christian Urapmin, referred to in chapter three, find themselves in a similar situation (Robbins 2004b). Their preoccupation with moral issues is not accidental as they too are conscious of the contradictions between the cultural systems in question.

There is among the Koyas an anxiety attached to the desire of following tradition, of doing the same as the ancestors. This is especially evident in ritual practices, not only those performed by the *pujari* but also those led by the head of the respective households. Rituals are often accompanied by discussions about their authenticity. Held up against these traditionalist attitudes, not only does the choice of converting to Christianity seem controversial, it also adds meaning to the polarization and to the theory of two cultural systems existing side by side. While the border cases – represented by the Christians who maintain contributions to animal sacrifices in honour of the ancestors – make good arguments in support of the syncretist stand, the mutual condemnation of each others’ “doctrines” speaks of the existence of two systems in Robbins’ sense (Robbins 2004b). According to Charles Stewart, in such cases it may be difficult to differentiate syncretism from religious pluralism, and the discursive framing varies from case to case and from scholar to scholar (Stewart 1999). As indicated in chapter three, I believe it is both possible and desirable to combine such theoretical frameworks and to acknowledge both the ambiguity of border cases and the uniqueness of different religious traditions. This points to the very nature of ethnic groups, where individuals may cross the ethnic boundary but where the boundary itself remains.

Who are the Christian Koyas?

In the anthropological literature, Christianity is rarely treated as a social reality worth studying in its own right, and Christians in traditional field sites usually do not make for more than an additional chapter in any monography (Robbins 2004b). They are most often connected to theories about cultural loss and syncretism, if mentioned at all. Just like Joel Robbins argues in regard to the situation of the Christian Urapmin, I would certainly say that Christianity among the Koyas represents culture as much as anywhere else. One does not lose culture by converting to a world religion just because this religion is shared by two billion others. Some of the cases I have referred to illustrate the diversity in religious expressions of people in non-western societies who converted to Christianity during the twentieth century. In

spite of the diversity, I have made the point that many of the Koya converts, like other converts, try to lead Christian lives to the fullest, as the ideal is constructed from Bible readings and from stories told by pastors or other church people.⁵¹ Kiernan argued that the desire and the ability to adapt to a ready-made Christian import made Zulu Zionism an exception to the rule that all religions are syncretic (Kiernan 1994). Should the Christian Koyas then, because many of them adopt the religion so whole-heartedly, be treated as “pure” Christians and not as products of a dialectical interaction with a different tradition?

This is the problematic core of the syncretist stand. Arguments about syncretism eventually lead to the unpleasant question of whether there are any pure religions in the world. There was a time when the religion of “the others” was generally accepted as being inferior compared to “our” Christianity. When “they” converted, the different ways to express the new religion were easily branded as being untrue to the Bible, second-rate, or – syncretic. In meeting with “the others”, the essence of Christianity was simply re-defined as belonging in its only true form to westerners and western civilization. But imperialistic reasoning does not hold water anymore. It may be argued that even the New Testament is a product of syncretism, thus adding to the description of religions as syncretic by nature (Hooft 1963).

I would like to conclude my discussion of the term syncretism by supporting the statements made by Stewart (1999) and Mulder (2000), who both reject the application of the term as a final answer. It can only describe a social reality produced by the blending of elements from different religious traditions, and if there are no pure traditions – or in Stewart’s words, “if we consider all religions syncretic, how useful can this term be?” (Stewart 1999:55).

One thing is the academic exercise of naming the synthesis created by Christianization, something quite different is the people’s own response to such a process. In chapter three, I posed the question of what it means to be a member of the Koya society, and whether or not Christian Koyas are part of it. Do they lose more and more of their Koya identity as they learn to live according to the rules laid down by the church? Are the two statuses, ‘Christian’ and ‘Koya’, so much in conflict that conversion is experienced by the society as a way of resigning from it? What makes a man or a woman a Koya? Judging from my conversations with Koya Christians and non-Christians, it is not the fact that people start going to church that may be upsetting, but the way they choose to go from there. Their *non-practices* in religious matters are perceived as more controversial than their practices. The

⁵¹ As mentioned in chapter three, the veiling of women while inside the church and the refusal of eating sacrificial meat, are examples of direct manifestations of biblical orders.

failure to fulfill the ritual obligations as members of the of the clan, village or tribe, represents a move away from the ancestors. Therefore, when I speak of the perception of Christian Koyas as a threat to the unity of the tribe, I consider the breach between those who continue to honour their ancestors with the traditional rites, and those who do not or, more likely, who find other ways of doing just that. To be the child of ones father and mother is an imperative status no matter where, but among the Koyas kinship relations involve obligations that are part of a higher order, and the characteristics of these relations cannot easily be maintained within the Christian world view. The choice of discontinuing the rituals in honour of the ancestors may thus be interpreted by fellow Koyas as a way of resigning from the Koya society. The harassment that some of my informants experienced in the beginning of their Christian lives amounts to excommunication, and was a more or less united response from the village community at large. Sanctions for turning Christian could be both formal and informal. But in later years, Christians Koyas in the area have to a certain degree become re-integrated. A Christian man in Ratnapuram told me that people are tired of arguing. When he converted more than 20 years ago and became the first Christian of that village, disputes were common, but now relations are relatively harmonious.

I have been referring to the pragmatism of conversion; I have claimed that most Koyas start going to church motivated by the pursuit of good health and economic upliftment. This should not be misinterpreted as a statement about their lack of dedication or as a prediction about their future as Christians. The lack of concern for the afterlife is not specific to the Christian Koyas when compared to other Christians around the world. Biblical terms such as Heaven and salvation take on different meanings in different social contexts, and even individuals within the same context apply the terms differently. All make interpretations on the basis of their own unique background. But although the concept of afterlife is not central in the lives of most converts today, in the future they may further their relationship with the Christian god and develop ideas that surpass their immediate needs. I have already suggested such a line of development as the pure pragmatism only applies to those who, as “the last step”, are encouraged to give the church a try. For them, the resulting conflict with the old world view may be a painful process, and the different ritual manifestations show to a certain degree how far into the conversion process people are, and to what extent they are ambivalent about their religious affiliations. The first Christians in any village or hamlet, such as Bajammah or Subammah (see chapter four), paved the way for the others, making conversion less painful. As entrepreneurs in the religious field, they have been defending their positions for several years and are less likely to engage in activities condemned by the church.

Thus, there is a chance that “the last step” may be the first in a step-wise conversion process that stretches over many years.

The Polavaram dam and the future of the Koyas

The threat posed by the Polavaram project inspires people to organize meetings at the village level and to engage in discussions about the future of the tribe. The discussions are not about how to apply pressure to the government in order to stop the building of the dam; even though almost all people in the area are against the dam, they have for the most part settled with the idea that their houses and fields will be put under water, and they concentrate instead on where and how to live after the dam is a fact. According to a newspaper article (“Tribals to ‘replant culture’ in new soil”, Deccan Chronicle 19.10.2006:5), the main concern of the tribals (the Koyas and the Konda Reddis) is to find place for their many gods and goddesses in their new habitations. The problem, says the tribals who are to be resettled, is that the land offered by the government does not resemble the land they live on today; the vegetation is different and hence the demand to have *ippa* trees planted on their new dwelling places. Says one Koya man in the article, “these goddesses are part of our life and we have to find place for them in the new habitations”. And another, “for us, the tree is as divine as the goddess”. A representative of Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) in Bhadrachalam concludes by saying that “they will not be able to leave behind their traditions”.

The idea of “replanting culture” illustrates the fear of losing it. It also shows the significance of the natural environment with regard to the Koya culture and identity. What would they eat and drink if they did not have their *own* fields and their *own* palm trees? By “uprooting” and “replanting”, cultural elements would be taken out of their context and brought into a new one. The new context is one where the government has laid down the premises, as most people are to be resettled on land that is acquired by the government for this purpose. Only a few families have the money to acquire land on their own and thus to decide themselves where to make a new living. An early report on the Polavaram Project points to the fact that engineers too often are given the full responsibility for the process of resettling the displaced, and that cultural factors are not taken into account (Reddy 1996). The Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) policy of the government is aimed at efficient administration and low costs, and the grassroots perspective is rarely paid attention to. People who are to be resettled are promised cash compensations so that they may continue with their lives. While the state government in Hyderabad speaks proudly of one of the best R&R

packages ever offered, it is easy to see from the statements of the displaced themselves that the loss they experience is not quantifiable. They fear the consequences of the Polavaram dam, and they know that life can never be the same after the dam.

The dam does not differentiate between Christians and non-Christians or between ethnic groups. It will submerge the houses of both tribals and non-tribals, rich and poor. But some say that it is no coincidence that the majority of the displaced are tribals, and that the project would never be realized had the affected villages been largely inhabited by non-tribals. Furthermore, judging from the anxiety of Koya villagers, it seems obvious that the dam strikes unequally. While the displacement of Koyas disrupts their relationship with the spirit world, thus adding another dimension to the alienation experienced by moving away from what is safe and well-known, Hindus and Muslims will be able to continue their worship since their religion is not place specific to the same extent as with the Koyas. But of course, temples and mosques will also be submerged; most famous is the Rama temple in Bhadrachalam.

The Christian Koyas make an interesting case in regard to the recontextualisation of culture following the Polavaram dam. Churches will be washed away, but they will most certainly be rebuilt on the new dwelling places. It is hard to imagine the church buildings – most of them newly built straw huts, as part of the Christian Koyas' sacred environment in the same way as are the palm trees and the rice fields that provide food and drink. The idea of the nature as being animated by spirits and ancestors is deeply rooted in the culture, and the disruption of this relationship may be as painful for them as for the non-Christians.

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