

# The Marriage Customs of the Christians in South Canara (India)

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## *Introduction:*

An elaborate historical account of the Christians in South Canara is not necessary here in the way of introduction, but a short explanation of its growth and development might be advisable.

South Canara, the most educated and a highly dynamic district in the state of Mysore, is situated on the western coast of India. The Catholic population of Canara in 1962 numbered 186,741<sup>1</sup> and is the third-largest community, only the Hindu and the Muslim communities being larger.

The origin of the place-name 'Canara'<sup>2</sup> has been much disputed. This is a sure indication that it is a complicated question and no single explanation is quite satisfactory. The name Canara is a misnomer. The word was coined by the English after the conquest of Seringapatam in 1799.

The vernacular name 'Kannada'<sup>3</sup> (the black country) which the European traders pronounced as 'Canara' really refers to the black soil of the Kanarese-speaking country in the Southern Deccan.

It is difficult to state when exactly Christianity was introduced in Canara. On a large scale it were the Portuguese<sup>4</sup> who founded Christianity in Canara in 1526, when they established their dominion there.

Soon missionaries were being sent to Canara and gained a number of converts. Also many new Christians in Goa, who did not wish to give up their ancient Hindu customs were being

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1. The Catholic Directory for India, 1962, St. Paul Publications, p. 191.

2. Severine Silva: History of Christianity in Canara, Vol. I, Kumta 1958, p. 2.

3. The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XIV, Oxford 1908, p. 353.

4. The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XIV, Oxford 1908, p. 360.

forced by the Portuguese to leave Goa and migrated into Canara. But this Christian community formed an isolated group on account of their Goan origin, the Christian religion and different language. In 1838 the Lutheran mission known as 'Basel Mission'<sup>5</sup> started spreading Protestant Christianity in Canara. Christianity soon took its roots in other Kannada speaking areas as well, like Dharwar and Hubli.

In 1901 the Christians in South Canara numbered only 84, 103<sup>6</sup> among whom 76,000 were Roman Catholics.

But in 1962 as already stated, the Catholic population grew to 186,471. This is a proof that the Christian community in Canara is spreading, by conversion, by natural growth, by immigration, and the settlement of Kerala Christians in the less populated parts of the South Canara districts.

One important point must be kept in mind namely the early population of South Canara that consisted of both Brahmins, who were strictly patrilineal and non-Brahmins, who belonged to the matrilineal stock. It is therefore only natural that the Christians of South Canara do not possess a uniform marriage ritual. The Christians of Brahmin stock observed to a great extent the Brahmin ritual but they also adopted some local Canarese marriage customs. The Christians of non-Brahmin origin followed, however, their ancient matrilineal system as far as it could be reconciled with Canon Law.

In South Canara, the general custom was to have the marriages arranged exclusively by the parents. But in modern times the educated classes take into consideration the wishes of the parties concerned. When a boy reaches a marriageable age his parents are always on the look-out for a suitable girl for their son. It is essential to note here that unlike the Brahmins, who had to go in search of a boy for their girl, the Christians in South Canara observed the non-Brahmin custom of finding the bride for their son. Therefore only the groom's relatives among the Christians in South Canara take the initiative of finding a bride for him. Among the Brahmins a dowry has to be paid to the bridegroom, the same custom is observed by the Christians in South Canara. This is a good example to show how the marriage customs of the Christians in South Canara represented a mixture of Brahmin and non-Brahmin rites.

The parents, who are in search of a bride for their son dis-

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5. The Gazetteer of India, Vol. I, Country and People, Delhi 1965, p. 493.

6. The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XIV, Oxford 1908, p. 360.

cussed their aspirations with their close relatives, or, as it is mostly done, with a match-maker (professional go-between) known in South Canara as '*Sairikecho malo*'.

*The Role of the Match Maker: (Sairikecho Malo)*

The match-maker in South Canara can be either a man or a woman. When the match-maker is a woman she is called '*sairikechi mali*'. Their role is to act as a matrimonial go-between. Another word used for such persons is the 'broker'. The match-maker has an important role in making contacts between prospective partners. It is he, who brings together marriageable young men and young women, who otherwise would have little opportunity to meet eligible prospects for marriage. It is common to have professional match-makers among the Mohammedans. In rural North India, the barber acts as a match-maker for non-Brahmin castes. Brahmin priests may also perform the role of intermediaries<sup>7</sup>.

But in South Canara among the Christian community anyone could become a match-maker provided he or she had the gift of persuading and moving the parties. These professional go-betweens in South Canara usually have an excellent memory and possess all the detailed and complete information about the girls ready for marriage in every nook and corner of the village. They use to carry snap-shots of several girls eligible for marriage. In former days these match-makers were very influential persons and demanded respect from the public. In South Canara they are rewarded with money, costly articles, saris etc., because they are largely responsible for arranging the marriage. They were also publicly thanked in the wedding booth (*matov*). In modern times the use of advertisements in newspapers has reduced the need for the services of a professional match-maker. For example, "Wanted a suitable match for a Mangalorean Catholic teacher, aged 31, earning Rs.500/-p.m. Apply Box 20830, The Times of India, Bombay, 1<sup>8</sup>".

When the match-maker performs his task of securing a partner for a prospective groom or bride he has to keep an eye on certain restrictions that are prevalent among the Christians of South Canara.

7. The Gazetteer of India, Vol. I, Sec—Country and People, Delhi Publications Division, 1965, p. 547.

8. The Times of India, matrimonial column, Nov. 6th, 1971.

*Restrictions:*

- a) The age of a girl at her marriage has to be between 15-18 and that of a boy several years higher. It necessarily follows from this that
- b) the boy has to be older than the girl.
- c) He is expected to be taller than the girl.
- d) Marriage is prohibited between the parallel cousins and cross-cousins. It is believed that such marriages will not prosper.

Among the non-Christians however marriage with some relatives is preferred in South Canara. The Jains of Karnataka (another name for South Canara), for instance, practise cross-cousin and even uncle-niece marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Another general custom, though not rigidly and always practised is that the younger brothers and sisters may not marry before the elder ones. Even though 'exchange marriage' is not approved by the non-Christians in South Canara, it is often practised by the Christians.

*Selection of Spouses:*

When the *malo* found a suitable girl, he informed the boy's father. After fixing a day for the visit to see the girl, the father, the boy (bridegroom), a maternal uncle, and one or two friends proceeded with the *malo* to the girl's house. The boy took special care and attention to look presentable to the girl. The people of the bride on the other hand swept and cleaned their house to receive the important guests. As soon as the visitors arrived they were welcomed with *pan-pod* (betel leaf, areca nut, tobacco, etc., arranged on a plate) and *udak* (a vessel of water). Hence we will repeatedly notice the role of *pan-pod* played in the different ceremonies of the wedding in South Canara. This is clearly a survival of the Hindu wedding-ceremonies adapted by the Christians. In South Canara among the Hindus there is a ceremony called '*vilyada shastra*' (betel ceremony) included in their marriage customs. '*Vilyada shastra*' is the formal acceptance of the promise made by the bride's father to the bridegroom's father that he will give his daughter in marriage. The details of the marriage, such as the date of the wedding and the following parties are settled during the *vilyada shastra*. The invitation card is to be drawn up accordingly. Some castes, such as Kadu Kurubas, Holeyas, etc., celebrate the engagement

9. The Gazetteer of India, Vol. I, Country and People, Delhi Publications Division, 1965, p. 546.

by exchanging betel leaves.

The girl is then asked to serve coffee or cold drinks to the guests so that the bridegroom and his father have a chance to watch her and form their opinion. The bridegroom has to be alert in observing the girl because he will not get another glance at her easily, whereas the girl can peep at him as much as she wishes from different corners of the house.

If the groom's party approve of the girl the amount of dowry (*dot*), property and the position of the family background are discussed. The amount of dowry differs according to the status of the family. Once upon a time it was considered a status symbol to pay an enormous dowry. In modern times dowry has lost its former importance, though it is still demanded in villages. It amounts to at least two thousand rupees. But it can be as high as fifty or sixty thousand rupees. The dowry has to be paid by the bride's father at least two weeks before the wedding. It can be paid partially on the day of engagement and the rest afterwards. The bridegroom uses the dowry for purchasing ornaments, gifts and clothes for the bride. The amount of dowry is handed over to the bridegroom's party with due solemnity in the presence of many witnesses in the bridegroom's house. In honour of this great occasion, it is customary to distribute *pan-pod*. A plate of *pan-pod* is passed from the bridegroom's side to the bride's party and another plate containing *pan-pod* is handed from the bride's side to the groom's party. This exchange is called '*badalchen*' (changing hands).

#### *Engagement and Ring Ceremony (Sairik ani Mudi)*

As a rule the bridegroom with his close relatives (parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, etc.) goes to the bride's house on a fixed day. The priest has to bless the wedding ring either in the church or in the bride's (or groom's) house according to their convenience. As soon as the bridegroom puts the engagement ring on the left ring finger of his future bride, wine or any other cold drink is served to quench the thirst and cheer the heart. Putting the ring on the bride's finger is a symbol of the bridegroom's claim on her. On this occasion the bridegroom gives some presents such as a rosary, handkerchiefs, a prayer book, blouse pieces, powder, perfumed oil and other articles of feminine toilette to the bride. The bride with a happy smile on her lips shows the presents to all the attendants and passes them

from one person to another. After the engagement (*sairik*) the bridegroom takes the bride to his house just to acquaint her with his relatives and to show her his property. When such an engagement is broken off, the ring (*mudi*) has to be returned to the bridegroom. The presents are not returned. Reasons for breaking off an engagement are, among others, some adverse circumstances in the groom's or bride's family which make the marriage inadvisable.

*Reading of the Banns (Chiti Vaschyö)*

It is an important rite following the engagement and ring ceremony. Before the formal engagement (*mudi*) both the parties of bridegroom and bride had approached the priest and informed him of their mutual wish. Now they fix the day with the priest for marriage which would be usually within two or three weeks after the formal engagement. The priest carefully notes down the names of the bride and the bridegroom. His fee consists in a full banana bunch, a cock and some money. The priest may instruct the young couple in the duties of married life and at the end gives them a test in catechism. Slight mistakes in answering catechism questions are forgiven if the priest is persuaded by a present that they are not serious. The reading of banns has to be done on three successive Sundays in church. The two persons concerned are present when the banns are read out. It is a matter of pride for them. If there is an emergency case an exception can be made by having the banns read on one Sunday only. Of course, the parish priest demands extra fees for it. Thus we see that weddings are of economical value for the priest.

The formula for reading the banns is as follows:

*Devache Kurpen kazar zata puth avnkar Christopher, Balthu Souzao ani dhu Diana, Rozar d' Sachi Hi zavnasa (poili, dusri, thisri) chit. Konichi adkol aslyar kaido asa pirge-jecha vodilank tilsunk.*

By the grace of God, the bachelor son, Christopher, of Mr. Balthu D' Souza, is going to marry the daughter, Diana, of Mr. Rozaris D'Sa. This is the (first, second, third) reading of the banns. In case anyone has any objection to this marriage he has the obligation of informing the ecclesiastical authorities.

*The Wedding Garments:* The commonly used dress for the

bride consists in an upper garment, the Sari, known as *sado*. It is a precious Sari purchased by the bridegroom's party for the bride and after the wedding is consummated, it is well preserved and worn only on special occasions. One such great occasion would be the day on which the bride goes to the mother's house (*kulara*) for delivery for the first time. Before leaving the house there is a sumptuous meal for the bride's parents, relations and friends who come to fetch her at the bridegroom's house. Distinguished villagers and close friends of the family are also invited. The mother's house is called '*kular*' and the bridegroom's house is known as '*mavado*'. A red coloured *sado* is mostly preferred. The bride is also presented with a sari by her own people which is called '*dharma sado*'. This sari ranks second only to the *sado* and is also very expensive. It is worn on other festive occasions. In former days the bride used to wear a *kirgi* and a *baju*. The *kirki* is a piece of cloth, not longer than four feet and about three feet broad. It was wrapped around the body from the waist down. A jacket called *baju* with long sleeves was used to cover the upper part of the body. This dress was a sign of her virginity and she wore it on the day of ros (*oil bath* or anointing ceremony).

The traditional bridal ornament which is still used in these days, is the *pirduk* that adorns the bride's neck. In early times a *pirduk* was a kind of necklace made of black glass beads. A married woman was expected to wear it as long as her husband was alive, a widow has to take it off. The *pirduk* was held in high regard by the women even among the Hindus as the symbol of their married state. The recent *pirduk* worn by the Christian women of South Canara is made of a golden chain with a dangling pendant of various shapes. The Hindus call this bridal ornament '*tali*' and it has the same significance for them as it has for the Christians. Among the Hindus however the *tali* is usually tied by the bridegroom himself. Among the Holeyas in South Canara it is tied by the maternal uncle. But among the Christians this function of tying the *pirduk* is performed by the mother-in-law. There were other ornaments worn by the bride, besides *pirduk*, such as *kanti*, *chakrasar*, *kap*, *karap*, *mugud*, *kanto*, *dantoni*, etc. But these ornaments are no more in use in the modern generation.

In the early times the bridegroom's dress consisted of a short loin cloth (*dhothi*) with a red and golden hem (*todop*), a shawl to cover his shoulders, a red handkerchief (*leis*) on the head and a shirt with gold buttons and a coat (*kutav*). The

bridegroom wore a *chakrasar* (neck chain) around his neck. He wore a pair of sandals or at least a pair of socks.

*The Wedding Invitation (voulik)*: Once the day was fixed for the wedding, both the bridegroom's and bride's parties took utmost care to invite their close relatives personally. This form of invitation is called '*voulik*'. In the past the bridegroom and a near relative of the bride, accompanied by two elderly men of either party, had to go to their close relatives and friends and invite them personally by giving all the necessary information about the celebrations—the exact time of the *ros* ceremony, *resper* (the blessing of the wedding in the church), *jevan* (wedding banquet), etc. In case they forgot to invite one of their relatives and friends, he would consider it a great offense or insult. In present times the bridegroom's party employs two or more persons (usually their own close relatives) to convey the *voulik* to their relatives and friends. When a man goes to invite people for the wedding he has to observe certain rules. As soon as he reaches a house, he stands outside the main door, greets the owner of the house (man or woman), he enquires about their health and finally reveals the purpose of his coming. He says '*Havn voulik sangonk ailam*'—'I have come to invite you for the wedding'. At once the master of the house welcomes the messenger with the words '*dev borem kurum, udak ailem*'—'God bless you, please, accept this water.' Then the messenger gives in detail the complete programme of the wedding celebrations. The same method is followed by the bride's party in her place. Educated people of South Canara now send invitation cards. The first invitation is sent to the parish priest, then to the *gurkar* (the headman of the Christian community) and then to all others.

#### *The Erection of the Wedding Booth (Kazara matov or Pandal)*

This is the next step in the wedding preparations. A special invitation called '*matvachi voulik*' (invitation to erect the wedding booth) was extended to certain skilled neighbours who are experts in erecting these *matovs*. It is interesting to note that among the Christians in South Canara, *matovs* are erected both in the bridegroom's and the bride's houses. Among the Hindus, in most cases, the *matov* (known as '*chapra*') is erected only at the house where the wedding takes place (bridegroom's or bride's) and not in both the houses. The main *matov* is



erected in front of the house where the courtyard is levelled and given a smooth coating with cowdung. The posts consist of the stems of areca-nut (*madi*) tree or in case they are not available, of bamboos (*vaso* or *piddo*). The roof and the sides are covered with palm leaves. The number of posts on which the *matov* rests has to be of an odd number. But among the Hindus it is quite the opposite, the number of posts has to be an even number. It is the common belief that the *matov* would not be well erected unless the bridegroom gives some liquor to the workers. The workers are given free meals in the bridegroom's house. The same method applies to the bride's party while erecting the *matov* at her house.

*The Ros Ceremony*: On the eve of the wedding day, in the evening an important ceremony is performed which is called 'ros'—oil bath or anointing. The *ros* is a mixture of coconut juice and coconut oil. With this 'ros' the wedding ceremonies really begin. Both bride and bridegroom have to undergo this ceremony in their respective homes. This ceremony signifies the mother's love towards her son or daughter. Usually the *ros* is celebrated on the previous evening of the wedding day, but for the sake of convenience, to cut down the expense, it can also be fixed on the morning of the wedding day.

The guests who come for the *ros* are warmly welcomed at the main entrance of the *matov* with *pan-pod* and *udak*. They are welcomed with the words '*pan-pod udak ailem*'—'receive this plate of areca-nut, betel leaves, etc., and water.' 'The guests acknowledge the welcome and reply: *dev borem korum*'—'May God bless you'. Among the guests those who are in the habit of eating *pan-pod* take the plate in their hands and chew some *pan-pod*.

*The yejmani* (the master of ceremonies), an office that generally falls to the parents of the bridegroom or those of the bride respectively, loudly announces the exact moment of *ros*. The wife of the *yejmani* is called '*yejman*'. No widower or widow can act as master of ceremonies. It is not compulsory that the parents of the bride or groom should act as masters of ceremonies. This office can be given to anyone related to their family.

Now as soon as the *yejmani* announces that *ros* is to be performed at such and such a time, the bridegroom with his best men (*dhedes*), usually his own brothers, and in case he has no brothers, his cousins, sits on a bench in the centre of the *matov*. The *yejman* (usually his own mother or if she is a widow, his

paternal aunt) enters the *matov* with two plates; on one is coconut oil and on the other coconut juice. She then pours the oil into the ears and on the head of the bridegroom and rubs it into his hairs. Then the coconut juice from the other plate is poured on the body and softly rubbed in. The two companions of the bridegroom, his best men, are also anointed likewise. Meanwhile the women surround the bridegroom (or the bride in her house) and sing *vovyos* (wedding songs) as the anointing goes on. It is worth mentioning here that all the essential wedding ceremonies are accompanied by songs called '*vovyos*'. The proper method to be followed is that one of the women, usually the *yejman*, leads the song while the rest of the women recite, '*voi voi*' (yes, yes) at the end of each verse and then repeat the last verse.

These wedding songs (*vovyos*) express the genuinely enterprising nature of the Christians in South Canara, their high ideals, respect for the elders, their deep faith in God, their poetic imagination, etc.

*Here are some of such 'vovyos'.*

1. *Aprosachi vatli davigi uzvi, poilo ros lavndi*  
*Voreta avoi tuji.*  
(The plate of unique juice is at the right or left side, let your mother, O bridegroom, first apply that juice to you) (preference to mother is expressed here)
2. "Ruzai muje maye naka korunk poice  
*kadel dovoru boice hya rosalagin.*  
(O my mother, Lady of the Rosary, do not leave us,  
But take a chair and sit besides this *ros* ceremony)
3. *Hya Garcho yejmani kain gela*  
*Cherela sait Ruzai mayek hadunk gela*  
(Where is the *Yejmani* of the house gone?  
He is gone with the *cherel* (palanquin) to fetch  
Our mother, the Lady of the Rosary)
4. *Rosyanche radnik lilin serputan,*  
*Voir podlin hadkutan Vokle avocchin,*  
(In the cooking shed fuel is put in the oven,  
The bones of the mother of the bride are projecting)
5. *Rosyanche radnik katyanche pog*  
*Vishranaka mogu tuja mai—Bapaicho.*  
(In the cooking oven fire is made of coconut shells  
Do not forget the love of your parents)
6. *Sakkad kam karn magir chikke bos,*  
*mai—manvan kade visarn kulara Evn Vos.*  
(After finishing all your domestic work sit for a while—  
ask your father-in-law and mother-in-law and come home)

Finally, when the women stop singing, the anointing also automatically comes to an end. Then the bridegroom is pushed to the bathroom with his brothers or friends for a so called 'bachelor's bath', (*avnkarponachem nan—navnchem*).

Thus we see that this impressive *ros* ceremony is a meaningful and important rite. The purpose of this ceremony is to indicate that the bride or the bridegroom now leaves his unmarried state of life and embarks on a new mode of life. This is evidently a remnant of the ceremony practised by the Hindus where the bride as well as the bridegroom are bathed in '*male-niru*' (water from the hill-stream).

When the bridegroom goes to take a bath, some men in charge sweep the *matov* and clean it well, spread the mats and arrange for the banquet. This banquet is a simple one compared to the wedding dinner on the following afternoon. It consists of rice, ash-pumpkin (*kuvalo*), gram-curry, pickles, curry of raw bananas and at the end a kind of pudding (*vorn*). The meal begins only when the bridegroom has finished his bath and taken the seat of honour reserved for him in the *matov*. Before starting the meal the master of ceremonies (*garcho yejmani*) says a few words on behalf of the public expressing their good wishes for a bright future to the bridegroom. These words he utters while he as well as all the elderly and respected people (mostly men) hold in their hands glasses containing liquor. This is called *boliki magchi*—'wishing good health to everyone in the *matov*.' It is significant that liquor is an essential ingredient in all important events of their life. At the end of the *yejmani's* short speech everyone says '*dev borem korum*'—'May God bless you', and the meal begins at once. The *yejmani* goes round seeing to it that everything is served neatly and sufficiently. If there is a large crowd present for the meal, the children, women and people coming from a long distance are given preference in the *ros* meal in the first turn (*poili pankti*). The *yejmani* who is known for his sense of humour and wit, in order to avoid any wastage, goes on announcing jokingly, *sit sodlyar vorn na*—'No pudding will be served for those who leave rice on the leaves or plates'. The children take this warning seriously and manage to finish their rice lest they suffer the loss of sweet pudding! As the meal progresses there will be a few boys running about, shouting at the top of their voice '*konak udak*'? 'who needs water?'

When the people sitting at the last turn (*kadechi pankti*) finish their meals the *laudate* is sung. Outside the *matov* big

barrels of water are prearranged for the washing of hands after meals. Those people who have come from far stay on for the night while people staying in the neighbourhood go home. That night very few people retire as there is great merry-making, singing and joking in the *matov*. Some people, especially those in charge of cooking, keep themselves busy killing the pig, slicing onion, chilly, etc., for the sumptuous wedding dinner on the following day. The bridegroom as well as the bride find it difficult to sleep as they are naturally nervous and anxious about their decisive step in life to be taken on the next day.

*The Nuptial Blessing in Church (resper) :*

On the morning after the *ros* ceremony, the priest blesses the marriage in the parish church. This blessing can take place either in the bridegroom's parish or in the bride's according to the convenience. The parties of the bridegroom and the bride proceed in separate processions to the church accompanied by the playing of bands and the blasting of crackers. At the appointed time both the parties are supposed to be in the church. Often there is much confusion as usually the bride's party does not appear in the church in time. The bridegroom before going to the church, is well dressed by his bestmen and friends. He wears an up-to-date suit. Just before proceeding to the church, the bridegroom stands in the *matov* to be blessed by his parents and elders. He kisses his younger brothers and sisters, then he sets out either in an open car or on foot (if the church is near).

All weddings in South Canara, whether Brahmin or non-Brahmin, included umbrellas during the wedding processions. In former times a special servant was employed to hold a damask umbrella over the head of the bridegroom or bride. It was a wide red umbrella which the Hindus used for their deities during the festive procession. These umbrellas were hired from the temples for the weddings. Later when such a temple umbrella was not available the people used to get the ordinary black umbrella from the parish priests, who were the only proud possessors of them. These days, mostly in villages, the bestman (*dhedo*) holds an umbrella over the bridegroom's head and in the same way the bridesmaid (*dhedi*) holds one over the bride's head. The bridegroom is accompanied by his bestman (*dhede*). The first bestman (*mal dhedo*) is by right either his brother or his sister's husband (*bavoji*). Nowadays he can also be another

close relative or an intimate friend. In case the bridegroom's party reaches the church early, they have to wait for the bride who comes accompanied by her bridesmaids (*dhedio*). The bridesmaids are her sisters or, if she has no sisters, her sisters-in-law or cousins (paternal aunt's daughters). The bride comes to the church well dressed in a white sari or frock, a long white veil, sandals on her feet. Just before she enters the main door of the church the bestman of the groom kisses her and presents the bouquet.

Now both the bridegroom and the bride holding hands (the bridegroom holding the right hand of the bride in his left hand), proceed to the centre place in the church reserved for the couple. The nuptial blessing is usually given by the parish priest during a High Mass. However if either the bridegroom or the bride have a priest among their relatives, the privilege of nuptial blessing falls on him. Then the nuptial mass begins. Just before the offertory the priest walks up to the communion rails and requests the couple to come forward. The priest asks the bridegroom and the bride one by one whether it is their wish to live as husband and wife forever of their own free choice. The priest always insists that this particular ceremony is witnessed properly. Then only is the union blessed by the priest. At the end he asks the two to exchange their rings (*resperachi mudi*) as a sign of their marital union and mutual consent.

#### *Ceremonies Following the Wedding in Church:*

On concluding the nuptial blessing in the church both parties proceed to the bride's house for the wedding dinner. As soon as the wedding party (*voran*) enters the *matov*, the bride's *yejmani* and his party is greeted by the bridegroom's *yejmani*, with the words '*dev borem korum ghorcha yejmanyak*': 'God bless the master of the house'. The bride's *yejmani* acknowledges the greeting saying '*dev borem korum*'—'God bless'. Then he goes to meet the wedding party with *udak—pan-pod* (a vessel of water, plate of areca-nut, betel leaf, etc.) and shouts out '*sank-dank pan-pod, udak ailem*'—Everybody receive water and pan-pod.' The other party replies '*pavlem dev borem korum*'—'We received, God bless you'. The bridegroom's party is received with great honour and invited to sit down. Some refreshments—cold drinks, biscuits, fruits, etc., are served first to the bridegroom's party and then to the bride's party. Since the bride is led into the house the bridegroom has to sit in the *matov* with his best-

men. At this time an important and impressive ceremony takes place. A few distinguished women from the bridegroom's party including his mother (who did not accompany the party to the church, she now goes for the first time to the bride's house) bring all the bridal clothes (also the *sado*) to the bride's house accompanied by a band. As soon as the procession (*vor*) reaches the bride's house, the bridegroom with his bestmen leaves the bride's *matov* and goes to meet the procession and leads it into the *matov*. When they enter the bride's *matov*, the women of the bride's party start singing *vovyos* from the inside. The contents of the *vovyos* are witty and clever and they ask tricky and funny questions trying to trap and humiliate the bridegroom's party waiting outside with the *sado*. The women in the bridegroom's party take up the challenge and answer in such a way that the bridegroom's position is defended. It is worth listening to these *vovyos* for they are humorous, creative and full of wisdom. At the end, when one of the parties gives in, the procession is admitted into the *matov* and the band plays an exciting tune. Crackers are blasted off.

The bride is now led to a private room and surrounded by the singing women, is dressed in *sado* and all the jewellery. She really looks like a royal bride in her new apparel. The mother of the bridegroom has the first right to dress the bride. However if she is a widow, this right falls on the *yejman* (bridegroom's paternal aunt). The next item is the tying of the *pirduk*. The mother-in-law or the *yejman* also ties the *pirduk* around the bride's neck.

There are two essential items included in the ceremony of *sado* 1) *Sovo*—After dressing the bride in her bridal apparel she is led to the *matov* and invited to take the seat at the left of the bridegroom. This is called 'seating at the assembly' (*sovyar bosovnhem*). The women surround the bridal pair and sing *vovyos*. At this time the *yejmani* announces 'If anybody wishes to present gifts to the bridegroom or the bride, they may do so.' This is known as 2) *ayar*:<sup>10</sup> In former days the groom's elder sister's husband used to sit with a clean brass plate to receive the gifts (*ayar*). In those days it was the common custom to put a rupee or half a rupee on the plate. As soon as the coin fell on the plate it would give a sound. Another man sat near to write down the persons' name who put his coin and the

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10. Konkani Magazine 'Rakno', 22nd Dec. 1963, Our Civilization, by D. P. Albuquerque, p. 55.

amount given. When this writer heard the clinking sound of the coin falling on the brass plate he would ask in Tulu *av yer?*—which means ‘who is he?’ The *yejmani* would tell him loudly the name of the person who put the coin on the plate. The brother-in-law then announced the amount to the writer. Later the *av yer?* was modified and now it is known as *a-yar*. The relatives and friends present gifts or money to the bridal pair at least one rupee in an envelope with their names on. The *mal-dhedo* (the first best man) keeps an account of the amount received from every invited person.

When the elders present something to the bridal pair they also bless them. Friends present their gifts with kisses or shaking of hands.

The wedding dinner is served when the presentation of the wedding gifts is over. The preference is given to the bridegroom’s party to sit at the first turn and they are served first. The bridal pair sits on the prominent place with their respective bestman and bridesmaids. The dinner is served on banana leaves. Unlike the *ros* meal, this dinner is of a superior quality. A certain method has to be followed while serving dinner to the guests. First a man goes round sprinkling water on the leaves so that each diner can clean his leaf. Next a little salt is served, then pickle (*lonchen*). Then come several different dishes of vegetables. The last item would be rice. Those who can afford it provide the guests with *sanna-mas* (rice cakes and meat) or *wnde-mas* (bread and meat), followed by rice and curry. The *yejmani* recites a short prayer before the starting of the dinner. The bridal pair is served big heaps of food which they would never be able to eat. But they are told to put morsels of food into each other’s mouth. When everybody has finished his meal the people sitting at the last turn sing the ‘*laudate*’.

When the dinner is over the bridegroom is asked to stand in the *matov* alone and his bride’s mother presents him in the sight of all with a ring as a sign that she is his mother-in-law. Hence forward he has to call her *mai* (mother). Soon after this ceremony, the bridegroom takes the bride to his own house. A procession follows to the bridegroom’s house as the band leads the way. Bride and bridegroom walk hand in hand at the front of the procession. The procession comes to a stop at the entrance of the *matov* at the bridegroom’s house. The women from the bridegroom’s family come forward to welcome the pair. When the bridal pair steps into the *matov* the band plays a gay tune and crackers are fired off. Then the psalm ‘*laudate*’ is sung.

The bride and the bridegroom are seated on chairs placed in a prominent place and all the guests from both parties sit around them. The women once again sing '*vovyos*'.

Now comes the most moving part of the whole wedding ceremonial. It is the solemn offering of the bride to the bridegroom's family which is called '*opsun divnchen*'. It is the bride's father (if he cannot control his emotions, a paternal uncle) who with his closest relatives comes forward and taking his daughter by the hand, presents her formally to the bridegroom's father and his relatives. The parting words which flow from his mouth (bride's father) are quite impressive and touching. He says 'till today we have looked after this girl as our own. But at this moment we offer her to you with the fond hope that you will treat her as your own'. This ceremony generally takes place in the main room of the house where an altar is erected on a stand. The bride kneels down and breaks out into tears and sobs. Everyone present there is moved to tears as they share her sentiments. The weeping of the bride is the symbol of her reluctance to exchange her dear parents' home for that of her husband. At this time the women sing a parting song which brings tears into the eyes of all:

*Radanaka baye, ani suzeinaka dole*

*ani atadisan pude tuka apovnk etavn pole*

(Don't cry, dear daughter, and don't allow your eyes to swell  
within eight days we shall take you home again)

Thus the song goes on for a while consoling the bride. The bridegroom's mother now steps forward and taking the bride by the hand, leads her into the house. With this the actual wedding ceremony comes to an end. Some tradition-minded Christians still keep up certain old customs such as '*porthapon*'—calling again. Both the bridegroom and the bride, with some of their close relatives, are invited to a grand dinner at the bride's place. But on the next day the bridal pair returns again to the bridegroom's house. Thus there is an almost continuous visiting and re-visiting between the two houses. However, these customs are not strictly practised in present times except in some villages.

Thus the marriage customs of the Christians in South Canara clearly manifest a mixture of the rich and impressive old original ritual of their Hindu forefathers with the new Christian concepts expressed in a modern and Western style.



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