



Ethnographies of States and Tribes in Highland Odisha

In this article, I introduce the discrepancies between official and ethnographic views on conditions in the highlands of the province of Odisha, the western and tribal half of the province. For tactical reasons, the colonial government joined it with the Hindu coastal zone, even though Odisha's borders cut through several major tribal territories with millions of inhabitants. Amazingly, very little field research has been conducted in these highlands, and the major anthropological schools have almost entirely neglected them. For millennia, empires or petty kingdoms have tried in vain to subjugate the highlanders, but during the last decades major industrial ventures by national and international trusts have entered the hills. Numerous state efforts at “development” have amounted to the transformation of free cultivators with a local religion into Hindu untouchables in slums. However, most of the unique tribal social structures continue to exist, though “education,” as the major state effort, tries to undo them.

KEYWORDS: tribal India—Scheduled Tribes—indigeneity—Kond—clanship—local descent groups

CASTE society of the most conservative kind is the dominant sociological feature in what is loosely known as coastal Odisha; that is, the flat, fertile, and densely populated zone bordering the Bay of Bengal and extending into the valley of the river Mahanadi.¹ The latter cuts the province into the mountainous Eastern Ghats, with the Kondhan Hills of the south and extensions of the Chota Nagpur Plateau in the north; both of these highlands rise steeply from the coastal plains. The hill people do not accept the caste model. The state as such, elaborately and firmly rooted in the lowlands for millennia, concerns the highlanders in rather different ways.

Why should the people of the hills attract attention? Is it helpful or informative to label them as “indigenous” or “tribal” because they do not belong to what is called the Indian “mainstream”? Must they be “integrated”? Are they of several heterogeneous cultures or part of a single cultural complex? Can they (or some of them) claim special state benefits or obtain administrative advantages?

ETHNOGRAPHIES

Academic discussions on Middle Indian highlanders, or public debates in general, contain a rather limited number of themes mainly linked to so-called “backwardness.” Formally, this term alludes to poverty, ill health, and illiteracy, though cultural values are tacitly implied. Since the 1970s, considerable federal and provincial budgetary provisions have been, in addition to the special aid for the Backward Classes in general, invested to hasten the “uplift” of some hill people who had officially been declared as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG).² These are the most isolated tribal units, who are not just poor but different in ways the administration depreciates, even though the officers will not discuss such alleged defects in public. The results of some forty years devoted to governmental measures to improve the conditions of the PTG have never been evaluated. At the same time, the issue of “development” continues to push aside all other issues.

About half of all inhabitants of Odisha live in the hills and many overt features confirm the special character of their culture. The official state language, Oriya, spoken on the coast, is closer to English than to several highland tongues of the Munda or the Dravidian family, and even its western variety,³ the lingua franca in

the hills, includes terms, pronunciations, and constructions unknown or “coarse” to the ears of coastal listeners. Temples, unless built very recently and lacking devotees, are found only in the few urban colonies of the mountains or, in rare cases, serve Hindu pilgrims when they withdraw to the wilderness. Agricultural production too differs substantially. On patches of the hill slopes the ashes of pre-monsoon fires fertilize the ground annually, to be hoed by swift arms before millet is sowed. Such cultivation, known as *podu*, is widely practised and, like many other central concerns of the hill people, prohibited by the state. The even fields of the plateaus, fed by the annual rains, are ploughed and the rare rivulets have been dammed wherever they could be broadened into terraces for wet rice cultivation. By contrast, most of coastal Odisha is intensely irrigated to carry two or three crops annually. Cattle keeping offers yet another dichotomy: most lowlanders consume milk and avoid beef while most highlanders reverse this rule. As late as 1936 the colonial power fused the provincial administration of hills and plains, since the creation of the new Muslim province Sindh, later part of Pakistan, had to be “balanced” by a new Hindu state.

If books on the regular features of Hinduism, as observed in coastal Odisha, tend to fill libraries all over the world, basic information on sociocultural ideas and values of the Middle Indian hill people is lacking. In the colonial phase of the twentieth century a few elaborate ethnographies were composed by tireless, committed, and highly educated authors who, nonetheless, were not trained as anthropologists,⁴ though this latter aspect would normally remain unmentioned. At a time when the ethnographers of the region had their most intensive and creative phase, academic social anthropology at Commonwealth universities rose rapidly in scope, intellectual acumen, and methodological refinement. Yet, these elite lineages, headed by Radcliffe-Brown, the prominent Oxford anthropologist, and his rival Malinowski of the LSE, left out India completely, even though their members knew perfectly well that the kind of “primitive society” they liked to study could be found among many millions of people everywhere in the vast hill tracts between the Ganges and the Godavari. The active ethnographers of this region embodied local knowledge but lacked theory, method, and comparative data from elsewhere, while the discipline’s leading academics, probably aware of such disproportions, went for fieldwork in all the British colonies apart from India. Each of these two camps carefully avoided any reference to the scholarship of the other.

During the 1950s Odisha welcomed non-Indian ethnographers to the highlands. In the northeast of the central Khondamals district, F. G. Bailey of the Manchester School could explore conflicts and contradictions among the Kond on their apparently inevitable path through a caste-like status to finally become citizens of a democratic nation-state. BAILEY describes contemporary territorial clans in detail (1960, 47–88) and their given binary oppositions, as well as past principles of extensive feuding that went along with collective marriageability (28). The latter, or “affinity” in anthropological jargon, is not the ethnographer’s strong point, for he dislikes the “alliance theory” proposed by some colleagues. Instead, BAILEY

offers what he himself calls “conjectural history” (1960, 63–68) with references to “decay” and “latecomers.” And yet Bailey reported that,

[E]veryone could be placed according to the clan territories in which they lived, as either agnates and therefore allies, or as in-laws and potential enemies.

(BAILEY 1960, 85).

Although in Bailey’s account, “the cult of the Earth and the Mountain”⁵ (52) used to be part of this, he reports that the ritual has become an individual affair, “although it draws people from a wide area of the countryside” (81). Detailed devotional concerns are hardly mentioned in his books. One reads:

[T]he corporate activity of the founding clan in the positive parts of the Earth cult has vanished, probably because that cult was initially suppressed by the Administration, and later because its substitute, the buffalo sacrifice, is both expensive and frowned upon by Hindus.

(BAILEY 1960, 83)

Again, such a description sounds convincing to Euro-American ears. We can easily follow an argument on the “causes” of assumed religious decay by reference to state prohibitions, condemnations in the dominant religion, as well as the comparatively low costs.

At about the same time in the 1950s, though some 80 kilometers further south among the Kuttia Kond, NIGGEMEYER (1964) witnesses the elaborate clan cult addressed to the Earth Goddess and her spouse of the mountain. This ethnographer records and translates the mythical recitations that dictate a human sacrifice to the Kond believers. However, during the same performance, the sacrificers also recite how individually named British officers had enforced the rule that buffaloes should be substituted for the human victims. Photos of different sacrificial stages and occasions with maps of clan territories illustrate this descriptive account, which is written in German and thus read only very rarely.

Niggemeyer also meets tribal Gond immigrants in the center of Kuttia Kond territory. Around the turn of the twentieth century their great-grandparents, hailing from the neighboring Kalahandi territory, had been given a single village in lieu of collecting millet and vegetables from Kond cultivators for the officer of a so-called Hill Raja, residing some 15 kilometers away on the lone mountain road. However, such an apparently unequivocal chain of command has a specific bent, since the immigrant Gond ask Kond ritual specialists to conduct the buffalo sacrifice on the very land they receive from their masters whenever it is their turn. The Gond outsiders do cultivate the fields and consume the harvested millet, but the Kond clan Goddess remains as the supreme owner to provide fertility only if appeased by the normative gifts—that is, those sacrificed by the human affines of her clan. In the year 2000, I witnessed what Niggemeyer observed in the mid-1950s on the very same spot as part of the ongoing clan cycle. To this day the village land continues to nurture the Gond expatriates, though socioculturally the latter remain within their own Kalahandi territory, where they select spouses according to the intricate

Gond phratry system that differs considerably from the Kond terms of agnation and affinity. Until 1949, these Gond hillmen collected from the local Kond whatever “revenue” they could get on behalf of a so-called hill state that had been instituted by the superior European power.

In contrast to Bailey and Niggemeyer, Charles McDUGAL (1963), the third important ethnographer of the 1950s, lived in a Juang village for more than a year to dance, work, and hunt with his hosts and to learn their language. The outcome is unique. These inhabitants of the northern Keonjhar district disclose their distinctive constitution, as articulated and confirmed by numerous rituals that order gender, time, territory, descent, affinity, and cropping. Sociologically the formal equation of alternating generations, most relevant in matters of authority and cult, dance and marriage, reminds anthropologists of pre-European Australia. Again, McDougal’s dissertation is hardly ever read or cited.⁶

In later decades non-Indian ethnographers became less welcome in upper Odisha and yet VITEBSKI (1993) was able to live among the Sora like one of them, involving himself intimately in shamanic sessions, the central feature of Sora culture. Their spirit media establish contact with the dangerous *sonum* (spirit) of the recently deceased so that the latter can articulate their multiple complaints against their nearest kin among the living rather than attack them. Subsequently, extended and complex rituals involving the entire village in significant singing, sacrifice, and erecting megaliths will transform at least some of the dead into benevolent ancestors. In the period after Vitebski’s field research of the 1970s, the Sora suffered from the inroads of North American evangelists or Hindu nationalists. The latter, probably having been mobilized by the former, are out to “regain” those who are said to have been “lost” to Hinduism in earlier epochs.

Subsequent research involves a team from Berlin. Initially, I had tried to locate the whereabouts of the larger hill communities, including those never discussed in the discipline, and then compare their kinship structures (PFEFFER 2004). Particular efforts were devoted to the grand give-way ritual determining the secondary funeral of the Gadaba (PFEFFER 2001) who inhabit the southwestern district of Koraput. The ethnographies of the other team members are based on long-term participant observation. In minute detail and with extraordinary analytical intensity and breadth, HARDENBERG (2005) elucidates “society, marriage, and sacrifice” of the Dongria Kond who are hoe-cultivators on the highest slopes. BERGER, after spending two years in the plateau villages of Gadaba plough cultivators, unfolds their refined and unique communal structure as is also articulated through their culinary code (2007). OTTEN (2006) studies illness and healing among the neighboring Rona, while among the Mali (OTTEN 2009) she discovers the female organized fertility cult linking this large plateau community of vegetable growers to the petty “jungle king.” SKODA (2005) recalls the historical entry of the Aghria in the northern Sambalpur district. They had been the pioneers of the plough. On behalf of the newly created colonial landlords they had operated as revenue collectors, supervisors, and agricultural experts to assemble and organize the hill people and thus make them clear the forests to plough land for surplus production. Skoda

also records today's unchanged local impact of such *gauntia* or supervisors. GUZY's account (2004) shows how a lowland Hindu reform movement of male-dominated asceticism is transformed into female-led forms of ecstasy among the hill people. The newly introduced abstention from meat and alcohol in no way alters the local conceptions of ecstatic communal devotion. Finally STRÜMPPELL (2006) gives a voice to immigrant lowlanders of an industrial settlement who try to enact the Nehruvian social order of equality while simultaneously, without much ado, expelling those who used to own the land.

The "postcolonial" type of anthropology has also found its way into upper Odisha, as DIRKS (1999) reports on THURSTON (1975), a well-known British-Indian "census ethnographer," who apparently,

[M]ade a great deal of missionary and colonial reports that the Meriah "tribe" of central India practiced human sacrifice. As is true of most such reports, they are invariably secondhand, and they become enlivened by the sheer horror of the story in ways that exercised particular forms of attention and misrepresentation, in general travel and missionary literature, in colonial documents, as well as in official anthropological writing. And it is worth noting that Thurston's chapter became a primary footnote for James Frazer in his discussion of human sacrifice in the canonical text of early British anthropology, *The Golden Bough*.

(DIRKS 1999, 170)

Dirks' contribution, which has been published repeatedly, requires some comments, since neither Dirks's sources nor other ethnographers have ever mentioned a "Meriah 'tribe'." In fact, the name does not refer to a social unit but to the human victim of the Kond sacrifice during the early nineteenth century, substituted by a buffalo in later decades. During the last thirty-five years, I (and others) have witnessed this ritual on several occasions. Moreover FRAZER (1983), writing in 1890, did not obtain his information from THURSTON (1975, 510), writing in 1907. Rather, the opposite was the case. Rather than a "primary footnote," the author of *The Golden Bough* had based his four-page passage (FRAZER 1983, 571-75) explicitly on firsthand sources, that is, the works of S. C. MACPHERSON (1842) and John CAMPBELL (1864) who at different times had been in command of the agency to suppress human sacrifice. As such they personally liberated numerous individuals who had earlier been raised and adored since they were to become the sacrificial victims of the Kond Earth Goddess.

From 1956 onwards anthropology was gradually established in the provincial universities of coastal Odisha. In due course, their departments have produced numerous ethnographies on hill peoples, as have several other state institutions. The research method of these studies mostly implies interrogations on the external premises of inspection bungalows, schools, and other official buildings that usually serve as places to sleep for lowland administrators. On such occasions, informants are summoned, questioned, and dismissed. MADAN (1989, 277) has described such a mode of interviewing informants as kinds of communications—and the reasons

why he would *not* want to get involved in them—better than anyone else. In fact, no member of the anthropological elite in Delhi has ever been interested in ethnographic work within the “backward” areas of Odisha.

Such “inner-provincial” interviews primarily refer to economic issues and touch basic needs such as water supply and medical aid, though they may include enumerations of village deities and social units. The operation of schools, dispensaries, and governmental cooperatives is very frequently, though not critically, commented on, in upper-level graduate theses. For more than a year during the 1990s, a young Kuttia Kond matriculate was also shown off at university and other government departments, though the idea of “tribal” staff members has always been out of the question. The Euro-American demand for altogether open and time-consuming fieldwork is probably arrogant in view of the severe status restrictions that govern Hindu academics in coastal Odisha. In a hill village the mere smell of beef or liquor would be enough to alarm a lowlander, since his reputation at home would be permanently damaged by any closer social intercourse with “the primitives.”

STATES

And the Beloved of the Gods conciliates the forest tribes of his empire, but he warns them that he has power even in his remorse and he asks them to repent, lest they be killed. (Asoka, *Thirteenth Major Rock Edict*)

Ironically, the reliability of reports on stateless social orders depends upon documents produced and published in a state. Guided by remorse after his bloody Kalinga (Odisha) campaign, Emperor Asoka of the third century BCE proclaims his famous message of tolerance towards all except the “forest tribes” who are threatened (“lest they be killed”). Perhaps their resistance was the cause of his unequivocal statement. While the maps of historians generously color most of India as Asoka’s empire, one may wonder how his troops, or those of innumerable later monarchs, were technically able to control the hill people in the vast forest tracts of the subcontinent. If his campaign in the coastal plains gave Asoka timeless publicity, how much greater an achievement would have been a victory in a mountain war? But nothing of this sort is ever reported in Asoka’s inscriptions. The threat in the rock edict may, in fact, be understood as a move against “forest tribes” beyond the domain of his actual sovereignty.

Regular and sound historical sources on the subcontinent are initiated under Muslim rule. In several steps the Moghul Empire conquers Odisha from 1576 onwards, but this only applies to the coastal belt, the Moghulbandi. Perhaps the so-called Garhjat “states” in the hills are asked to pay tribute to the Subahdar (governor) in coastal Cuttack, though whether they ever oblige, or are able to oblige, cannot be discovered. After 1751 Maratha rule, at least according to all British sources, amounts to sporadic raids by the soldiery of the Nagpur Bhonsle Raja, an administrative style that is unlikely to have touched the forested hills. When the British East India Company enters coastal Odisha in 1803, the situation in the highlands

remains fluid “up to the general uprising in 1857/8” (SKODA forthcoming, 5). As late as 1888 the status of some twenty-four hill states called “Tributary Mahals” is finally defined by the colonial power, though later, together with others from present-day Chattisgarh and Jharkhand provinces, the twenty-four “kings” also form an Eastern States Agency in 1935 (SKODA forthcoming, 5). Thus a kind of ruler with a kind of state did exist in the hills during this colonial epoch.

For centuries the “Lord of the Elephants,” the supreme Gajapati Raja controlling the coastal region with interruptions since 1077, had been a major monarch of India (KULKE 1979). He was a godly king who, by impersonating Lord Jagannath, the “Lord of the Universe,” on certain ritual occasions in the sacred city of Puri, came to be identified as “walking Vishnu.” As overlord for all other nobles in the region, he monopolized this cult, disallowing any other construction of a Jagannath temple within his sphere of political influence (KULKE 1978). Only after 1817 did the colonial power terminate these claims, reducing this king to a religious functionary of the Puri temple (HARDENBERG 2008). Thereafter the British approached the Malaria-ridden hills in a very gradual manner that for decades included a campaign against militant irregulars. For want of profitable returns, “indirect rule” was finally established. This measure substantialized the twenty-four “jungle kings” (see Schnepel in this volume, 233–57). By the end of the nineteenth century, these petty rajas, liberated from their former indigenous overlord or any other external danger, constructed numerous royal Jagannath temples and called in Brahmins (PFEFFER 1978) to initiate the royal rituals of this “Lord of the Universe” on a micro-scale. The puppet kings could imitate the lifestyle⁷ of their colonial masters and carry on without warfare, irrespective of the idea that the sword is the only calling of a true Kshatriya. Their construction work ceased in the 1930s, when Independence was inevitably approaching, and the upkeep of the palaces was discontinued, after Indira Gandhi abolished the privy purses in 1971.⁸ Today, some ruins remind onlookers of less than a century of colonially-sponsored traditional kingdoms in the hills.

In retrospect, any realistic assessment of statehood in highland Odisha⁹ will conclude that the colonial interference and, even more so, the succeeding Indian Union changed the dimension of any kind of rule that may have earlier existed in the hills. The British installed twenty-four puppet courts, but their general Indian Forest Act of 1878 was far more consequential, since it took away from the highlanders what had been theirs throughout known history. By the stroke of a pen the Middle Indian forests became property of the crown as the following:

- Reserved Forests
- Protected Forests
- Private Forests
- Village Forests

In return, the local cultivators were granted certain “privileges” in the immediate vicinity of their villages, such as the permission to collect “minor forest produce” and the watering and sometimes the grazing of their cattle (JEWITT 1998,

147). Shifting cultivation became illegal overnight although, like the prohibited animal sacrifice, it continues in practice, since large numbers of highlanders would simply perish if actually prevented from exploiting the hill slopes in this manner. After 1947:

[F]orest reservation and “scientific forestry” continued in the “national interest” to satisfy India’s large and growing industrial, commercial, communication and defence requirements. (JEWITT 1998, 148)

In fact, forest conservation gave way to timber exploitation on a vast scale (GUHA 1983).

Spectacular interventions by independent India created new dams that flooded innumerable old villages and created highly prized irrigated soil for immigrant cultivators, whereas the former owners were never compensated. No amount of financial consideration could have recovered the sacred earth of the Goddess for them anyhow. After foreign calamities made millions of people flee to India from Tibet or the former East Pakistan, the state settled them in highland Odisha without asking the inhabitants. As one outcome, one can find many contemporary Tibetans who live in urban India, but regularly collect “rent” from highland cultivators who used to be the landowners before the Buddhist refugees were settled in the vicinity.

Even more disastrous was the industrial impact of the state. Within a few decades, German development aid transformed the tiny village of Rourkela into a huge, ugly, smelly, and permanently darkened steel city. The paper mills of Rayagada, known to be of the most polluting of any kind of industrial venture, were a governmental concession to a major business tycoon of India’s well-known Parsi dynasties. Since the local trees there had been processed very quickly, the area is now covered with eucalyptus plantations that drain the groundwater out of the wells of the surrounding villages. The National Aluminium Company (NALCO) is also adding to the devastation. Its huge plant in the Koraput district is poisoning the rivers within a radius of 30 kilometers. Each one of such centrally organized highland ventures has also created new settlements, comparable to “gated communities,” for thousands of skilled immigrants, with the local cultivators being simply removed to urban slums. Recently the South Korean POSCO trust has purchased an entire mountain range for a new steel plant.¹⁰ Such activities have finally caused a stir of civic movements all over Middle India and beyond. In some cases, preventive court action has halted the expansion.

These sketches may indicate that “the state” in action is referring to rather different concerns of past and present public authorities in the western hills. Though all over India the administration must cope with “informal,” collective, social forces such as castes and sects, the modern state is mostly absent in the public spheres of highland Odisha, or else interfering in a social order that is markedly different from the well-known one of the lowlands. This external character of statehood is not reduced, but rather reenforced, by the recent large-scale industrial onslaughts that have turned independent cultivators into slum dwellers. Special zones are

enforced for such enterprises, as if they served the occupational forces of an altogether different country, while the former inhabitants are removed rather than integrated into the transformative efforts. Thus the mere presence of state actions in the highlands may easily be misunderstood. In fact, different degrees of state sovereignty characterize the following historical types:

- Local strongholds of indigenous or foreign adventurers who may have been asked by Moghuls or Marathas for “revenue” that may have been supplied on an irregular basis.
- Somewhat larger zones of control around the new palaces that had been established by colonially installed “hill rajas” collecting “revenue” on a more regular basis.
- The colonial government’s central control and exploitation of all forests after 1878, as well as certain mining and hydroelectric ventures of that period.
- The independent republic’s “development” projects, that is, initially road construction and administrative outposts, bazaars, and schools manned by inflowing lowlanders. Thereafter huge industrial ventures of national and international trusts that draw skilled all-Indian immigrants into “gated communities.”

Although nobody will question the final supremacy of the Indian republic in all of Odisha, at the same time, the majority of the highlanders continue to shape their communal lives on their own, or without reference to administrative measures. This autonomy applies to production, distribution, and consumption of food and, inseparable from such activity, to socio-ritual structuring of a “good and just” order that has no room for the state. In return, local constitutions are simply negated by the latter. However, contemporary hillmen are not ignorant of external opportunities and threats. They may emigrate to other provinces for months or years to engage in wage labor, just as a few police stations here and there have come to stay along with forest rangers, state run cooperatives, and Block Development Offices, even if all immigrant officers in private simply avoid the local people and are avoided in return. During the last decade the Berlin anthropologists have, to mention just one field of public concern, witnessed several homicide cases that were not brought to the notice of officials but were rather covered up by the villagers.

TRIBES

Beyond the lowland regions, the colonial state has cut the provincial border of Odisha through the middle of several territories inhabited by large and distinct cultural units of indigenous highlanders. Its administration has also created Scheduled Tribes. This bureaucratic label, colloquially substituted by *ādivāsī*, or “original inhabitants,” has been allotted to some—but not to all—hill people who, by certain administrative “privileges,” are meant to be transformed into educated and democratic citizens. The label refers to fuzzy criteria and has a long history. For the first time in 1796, the East India Company introduced a “Non-Regulation

System” to “pacify” the militant inhabitants of the Rajmahal Hills (DALTON 1872, 266), presently in Jharkhand province. While the peasants of the plains accepted British supremacy, as they had submitted to the many foreign governments earlier on, the Middle Indian highlanders resisted conquest, since they had never been subordinated to the same extent. As a result of numerous rebellions in the nineteenth century, they were awarded a special administrative status under different titles of the respective region, though they had been fighting for freedom rather than for incomprehensible bureaucratic changes. The Government of India Act of 1935 unified such “protective discrimination,” later to be adopted by the independent republic. Accordingly, the hill people of Odisha are classified into Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC).

The special state “protection” differs between one category and the other. At elections, the respective candidates of either ST or SC have reserved constituencies wherever their people form a majority, though adults of any status may go to the polls. Public sector jobs—other than those in the armed forces—have a reserved quota for any of the three categories, provided qualified candidates apply, which is exceptional in the higher services. Educational institutions also offer reserved scholarships, and various public budgets allot special funds for the “development” of these three categories of backward classes.

The dividing lines between the three categories are most important in matters of land ownership and religion. Only a person of ST status is allowed to buy immobile property from another one who, like a member of the OBC, may be of any religion, whereas only Hindus, which in practical terms means non-Christian hill people, qualify for the SC status that is elsewhere assigned to lowland ex-untouchables of an entirely different sociocultural milieu.

Deviating from the Nilgiri conditions (see Heidemann in this volume), these administrative categories have never been invented nor demanded by hill people of the province, and the highlanders never had a say in their specific application. This kind of pigeonholing definitively divides their common interests and is obviously applied in an erratic fashion. The Chick Baraik, for example, are ST in Jharkhand and SC in Odisha, where the Rona are OBC and not ST as in Andhra Pradesh. Similar discrepancies indicate the arbitrary nature of such far-reaching interventions. In reality, ST and OBC assemble cultivators, while male and female members of the SC, when at home in the highlands, engage in crafts and petty commercial activities. The symbiosis between cultivators and craftspeople has been omnipresent since the earliest accounts of the inhabitants of western Odisha have been published.

Should we conceive these highlanders as belonging to the “indigenous” people(s) of India? The issue is of great political relevance, since the United Nations demands equal rights for those classified as “indigenous.” The latter also have the right “to consider themselves different and to be respected as such.” The same resolution unequivocally proclaims:

[A]ll doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or

cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust. (UNITED NATIONS 2007)

The Indian government's ambivalent reaction to such UN resolutions was probably based upon arguments developed by Bêteille, one of India's most renowned sociologists who, however, has never engaged in empirical research in the Middle Indian hills or discussed ethnographic details of the highlanders. Bêteille resorts to a formal argument by which the term "indigenous" necessarily refers to a "priority of settlement" (BÊTEILLE 1998, 188). Since the history of interaction between ST and non-ST "has been a long and complex one in which both populations have undergone many transformations" (189), such priority cannot be ascertained. Also, "the distribution of physical or racial traits shows no marked¹¹ cleavage as it does in Australia or in North America" (189), just as it is "impossible to disentangle history from mythology in the available accounts of migration" (189). Linguistically, no valid generalizations can be found, since several ST, "including some of the larger ones, speak a form of the regional language" (190). BÊTEILLE further elaborates that, "if some Oriyas¹² or Tamilians are known to have lived in their present homes in Orissa or Tamil Nadu since time immemorial, they may certainly claim to be indigenous" (BÊTEILLE 1998, 190). Bêteille is an expert on current public affairs and certainly aware of the political intentions that inspired the UN resolutions. By his formalism he is, in fact, rejecting their impact upon India. Are his arguments convincing?

Irrespective of more recent research results postulating the existence of two genetically divergent populations on the subcontinent, one close to external peoples and a second one found in central India and nowhere else (REICH et al. 2009), and irrespective also of the fact that the Middle Indian ST in their Munda, Dravidian, and Indo-European languages¹³ share the same pattern in their relationship terminologies, which differs significantly¹⁴ from the patterns of either the North or the South Indian caste societies (PFEFFER 2004), the term "indigenous" may be politically correct but is, no matter how one interprets it, always associated with priority of settlement. Due to the general lack of data, this cannot be ascertained for anyone in mainland India. Accordingly, the application of the term "indigenous" will always be contested by the "mainstream."

The United Nations probably chose the reference to indigeneity because the term "tribal" appeared to be no longer politically correct, even though the word as such¹⁵ bears no objectionable content. Arguments against it are frequently emotional and are rarely analytical contributions. CLIFFORD (1988, 321), for example, ridicules the concept of "tribe" by reference to conditions in US reservations, as if, by some form of amnesia, the European onslaught upon the Amerindian population could be ignored. As always, the arguments of this historian express ethical concerns as well as ethnographic ignorance of conditions in countries beyond the Americas. Generally, the recent ethical or political objections against the term "tribe" may have been developed within the following contextual sequence:

- Euro-American media expose Amerindians and other ill-prepared victims of European conquest and genocide as “tribes” by romanticizing, exoticizing, and fictionalizing their livelihood.
- In adverse reactions to such expositions the term “tribe” is generally discarded.
- The rejection of the concept is technically supported by the fact that even academics are usually unaware of many millions of contemporaries following their own—unwritten—socio-religious constitutions that remain beyond the reach of most bureaucracies of modern states.

Among the academic arguments, SOUTHALL (1970) conceives “tribes” only as stateless societies of past epochs, and FRIED discards the notion (1975) because he prefers another evolutionary sequence (1967), that is, one without a “tribal” stage. GODELIER (1977, 70), on the other hand, is basing his critique on the misleading equation of tribe as a “type of society” and as a “stage of evolution.” In reaction, I suggest that all arguments involving a chronological sequence of separate social systems should be left aside.¹⁶ The purely typological notion of the tribe, however, is applicable to contemporary empirical societies more than any other. Such anthropological classification, however, should have nothing in common with the Indian administrative label of ST.

SAHLINS (1968) has developed the relevant criteria for a tribal-type society, the most important being anarchy, or the absence of a central authority. This may sound odd for highland Odisha where the Indian Union claims to exercise sovereignty. Even though today’s militant anti-state bands of “Naxalites”¹⁷ have their strongholds in all Middle Indian tribal areas, the republic has formally succeeded the odd “Tributary Mahals” in 1949 as well as the indirectly active colonial masters who, nonetheless, had been more direct in their governmental efforts than the preceding adventurers. Sahlins is aware of such contemporary state interventions against tribal peoples. His initial passage reads: “Once discovered they were rapidly colonized, baptized, and culturally traumatized” (SAHLINS 1968, I). However, one can still witness, though only with eyes wide open, a “cultural formation, at once structurally decentralized and functionally generalized” (viii) or the tribal order that, as such, is the very opposite of our structurally centralized and functionally diversified modern state.

Basic criteria of a state or states can also be seen globally. For example, so-called “failed states,” like Somalia, practically operate without a central authority, though they are fully recognized as states by the United Nations. An entirely different example shows how the European Union has withdrawn more than 40 percent of the administrative sovereignty from its members and is constantly interfering in their legislative, judicial, and executive decisions, and yet nobody would hesitate to call the Netherlands a state or deny this status to the EU. Like the Somalis, the Dutch are bound to miss several defining criteria of their state. In the same manner, most tribal people of Odisha have been forced to adjust themselves to the occasional forest ranger and policeman, or even to the major industrial onslaughts upon their

physical existence. However, the sociocultural meanings and mechanisms of their daily social existence continue to accord to the tribal setup and the tribal values. In short, the constitutive features of both the tribe and the state are such impressive historical achievements of *anthropos* that anthropology should not ignore the tribal societal type, since it remains unnoticed by other disciplines. Empirical forms may be partial as long as they remain significant. The alternative would be to ignore a highly differentiated superstructure of a social system that has dominated the globe for millennia. However, we have good reasons to consider those tribal constitutions that continue to guide many millions of contemporary Indians.

Tribal society differs from that of gatherer-hunters¹⁸—like those of the ST described by Bird-David in this volume (139–53)—since tribesmen domesticate animals and plants. Indian tribes may be very large. Thus more than seven million Gond inhabit several Middle Indian provinces like the more than five million Santal. Mostly confined to the Eastern Ghats of Odisha are about 1.5 million Kond. However, the “strength of a tribe is ... in homestead or hamlet, the smallest groups and the narrowest sphere,” while “the social system ... becomes weaker where it is greater” (SAHLINS 1968, 16). Accordingly, the Gond or Kond as such never formally control membership¹⁹ or gather together anywhere. They would not dream of doing so.

Formal authority is lacking in a tribal village. Researchers will always find some kind of a non-hereditary “elder” in the secular sense, though never a “headman,” and another man will not be a “priest,” though he is accepted when leading the rituals. Both are ordinary cultivators, just as the male astrologer and the female or male shaman are neither wealthier nor “superiors” in relation to anyone else. And yet many status differences juxtapose groups and categories. The notion of “tribal equality” may apply to our normal criteria, that is, power and wealth, but in a “familial mode of production” (SAHLINS 1968, 75) generalized status differentiation implies inequality. Irrespective of their personal influence, the tribal highlanders are graded hierarchically. The crucial point is that “in tribes production, polity and piety are not ... separately organized” (SAHLINS 1968, 15). The multivalence of domains marks the basic difference of the tribal kind of constitution.

This will be obvious when compared to the caste system of a Hindu kingdom where individual members used to follow specialized callings by birth. Castes of priests and accountants, carpenters and sweepers, each hierarchically subdivided into several internal categories, separated social life into numerous general and particular domains. Both dancer and doctor are caste specialists in their fields. Agricultural production in caste society is a matter of the landlord, his peasants, and their respective craftsmen and day laborers. Polity used to be the domain of the king and his officers, engaged and graded on a hereditary basis, while piety, the complex order of temples and philosophers, is still organized by Brahmins who may be endogamous cooks or valets of the deity, or even endogamous Vedic intellectuals (PFEFFER 1978). By contrast, occupational specialization in tribal society is rudimentary only.

The house is the most structured tribal unit, with every corner containing a sacred or secular meaning of central relevance. Similarly, the village has a sacred layout that may contain a central men’s house, as among the Juang, or an inner

male and an outer female space within or beyond the two parallel rows of Kond houses. The Dongria Kond have female youth dormitories on the backside of each row, and the Kuttia Kond village is “closed” by the single cottage of a weavers’ family between the rows at their low ends.

All Middle Indian tribes primarily distinguish hereditary cultivators and those born as craftspeople. The latter, called “weavers” or some similar derogatory term, also involve themselves as petty commercial agents, just as they are the hereditary musicians. Some of their instruments may sound like the voice of the village Goddess and are thus equated with her (GUZY 2008, 372). The earth-bound and sometimes rather inarticulate cultivators would never have been able to preserve their tribal heritage without their messengers, the mobile and communicative weavers, who have “always” taken some of the forest produce, or even the harvest, down into the lowlands to return with selected goods like salt, dry fish, or metal tools and implements. At the weekly market, weavers sell discarded animals for a commission and buy sacrificial ones on behalf of the cultivators, just as they used to provide the victim of the Kond human sacrifice. These craftspeople in general are classified as “juniors” or “latecomers” in relation to the cultivators, but most ethnographers have misunderstood this term. In fact, it implies a certain status and not a certain history. Such references to later arrivals or births belong to the omnipresent code of seniority, with the craftspeople being defined as social juniors. For millennia the Goddess had unequivocally declared who was to own and cultivate the land and who was to weave and trade, but the last decades of state-sponsored “protective discrimination” have led to some tensions²⁰ between the two status groups.

Middle Indian tribes conceive themselves as either “seniors” or “juniors” in a binary unit, such as Dhelki and Dudh Kharia, Ho and Munda, or Oraon and Kisan. Together these three “couples” form an allied “triple complex” in the adjoining Jharkhand province and northwestern Odisha. Apart from the Sora, each tribe is further subdivided into a finite number of exogamous totemic patrilineal clans. Among the Kond these have a clear territorial basis and BERGER’s research in Gadaba classification (2007) indicates the same for the past of this tribe. In the solidly tribal southwestern “tail” of the province, the large plateau of the old Koraput district, most tribes unite in the same eight exogamous and totemic categories, but some have only four²¹ or two²² of them. All eight—fish, cobra, cow, bear, leopard,²³ monkey, eagle, and sun—stand for biospheres of different altitudes and perhaps oppose symbols of aggression and nonaggression, but the highlanders do not interpret them in Lévi-Straussian analogies (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1962). Similarly the four (or five) totems of Gond phratries are associated with land and water animals (leopard, tortoise) or to those of earth and sky (cobra, cuckoo), even though in some major regions the phratries are joined and juxtaposed by odd and even numbers rather than animal symbols. Then the four- and six-clan phratries intermarry with the five- and seven-clan phratries. In the case of the Dongria Kond eight exogamous territorial clans control the highest slopes, while only seven of the Kuttia Kond interact in this manner and both Kond units are the “seniors” of “junior” ones on the plateaus. Everywhere, the clans on

the fringes also conduct marriages beyond their own tribal collective. The explicitly territorial type of classification is extensive and detailed among the Juang and the Bhuiya of the northern Keonjhar district, whereas the “triple complex” in the northwest has blurred territorial patterns due to the many migrations caused by colonial interference since the eighteenth century.

At the village level, several collective status categories criss-cross through the totemic order. Accordingly, two or four or even eight of such local descent groups (LDG), named after sacred or secular leadership positions, subdivide a village. On a permanent basis, each one of them regulates marriage relations with others of different villages and clans. These affinal links of LDGs will frequently contradict individual choices with the effect that elopements, lengthy controversies, and elaborate compensation payments make up much of village politics. All marriages involve major bridewealth transactions. Similarly, systematic gift exchanges are due at the grand and exceptional rituals like the Kond buffalo sacrifice, usually marked by an impressive totemic pole of wood, or at the triumphal celebrations of secondary funerals that involve megalithic erections among Gadaba, Koya, Ho, and Sora.

In the eyes of lowland outsiders, these rituals, and the tribal people as such, are “backward” and require a somewhat nondescript “uplift,” whereas the highlanders themselves continue to cultivate their land or carry out their petty trade embedded in their extensive gift economy. They exchange alcoholic drinks of a sacred and of a secular kind in smaller groups of adults, or they meet during extended dancing visits of their youths, as they oblige the Goddess of the Earth and the God of the High wherever they are permitted to do so.

CONCLUSION

Power is the real issue. The highlanders of western Odisha—and of much of Middle India in general—may be classified as belonging to “tribal” societies if Sahlins’ definition is applied. They may also be added to the category of “indigenous” peoples on the terms the United Nations propagate if it is agreed that illiterate cultivators certify the priority of their settlements by megaliths and clan poles rather than written documents as introduced through colonial legislation. Irrespective of their application, however, these hill people are powerless when facing the lowlanders. The latter have—under the pretence of development—used their vast numeric majority to crush the indigenous tribal constitutions that have been the local guidelines in past millennia. The onslaught has been organized by the agencies of the modern bureaucratic state.

The British colonial power had, for the first time, disregarded the ancient Indian tradition of leaving the hill people alone. Later, the Indian Union took some time to conceive specific policies towards the decentralized minority communities of the hills. Thereafter, independent India reserved a huge part of its budget for the “uplift” of these colonially defined Backward Classes, though these financial resources have almost entirely been consumed by an ever-growing development bureaucracy. In

fact, the highlanders' physical and metaphysical conditions of life have not improved during the past sixty-five years, but have deteriorated dramatically. On some occasions, such as Republic Day, tribal representatives are expected to perform as dancers and singers of their folklore, though on other occasions, such as the construction of highly polluting industrial ventures of national or multinational trusts, those who had owned the land for the past millennia are either ignored or forcibly evicted.

For the agencies of the state, the elaborate tribal constitutions simply do not exist, just as the obviously vast differences between the tribal religion and lowland Hinduism are never admitted. When introducing schools,²⁴ for example, the immigrant teachers would always force tribal students to avoid beef and to drink milk.²⁵ Without fail, educational efforts will introduce Hindu deities to the hills more than anything else, even if other schemes are less successful. At the same time, immigrant developers would personally avoid all nonofficial contact with the "polluting" indigenous people.

Many large tribal communities in highland Odisha are—in sociocultural terms—completely unknown to outsiders, since the latter conceive all indigenous value systems as "primitive" and obsolete. Under the pretence of development, these intruders explore and exploit the tribal zone, as if it were a new colony, to be opened up for petty shopkeepers and multinational companies alike. Over the past three decades, they have gained ever-increasing power to do so, irrespective of officially progressive policies.

NOTES

1. On 4 November 2011 the former Indian province of Orissa was renamed "Odisha."
2. These PTG include the Lodha, Bhuiya, Juang, Kuttia Kond, Dongria Kond, Sora, Bondo, and the Koya.
3. Sadri, spoken in the northwest, is also known and spoken as Nagpuri in the neighboring state of Jharkhand, whereas Desia of the southwest resembles Halbi in the neighboring two Bastar districts of Chattisgarh State.
4. For example, S. C. Roy was a jurist, V. Elwin a theologian, W. G. Archer, like W. Grigson, an administrator, and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf had a PhD in ethnology from the diffusionist Vienna Institute, which ruled out any kind of social anthropology.
5. Only very rarely does Bailey introduce terms of the (Dravidian) Kui language of the Kond. He never ponders over the specific local meaning of a category.
6. In 1987 I gave a copy to Robert Parkin for his comparative study of the literature on peoples speaking Munda languages (PARKIN 1992).
7. The hill kings liked to initiate cricket tournaments and tea parties with English crockery and cutlery.
8. Formally this was the twenty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution of India in 1971.
9. Kulke's bibliography with numerous books and articles on the dynasties of the region can be found in BRANDTNER and PANDA (2006, 381–90).
10. On 1 February 2011 the press reported the government's clearance for a twelve-billion-dollar steel plant in the highland Keonjhar district against the protests of environmentalists; *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, Tuesday 1 February 2011.
11. In fact, any highlander of Odisha would, at first sight, be able to distinguish a lowlander.

12. Significantly, the term “Oriya” is not applied to all inhabitants of Odisha, that is, the Odishans, but only to members of the coastal caste society.

13. Munda languages are only spoken by Middle Indian highlanders, while—presumably—Dravidian and Indo-European languages have been adopted and transformed by highlanders in the course of history.

14. Non-anthropologists are unaware of the fact that, when comparing globally, patterns of kinship terminologies differ markedly. Thus the so-called “affinal prescription” applied in South Indian caste society is very different from the “descriptive” method of North Indians. Since such patterns of naming relatives are never created intentionally, the unique one of the Middle Indian highlanders confirms a separate social history.

15. The Latin term *tribus* was introduced as a quantitative reference to the three original ethnic units of ancient Rome.

16. If these arguments are not left aside, misunderstandings are bound to arise because our capitalist milieu equates the respective “latest” with the respective “best.”

17. The name of these militant leftists refers to Naxalbari in West Bengal where the movement was founded.

18. This applies only to “immediate return societies” and not to “delayed return societies” (see WOODBURN 1982). The latter handle major investments and are organized as tribes or even as historical states.

19. To obtain state benefits, a sub-divisional officer must certify an individual’s ST status.

20. Since 2008 so-called “anti-Christian” pogroms in the district of Kondhamal have been instigated by Hindu nationalists on the basis of this cleavage. In some regions of the district a small weaver minority had converted to Christianity during the last sixty years, in others a small cultivator minority.

21. These include the Gutob Gadaba and probably others too.

22. For example, the Bondo, Bhumia, and Matia.

23. The term *killo* stands for both the “senior” tiger and “junior” leopard, but tigers no longer exist in the region while plenty of leopards do.

24. Rather uncritically, these innovations are generally seen as the climax of developmental benefits.

25. Tribal morality conceives the human consumption of nonhuman milk as a transgression of the natural boundaries between the species, or comparable to sexual acts of bestiality.

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