



Research article

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## CHRISTIAN TODAS OF THE NILGIRIS

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the Todas, a pastoral tribe, one of the earliest tribes who live in the highest peaks (above 2100 meters) of the Nilgiris, Tamilnadu, South India. The author is a Toda Christian, and grew up in the Nilgiris, but did not know much about the culture, tradition, and religion of the Todas and how and when Christianity came to the Toda community and what impact it had on the culture and tradition of the Todas. Hence, the author was eager to research on Toda tribe. This article explores a brief history of the Todas; the Toda people; the coming of Christianity to the Todas; the motivating factor/s for the early converts to Christianity; and the impact of Christianity today on the culture of the Todas. This is an interesting article to know the complexity of the life of Toda people who appear simple. Christianity is richer when peoples of diverse cultures and languages come together to worship.



## Introduction

As a Toda Christian, I grew up in the Nilgiris, Tamilnadu, but I did not know much about the culture, tradition, and religion of the Todas and how and when Christianity came to our community and what impact it had on the culture and tradition of the Todas. Hence, I was eager to do this research paper. So, I will seek to explore: 1) a brief history of the Todas; 2) the Toda people; 3) the coming of Christianity to the Todas; 4) the motivating factor/s for the early converts to Christianity; and 5) the impact of Christianity today on the culture of the Todas. I significantly draw insights from Anthony R. Walker and Catherine F. Ling for this paper.

## A Brief History of the Todas

The Todas, a pastoral tribe, are one of the earliest tribes who lived in the highest peaks (above 2100 mtrs) of the Nilgiris. They believed that their goddess *To.kisy* created the long-horned hill buffaloes that are a major part of their lives.<sup>1</sup> They coexisted with the Kotas (artisans); Kurumbas and Irulas (forest dwellers), and Badagas (agriculturalists). These five tribes were linked in ritual, economic, and social symbiosis with ritual hierarchy -Toda, Badaga, Kurumba and Irula, and Kota, resembling the multi-caste Hindu society.<sup>2</sup> The Todas claim supremacy in the hierarchy being “the Lord of the Soil”.<sup>3</sup>

The five communities spoke their own languages, lived in their own villages, had their own temples, and priests, preserved their respective cultural identities, and were economically interdependent. The Badaga language was the *lingua franca* of the five communities.<sup>4</sup> Each community had internal subgroups, which are wholly or partly endogamous, ranked hierarchically, based on relative purity, and are further divided into exogamous clans.<sup>5</sup>

As interdependent communities, they had a system of exchange through inter-familial traditional relationships passed down from generation to generation.<sup>6</sup> This close relationship among the tribes was disrupted after the British rulers initiated major changes in the social

<sup>1</sup>Anthony R. Walker, *The Toda of South India: A New Look* (Hindustan Pub. Corp., 1986), 10.

<sup>2</sup>Walker, 10–15.

<sup>3</sup>Walker, 26.

<sup>4</sup>Walker, 20–22.

<sup>5</sup>Walker, 21.

<sup>6</sup>Walker, 25.



and physical environment of the Nilgiris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the influx of people from the plains paved the way for a new social order.<sup>7</sup> The British innovated agriculture and large areas were used for agriculture to grow English fruits, vegetables, and trees. Grasslands were cleared for growing crops. In 1863, the British administration stopped 'slash-and-burn' cultivation, which forced people to become daily laborers on the British plantations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the traditional exchange economy and interdependence slowly faded and became archaic.

## The Toda People

### *Physical Features and Clothing*

The striking physical appearance and their distinctive huts gave birth to several romantic theories about their origin, which is still a mystery. Toda men and women are distinctive in their looks with their hairdo and a toga-like cloak. Srinivasam asserts, "The Todas bear little resemblance in their bone structure, facial expressions, texture and colour of skin to the rest of the peoples of India".<sup>9</sup> Catherine F Ling, who knew the Todas for 47 years wrote: "In physique the Todas are a fine race, tall and well-proportioned and capable of travelling long distances on foot".<sup>10</sup>

The Toda men and women wear a long one piece, cream, cotton embroidered cloth called 'puthukuli'. The embroidery is done only by the Toda women and exclusively of three colours - red, blue, and black; No two designs are the same. They do not use any pattern for the design; but takes a unique shape as the embroiderer works. Men and women wear the same *puthukuli*, but tie them differently- the men up to the knee and the women full length. The Toda men and women grow their hair long. Women style their hair in a unique style of ringlets. The men wear their beards bushy and long. They use ghee or butter for their hair and body. Jewelry made of silver, brass, iron, and gold is worn by men and women. Women also adorn themselves with tattoos. In the earlier days tattooing was mandatory at maturity. It was

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<sup>7</sup>Walker, 12.

<sup>8</sup>Walker, 36.

<sup>9</sup>Mangalam, Srinivasam. *Buffaloes, Sex and the Strange Todas*. San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle 29, 1970, 30.

<sup>10</sup>Catherine F Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas* (London: The Zenith Press, 1934), 4.



considered unfortunate if a woman died untattooed. In such cases, few soot marks are drawn on the corpse before cremation.<sup>11</sup>

## *The Settlements*

The Toda settlement *mod*, (also called *mundor* hamlet) consists of unique barrel-vaulted huts, dairy or temple building, buffalo pen, and calf sheds. The huts and dairy buildings are made up of rattan, hard wood or bamboo, and grass for thatching.<sup>12</sup> The concept of the *mund* is sacred must be separated from the secular, pure from impure.<sup>13</sup> The huts are built closer to each other or in a line. A stone wall or fence surrounds the huts with an opening enough for a single person to enter.<sup>14</sup>

The internal space of a hut is divided into two, pure and impure. A mortar in the middle of the hut separates the space. The pure division is associated with men, as churning is exclusively a man's work; milk, churning pot, and other dairy related equipment and products are stored in this space. The impure division, associated with women, contains the hearth, cooking vessels, firewood, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Like the huts, the Toda hamlet is divided into pure and impure, with a special stone or pile of stones separating the two. The dairy, considered sacred, is built in a special place in the pure division; the buffalo pen and calf sheds are also built in the pure division at distance from the domestic area.<sup>16</sup>

## *The Social Organization of Toda Society*

Toda society is divided into two endogamous groups, *Toroas* and *Towfity* (Rivers' *Tarthar and Teivali*).<sup>17</sup> The *Toroas* (*important people*) are considered ritually pure compared to the *Towfity* (*servants of gods*). The relation between the two groups are characterized by rituals, hierarchy based on purity, a prescribed degree of separation, and a prescribed degree of

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<sup>11</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 44.

<sup>12</sup>Walker, 47–48.

<sup>13</sup>Walker, 44.

<sup>14</sup>Walker, 14.

<sup>15</sup>Walker, 50.

<sup>16</sup>Walker, 51–52.

<sup>17</sup>Walker, 62.



cooperation.<sup>18</sup> The two groups are further divided into patrilineal and matrilineal exogamous clans.

The five-member Toda Council called *noym*, which dealt with issues of the Todas, consisted of influential members from *Toroas* and *Towfity* clans and a member from Badaga village.<sup>19</sup>

In Toda society women are considered a principal source of impurity and inferior to men. The pounder, sieve, and broom, the emblems of women are considered polluting.<sup>20</sup> To safeguard the purity of the dairy, Toda women must not enter or walk in front of the building. They are not allowed to cook for occasions. Polyandry further degraded the status of women.

### *Religion: Toda Buffaloes and Sacred Dairies*

Social life and religious observance revolved around the buffaloes and sacred dairies. The buffaloes are not ordinary animals, but a special gift from the deity *To.kisy*.<sup>21</sup> A legend has it that *To.kisy* brought forth the buffaloes from a small stream below the *mund* of the *No.s* (one of the patriclans), by beating the water surface with a staff. She then separated the animals for various grades of sanctity.<sup>22</sup>

The appearance of the dairy buildings resembles dwelling huts except the circular base and conical roof. The front wall bears carvings of buffaloes, sun, moon, and even the five Pandava brothers.<sup>23</sup> Most dairies have two rooms, certain types have a single room. Usually the funeral place is separated from the *munds*. In *munds* where funeral place is within the *mund*, the dairies have three rooms.<sup>24</sup> The innermost room is considered *sanctum sanctorum*. Only the ordained priest can enter the inner room and perform the most important duty of churning the milk into butter and buttermilk.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is observed that the entire Toda dairy

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<sup>18</sup>Walker, 63.

<sup>19</sup>W. H. R. Rivers, *The Todas* (University of Michigan Library, 1906), 550.

<sup>20</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 15.

<sup>21</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 103.

<sup>22</sup>Walker, 103.

<sup>23</sup>Walker, 123.

<sup>24</sup>Walker, 123.

<sup>25</sup>Walker, 123.



ritual is a procedure for diluting the extreme sanctity of the milk in order that its final product, ghee, may be consumed by all.<sup>26</sup>

## *The Passages of the Todas Through Life*

All the events in the life of a Toda revolves around the sacred dairies and buffaloes. Events which are considered threat to the purity of the dairies have elaborate rituals, like first pregnancy, birth, and death.<sup>27</sup> Song and dance played an integral role in social occasions and is performed at all religious ceremonies.

### **Birth**

Conception without the reference to the supernatural is a matter of great pride to the Todas.<sup>28</sup> However, the first pregnancy is considered polluting the dairies of the woman's *mund*. The woman had to live in the 'pollution hut' outside the *mund*.<sup>29</sup> There are elaborate rituals to be followed before and after birth to guard the dairies from pollution. The Toda council in 1950 abolished the institution of the pollution hut because of the discomfort experienced by the women.<sup>30</sup>

Before the first child is born, social paternity is established through the bow and arrow ceremony. The husband presents a handmade bow and arrow to the woman, to establish paternity of the child.<sup>31</sup> When polyandry was the norm several husbands of the woman took turns to establish paternity of her children.

### **Childhood**

A child is recognized as a social being only after the rites of face-uncovering and name-giving, which happens one month after the baby is born and before the third month. The oldest patrilansman uncovers the face after the rituals and names the boy.<sup>32</sup> It is a simple process for a girl. The mother uncovers her face and gives her a name. The child is

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<sup>26</sup>Rivers, *The Todas*, 231.

<sup>27</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 180.

<sup>28</sup>Walker, 185.

<sup>29</sup>Walker, 185.

<sup>30</sup>Walker, 194.

<sup>31</sup>Walker, 190–91.

<sup>32</sup>Walker, 198–200.



completely covered under an adult's *puthukuli* when taken out of the house until the ceremonies are performed.

Marriage is initiated in childhood and completed at maturity. Women are incorporated into the patriclan of a male through marriage.<sup>33</sup> The children live in their parental home until maturity. Child marriage is a fulfilment of a ritual requirement that every Toda be married before death as certain funeral rites can be only performed by the spouse. If someone dies without being married, even an infant, a spouse must be chosen to perform certain funeral rites.<sup>34</sup>

## Maturity

All the boys are expected to pierce their ear between 10 and 15 years of age to mark the attainment of ritual maturity. Only after ear-piercing they may serve in a dairy of higher rank.<sup>35</sup> The girls undergo defloration before their first menstruation. The girls are coaxed into this rite by horror stories told by their mothers. This rite marks a girl's entry into womanhood.<sup>36</sup>

When the children in a marriage alliance reach maturity, arrangements will be made for their living together. If the boy or girl decides to dissolve the union, the family must give a certain number of buffaloes, decided by the Council, to the parents of the other side as compensation. If all agree for the marriage, the marriage is completed with rituals and ceremonies.

Rivers observed that at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Todas had a completely organized system of polyandry.<sup>37</sup> Adelfic or fraternal polyandry was the natural form of marriage for the Todas, this is because of the polyandrous marriages of their gods.<sup>38</sup> Polyandry was related to the practice of female infanticide and the consequent shortage of women.<sup>39</sup> After the

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<sup>33</sup>Walker, 200.

<sup>34</sup>Walker, 200–201.

<sup>35</sup>Walker, 202.

<sup>36</sup>Walker, 203.

<sup>37</sup>Rivers, *The Todas*, 515.

<sup>38</sup>H. R. H. Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark, *A Study of Polyandry* (Mouton & Co., 1963), 601.

<sup>39</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 208.



abolition of female infanticide in 1819, the ratio of female to male increased and turned into polygyny. Then slowly monogamy came into practice.<sup>40</sup>

### Old Age

Old people seldom live alone in the Toda community. As they near death, they look forward to a life after death not radically different from the present life. They believe that as the goddess *To.kisy* rules over the living and their buffaloes, her brother, *On*, reigns over the dead and the buffaloes sacrificed at their funeral.<sup>41</sup>

### Death

Death is the most polluting event of the sacred dairies. Hence, elaborate rituals are performed when a person dies. The Todas perform two funerals, green and dry. The green funeral is conducted several days after death and the corpse is cremated after elaborate rituals. A lock of hair, cut from the dead person, is preserved by the women for the dry funeral. On the day of the dry funeral, after a month or year from the green funeral, the relics of the dead person was cremated.<sup>42</sup> The dry funeral was elaborate and expensive and has faded out of existence. The final rite, 'the pot breaking', to enable the dead to finish the journey to *amunor* (the after-world), was performed at the green funeral.<sup>43</sup> During the funerals, sacred and domestic buffaloes were sacrificed.

### The Afterlife

Todas believe the dead go to an after-world, called '*amunor*' (from *amun*, the other side and *nor*, country) to join the ancestors, they are called *amunotot*. Todas believe that there are many *amunors*, and Todas have two. The routes the dead travel to *amunor* are well defined.<sup>44</sup>

Keeping in mind the background of the Todas; their deep-rooted customs and practices; and the status of women, let us move to explore how Christianity entered the Toda community, engulfed as they were with their way of life and their sacred buffaloes and dairies.

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<sup>40</sup>Walker, 208.

<sup>41</sup>Walker, 213.

<sup>42</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 8.

<sup>43</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 237.

<sup>44</sup>Walker, 137.



### **The Coming of Christianity to the Todas**

The British administration in the Nilgiris paved the way for Christian missionaries - European and Indian, to the Nilgiris. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, two Indian clerics, a priest, and a deacon, of the Malabar Syrian Rite, in union with Rome and an Italian Jesuit based in Calicut visited the Nilgiris.<sup>45</sup> They made no attempt to evangelize the Todas. In contrast to the missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were determined to convert the Todas. The first Christian organization to work among the Todas was the Basel Mission Society. Rev. J. F. Metz, a German, represented the Nilgiris; Metz could not win a soul among the Todas even after 25 years of labour among them. In frustration he wrote, “they are as a body virtually atheists, leaving nearly all religious concerns to their priests, and never giving themselves the smallest trouble about them”.<sup>46</sup> According to a later missionary, Catherine F. Ling, the Basel Mission started a school for the Todas.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the Protestants and the Jesuits abandoned their work among the Todas considering it a waste of time. After Metz and the Jesuits, Catherine F. Ling, an English woman was successful among the Todas.

#### *Catherine Frances Ling*

Catherine Frances Ling, lovingly called ‘Ling *missiamma*’, by the Todas, was born on February 24, 1861, to a God-fearing lower middle-class family, in Sussex, Wangford, South East England.<sup>48</sup> Ling was a God-fearing child from her childhood. When she was nine years old, she heard about the plight of India through her Sunday school teacher. Burdened for the people in India, she committed her life to work in India. From then on, she prepared herself to go to India. In 1881, when she turned 20, she joined the Church of England Zenana Mission Society (CEZMS), as a missionary to India, and set sail for India.<sup>49</sup>

Ling worked in India for 48 years, remained single, and visited England only seven times. Ling took care of the welfare of the Toda converts till her retirement in 1933. In 1933

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<sup>45</sup>Walker, 262.

<sup>46</sup>Walker, 262.

<sup>47</sup>Catherine F Ling, *Dawn in Toda Land: A Narrative of Missionary Effort on the Nilgiri Hills, South India* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1910), 30.

<sup>48</sup>Devaraj M, “தொதவர்களின் தோழி லிங் மிசியம்மா,” (n.d.), 2.

<sup>49</sup>M, 2–6.



Catherine Ling Toda Mission Committee was organized to carry on the work after she left India. Christian Todas could not reconcile with Ling's absence. They depended on her entirely. Her departure caused disintegration among the Christians. The Todas appealed to her to come back to India. The situation became so severe that she returned to India in 1938 and left for England in 1940 never to come back; she died in 1951.<sup>50</sup>

### *Church of England Zenana Mission Society (CEZMS)*

CEZMS is an evolution of the Indian Female Normal school (IFNS) begun in 1852.<sup>51</sup> The primary task of the CEZMS is to introduce the Gospel of Christ to the women of India and China through basic education and healthcare. The mission's aim was to educate the Hindu and Muslim girls and develop Bible women.<sup>52</sup> The CEZMS worked among the women so that they could reach other women in their community, as male missionaries could not minister to the women at that time.<sup>53</sup> By 1881, the CEZMS established mission centres at Madras, Trichy, Palayamkottai, North Tirunelveli, Trivandrum, Ellore, Vijayawada and Amalpur.<sup>54</sup> In 1883, the CEZMS ventured into the Nilgiris.

When Ling arrived in India, she was stationed at Palayamkottai. She learnt Tamil and Urdu. In 1886, when there was no one to take care of the school founded by the CEZMS in Ootacamund, Ling, a woman of extraordinary abilities, was unanimously chosen to take up the work. Ling, Miss Walinger, and Miss Synge arrived in the Nilgiris in February 1886.<sup>55</sup> The Mission continued its work among Hindu and Muslim women and female children in the Nilgiris until 1890. In 1890, the Mission directed its focus towards the Todas. A Tamil evangelist gave a sick Toda man medicine with advice to pray to Christ for healing. The Toda interpreted the advice as a vow, frequently taken by the Todas, and went to the Tamil church twice. Later he approached the Mission house to ask for teaching for his

<sup>50</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 271.

<sup>51</sup>"12\_chapter 6.Pdf," 163, accessed March 31, 2018, [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105478/12/12\\_chapter%206.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105478/12/12_chapter%206.pdf).

<sup>52</sup>"12\_chapter 6.Pdf," 163, accessed March 24, 2018, [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105478/12/12\\_chapter%206.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105478/12/12_chapter%206.pdf).

<sup>53</sup>"12\_chapter 6.Pdf," 163.

<sup>54</sup>"12\_chapter 6.Pdf," 163.

<sup>55</sup>"12\_chapter 6.Pdf," 165.



people.<sup>56</sup> The missionaries took this as a sign and started the work among the Todas. Ling opted to work among the Todas.

## *Toda Christian Literature*

First, Ling learnt the language of the Todas with the help of a Toda. She successfully learnt the language and translated the Gospel of Mark in Toda using Tamil script, which was published in 1897.<sup>57</sup> Later, stories from the Old and New Testaments, the Psalms, the Creed, the Gospel of John, the Ten Commandments, and some hymns were translated with the help of Ms. Grover, a colleague, and Samuel, the Mission's Tamil evangelist.<sup>58</sup> The Psalms, full of allusions to nature, had a special place for the Todas, Psalm 23 was almost called the Toda 'belief'.<sup>59</sup>

The Toda Christian literature stopped with these publications as they were the only means to convert the early Toda Christians. Later when the Toda children started going to school and Tamil being the medium of language and *lingua franca* of the Nilgiris, Ling thought the Todas do not need the Christian literature in Toda.<sup>60</sup> Failure to develop a tradition of Toda literacy among the converted Toda community is one of the reasons for the converts to lose their Toda identity.<sup>61</sup>

## *Education*

Ling felt the need to start schools for the Toda children. By 1891, three schools were started: the first in Pykara and the second at Wenlock Downs. This second school was started as the Todas migrate to other places for grazing during dry season, taking their children along; later the third school was started in Coonoor.<sup>62</sup> Ling pointed out the difficulties of schooling the Toda children. A Christian school teacher was appointed, and he spent part of the day in bringing the children from scattered *munds* to the school. He walked them all the way to the school. He imparted most valuable instruction during the walks. Once they arrived, they were able to listen to the teacher for a maximum of three hours a day. Then they found their way

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<sup>56</sup>"12 chapter 6.Pdf," 175.

<sup>57</sup>Catherine F Ling, Trans. *The Gospel of Mark*. Toda (Madras: Madras Auxiliary to the British and Foreign Bible Society (SPCK) Press, 1897).

<sup>58</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 24.

<sup>59</sup>Ling, 24.

<sup>60</sup>Ling, 24.

<sup>61</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 264.

<sup>62</sup>"12 chapter 6.Pdf."



home.<sup>63</sup> The Toda girls and boys were also admitted in boarding schools started by the CEZMS – Gell Memorial School (Dunmere) for girls and CMS School for boys.

Ling visited the schools twice in a month, which was an important part of her plan of evangelize the Todas. She wrote, “From an educational point of view no doubt our little schools did not amount to much” she later confessed, “yet it was these very schools that gave the Todas their desires for better things, and from them the early converts were won.”<sup>64</sup>

### *Toda Converts*

The first response from the Todas came, after fourteen years of hard work. A Toda boy, Kishkar, who continued his high school studies at Tirunelveli, became the first convert in 1904, and was baptised. He was the first one to abandon the ancestral Toda religion. The Toda community was so furious that they stopped the children from attending mission schools, except a few who received scholarships.<sup>65</sup>

Ling firmly believed that the daily Christian teaching and the Christian atmosphere in the boarding school would lead the Toda children to true conversion. She wanted to start a simple boarding school exclusively for the Toda children so that they can live their Toda life under the care of a Christian teacher. She thought this would help them continue their education without interruption when the parents moved to different *munds* during the dry seasons.<sup>66</sup> The mission hired a small cottage with twenty-four acres of land, at Glenmorgan, eight miles from Ootacamund, in midst of a Toda neighbourhood.<sup>67</sup> On the day of the inauguration, the invited parents came and partook of the snacks served, and no child turned up.

Later, this boarding school attracted a few married couples who failed to register their marriages.<sup>68</sup> As mentioned earlier, the Toda marriages did not have any guarantee as they practiced adelphic polyandry and the wife can also be married off to the opposite subgroup, with or without the consent of the woman. This practice put the Toda women in a dangerous situation. The British administration brought in marriage registration to safeguard Toda marriages but the Todas who wanted to register their marriages had difficulty because of

<sup>63</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 25.

<sup>64</sup>Ling, 26.

<sup>65</sup>Ling, *Dawn in Toda Land: A Narrative of Missionary Effort on the Nilgiri Hills, South India*, 41–42.

<sup>66</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 26.

<sup>67</sup>Ling, 26.

<sup>68</sup>Ling, 26.



polyandry. The couples who entered the boarding school premises, were under the care of a Christian teacher and his wife. The couples built huts and a buffalo pen and took to potato cultivation, besides herding, for survival and the women were occupied with embroidery, and the embroidered items were sold by the Mission.<sup>69</sup>

Ling hoped the five couples would convert over time and a Christian Toda colony formed. But to her dismay the Toda elders sensed the danger of conversion and issued an order that if they did not return to their own *munds*, they would be excommunicated, which included withdrawal of grazing lands, no inter marriages, and most importantly no burial rights.<sup>70</sup> A few days later, the families left without even mentioning it to the teacher and his wife. The missionaries waited for few months with the hope of their return but in vain. After the incident there was hostility between the missionaries and the Todas for some time. The Todas did not come to the missionaries for medicine or for any other help.<sup>71</sup> The work among the Todas was suspended temporarily.

After a gap of three years, in January 1907, two Toda girls, former students, went to a mission school in Ootacamund. A month or two later, three more girls joined them, the five girls were baptised in October 1907.<sup>72</sup> Though there was opposition to the conversions from their families, the community raised less opposition than it did for the five families. Despite the conversions, the elders requested the missionaries to reopen the schools. The missionaries readily agreed as in the days to come the children can be won for Christ.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the schools at Glenmorgan and Pykara were reopened in 1907.

### *Christian Toda Settlements*

By 1913, there were six males and five female converts.<sup>74</sup> By 1920, opposition to schools stopped and several girls and boys started going to the boarding and regular schools. Girls were sent to Gell Memorial Boarding School and boys to the boarding school of the Church Missionary Society.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Ling, 26–27.

<sup>70</sup>Ling, 27.

<sup>71</sup>Ling, *Dawn in Toda Land: A Narrative of Missionary Effort on the Nilgiri Hills, South India*, 40.

<sup>72</sup>Ling, 56–58.

<sup>73</sup>Ling, 59.

<sup>74</sup>Catherine F Ling, “Letter to the Collector of the Nilgiris,” October 8, 1913.

<sup>75</sup>“12\_chapter 6.Pdf,” 178.



Ling hoped that the converts would live in the *mund* with other Todas and be cut off from the customs and practices which were contrary to the Gospel and the dairy temple would eventually turn into a Toda Cathedral. But that did not happen, and Ling felt the converts had to be separated from the orthodox Toda *munds* to cope with their new found faith.

She put forth four reasons for a separate settlement to the Collector of the Nilgiris: i) it was necessary to teach them an alternative occupation other than herding, because if the cattle die of disease or any calamity strikes, they would have no means of sustenance; ii) it was necessary to provide a home for the converts so that they could live under improved conditions; iii) to safeguard the converts, especially the women from the oppression of the headmen; and iv) to establish model settlements to show how honest work, cleaner lives, and observing rules of health could stop the Todas from dwindling.<sup>76</sup>

In 1913, the government allotted 48.21 acres of land in Cairn Hill, ten kilometres away from Ootacamund.<sup>77</sup> In this place stood the long-abandoned ti-dairy. The settlement is named *TiMod* or *TiMund* after the ti-dairy. This is the first Christian Toda settlement. *TiMund* had Badagas who knew agriculture to help the Todas. Six families moved to *TiMund*. The converts were encouraged to engage in agriculture. They cultivated potato, oats, and millet. They were also encouraged to keep cows.<sup>78</sup> My grand-parents descended from the families settled in *TiMund* and I belong to *TiMund*.

In 1919, out of the six families, two families, discouraged by the poor result of their agriculture, moved to *ThoMod* or *mund*.<sup>79</sup> They reverted to pastoralism, but remained Christians. This became the second settlement. A third Christian Toda settlement, *Pu Mund*, was formed in 1920s and early 1930s. The three settlements exist to this day. From their inception, the Christian settlements looked different from the traditional Toda *munds* – no dairies, huts, and buffalo pens. Instead, there was a church, brick houses, schools, dispensaries, and patches of agriculture.<sup>80</sup>

## *Medical and Welfare*

<sup>76</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 267–68.

<sup>77</sup>Walker, 269.

<sup>78</sup>Walker, 268–69.

<sup>79</sup>Walker, 269.

<sup>80</sup>Walker, 270.



The Toda population dwindled because of the venereal diseases, the practice of polyandry, sub-caste intermarriage of wives, defloration, and female infanticide. Todas became debtors. Ling was concerned about the plight of the Todas and requested the government for a dispensary, which did not materialize. In 1924, there were only 582 Todas. Fearing the extinction of the Todas, C. F. Brackenbury, the Collector of the Nilgiris decided to give financial assistance through cooperative credit societies; and requested Ling to provide Toda women work at her colony; to set up a dispensary exclusively for the Todas; and to set up a committee for the welfare of the Todas.<sup>81</sup>

A Toda Welfare Committee and Ladies Auxiliary of the Toda Welfare Committee were formed to take care of the Todas. Ling became the Honorary Secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Toda Welfare Committee and took care of the women and children.<sup>82</sup> In 1926, a dispensary with a maternity ward with four beds, was built in *ThoMund*, the second Christian *mund*.<sup>83</sup>

Rachel, a Christian woman was appointed as a nurse for the *ThoMund* dispensary. Rachel, with a Toda helper visited the surrounding *munds* with a basket of medicine and simple medical appliances.<sup>84</sup> The sick came to the dispensary to be treated. The *munds* are far apart from one another and reaching the sick became a difficult task. Sometime women walked a long way to avoid sacred dairies to reach the dispensary. Even with these difficulties the work continued.

In 1951, the government established a mobile dispensary. After a year of its inception, Evam Pilgin, a young woman from the Toda community, educated in India and England, returned to the Nilgiris. Alarmed at the rapid dwindling of her people, she offered medical service through the mobile dispensary. With Pilgin's presence and personal commitment, the Todas began to survive.<sup>85</sup> She also donned the mantle of Ling after her departure.

## *Toda Needle Work*

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<sup>81</sup>“12\_chapter 6.Pdf,” 188.

<sup>82</sup>“12\_chapter 6.Pdf,” 189.

<sup>83</sup>“12\_chapter 6.Pdf,” 189.

<sup>84</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 33–34.

<sup>85</sup>Walker, *The Toda of South India*, 283-84.



The women had a natural talent for needlework. Ling commercialized their talents and organised the needlework into an industry. As a Secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Toda Welfare Committee, Ling provided employment for women in the needlework industry. They were also taught to embroider placemats, table cloths, napkins, bedsheets, shawls, mini coats, and so on. The profit from selling the products was used for the girls in the boarding school and to support the *ThoMund* Welfare Centre (dispensary).<sup>86</sup>

### **The Motivating Factor/s for Todas to Embrace Christianity**

According to Ling, desire for better things in life motivated the young boys and girls, who had their education in mission schools, to embrace Christianity. The Gospel aroused a desire for a better life.<sup>87</sup> They educated Todas condemned and abandoned to some of the ancient customs and practices and became Christians. They could not mend the system from within and be a part of it. For women and young girls, conversion to Christianity was the only choice to escape from the practices that took away their dignity. Many girls feared defloration and fled to the mission house and converted to Christianity immediately. They were assured of protection in the boarding school.

In the case of adults, the concept of Toda Christian colonies enticed the landless Todas into Christianity. Good education, better employment opportunities and a settled life attracted the Todas to embrace Christianity.<sup>88</sup>

Circumstantial evidence shows that the early converts became Christians because of material needs or to escape cruel customs and practices. There is no record of the Todas becoming Christians because of conviction.

### **The Impact of Christianity on Christian Todas Today**

Toda women were liberated from the customs and practices that took away their dignity. Christianity changed the status of women. Their marriages became stable. Women were able to enter the church with their families. The endogamous divisions, patriclans, and matriclans had no relevance to Christian Todas. Men and women were free from the clutches of the hierarchy and related rituals.

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<sup>86</sup>“12\_chapter 6.Pdf,” 193.

<sup>87</sup>Ling, *Sunrise on the Nilgiris: The Story of the Todas*, 25–26.

<sup>88</sup>“12\_chapter 6.Pdf,” 194.



Education opened opportunities for the Todas to take up occupations other than herding to realise their God-given potential. The Gospel and education elevated the status of women. Comparatively, in the economic sphere women did better than men. Toda Christians were able to live their lives fully as opposed to the restrictions of the orthodox community, where their life of self-denial revolved around the sacred dairies. Health care schemes kept diseases away and life expectancy increased.

On the other hand, the missionaries encouraged the total separation of the Christian Todas from the Orthodox Todas. As a result, the Christian Todas were alienated from their rich culture and customs which are not contrary to the Gospel - language, attire, dance, and so on. Christ is the transformer of culture.<sup>89</sup> They lost their Toda identity. They married non-Todas as they abandoned the rule of endogamy. They spoke Tamil, the *lingua franca* of the Nilgiris.

Today the Toda Christians are unable to speak the Toda language. It is the language that carries the culture. Therefore, the Toda Christians are Todas by name and there is no difference between the Toda or Tamil Christians.

## Conclusion

The writing of this essay enabled me to learn about the Toda people, the culture and practices of Todas in general. I understood the complexity of the life of people who appeared simple. It taught me that songs, dances, dress, and the culture of distinct peoples can continue even when they became Christians. Christianity is richer when peoples of diverse cultures, and languages, come together to worship; and people of all tongues as in the description in Acts, and in the vision of John in Revelation, can praise God together.

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