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Malekudiyas and their relationship with Religious Institutions: A Sociological Study

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Abstract:

This study explores the multifaceted relationship between the Malekudiyas, an indigenous community residing in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, India, and various religious institutions. It examines how these interactions have shaped their cultural identity, social practices, and belief systems. The research highlights the syncretic nature of Malekudiya spirituality, which blends animistic and nature-based beliefs with elements of mainstream Hinduism—particularly the worship of local deities and the observance of select Hindu rituals. The study also investigates the role of local temples and priestly hierarchies in mediating this relationship, which has often led to both cultural integration and the marginalization of traditional Malekudiya practices. Furthermore, the paper discusses the influence of religious institutions on the community's access to resources, land rights, and social status within the broader regional context. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, historical records, and oral narratives, the analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play. Findings suggest that while religious institutions have significantly contributed to the acculturation of the Malekudiya community, they have simultaneously served as platforms for the preservation of certain unique cultural elements, albeit frequently in a reinterpreted or co-opted form. The study employs a qualitative methodology, relying on secondary data, ethnographic studies, and archival sources to trace the Malekudiyas' relationship with religious institutions.

Keywords: *Malekudiyas, Indigenous Community, Religious Institutions, Cultural Identity, Integration.*

Introduction

Among the tribal communities of Karnataka, the Male Kudiya is an important group that has drawn attention for its unique rituals and traditions.

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Although their population is relatively small, they are regarded as one of the prominent tribal communities in preserving traditional culture. The Male Kudiyas inhabit the hilly regions of Kodagu, Dakshina Kannada, and Chikkamagaluru districts of Karnataka. In Dakshina Kannada, they are known as Malekudiyuru; in Kodagu, as Kudiyaru; and in Chikkamagaluru, as Malaikudi or Malayaru.

The name "Male Kudiya" itself reflects their habitat and way of life—Male means "hill," while Kudi is a Dravidian term meaning "progeny" or "settlement." Interestingly, in Malayalam, Kudi also refers to a "hut." Thus, the community came to be identified as the Malekudiyas—people living in huts on hilltops. Since ancient times, they have been a hill-dwelling community, and over the years, they have also been referred to by various names such as Malekudiyas, Kudirs, Maleyan, Kudiyan, Gaudar, Kudiya, Malaikudi, Melakudi, and Malekudiya. (Adivasigala Asthithwa mattu Asmithe-K. G. Ramesh,).

The Malekudiya tribal communities are primarily found in the hilly regions of the Western Ghats, spread across Dakshina Kannada, Kodagu, and Chikkamagaluru districts. Their settlements extend from Agumbe to Brahmagiri. Broadly, the Malekudiyas are classified into two groups: the *Nalmu Malekudiyas* and the *Mooru Malekudiyas*. The Nalmu Malekudiyas are mainly concentrated in Dakshina Kannada district, while the Mooru Malekudiyas are found in Kodagu district. The four mountain peaks—*Barimale, Panjarumale, Ambottimale,* and *Elimale*—are considered the abodes of the Nalmu Malekudiyas. The Malekudiyas residing along the Brahmagiri mountain range were traditionally identified as *Pumale, Temale,* and *Umale Kudiru*. However, the name *Umale* is no longer in use today. Additionally, Malekudiyas who migrated to work in cardamom and areca nut plantations in the hill regions are also recognized as part of the community. Essentially, the Malekudiyas are a hill-dwelling tribe. Historically, they have been associated with the foothills (*kudi-tudi*), which naturally led to their identification as "Malekudiyas." Within Kodagu district, they are also regionally and linguistically categorized as *Poo Malekudiya, Temale Kudiya,* and *Adike Kudiya*.

Understanding the Malekudiyas and their interaction with religious establishments is critical on several counts. Anthropologically**,** it offers insight into how tribal religions have survived and adapted amidst modernity and cultural assimilation. Sociologically**,** it reveals the processes of social exclusion and the persistence of prejudice, even within populations that share a common religion. From the standpoint of social justice**,** documenting these interactions is vital for safeguarding the rights of indigenous peoples and for challenging discriminatory practices. Ultimately, the study of this relationship demonstrates

that religion is not a static entity but a living, dynamic system shaped by history, power relations, and the distinctive cultural heritage of its adherents.

The primary aim of this paper is to explore both the historical and contemporary relationship between the indigenous Malekudiya tribe of the Western Ghats and the formal religious institutions with which they engage. Particular emphasis is placed on the ways these interactions have influenced and reshaped the cultural identity and practices of the community.

The Malekudiyas, an aboriginal group in Karnataka, maintain a complex and evolving relationship with religious organizations, especially dominant Hindu temples. While they possess their own indigenous animistic beliefs and deities, over time they have also adopted and embodied many practices of mainstream Hinduism. A striking example of this dynamic is their role in the rituals of the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple**,** where they have traditionally been entrusted with significant responsibilities, such as constructing the temple chariot for annual festivals. This role symbolizes a form of religious integration, yet it is not without tension. On several occasions, the Malekudiyas have threatened to boycott temple ceremonies—either in protest against government policies or in defense of traditional customs, such as the much-debated *"Made Snana"* ritual.

Such instances highlight that their association with formal religious institutions is not one of passive obedience. Rather, it serves as a platform through which the Malekudiyas assert their cultural identity, negotiate power relations, and demand recognition of their customary rights and beliefs.

Review of Literature

The Malekudiyas have been the subject of scholarly attention for centuries, with researchers documenting their distinctive lifestyle, traditions, and socio-religious practices. Naganna Kudiya (1968) was among the earliest to highlight their unique customs, beliefs, and family structures, while also drawing attention to the exploitation they faced and the influence of legal systems on their way of life.

Later accounts, such as those by Singh K.S. (1994) and the French missionary Abbé J. A. Dubois (1906**)**, describe striking features of the Malekudiya community. Dubois, for instance, notes their minimal use of clothing and records an instance where they reportedly requested Tippu Sultan to allow them to continue living in forests without being compelled to wear garments. He also observes their primary occupation of extracting palm tree juice, with women adeptly climbing trees to collect it.

Edgar Thurston (1909)**,** in his *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, provides a detailed ethnographic account of the Malekudiyas, highlighting their marital

linkages with the Kudiya community of Kodagu. He records that in the Dharmasthala region, Male Kudiya daughters were married into Madikeri Kudiya families, suggesting social and cultural overlap between the two groups.

Anantha Krishna Ayyar (1948) emphasizes the role of the *Gurikara* (traditional headman) in governing the community. The Gurikara oversaw social and economic activities, including marriage arrangements such as the *Swajati* (intra-community) marriage system, without external interference.

More recent studies also highlight their close relationship with nature. Moraab S.G. (2003) describes the Malekudiyas as a "race close to nature," worshippers of natural elements who performed rituals before felling trees, ate on banana leaves, and practiced cremation with ashes immersed in the River Kaveri. He further notes that disputes were traditionally resolved through strong community panchayats, which functioned as indigenous systems of justice.

Nanjundayah H.V. and Ananthakrishna (1961) observed distinctive marital practices in Kodagu, where compulsory divorce and remarriage were introduced in cases of incompatibility between spouses. Household responsibilities passed to the eldest son, and financial assistance was given to those beginning new lives after separation. Parvathamma C. (2005) corroborates these findings, underlining the institutionalization of divorce and remarriage as mechanisms to maintain social balance within the community.

Together, these studies reveal the complex interplay of tradition, social organization, and adaptation among the Malekudiyas. From early ethnographic observations to modern sociological analyses, the community emerges as one negotiating its identity through unique cultural practices, evolving marital norms, and a deep ecological orientation—while simultaneously grappling with external pressures of state policies, dominant religions, and social change.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the historical development of the Malekudiyas' connection to religious institutions and how traditional roles and responsibilities within these institutions have contributed to their cultural identity and social structure.
2. To explore the contemporary influence of legal systems and socio-economic shifts on the Malekudiyas' religious practices and their customary positions in local religious institutions.

Religious Systems and Practices

The Malaikudiya community is essentially comprised of idol worshippers. Over time, they have adopted and celebrated the local religions, deities, and festivals of the regions in which they reside, influenced by the broader religious practices and cultural traditions of India. Their way of life is deeply rooted in the

religious beliefs handed down from their ancestors. They hold that an unseen, fundamental power governs all aspects of existence—pleasure and pain, good and evil—and that this power acts independently, beyond human resistance.

Religious symbolism is embedded even in their everyday lives. The Malaikudiyas perceive divinity in the weapons and tools they carry, attributing sacred value to their daily implements. Ancestor worship also forms an important part of their religious system, particularly observed during the festival of *Diwali*. According to their beliefs, if ancestral spirits are not appeased annually, the family will face disunity, misfortune, and decline, including setbacks in household prosperity and cattle rearing.

Festivals hold central importance in understanding the Malaikudiya religious worldview. These occasions not only reflect their belief systems but also offer insights into the cultural origins of the community. The major festivals celebrated by the Malaikudiyas demonstrate how religion and cultural identity are intertwined, and how their traditions are sustained through ritual practices.

Historical accounts further emphasize these practices. Lewis, in *Tribes of Mysore* (1963), notes that the Malaikudiya community identified as Hindu and worshipped a range of deities, including Subrahmanya, Manjunatha, Ishwara, and Ganesha. During the fairs of Dharmasthala and Kukke Subrahmanya, the Malaikudiyas were traditionally entrusted with the responsibility of pulling the temple chariots, highlighting their ritual significance within the broader Hindu religious framework.

The Relationship between the Malaikudiya People and Lord Kukke Subrahmanya

The Malaikudiya tribe traces its association with Lord Kukke Subrahmanya to a rich body of oral traditions and ritual practices. According to community narratives, two ancestors, Kukkappa and Lingappa**,** are regarded as the first Malekudiya family in the region, believed to have lived nearly a thousand years ago. They practiced shifting cultivation—clearing forests by cutting and burning vegetation before planting sorghum and paddy—and supplemented their livelihood through basket weaving, hunting, honey collection, and gathering forest produce.

The Myth of the Serpent Encounter

A central legend recounts how Kukkappa and Lingappa encountered a serpent (interpreted as Lord Subrahmanya) during a forest fire. The snake, speaking in a human voice, called out to them for rescue. Using arrows as a makeshift palanquin, they carried the serpent to safety—a symbolic act that is today echoed in the annual palanquin festival (pallakki seve) at Kukke Subrahmanya. The serpent later instructed them in worship practices, promising

blessings for their descendants if rituals were observed. This myth forms the foundation of the Malaikudiya claim to ritual authority in the temple.

Ritual Integration with the Temple

Over time, the Malaikudiya became closely integrated with the rituals of the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple. Historical records and oral traditions state that they were entrusted with constructing and decorating the temple chariots—the Brahmaratha and the Panchami Ratha—for the annual *Rathotsava*. Bamboo canes, sourced from the forests by groups of 20–30 Malaikudiya men, are used for these chariots. This work requires extended forest stays, and historically, the Maharaja of Mysore supported the community with provisions during this period. Today, the temple administration provides food and supplies for the workers.

The Brahmarathotsava remains one of the most significant festivals, where the chariots, decorated with kora cloth, banana and mango leaves, areca nuts, and flowers, are ceremonially pulled. The Malaikudiya community plays a central role not only in constructing but also in guarding, guiding, and ritually supporting the chariot during the festival. Oral accounts stress that this service has been their hereditary right for generations, and it continues to symbolize their deep bond with the deity.

Ritual Status and Boundaries

Despite their integration, the Malaikudiya's role is bounded by ritual hierarchy. While they enjoy special privileges—such as receiving the first share of prasad during the festival and participating in major rituals—they are excluded from performing offerings directly to the deity. This tension reflects broader patterns of tribal-Hindu relations: inclusion through service, but exclusion from priestly roles.

The Made Snana Controversy

An important practice associated with the temple is Made Snana**,** performed during the *Shashti Jatrotsava* following the month of Kartika. In this ritual, devotees roll over plantain leaves previously used by Brahmins, believing the act cures ailments and removes misfortunes. The Malaikudiya, however, do not participate in Made Snana. While they undertake nearly all other temple-related activities, they abstain from this ritual, which has generated debate in modern times regarding caste, faith, and social justice.

Methods of Study

This study, *Malekudiyas and their Relationship with Religious Institutions: A Sociological Study*, adopts a mixed-methods approach. Primary data was collected through interviews with selected members of the Malekudiya community, focusing on their perceptions of religious practices and institutional interactions. Secondary data was obtained from ethnographic accounts, historical records, and previous scholarly works. A qualitative methodology underpins the

study, emphasizing narrative interpretation and thematic analysis. The literature review further situates Malekudiya practices within broader debates on tribal religiosity, cultural assimilation, and the sociology of religion.

Results

The Malekudiyas are an aboriginal tribal group of Karnataka whose religious life reflects a dynamic interaction between traditional animistic practices and mainstream Hinduism**.** A key finding is the functional role of the Malekudiyas in temple rituals**,** particularly at the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple**,** where they traditionally construct and decorate the temple chariots for annual festivals. This ritual responsibility signifies a form of religious integration, while also reinforcing their identity and customary rights. Notably, the Malekudiyas have occasionally asserted agency by threatening to boycott temple ceremonies in response to state policies or in defense of contested practices such as the controversial Made Snana ritual. Such actions highlight that their relationship with religious institutions is not merely submissive but also strategic, enabling them to negotiate respect and cultural autonomy.

The research further demonstrates that Malekudiya religiosity is plural and adaptive rather than uniform**.** Their rituals continue to center on nature worship, ancestor veneration, and totemic practices**,** all of which remain deeply tied to their forest-based lifestyle. At the same time, acculturative elements from Hinduism—such as the adoption of sacred threads, the invocation of the symbol *Om*, and participation in temple festivals—have been incorporated without erasing their distinct tribal identity. The annual Purusha Puje exemplifies this syncretism, combining indigenous ritual forms with selective borrowings from Hindu symbolism.

The persistence of the Made Snana ritual illustrates the internal contradictions of Malekudiya religious life. While the practice reinforces social hierarchy and has been criticized by progressive forces, the community's defense of it reflects their struggle to preserve customary traditions amidst external pressures. This underscores that religious incorporation is not a linear process of assimilation but one marked by negotiation, tension, and resistance**.**

Suggestions

Future research on the Malekudiya population should move beyond broad overviews and focus on in-depth, localized ethnographies that record the intricacies of their religious life and interactions with regional religious institutions. Documentation of rituals and folklore—through recordings and analyses of oral traditions, songs, and clan-based ceremonies—would provide valuable insights into religious syncretism, particularly in understanding how native

animistic practices are integrated into mainstream Hindu worship.

Generational studies would also be instructive, revealing how exposure to modernity and external influences has shaped differences in beliefs and practices between older and younger cohorts. Comparative analyses with other tribal groups in Karnataka, such as the Soligas or Koragas, as well as with indigenous communities in neighboring states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, could highlight both shared patterns and distinctive features within regional contexts. Positioning the Malekudiya experience within a broader international framework would further illuminate how indigenous groups globally confront challenges of cultural heritage preservation, religious integration, and socio-economic transformation.

Another important line of inquiry concerns the socio-economic and political dimensions of religious associations**.** The role of temples in community development—through education, health, and infrastructure—merits systematic exploration. Similarly, research into religious conversion and its implications for social cohesion, leadership structures, and customary rights would yield critical insights. Finally, the complex interplay between religious institutions, forest authorities, and Malekudiya communities over issues of land and resource rights requires detailed investigation, particularly where religious spaces overlap with or contest traditional territorial claims.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the complex and evolving relationship between the Malekudiyas, an indigenous community of the Western Ghats, and the religious establishments that have shaped their socio-cultural existence. Far from being monolithic, this association reveals a dynamic interplay of assimilation, resistance, and syncretism**.** While state-backed religious institutions have historically contributed to the commodification of forest resources—undermining the Malekudiyas' traditional lifestyle—the community has simultaneously exercised agency by appropriating and reinterpreting external religious practices.

The study argues that Malekudiya religiosity reflects a form of dynamic syncretism rather than outright substitution. For example, sacred groves—long revered as divine spaces—remain central to their spiritual world even as elements of Hinduism and other religions are selectively adopted. This pattern of adaptation demonstrates a resilient cultural strategy in the face of external pressures.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its nuanced understanding of religious pluralism among indigenous peoples**,** showing how Malekudiya practices are embedded in an ongoing negotiation between tradition and change.

Looking ahead, further ethnographic inquiry should focus on the theological and ritual negotiations within the community, as well as the impact of inter-faith dialogues on their cultural self-determination. Equally important is the examination of land rights and cultural conservation in an era of increasing global interconnectedness.

Ultimately, appreciating the lived realities of the Malekudiyas is crucial for shaping fair and respectful policies that safeguard their sovereignty, cultural integrity, and shamanistic-animistic traditions while enabling them to engage confidently with contemporary challenges.

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