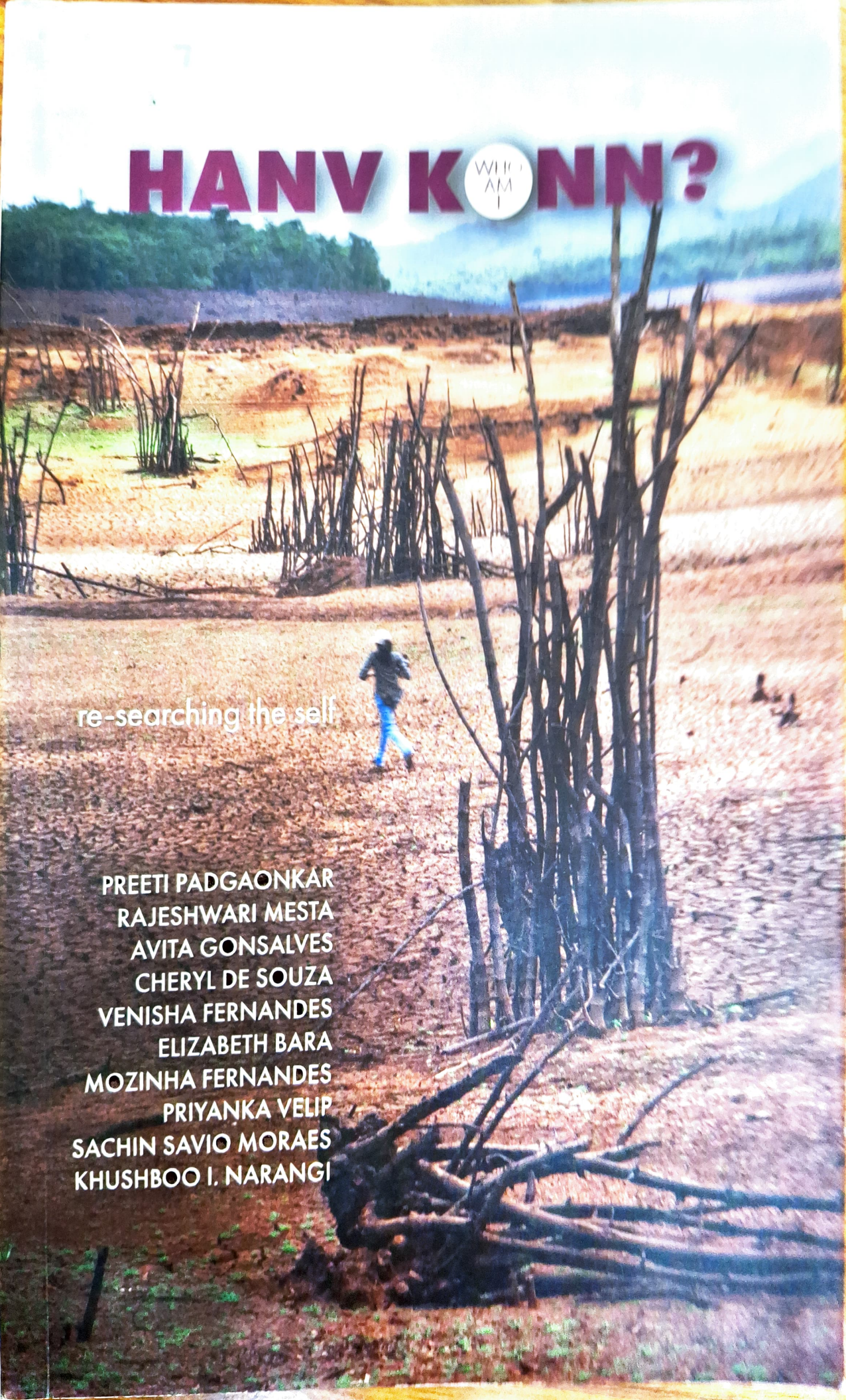
HANV KONN?



re-searching the self

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Where Have All the Songs and Rituals Gone?

MOZINHA FERNANDES

A chance opportunity to collect information on the traditional songs of her community leads to a realization that it is difficult to do this because what was sung and danced is no longer performed, and no longer remembered. This article recounts the small exploration as to why the songs have disappeared with interesting findings at the end.

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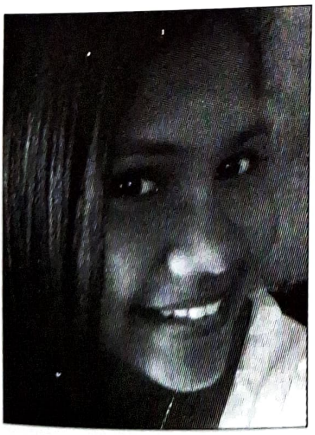

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is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Goa University. She has a passion for singing and for writing poems. She is proud to declare that she belongs to the Gawda tribal community from Goa. Her M.A. dissertation has empowered her in regaining her lost voice, which was suppressed because of discrimination.
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In 2008 I worked with the Archive and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology[1] to collect information on the traditions of the Gawda people of Ambelim village in South Goa. Although I am a Gawda myself, before this I had never thought of researching my own community. So when my work demanded information from me about our rituals, beliefs, and practices and more importantly our songs, I was confused, because all these things that used to happen in my childhood no longer happen today.

For example, when I had to collect information about a traditional dance called the *dhalo,* I could not find it in my own village of Ambelim, because all traditional practices have been abandoned there. However, when I went to Avedem village in Quepem taluka where some Gawda families have preserved their traditional dances, I was surprised to see that they were proud to speak about their traditional practices whereas in my village people were reluctant to talk about their past.

This left me even more confused, and prompted my research question: What do our people remember of their past, particularly of the ritual practices and songs that were performed until recently, and why do some people want to forget them now?

Introduction

Our present is linked to our past. So when we ask, "Who are we?" We must also ask, "Where are we from? And who were our ancestors?" All these questions have great significance in our lives. We identify ourselves by our name, our community, our religion, our rituals, our language, our music and our songs, and so on. All these are markers of our identity. But do we always identify ourselves with these markers?

Perhaps some people will quickly answer, "Yes." But why? It could be because from the past they have been occupying a privileged position of honour and pride in society. But what about those people who have suffered discrimination at the hands of people of a higher caste? They will reject their past and are still rejecting it. Yes, I am talking about the Gawda people of Ambelim in Goa's Salcete taluka. It felt great to do research on my own community as I know the people very well. But when I went to interview them in person, they hesitated to talk about their past.

At this point I began to think: why is this so? As a member of the community, two conflicting viewpoints emerge in my mind. On the one hand I feel that the culture of the Gawdas should become known to others. At the same time I feel hesitant, because by identifying our-

1 Archive & Research Centre for Ethnomusicology. American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon, Haryana.

selves as Gawdas we may face discrimination.

The Gawdas

It is commonly accepted that the Gawdas were the first settlers in Goa. According to Dantas[2] the word Gawda is derived from the word '*Ganv*,' which means 'village.' The Gawdas are of Proto-Australoid origin and are believed to have migrated from Southeast Asia through Assam, Bengal and Orissa to Kerala, Malabar, and Goa. In the 17th century, Gawdas who had settled in Goa were forcibly converted to Christianity by the Portuguese.

Today the Gawdas are divided into three main groups: the Hindus, the Christians, and the *nav*-Hindus (new-Hindus) who were converted to Christianity and reconverted to Hinduism, but were then not accepted by either the Hindus or the Christians.

Let me briefly review some studies relevant to my subject. In her work 'Ethnomedicine and Healing Practices in Goa', Maria Bernadette Gomes has focused on the social categories, sense of time, and the various medicines used by the Kunbis of Baradi village in Salcete.[3]

Srivastava Bennebroek, in his article 'Woman as Portrayed in Women's Folksongs of North India', dwells on the songs sung by women at ceremonies celebrating births, weddings, seasons, and festivals, and while performing their daily chores. He has found that those women whose voice can be heard only within the four walls of their house get a chance to express their emotions through songs.[4]

In his article 'Painful Memories', David Graeber talks about the people who lost everything in Imerina (the traditional name for the northern half of the central plateau of Madagascar, Africa), where people attach enormous importance to the memory of their ancestors and the land on which the ancestors once lived.

Myths of origin: the oral history of Ambelim village

"Myth and memory should not be seen as separate from history." B. Stråth writes in an illuminating book, *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community*. "They are history in ceaseless transformation and reconstruction. The image of the past is continuously reconsidered and reconstituted in the light of an ev-

2 Norman Dantas. 1999. *The Transformation of Goa*. Other India Press.

3 Bernadette Maria Gomes. 1993. Ethnomedicine and Healing Practices in Goa (The Kunbi Case). Goa University. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis.

4 Srivastava, I. 1991. 'Woman as Portrayed in Women's Folk Songs of North India.' *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol.50 (2). pp. 269-310.

Today, owing to various proposed projects, there is a struggle between the government and the Gawdas to occupy the land of Betul.

er-changing present. History is an interpretation of the past, not the past as it really was."[5]

This essay is one such reconstruction or interpretation.

The Gawda people came to Ambelim from a place called Kazra. When asked where this place is situated the answer is up in the air; nobody knows where they actually came from, and the year is also not known. When I asked my parents to describe the place they told me that they travelled through thick forest and crossed waters to reach Kazra. People mostly used to go there during Carnival. I saw Kazra through my parents' eyes. It was a very noisy place, with much loud drumming, and many women dancing and running with big lighted *divleo* (lamps) on their heads. From very far you could see a monument of black stone. That's the description of the place, and nothing else was told to me by my parents.

Through interviews, I traced the oral history of the Gawdas. I interviewed Stantina Fernandes, a 80-year-old woman from Pedda. She told me she was born in Kumbeabhatt, a Gawda ward in Velim, and she got married in Pedda. Stantina told me the *fudde munis* (ancient people) came from Kazra. According to her, they first settled in New Ambelim, another ward of Ambelim, and then they moved to Fondop and Zaino, the two wards of Velim.

In Velim they celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Coinsanv, but because of the excessive cost of the feast they moved, finally settling in Pedda, Socobanda, and Voddir, the three wards of Ambelim. She said some of the people who came to Pedda had names such as Koiro, Sukdo, Fondu, Paik and Pandu.

According to another woman, Mita, the history of Gawdas is that three brothers came from Kazra to Salcete and then scattered. One brother settled at *Aalareche Raj* (on the mountain of Betul), another settled in Velim and the third settled in Ambelim. That is why concentrations of Gawdas can be found in these places: Kumbeabhatt; Goenchembhatt and Bollear in Velim; and Ambelim.

Mita said that in olden times the Gawdas grazed their animals on

5 Bo Stråth (ed.). 2000. *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community. Historical Patterns in Europe and Beyond: Multiple Europes. Brussels.* PIE-Peter Lang.

the mountain of Betul and also practiced agriculture there during the growing season. They had a lot of land on which they grew crops. They even built small huts of palm leaves on the mountain, spending their lives there peacefully. But today, owing to various proposed projects, there is a struggle between the government and the Gawdas to occupy the land of Betul.

Another myth of origin is that in Kazra a certain couple was not able to have children, so they left the place and came to Ambelim where the woman gave birth to a baby boy named Salu Fernandes. This is why they settled in Ambelim. Salu became the *vhoddil* (leader) of the Gawda people after his father died.

Even though they were settled in Ambelim they would go to Kazra during Carnival. On the day before Carnival a person from Kazra would come to the wards of the Gawdas to collect essential food items like red chillies, coconuts, and rice, and take all this to Kazra. On Carnival day these items were used to prepare food for the visitors. Therefore, Kazra is the most important place of our origin.

Ambelim has nine wards in all, three inhabited by Gawdas and the rest by members of the *Hayreache (Kharvi/Kharviche)* caste, comprising the fisher folk community.

Although the main traditional Gawda occupation is agriculture and cattle rearing, today many work as daily wage labourers. In Socobanda, Gawdas have taken up fishing to earn their livelihood as they live on the banks of the river Sal. However, in the rainy season this river is prone to flooding. So most of the people live as *mundkars* (tenants) on the land of a *bhatkar* (landlord). Coconut plantations provide the main source of income for the landlords. Every two or three months, when their landlord comes with a toddy tapper, the Gawdas collect the coconuts that the tapper plucks and give them to the landlord; they are entitled to live on the land in return for such labour. However, the Gawdas have to pay for any coconuts they pluck for themselves.

Life-cycle rituals

Life-cycle rituals mark major transitions in the life of an individual.[6] Specific ceremonies are performed during pregnancy, birth, marriage and death.

Rituals during pregnancy

When a woman is pregnant she is called a *Nozo zaleli bail* which means

6 Indian Child Contributor. (n.d.) 'Life Cycle'. Indian Child. http://www.indianchild.com/life_cycle_rituals_india.htm. Accessed on September 14, 2008.

'a woman who is unable to do anything.' In the past the pregnant woman was not taken to the doctor for the first six months but was taken to her mother's house during the seventh month of her pregnancy. This was called *vokot korpak vortat* (the woman is taken to her mother's house for some medicines). Only after going to her mother's place was she taken to a doctor.

Rituals of birth

On the seventh day after the infant's birth there was a celebration called *Sutti*. That night, the women and children came together in the house to celebrate. The baby's maternal grandmother also attended. She would wait for a few minutes in the balcony of the house without entering inside. Then she could enter the house and was the first person to feed *chuvolleo* (a sweet dish prepared by mixing jaggery, wild beans and coconut) to the baby and its mother. This sweet dish was served to everyone except pregnant women, after which women and children danced the fuggdi. (When the *sutti* was celebrated, any woman who was pregnant was sent to her mother's house; it was believed that *Sutti Mai* (Mother Destiny) would come to the house where *sutti* was being celebrated and this was considered dangerous for pregnant women.)

A bathing pit was dug in front of the house and covered by palm leaves and the mother had to bathe in this *nanni* from the first day after delivering a child till the eighth day. On the eighth day a ritual called *Nanni* was performed: the newborn baby was given a bath for the first time in the *nanni* followed by the mother, and then the child kept in a *sup*, a bamboo sieve used for winnowing.

All the children from the ward were invited for lunch. One small girl then had to remove all her clothes except for an undergarment, take the naked baby from the *sup*, and hand it over to the mother.

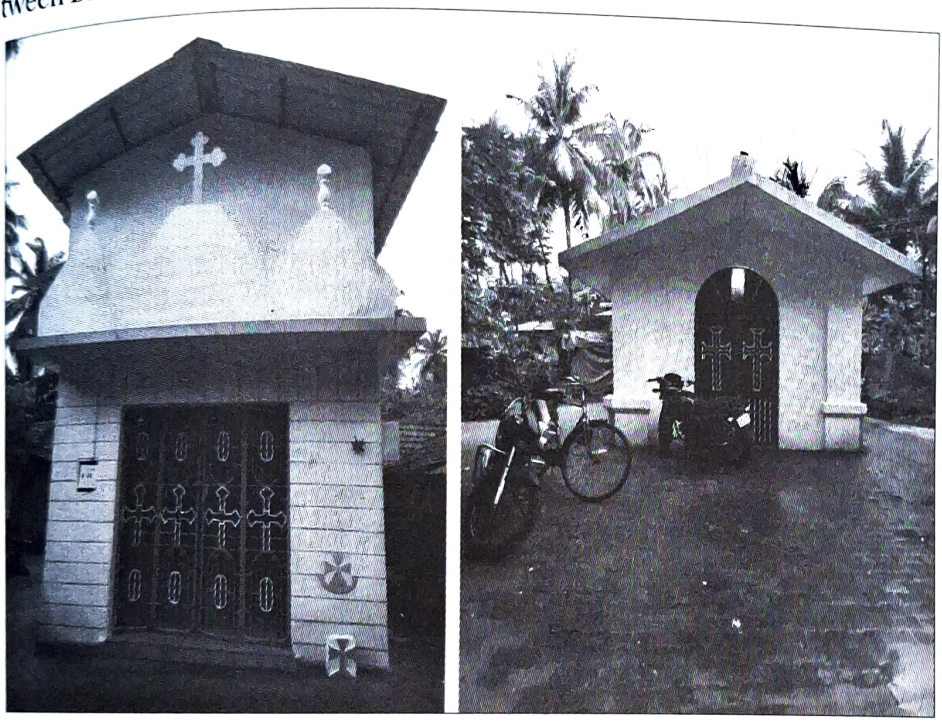
Before lunch some food was served on banana leaves, and this offering, along with a lighted candle and a *divli* made of a shell with oil and a cotton wick was kept in the *Nanni* for deceased members of the family. After this, lunch was served to everyone. Then the father of the baby had to tie a red handkerchief to his forehead, break a coconut in the *nanni*, and walk three times around the ritual pit.

On the ninth day, the maternal grandmother sent around a gift of *Bhalseache Ojjem*, a basket containing fruits like bananas and sweets like *ollge* (prepared by mixing flour, jaggery, and coconut). The *ollge* were given to everyone in the ward except women who were pregnant, because they might be harmed if they ate them.

Rituals of marriage

The Gawdas would get married within their community to others from the same ward or from other wards like Goenchembhatt and Kumbeabhatt in Velim. However, Gawdas from Pedda did not get married to people from Baradi. When I asked why, this is the story that a Pedda man told me:

"Once upon a time during Carnival some newly married couples from Pedda went along with the *mhell* (a festive procession of people) to Baradi. People in groups visited their community people from neighbouring areas and there was dancing and singing accompanied by drumming all along the way. When they reached Baradi, the *Baradkars* (the men of Baradi) misbehaved with a married woman from Pedda and therefore all the men from Pedda killed the *Baradkars* and brought back their flesh filled in coconut shells." From that time, marriages between *Baradkars* and the people of Pedda stopped, he said.

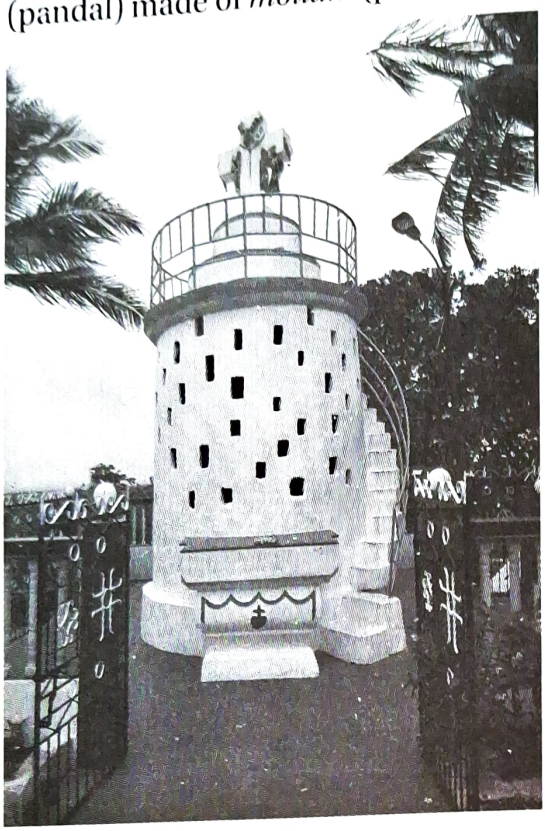


(L) 'Dha Zannache Kopel' at Pedda. (R) Chapel belonging to three families at Pedda. Photos: Mozinha Fernandes

Child marriages were very common in ancient times. A girl was married at the age of 11 or 12. After marriage the bride was taken to her mother's house and was kept there until she attained puberty. Then she was sent back to her in-laws' house. The young couple never saw each other before their marriage, which was arranged by their parents and relatives. They could see each other only when they were brought to

the church for marriage. The wives were afraid of their husbands. They would never walk in front of them. For two or three years, husband and wife barely spoke to each other. The woman was called *vokol* (bride) and the man was called *novro* (bridegroom).

Eight days before marriage the place in front of the house called *angonn* was cleaned up and cowdung was spread on the floor. A *mattov* (pandal) made of *mollam* (palm leaf thatch) was erected.



Holy Cross, Baradi. Photo: Mozinha Fernandes

One day before the marriage, food was prepared for the entire Gawda community and their relatives. Old as well as young people sat on a *vaso* (coconut tree stem split in half). Food was served on banana leaves and sometimes on jackfruit leaves stitched together to make a *potravoll* (plate).

Resper is the celebration of the Christian sacrament of marriage in the church. The couple promise each other that they will share all the happiness and sadness of life. Before going to the church, the groom or the bride go to the *Roseant* (a place in the kitchen) to lift the pot in which food was prepared. They had to lift it up three times from the *randonn* (a fireplace of three stones placed in a triangle) and finally replace it on the fireplace.

After the *Resper* a celebration was first held at the bridegroom's house. The bride and the groom were kept at a neighbour's house till the *potor* (people from the bride's side) came. After the *potor* arrived, people from the groom's as well as the bride's side sang marriage songs known as *Erss* (also pronounced as *Vers*) whose words were so provocative that sometimes fights took place. The *vhoddil* (the elder of the ward) then brought the married couple inside the house. After he had given them jaggery to eat, the *Ladin*[7] was sung.

7 A term derived from Ladainha, Portuguese word for Litany, it comprises invocations of the Blessed Virgin through hymns sung before the village cross and also in houses as prayers and for the fulfillment of vows.

Rituals of death

When there was a death in the family, the first thing that was done was to give the deceased a bath on a *moll* (bamboo mat). The *moll* then had to be thrown out, but only the *Vhoddil*, the village elder, had the right to do so.

On the fourth day after the corpse was buried, all the people of the *kuttumb* (also called *daji*, a clan of families) came together in the house of the deceased, with every member bringing food items needed for lunch. They then prepared the meal and all ate together as a symbol of equality.

If the husband died, then the wife was called a *randd bail* (widow). On the eighth day after the burial she was taken to her mother's house, where food was kept ready, along with a black *kapodd* (a type of cotton sari worn by Gawdas). When she reached the house, everyone else moved out and the widow was left alone. After having eaten her lunch the widow had to take the *kapodd* and return to her in-laws' house.

The ritual of mandd

A *mandd* is the ritual of celebration performed by the Gawda people. It was both a sacred space and an event where all Gawdas came together to pray, dance and sing.

In earlier times the *mandd* was performed in Pedda by two separate groups, each using its own site. Today the *Mandd Committee* maintains two small chapels in Pedda—the '*dha zannache kopel*' (a chapel in Pedda belonging to ten families from Pedda and Socobanda), and the other chapel in Pedda belonging to three families from Pedda. The Holy cross at Baradi is an important religious place for the community members.

In this ward two places were called *Manddachi suvat*, the place where the *mandd* ritual was performed and the traditional lamp called the *maulem* was placed eight days before Carnival. The *vhoddil* lit the lamp on a day fixed by the local shaman, or *gaddi;* once the *gaddi* had picked a date, it could not be changed. People from the ward gathered at the Mandd each night, placed five lit candles around the *maulem*, and dance around the light to the beating of a drum.

On the Saturday of the week before Carnival, all the people dressed up well; some men dressed like women by wearing saris or other costumes, and danced happily. On Carnival days, as a gesture of unity, they went visiting neighbouring Gawda communities in Kumbeabhatt and Goenchembhatt in Velim, and Baradi, in a festive procession or *mhell*, dancing to the beat of drums. As part of the ritual festivities, they also staged mock sword fights.

Every year, during the Carnival period, all the *mhells* from Baradi,

Pedda, Kumbeabhatt, and Goenchembhatt would visit a cross at Baradi hill, a place of religious significance. Here they sang songs and the *Ladin* and put forth their petitions. All this was an integral part of the *mandd* ritual.

On the last day of Carnival, the *mhell* would visit each and every Gawda home in its ward, singing songs as they moved from one house to another. If there was a death in the family then they would stop beating the drum and a prayer was offered for the dead. Finally, on that night, everyone from the ward gathered at the *mandd*. People who went visiting outside their ward had to return to their house by nightfall.

Sannas (cakes prepared from rice, toddy, and grated coconut) were eaten, along with a coconut that, having been buried in the ground the previous year, was dug up, broken, and eaten. Another coconut was then buried, to be eaten the next year.

Women could not enter the place where the *mandd* was being performed, but they could watch the happenings standing outside the sacred space.

Today everything has changed and the *mandd* scene cannot be seen anymore. Even its relics like the traditional lamp are no more; I was told that the *maulem* has been thrown into the river Sal. Fourteen years have passed since the Mandd ritual has been completely stopped by the Gawda people of Ambelim. Today there is no *mhell* of the Gawdas formally visiting Baradi.

The question arises: has the *mandd* ritual been completely stopped by all the people of Ambelim? No,the answer is that people of the other caste, that is *Hayreache* caste (otherwise called *kharvi,* or fishermen), still perform the *mandd*. They have never stopped this ritual. They visit the Gawda wards but do not dance on the traditional Gawda *mandd* site. Instead, they pray, sing, and dance in front of the two chapels in Pedda. A few local Gawda boys and men go along with the people of the fisher caste. For two years in a row the drums were beaten by a local Gawda boy. From the Gawda wards only a group of young boys and men go to Baradi as a *mhell* but not with the emotional attachment to *mandd* that the olden people had in them; the youngsters of today only go for fun.

Cantaram (songs)

Gawda rituals were always accompanied by songs. For marriage the women sang *Erss* (marriage songs); for *sutti,* performed on the seventh day after a child is born, they danced the *fugddi* and also sang songs; and for a death they sang religious songs. Songs were also sung on the sacred space of the *mandd*. Traditionally, certain songs like *mandd* songs could be sung only by men, and the marriage songs were sung

only by women.

Songs also featured prominently in popular entertainments such as the *khell* (Konkani street plays) and the *tiatr* (Konkani theatre on stage). The Gawda people of Ambelim used to perform *khell* on the three days of Carnival; all the actors walked from one village to another, as in those days there was no transportation; mothers or wives walked alongside carrying food.

In those days *khells* were performed on the ground and not on a stage. Well-to-do villagers would invite the actors to perform the *khell* in front of their house and would pay the actors for this performance. Actors as well as audiences enjoyed this experience. The *khell* was like a social gathering and also a form of entertainment for the people.

Women were barred from acting in a *khell.* Instead, men dressed like women and played female roles. It was only in the *tiatr*, when it came to Ambelim, that women and young girls where given a chance to act.

The scene is completely different today. There are no rituals, no songs, no *khell* and no *tiatr* performed by the Gawda community of Ambelim. Today professional *tiatrists* are hired for their shows on occasions such as the village feast and Carnival. Actors from the neighboring villages of Betul and Kumbheabhatt perform their *khell* in Ambelim.

Marriage songs and *fugddi* dances no longer delight the Gawda community. The youth are not even aware that such performances took place in the past.

Television programmes, Hindi and English movies and songs are popular today and have replaced the traditional songs. Although people still listen to popular Konkani songs, the essence of the community's traditional songs has been lost.

Remembering and forgetting

In some nomadic tribes it is a matter of honour and they remember nine to 12 generations back. While in modern industrial societies people seldom remember further back than two generations.[8]

Remembering and forgetting are a part of human nature, but we do not forget things that are unique to us. Sadly, the Gawda people of Ambelim do not want to remember their past, and even if they remember they do not want to express their feelings about it.

I tried to ask the people I met: What do they think of their past? I went to Socobanda and began telling my friend Martha's grandmother that I needed her help in finding out details of the rituals followed by the Gawda community in the past. As I spoke, Martha's cousin came in,

8 Boris Erasov. & Yogendra Singh. 2006. *The Sociology of Culture.* Rawat Publications. pp. 46-48.

and Martha told him that I was doing a project on the Gawda people. The cousin interrupted her and said, *"Hanv Gawddi num, Gawddi ti tumi."* (I am not Gawddi, you are the Gawddis.) He did not want to identify himself as a Gawda, but I could not understand why.

To find out the reason, I moved on with my interviews. In my search for the songs of the past I asked two persons if they could remember and sing them. One man happily said, "Yes," but the other said, *"Tem poilichem tuka kiteak zai?* (Why do you want those old things?) I do not remember anything."

Even the aged *vhoddil,* Caitu Fernandes, rejected his past. I know that he knows many songs, as I have often seen him singing them. Once I had seen him singing when the Hayreache caste people came to Pedda with their *mhell.* But he, too, refused, saying, *"Zantelle ani kantaram mhonttat?"* (Do old people sing songs?)

Zina Fernandes liked everything about the past. She used to dance the *fugddi.* When I asked her why she did not continue to dance it, she said with sadness, "How will I continue? Today's sons and their wives ask, why do we have to sit with those old things like the *fugddi*?"

Focusing on present customs, she mentioned how today most people celebrate the baptism of a child. "They hold grand celebrations for it," she said. "People say we celebrate baptism, so why should we perform *sutti* on the seventh day? It is simply a waste of our money to perform *sutti* and then follow it with baptism."

She told me of an incident in which two Gawda women sang *Erss* at one of the chapels of Ambelim. While they were returning after the event, two men from some other caste commented mockingly *"Avoie! Erss mhunnon ghelio!"* (Oh! They sang *Erss* and went off!).

"That is why we do not like to sing," said Zina. "Forget about those men, the young Gawda couple who were about to marry said, 'We do not want anyone to sing *Erss* for our marriage'."

In the past marriages were celebrated at home, but today marriages are celebrated in wedding halls, and this also hampers people from singing the *Erss.* In the past the singing of the *Erss* was seen as a normal practice and people of other castes even invited Gawda people to sing the *Erss* for their marriages, but today it is scorned.

When I asked Javelin Fernandes why she thinks people have forgotten everything, she replied, *"Atam soglem sudorlam."* (Everything is changed and civilized.) I asked her whether in the past people were not civilized. Her words were, *"Poilim amkam sogllea von soklla mhonn lakttalim, punn atam soggllim ek."* (In olden days we were considered as very low caste people in society, but today we are all equal). According to her, today Gawda boys work on ships like the boys of other castes. Like the *Hayreache* caste people, our Gawda boys also go for fishing, and many have bought land like others. We have left our traditional

dantulli (traditional sari of the Gawda people) and now we are wearing saris like others and we have become like them.

Pedro Fernandes from Voddir also said, *"Ami sudorleat."* (We have become civilized.) According to him, in the past, girls who were getting married were not given a dowry, but today Gawdas give a dowry to their daughters, just as the other castes do.

When Gawda people talk about their past, they consider themselves as having been inferior to others; they see the culture of other castes as being superior and are imitating them.

Conclusion

I conclude that the Gawda people are dropping their own traditional customs and imitating the customs of others because they see this as being part of the process of becoming 'civilized.' By imitating the other castes they have been able to compete with them in terms of acquiring land and money.

They have started eating beef and pork, which they never used to eat before. They dress like others and want to forget their past to raise their position in the social hierarchy.

They see their past as holding painful memories wherein they experienced discrimination. Let me speak of my own experience of being a Gawda and how I went through this myself. When my friends and I visit the wards of people of another caste, they keep staring at us. Some who know us very well even pretend as if they do not know us at all!

For the last two years when we go to deliver the statue of Our Lady[9] from our ward to their ward, they openly comment about us, saying, "These people come everywhere nowadays." At the end of the prayers, when snacks are served, they serve their people first and serve us last. I remember last year, when we attended Our Lady at such a house, because of this behaviour we came home without eating their snacks. Another example of discrimination is that the Ambelim Club (*Kudd*) in the city of Mumbai does not give membership to the Gawda people. However, Gawda boys play in the football team of Ambelim Sports Club in Goa.

Such discrimination, past and present, compel the Gawda to forget their past and to bring a halt to their rich traditional rituals of birth, death, marriage, and community celebration. Yet, the songs that they know but do not value any longer are indeed most valuable and are still cherished by other sections of society.

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9 A ritual wherein the image of the Pilgrim Virgin is kept for a day or two in each house of the village and the people of the house are expected to take the statue to the next house.

Even now the experience of discrimination is rooted in the hearts of the Gawda people and in reaction to this they forget their own culture and appropriate the culture of other people. But even after accepting the other culture that they perceive as being superior, they are still discriminated against.

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