

Analecta et Additamenta

The Honey-Gathering Skills of a Nilagiri Tribe

1. Every student of South Indian anthropology knows the 'classical' photograph of the Irulas climbing two steep boulder rocks with a fibre ladder for collecting honey, published I believe first by E. THURSTON (1909: opp. 391)¹, and subsequently in a number of other books and brochures (e.g. JAYADEV 1964: 35; IYER 1968: Fig. 7)². There is some justification in this photographic 'tradition': The Irulas are (or, rather, were) honey-gatherers par excellence, though honey-gathering is (or, rather, was) an important occupation and one of the main skills of a number of tribes in South India. To some of them, honey even gave their name, or a distinctive epithet, like to the Jenu Kurumbas (alias Kadu Nayikas) of Gudalur Taluk and Wynad³.

2. Honey is mentioned as favourite and prestigious food in Old Tamil Literature. It was also object of barter. In fact, one old Tamil poem (*Porunarāṇṇuppaṭai* 214f.) mentions what seems to refer to tribal economy, when it says that there are "those who exchange honey and edible tubers for fish-fat and intoxicants"⁴. Honey was mixed with rice flakes (*Akam* 237), but it also provided the basis for the production of a fermented intoxicant drink⁵. The mixture of honey and milk was considered to be of particular excellence since the *Tirukkural* (ca. 450 A. D.), in the chapter on the glory of love, compares in a famous couplet the water which oozes from the shining teeth of the soft-spoken sweetheart to the mixture of milk and honey⁶.

3. In the area of the Nilagiri mountains, gathering of honey has been the regular occupation of particularly two tribes – the Kurumbas and the Irulas⁷. It has been mentioned as such in earlier ethnographic literature. Thus e.g. THURSTON writes (1909: 378f., quoting as his source *Agricultural Ledger Series*, 1904):

¹ E. THURSTON and K. RANGACHARI, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*; Vol. 2. Madras 1909.

² C. J. JAYADEV, *Guide to the Anthropological Exhibits*. Madras 1964. Government Museum; – L. A. KRISHNA IYER, *Social History of Kerala*; Part 1. Madras 1968.

³ In the language of this interesting tribe, the term for 'honey' is *je.nu* (DED 2674b). The name of the tribe in precise phonemic transcription is *Jē.nu Kurumbar* (alias *Ka.ḍu Na.yikar*), abbreviated further J.Ku.

⁴ *Tēn* and *kilāṅku*. One could almost visualize an Irula or Kurumba tribesman with his *te.nu* / *je.nu* 'honey' in a bamboo receptacle, and *heca.ṅku* / *kaṅgu*, the edible tubers, returning from the market in the plains.

⁵ *Kurincippattu* (200 A.D.) mentions in line 155 *tēmpilittēral* 'clarified toddy extracted from honey', *Puram* 115, 3 speaks of *tēkkattēyal*, etc.

⁶ *Tirukkural* 1121: *pāloṭu tēn kalantarrē*. This, incidentally, shows that saliva was obviously not considered to have so awfully polluting properties as in modern Hinduism.

⁷ The Kurumbas (more correctly Kuṛumbas) of the greater Nilgiri area are a complex of at least seven tribes: 1. Pālu Kuṛumbas 2. Alu Kuṛumbas 3. Jēnu Kuṛumbas 4. Beṭṭa Kuṛumbas 5. Muḷḷu Kuṛumbas 6. Urāḷi Kuṛumbas 7. Muḍugas (DIETER B. KAPP, *per-*