

SEEDS OF TRADITION

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HOW LITTLE IS THE LITTLE TRADITION ?

The term "little" Tradition was coined by Robert Redfield of the Chicago school of sociology, and later adopted by Milton Singer, to designate those cultural forms which are very localized. In fact, there are studies which show how cultures change subtly from village to village, and even within a given village, we find cultural differences existing between various communities. On the other hand, cultures do not only divide--by stressing upon the differences which exist between cultures, but also bring people together, creating new bonds between very disparate communities. Cultures are very human, and so they do remind us that as human beings we have much in common. To express this coming together of communities, to share a common culture, we could use the term "global culture". The problem with the terminology suggested by the term "Little Traditions" as opposed to some Great Tradition, which is supposed to embrace a more widely distributed cultural identity, is that it is implied that this Great Tradition represents a cultural expression which is common to a greater number of people. Paradoxically, however, most human beings belong to some form of little tradition, and the so-called "Great Tradition" is very much restricted to a certain cultural elite. The fact is that all cultures are "little Traditions" of one sort or another, and difference, or variety, is much more characteristic of cultural forms, than similarity. Ofcourse, this does not deny the fact that there have been various attempts to create a synthesis of cultures, taking elements from different cultures, and creating a new type of culture which attempts to combine what is perceived to be best, or most vital, in different cultural traditions.

Even the term "Tradition" needs to be defined more precisely if it is to be a useful reference when discussing different cultures. The Tradition is generally understood as something conveyed from one generation to the next, providing cultural continuity through certain set forms of thought and

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life style. This Tradition is often associated with an oral form of communication, which we will discuss later in this essay. In theological parlance, Tradition is distinguished from Scripture, a point which we will have occasion to return to. One famous "orthodox" theologian (Vladimir Lossky) speaks of Tradition as a kind of silence, from which the spoken word emerges. Tradition is the context in which the word is to be interpreted--its ground.*1

The epithet "great" could perhaps be understood in two distinct ways. First of all, it can be viewed as referring to a bringing together of various "little traditions" into one common, more universal culture. In the south of India, for example, we are familiar with the "Sangam" period, which brought together various local, even tribal forms of culture into one common culture which could atleast provide a common stage for cultures to inter-relate. Without this common platform, there could be no way of sharing cultural insights, and enriching each other. But this coming together of cultures does not necessarily mean the obliteration of differences. Indeed the very idea of the five symbolic landscapes which constitute the cultural map of the Sangam tradition, implies that each landscape had its own ethos, and distinctiveness. Another way in which the "great" tradition has been understood in India, has been the "Sanskritic" or 'Brahmanic" culture. But here we have a quite different dimension of understanding as to what constitutes a great tradion. "Great" is opposed to what is peripheral, inferior, --the common "dialect" of the ordinary folk. Here we recognize the coefficient of power, and influence, and also a sense of ethnic superiority, combined with concepts of purity as opposed to pollution. That is to say, those who claim to have a great culture, also consider themselves to be the powerful, important people within a society or state. Concepts of the State also influence the way in which we understand "great" as opposed to "little"; in a hierarchical state, great does not imply numerous, but simply those who are above, and this generally means the few. The many are in fact the little, in that their culture is only dismissed as "popular", and rough, or crude, lacking the refinement of the truly cultured. As a society shifts to being more federal (as was the case more clearly in the Sangam period) "great" has a different connotation, meaning the more embracing, and the "little" cultures are organically the constituent parts of a greater unity.

There is certainly a tendency to look upon the merely local, folk cultures, as having a marginal status, representing the crude majority who lack the polish of the urbanized elite. Here "little" is used negatively to mean what is insignificant, and quite safely to be ignored.

THE STRUCTURE OF CULTURE.

Terms like "little" and "Great" tend to be very loaded, implying, as we have seen, value judgements that amount to prejudice. For this reason I would like to focus in this essay more on the actual structure underlying the dynamics of cultural interaction, or exchange. I have been primarily concerned with the way in which cultures influence each other, and how cultures are constantly adopting elements from other cultures, and adapting their own traditions to respond to changing conditions. In fact, I would suggest that a culture is rather like a seed. It is little in the sense that it is compact, and carries its own memory, and typology. But this seed needs a ground which is hospitable, for it to grow in. And in due course of time, a seed changes its character in accordance with its relationship to the ground to which it has adapted itself. For example, there are hundreds of different varieties of rice grains in India in fact the relationship of different grains to cultural patterns is quite remarkable. A culture is defined not only in terms of what it knows, or the "information" that it can store, but also what its members live on, what they eat, and how they work. In other words, culture is defined in relation to ways in which it operates.

To explore these patterns of consumption, as well as occupational patterns within a cultural grouping, I would suggest that we could study at greater depth how cultures are on occasion "inclusive" and yet also inclined to be "exclusive". Finally, we can reflect on how cultures can come to accept "plurality" within a federal framework which implies not simply tolerance but more actively a celebration of diversity, which, I believe, is what a festival is all about.

These terms "inclusive", "exclusive", and "plural" have been applied to Faith systems, and the way in which certain fundamentalist theologies tend to exclude cultural adaptation, or recognize influence coming from other expressions of belief. The relationship of Faith systems to cultural forms has not been sufficiently analysed.

As an artist, I have been very much involved in the process which calls itself "inculturation" within the Indian Church. But cultures cannot be divorced from belief systems. We cannot just look at cultures in the abstract, without taking into account the inner spiritual intentions which have given

rise to cultural expressions. Cultures do not simply comprise of external ways of doing things ; habits which become life styles. Every pattern of life, especially when it becomes a sign of identity, that is invested with the self-image of a person or community, has at its core a kernel of visioning. We see reality through the culture to which we belong ; that is to say our culture provides us with a frame, or format, for looking at the world around us. And this also means that the external forms of a culture do give shape to our inner spiritual perceptions, and experiences of life.

Indian culture in the past has been very inclusive, offering hospitality to many different communities beneath an over-arching syncretism. But yet the caste system as such has been characterized by exclusive cultural bonding. In other words, the complexity of inter-cultural dynamics can be motivated both by impulses to include new elements from other cultural traditions, whilst at the same time attempting to conserve and protect what is perceived as the power base of a given cultural identity. The fact that from very ancient times the dominant Brahmanic tradition of India has denied to access to the Vedas, and certain important rituals, which have given status to a high caste elite in Indian society, shows to what extent the so-called "great tradition" of India has been exclusivist. And yet, in other respects, this same powerful group has been quite willing to incorporate new elements from those communities which have otherwise been outside the main stream of the dominant culture.*2

Changes in society put new strains on the level of tolerance as opposed to protectionism, that characterizes a given cultural patterning. The capacity to welcome another culture is also related to the way in which a community looks on its own cultural identity---as something to be possessed, or as a way of sharing its resources. These attitudes are also affected by the measure of self confidence within a cultural grouping ; any sign of insecurity, or feeling that the other poses a threat to identity, immediately brings protective reactions into play, leading to exclusivism.

Culture can become a commodity, which gives status like any other possession. Where culture is a sign of power, it is easily corrupted into something which is purely conservative. It is here that the tradition is no longer an expression of life, but rather of a dead habit which seeks to enclose, or guard against any outside intrusion. Culture becomes a defence mechanism, a kind of armour. Instead of freeing individuals, to be more resourceful, a conservative tradition can be an inhibiting factor against forms of new creativity. Strangely, it is then the marginal elements that carry the

seeds for future growth,-- in so far as cultural exchange demands risk, the willingness to take a change, which the conservative are not willing to do. Later, we will again return to this paradox of culture, that it is often the very elements which lie outside the safe confines of a given tradition, which have the power to transform, and re-define a given tradition.*3

Cultures may adapt in the sense of assimilate, without giving room for differences. This amounts to a form of appropriation, which can even be motivated by a hidden and often unrecognized aggression. To *include* is not necessarily to *welcome* ; it can be a kind of exploitation, motivated by a will to conquer, or consume. "Inculturation" as a process adopted by the Church, has certainly been perceived by those who are nervous of the power of the Church, as an attempt by the Church to possess, or appropriate, cultural forms as a way of spreading its own influence. In that sense I have often argued that inculturation can not easily go hand in hand with dialogue, any more than a centralized authority can coexist with federal forms of governance.

In other words, inclusiveness can be the other face of the will to possess, which finally reveals its true face as a type of exclusivism, motivated by a centralized and dominating mode of authority. Colonialism, for example, wants to include everything within its own ambit of power. But it also excludes every attempt to share that power, or decentralize it. But inclusivism can also represent a genuine effort to be more open and welcoming. The opposite of exclusivism is not inclusivism, but rather pluralism. Plurality is based on a totally different concept of power, which is federal, open minded, and participatory. In that sense a culture which accepts plurality of expression is necessarily of a very different type from a culture which aims at uniformity, or what we might call a "*mono-culture*". Globalization, in so far as it uses technology to iron out differences, and make every culture into a commodity which is up for barter in a world wide market economy, is completely opposed to a cultural diversity which would eventually threaten its centralized form of power, however "free" it might claim to be.*4

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH DIVERSITY.

The confusion caused by the term "little traditions" as opposed to the Great Tradition, does not arise from a recognition of little traditions as such. The difficulty is really attendant on what is meant by a "Great Tradition". Does the term only imply an appropriation of power ? Or is it also concerned

with what Tagore called a "Universal Culture" (*VishwA BhArAti*)? In other words the local, culture, because it is contextualized and appropriate, is viewed in contrast to the universal, generalized. Small is beautiful, because it is also familiar, and therefore personalized, whereas the universal tends to be an abstraction, and an ugly one at that. The more universal a culture aspires to be, the more abstract and theoretical it becomes. There have been a number of efforts in recent times to distinguish two processes of knowing. One way of knowing is generated through participation, involvement, or dispersion, into specific areas of practical application. The other form of knowledge is more abstract, centralized, and therefore idealistic. These two forms of knowledge have been called *Epistemic*, as opposed to the *Theoretical*. The first form of knowledge is more pragmatic, and associative, working through nature, whereas the second form of knowledge is supposed to be more logical, dominating, manipulative,— working against nature in order to control it. The first form of knowledge characterizes the craftsman, whose skill was in fact an art, whereas the second form of knowledge is that of the scientist, who has empowered the mechanical technician.*5

There has been a tendency to see culture as over and against nature, but in fact culture in many ways imitates nature in its manner of operating. Like nature, it reproduces itself through small cells, which have the capacity to re-plant themselves in different environments, germinating in different soils. The analogy of the tree which grows from a small seed serves well to explain how cultures evolve. Little traditions are like small seeds. A great and complex organism like a tree cannot reproduce itself except through the agency of such small parts. You cannot transplant a full grown tree—to try and uproot it, is to kill it. The analogy ofcourse has its limitations, but it does help us to understand the relationship between a growing system like a culture, to its ground, in which it is rooted. This ground is nature—the very earth which nurtures and sustains human culture. It is into this natural context, or environment, that a tree is rooted. A tree offers a good image for understanding how a culture functions, because it is a living and growing system. It is not just something that is static and fixed, like an inanimate object. Cultures grow, and give birth to other cultures, bearing fruit and scattering their seeds.*6.

In nature we do not find any form that is exclusive, for every living organism is open to its environment. Ofcourse, a body can reject certain new elements, but within the whole organism there are no parts, however lowly, which do not contribute to the common wealth of the whole. The social structure of the Caste system, though it uses the analogy of the body, in

which there are supposed to be higher and lower members, is actually flawed conceptually. That is to say, in nature, there is no assumption head that is superior to the feet--it is only an externally imposed value system (of which nature is innocent) that creates this kind of hierarchy. In fact what we call "mind" is not just located in the head, but is an ordering principle which is distributed through the conscious functioning of the whole body. In that sense "mind" is as much in the heart and in the hand as it is in the brain.

Nature itself operates holistically, as a growing organism in which every part is involved. The assumption that one tradition is greater than another is fortuitous. It is the will to control and have exclusive rights, that destroys the integrity of a living organism.

The relationship of culture to nature also helps us to understand the way in which cultures have an ecology of their own. The modern concept of ecology comes from the Greek word *Oikos*, meaning the natural as well as human habitat. Ecology is the way in which this habitat is ordered. Ecology implies a systemic pattern of relationships between various inter-dependent parts. Even our understanding of Ecumenical, also derives from this important notion of the shared home. The home should be a welcoming one, as well as being a shelter to those who live in it. Hospitality is a basic cultural value. Unfortunately a greater number of cultures today are becoming increasingly inhospitable, as culture is taken over by power, and the desire to possess. In fact the need to possess becomes the most damaging cultural disease.*7

The scientific and technological culture which has swept across the world, originating in western societies, is based on the assumption that culture is opposed to nature. Possibly arising from an interpretation of the Genesis story, where God puts human beings in charge of the Garden of Paradise, giving the first couple power not only to name all creatures, but also to harvest the fruits of the earth, it has been assumed that nature is only for the use and gratification of human beings. Culture has exploited nature, using it as only a store house from which to take indefinitely, without ever thinking of replacing resources which cannot be artificially replenished. This wasteful attitude has in the span of a few generations brought humanity to the brink of catastrophe. It is in the face of this man made destruction of the planet, that some people are now looking back to the life style of human communities before the advent of modern industrialized civilization. to question how it was that for millenia human beings lived in harmony with

nature, in a way which was sustainable for millenia, and only very recently has been disrupted by our modern approach to culture.

The very concept of little traditions as opposed to great traditions is another reflection of this underlying disjunction between human culture and nature. Little traditions are those cultures which live in harmony with nature, seeing that culture is a part of nature, and therefore reflecting natural processes which sustain an ecological balance between the human community and its environment. The so-called Great traditions are characterized by a split between nature and culture, where culture assumes a dominant role, lording it over the whole of creation.*8

How did this concept of culture as opposed to nature arise and find rational justification ? It seems that part of the process which has given rise to Universal Faith Systems spanning across many lands, is a belief that spirituality transcends physical conditioning. In other words, the idea that the soul is far superior to the body, and needs to be liberated from merely physical necessities, has contributed to a world view which has been called "metacosmic". The great religious systems of thought, which arose out of the speculative idealism which characterized the Vedantic philosophies of India, such as we find in Brahminism and even Buddhism, have tended to reject the phenomenological world as only Relatively, or partially real (mital), the ultimate reality being a condition of the pure spirit, disembodied and beyond both name and form, which is no longer conditioned by, or dependent on, the physical environment in which we live.*9 Similarly, the Judeo Christian spiritual synthesis, which also characterizes the Islamic understanding of the relationship between a Transcendent Deity, to the rest of creation, has also often favoured a disjunction between Heaven and the fallen world which is the domain of Satan. The Transcendent reality of the realized soul is no longer bound down to the world of sensual experience. The body is often perceived especially by those ascetic schools which have been affected by gnostic or Manichaeian dualism, as a kind of impediment which drags the soul downwards, preventing the Spirit from realizing its true destiny. Thus the dichotomy between the body and the spirit, nature and Grace, the heavenly and the worldly, results in a profound disregard for the physical environment in which we live.

I would suggest that one of the reasons why this spiritual arrogance has arisen, is related to the dominance in human culture of the Word as opposed to the Image. Language, in the sense of the expression of thought processes which are ultimately disembodied, tends to give rise to a purely cerebral

approach to reality. The other senses are put at a lower level, such as feeling, tasting, or even seeing. The Word is absolutized, and as words are a purely human construct, not to be found in nature itself, it is the power of language which places human cultures above nature. We recall that in the Genesis story, the power of the first human beings over the rest of creation, was closely associated with their capacity to "name" creatures.*10 The cultural power to create a "virtual reality" through the use of metaphor in language, has been viewed as a mysterious gift with which the human being has been endowed by God, enabling mankind to share in the creative energy which characterizes the Divine Creator. It is in this sense that human beings have been made in the image of God, through an almost magical power to create a world through speech. It is this mysterious power of language to create a virtual reality by which the visible and tangible world in which we live is made intelligible to the human mind, that culture gains the power to transform and even re-create nature in its own image. Now, instead of culture being a part of nature, nature becomes a construct of culture. Instead of human culture reflecting the processes which characterize nature, natural processes are made subservient to the inventiveness of the scientific and technological mind. Language is the prime tool which culture has, for grasping nature, and making it obedient to the human will.

ORAL AS OPPOSED TO WRITTEN LANGUAGE:

The relation of culture to language is certainly a very complex one. Going back to such myths as the story of the tower of Babel, we have the idea that what has led to the downfall of a human civilization has been the diversity of languages. In the North East of India, there is a similar story about a construction made out of bamboo reaching like a ladder to the heavens. As those who were on top of this ladder got nearer to the skies, they were no longer able to communicate with their companions who were at the bottom of the ladder. And so mis-understanding arose, and instead of supplying the people at the top with more material which they needed to build the ladder even higher, the people at the base of the structure began to remove the supports from below. This was because the instructions, which those who were at the top were shouting down to those at the bottom, could no longer be heard properly, and therefore understood. Through a lack of communication between above and below, the whole structure came tumbling down.

This, in fact, seems to be the basic problem of a culture based on hierarchy, with some at the top, and the others at the base of the cultural

construct. Finally, the two parts of a community no longer speak the same language, and the ambitious structure which aims to reach the heights, falls to pieces. It has been pointed out that the little folk traditions are mainly oral traditions, whereas the "great" traditions are based on written scriptures, which are the established memorials of a whole culture. One legend from the North East of India, claims that originally even their culture was a written one, but in the process of their wanderings, the tribe had to cross a great raging torrent of a river, and so the books which they were carrying had to be carried in their mouths, as they swam across. In the process of trying to get across the waters, they had to swallow their traditions, and that is why their most precious stories remain only orally transmitted.

The difference between an oral culture, and one which is based on written texts is not just a matter of certain objects which are handed down as written records. The difference goes much deeper, and involves the whole process of transmitting cultural traditions. In the oral tradition, the person of the storyteller is very important, and stories always remain very open ended, allowing for adaptation in the very process of retelling. Once a tradition gets written down, it becomes much more rigid, and fixed in the idiom of the past. Now it is no longer so easy to re-fashion the tradition to be relevant for the present.*11

Also, prior to written documents, other artifacts acted as containers for a cultural tradition. Images, rituals, instruments, even music, all had a part to play as the bearers of deeply evocative memories. The advent of the written word had a remarkable effect on other forms of cultural transmission, taking over as an all powerful, and dominant mode of recording the experience of the community. A kind of iconoclasm made into all non-verbal expressions of shared community living, something almost suspect. Dance and Drama, perhaps the earliest creative form of cultural enactment, became counter-cultural in that they continued a tradition in which the spoken word was secondary to the non-verbal gesture. It appears as though something so physical as the movement of the body as a vehicle of deep meaning was feared as a danger to the highly cerebral dominance of the Word. The word could be controlled by a priestly elite of professional scribes, whereas dance and drama remained rooted in a popular culture which was open to all, and did not need the intermediary of a special class of qualified persons, to be interpreted by the ordinary masses. Where Tradition is set over and against the Scriptures, we find a greater importance given to popular cultures, which are oral or even non-verbal. But it is precisely these expressions of the

ordinary unlettered people which are viewed with the greatest suspicion as tending towards the superstitious, and even subversive, or idolatrous.

THE LITTLE TRADITIONS AND A COUNTER CULTURE.

Nowadays we find that the technology of communication has once again given to the oral or non-verbal forms of cultural exchange a new possibility for being documented. The film, as well as various systems for recording sound live, without relying on written techniques, has made it possible for the story teller, as well as the musician or dancer to preserve their art for future generations to hear and see. The television has made a very powerful, though also ambiguous contribution to the creation of new forms of cultural memory. The main problem is commercialization. Whereas before, the impromptu and spontaneous performance could not be made into a possession in the same way that certain cultural artifacts could be converted into status symbols for a leisured class, now even a folk festival could be turned into an occasion for making money for those who have the capital to control the media.

Certainly the democratization of the secular state has played an important role in giving new currency to little traditions, despite the fact that the new Great or powerful culture is the increasingly globalized communication technology of the multi-media. It is in this context that we note that often it is the former "great traditions" that are being reduced to little ones. The new elite are not just those who have learnt how to read and write, but need to know how to re-interpret the traditions of the past in such a way that they become relevant for the present.

Whatever be the changes brought about by new technologies, the essential nature of the little traditions remains the same. These traditions stand out against all forms of monopoly, and remain the birth right of those who are not in power. Their power lies not in their capacity to control, or manipulate, but through their freedom to be creative. They continue to be the seed-bearers of a living tradition, which cannot be possessed. There is something inherently anarchical about the way in which culture functions. This is partly because of the very nature of the random, or chaotic, as opposed to the ordered or controlled. As noted by communication theory, the fractal, or random, contains far more "meaning" in terms of possibilities for interpretation, than the ordered, and symmetrical. Finally order generates its own death, by trying to make its own continuance predictable. Culture is essentially wedded to chance, and the unpredictability of inspiration.

Without this freedom, culture is no longer like nature, and its very conformity, and lack of diversity is a sign of its irrelevance. The future of a plant does not lie in the dead wood at the centre of its stem, or even in its roots, but rather in the seeds which are at the very tips of its extended branches, ready to fall off, and be scattered by the wind. It is the very fragility and diversity of the seeds that make them into the promise of the future.

"Unless a seed dies, it will not bear much fruit". Unless a culture is willing to shed its outer covering, and be buried in the ground which is our common heritage, and context, it will never bear fruit in the future. It is not so important to preserve cultural traditions, as to allow them to become like small seeds which are scattered abroad. Somewhere, some time, in a way that we can never predict, they will sprout again, if the conditions are favourable, and bring forth new fruit.

REINTERPRETING A LOCAL CULTURAL TRADITION

THE DRUM AS A SYMBOL OF A PRIMAL COSMIC CULTURE.

I would like to draw together some of the ideas which I have presented in this essay concerning the character of a very localized and cosmic Faith system which has often been designated as a "little tradition", by taking a very concrete symbol, that of the Drum, and seeing how this Drum has assumed a very central place as the focus for a Cosmic Culture. First of all, the Drum is an instrument which is used to create a very penetrating, far reaching sound. In that sense it becomes the sign of the energy which is also celebrated in the Word. But the drum is different from the Word in that it does not convey the same discursive, rational meaning, that the Word contains--the beat of the drum is very primal, evocative, but also impossible to limit to any verbal statement. The story teller, as also the person who announces an important message to the community, often accompanies the spoken word with the beat of the drum. But here the drum acts as a way of emphasizing utterance, with the attractive rhythm of percussion : the fact that ancient forms of narration were also poetic, being spoken in the form of a

chant, meant that the drum beat provided a stress, which tied in with the rhythm of the song.

The drum is primarily associated with rhythm, and the dance. Those who hear the drum are drawn to it almost physically--it seems to have a direct appeal to the heart and the hand, rather than to the thinking brain. Yet the drum also functions very much like the ear, and has a direct impact on the human ear drum. It has been suggested that the rhythm of the drum reminds us of the heart beat of the mother against whose breast each one of us as a child was nurtured, feeling security in that repetitive sound. It is possible that the sound of the drum replicates in some way the sound heard by the baby in the womb, created by the very throbbing of the blood vessels in the mother's enclosing body. The drum is therefore not only a symbol of meaningful sound, but the body itself. The drum, made from either an earthen vessel, or from the hollowed trunk of a tree, represents an enclosed space over whose surface the skin of an animal has been stretched taut. It is in fact this animal hide which, when beaten, emits the characteristic tone of a particular drum, and so the drum is closely associated with the body of the animal from which its skin has been taken. The concrete image of the drum has three distinct elements--an outer skin, or surface which is struck, and a container vessel made from clay or wood over whose hollowed interior the skin has been stretched, and finally the inner space or enclosed emptiness, which gives the sound of the drum its depth and resonance. These three aspects of the drum could be related to the three dimensions of the circle itself : the outer circumference (the skin), the radii which "contain" the circle,(the physical structure of the drum over which the skin is stretched) and finally the point, to which the radii are grounded, and which, as a point which cannot be defined in terms of either length or breadth, is as limitless as space. The relation of the three dimensional drum to the geometric form of the circle is important, because it also indicates how the drum becomes a metaphor for the enclosing boundary of localized space.

In the ritual of beating the drum, we often notice that the drummer is delineating through the rhythmic structure of sound, a sacred space. The drum conveys the inner meaning of sound, but also becomes an icon of spacial enclosure. The drummer circumambulates a given boundary, the beating of the drum becoming a sacrament of enclosing space. The drum is often used as the accompaniment to movement, helping undoubtedly in the rhythmic motion of the step, or dance. In a way the whole universe has been symbolized by the metaphor of the drum--we are all part of this cosmic drum which is struck by the hand of a divine drummer. Dr Eric Lott suggests in

his essay on the symbolism of the Drum in the Sri Vaishnavite tradition, that the drum is somehow related to the concept of the "body of God" which is a key concept in the mystical doctrine of Sri Ramanuja.*12 It is this drum awakens the mystic longing of the worshipper, to be united with the Lord. Vishnu himself is depicted as the drum beater, the whole universe being his drum.

THE PARAIYARS ; PRIESTS OF THE DRUM.

One of the most ancient communities of South India are the **Paraiyars**. This community is characterised as professional drum beaters, who are also considered untouchable. The ritual impurity of the drum beaters is supposed to derive from their handling of the dead skin of an animal, particularly the dead skin of the calf. The living cow, or calf, is held to be very sacred, but through a symbolic inversion, the *deAd* skin of this animal is considered to be the most polluting.

These professional drummers, however, have a very important role to play in society. Beating the famous **Parai** drum of South India, they announce important messages in the village. The **Parai** drum is generally in the form of a large wooden circle, across which the skin of the cow or calf has been stretched. In appearance it is reminiscent of a very large tambourin, a shallow single headed drum, but without the jingles.

The **Paraiyars** also accompany the dead corpse to the burning ground for cremation. The sound of the drum is supposed to have a magical power to ward off the spirits of evil, and also to direct the spirit of the dead human being along the path to a future existence beyond death.

The drum beat is not only dangerous, or inauspicious; it is also festive. It symbolizes time, in that the measure of the drum beat is the rhythm of the life cycle. It acts as a summons to the dance of life, as well as to the limits of death. In other words, the drum mediates between the extremities of existence. By beating the drum, the drummer helps the individual to realize the journey from birth to death, from inner to outer, from what is good and beneficent, to what is dark and dangerous, from order to chaos. The drum announces the importance of change, marking rites of passage, and the way of transition.

In a detailed study of the cultural traditions of the **Paraiyar** Drummers, Dr. Sati Clarke takes up a theme outlined earlier by Dennis B. McGilvray (*PARAIYAR DRUMMERS OF SRI LANKA : CONSENSUS AND CONSTRAINT IN*

AN UNTOUCHABLE CASTE) and the more philosophical reflections of Dr. Eric Lott *13 Here Dr. Sati Clarke is able to show that the Drum not only acts as an intermediary between different dimensions of life experience, but also between the counter-cultural local tradition of a Dalit community, and the so-called "Great Tradition", which takes up the symbol of the Drum at a more philosophical, or speculative level, as a powerful metaphor for the relationship between the human and the Divine, the Cosmic and the Metacosmic.*14

According to Eric Lott, in his commentary on the mystic hymn of **Sri Andal**, known as **Tiruppavai**, the word **Parai**, meaning the drum which is mentioned in her hymn, carries the connotation "lowly, mean", but also implies "what we desire".

In ancient cultures the drum is related to the heavens as well as to the earth, as the sound of thunder is also likened to the beating of heavenly drums at the time of a festival. Drum beating was important in primordial rain magic. It also had a sexual connotation, stimulating deep and primal passions. It is in this connection that a myth is recounted concerning the origins of the goddess **Ellaiyamman**, who is the main deity of the **Paraiyar** community of Dalit drum beaters. To begin with, one might wonder what the story has to do with their traditional occupation of drum beating, but on deeper reflection one realizes that the narrative reveals an inner process of bringing together of opposing cultural traditions, one high, and the other low and even outcaste. This marrying of opposites is also symbolized by the very body of the drum, and its place in the ritual life of suffering and marginalized people. In that sense the story is itself liberative, because it shows how a community can re-define its own self image, by using the very symbols which characterize its suffering, as a source for a new self identity. The narrative seems to accompany the drum, throwing a new light on its significance. Through re-interpreting this story we can understand how a little tradition has a prophetic function within a society, containing within itself the seeds of liberation for those who have been rejected by the powerful, and whose very culture has been thought of as irrelevant.*15

THE STORY OF ELLAIYAMMAN, THE MOTHER OF EVERYONE.

The myth of **Ellaiyamman**, the goddess of Everyone (**Ellaam**) who is also the goddess of the boundary (**Ellai**) is very helpful as indicating how the mythic imagination is able to combine elements coming from very different traditions. The goddess is pictured as single (which also suggests her

supremacy, as she cannot be contained or controlled by making her into the obedient spouse of some male deity). According to her legend, she was originally a high born daughter of **Uppai**, who had seven daughters. Her name then was **Renuka**. This daughter was abandoned, and found by a washerman (a Dalit). However, because of her great beauty she was adopted by a queen, who was without a child of her own, and brought up in a palace. Later, however **Renuka** was married to an ascetic, through the clever machinations of **Narad**, the son of Brahma who is always causing mischief. **Narad** wanted her to marry this ascetic in order to disturb his peaceful meditations. **Renuka**, however was a devoted wife of this Brahmin, bearing him four children, the youngest being **Parasuraman**, the bearer of the axe. She was able to bring water from the nearby river, without the use of a vessel, through her yogic powers, and great purity. One day, however, when going to fetch water for the ritual ablutions of her ascetic husband, she fell in love with a **Gandharva**, whose reflection she saw in the water. It is important to remember that these demi-gods of creation were particularly associated with music, and were pictured themselves as divine drummers. The relation of water to music, and the clay vessel in which water is carried, to the drum, is not accidental. Because **Renuka** had lusted after this divine being, she now lost her primal purity, and could no longer carry the water of the stream to her husband without the help of a vessel, as was her wont. In her shame she asked her son **Parusuraman** to cut off her head with his axe, and when he refused to do this terrible act, she fled and hid herself in a **Paraiyar** village, where an old woman offered her hospitality. Her son **Parusuraman** informed his Father of what had happened, and the old ascetic ordered him to cut off the head of his mother **Renuka**. He went in search of his Mother, and found her hidden in the home of the **Paraiyar** woman, where he decided to behead his mother, but in his excitement not only cut off her head, but also that of the **Paraiyar**. He then returned to his Yogi Father, and told him that he had done what he had been ordered to do. The Father was pleased with his son, and said he would give him a boon. **Parusuraman** asked now that he might be given the power bring back to life his Mother. The Yogi agreed, and gave him some magical ash (**vibhuthi**) which, if applied to the severed head, could join it again to the body. The boy went in search of his Mother, but again in his confusion joined the head of the old **Paraiyar** woman to the body of his mother **Renuka**. Thus the goddess **Ellaiyamman** was brought into being, a strange composite of the body of the high born **Renuka**, and the head of the old **Paraiyar**, outcaste.

The story is typical of a class of legends, often associated with folk deities. (For example, in the story of **Ganapati**, whose severed head, again

brought about by the fiat of a Yogic Father, is lost, to be replaced subsequently, by that of an elephant). This composite figure, where the lower limbs of a beautiful and high born person are joined almost ridiculously to the head of someone common, or even beastly, indicates a joining together of opposites, high and low, to create a new creature. It is interesting that it is the lower half of the higher being that is joined to the head of the lower creature. In the forming of this new cultural entity, it is what is base, or marginalized in the hierarchically higher culture, which is married to what is the head of the outcaste. Thus we find the coming into existence of one who assumes the role of the mother of everyone (**Ellaiyaman**, commonly also known as **Yellamma**.)

I would like to suggest that in this figure we have the bringing together of two traditions. One tradition is represented by the drum, the other by the Vedic ritual. This whole process is mischievously engendered by the intervention of **Narada**, the son of **Brahma**, the Creator, and Priest of the Vedic Chant. **Ellaiyaman**, is, in a way, the typically popular deity of an Indian Folk culture.

The Drum itself can be understood as the bringing together of opposites into a Primal Image. The formless, nameless Space is given a form through clay, or the very tree of Life, and the two are bound together by one skin. In the form of the two-faced drum we have the two surfaces which can be played upon by the two hands of the drummer. Reality itself has two faces : the face which is young and beautiful, and the face which is old and ugly. Folk deities are often, in the same way, very ambivalent. It is as though the creative imagination of the people, is itself the product of such an inter-play of opposites.

The seeds of culture are inter-mediaries. They are compounded out of the opposites which characterize the patterns of nature. They germinate in the very act of splitting apart. Like the drum, the pod bursts with an inner sound or generating force which shatters the enclosing shell of the living germ. Aroused by the sounding drum, we are all summoned to the dance of life, and required to step over the boundaries of enclosing traditions. It is this sound beyond word that is the Mother of the Universe.

NOTES.

1. "The Meaning of Icons" by Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky: Urs Graf-Verlag, Switzerland 1952.

In his introduction entitled "Tradition and Traditions" Lossky argues (p 7) "This silence, which accompanies the words implies no kind of insufficiency or lack of fulness of the Revelation, nor the necessity to add to it anything whatever. It signifies that the revealed mystery, to be truly received as fulness, demands a conversion towards the vertical plane, in order that one may be able to "comprehend with all saints" not only what is the "breadth and length" of the Revelation, but also its "depth" and its "height" (eph. iii, 18)"

2. Till recent times certain important ritual utterances like the *Gayathri Mantra*, were denied to even the women of the high caste community, and to attempt reading the Vedas, especially someone outside the Caste system of the three dominant castes, was to invite the wrath of those who kept the tradition as a preserve which only they had a right to. In this context, the oral tradition could be more exclusivist than the written on, in that once the Vedas were translated, and made available in books to a wider audience, they could no longer be controlled by a priestly aristocracy. The same happened in the Church, when the Bible was printed in vernacular languages, and made available to all who were able to read.

3. I am conscious that in presenting this negative face of a conservative tradition, I am not doing full justice to the way in which a tradition has also tried to protect itself from the unwanted intrusion of outside elements, which have often attempted to attack a tradition and destroy it. Modernization, for example, with its negative attitude to traditional cultures, has been very destructive, and has not helped in liberating cultures from within, to discover new ways of creatively re-interpreting their cultural heritage.

4. It is necessary to distinguish between the process known as "globalization", and the attempt to find the Universal which characterized the Great Traditions. Globalization often uses folk cultures as a kind of commodity, very much in the same spirit as the Tourist Trade uses the exotic attraction of far away cultures, in order to bolster its own industry. Globalization tries to access every culture, by putting it onto the internet, and denying privacy to any cultural form. The result is often disastrous, as we know. Cultures, like plants, need a certain sheltered place to grow, for, as

Tagore puts it, we want a home in which the windows are open to fresh air from every side, but we do not want our home blown down.

5. cf. "Farmers, Seedsmen, and Scientists : Systems of Agriculture and systems of Knowledge," by Stephen A Marglin, Harvard University, May. 1991, revised March 1992. The author argues (p.39) There is no single epistemology, but specific epistemologies which belong to distinct ways of knowing. Equally there are distinctive ways of transmitting and modifying knowledge over time. And different ways of knowing imply different power relationships among the people who share knowledge and between insiders and outsiders"

He further draws a link between this form of knowledge and the ancient concept of *Techne*(p.41) : "*Techne* is often difficult if not impossible to articulate. Those who possess it are generally aware that they possess special knowledge, but their knowledge is implicit rather than explicit. It is revealed in production of cloth or creation of a painting or performance of a ritual or a forecast of economic activity, not in textbooks for student weavers, artists, priests, or economists.

"*Technic* knowledge made no claims to universality. It is specialized in nature and closely allied to time and place. It always exists for a particular purpose at hand ; *techne* is contextual."

By contrasting these two forms of knowledge, *Techne* and *Episteme*, the author tries to highlight what in fact are two distinct ways of transmitting knowledge, one through precept, which tends to be theoretical, and the other through practice, which is eminently practical, though not articulate in the same way that a theory attempts to be. I feel that it is important to understand cultures not simply as artifacts, but rather as ways of teaching. Margaret Mead suggests (quoted by Herbert Read in *Education through Art*), that a Culture does far more in educating a community, than any schooling system, however enlightened.

6. Cf "Asian Christian Thinking" by Cecil Hargreaves. The author presents an interesting contrast between, on the one hand, the tree as a living system, with many branches, and the possibility to propagate itself through seeds, and a telegraph pole which is planted in the earth as so much dead wood, but which does convey certain messages typical of our modern mode of communication.

7. There is also a need to understand the kind of motivation which drives individuals as well as whole communities in search of other cultures, and their perceived riches. A culture does, in a very profound sense, constitute a "treasure", and treasure hunting is one of the most powerful patterns underlying cultural exchange. We may consider, for example, the way in which this theme of a hero going in search of Treasure is a continuing motif in many stories. Cf, "Finding is the First Act: Trove folktales and Jesus' Treasure Parable" by John Dominic Crossan.

The desire to find a hidden treasure is often the basis for the cultural quest. It would be dangerous simply to dismiss this motivation as acquisitive, and therefore inherently exploitative. Though the search for treasure is always balanced by the desire to hide it, and guard it from unwanted discovery.

8. Attention may be drawn to the essay of Kapila Vatsyayan, entitled "Ecology and Indian Myth", in "Indigenous Vision: Peoples of India, attitudes to the environment" edited by Geeti Sen, India International Centre, Delhi 1992.

Kapila Vatsyayan substantiates her argument very much with examples taken from what might be called India's Great Tradition, that is the Sanskritic texts. So it is important to remember that despite the philosophical, and even spiritual tendency to look on creation and the environment as "Maya", and therefore to be transcended, there exists in the corpus of Indian received wisdom, a very important tradition which is world affirming, and which probably originally came from what is here being termed the "Indigenous Vision". .

9. I am using the terms "Cosmic" and "Metacosmic" in the way that Aloysius Pieris SJ. has coined these concepts, based on a Buddhist understanding.

10. Cf. *Language and Myth*, by Ernst Cassirer translated by Susanne Langer, Harper and Brothers, 1946

Cassirer writes :

Those religions which base their world picture and their cosmogony essentially on a fundamental ethical contrast, the dualism of good and evil, venerate the spoken Word as the primary force by whose sole

agency Chaos was transformed into an ethico-religious cosmos.....P.47

In a whole section on Word Magic, Cassirer shows how the power present in words is released by a mytho-poetic language, which believes that words and names have the power not only to evoke, but also empower that which has been named, so that to articulate is to bring into existence.

11. A written text becomes representative and definitive, in a way that a spoken tradition cannot be. But there are also advantages. The oral tradition is very much tied up with a lineage of story tellers, and as society shifts from lineage to state, the specialist keeper of a community's oral tradition disappears, and the whole community has to rely more and more on a written record. The story is told of an anthropologist trying to record the oral tradition of a tribe, by interviewing one of its elders, and every now and so often this elder would disappear into his hut for a while. The anthropologist in the end became intrigued by this constant return to the inner recesses of the elder's hut, and asked why he had to do this. Then the elder said quite innocently that he had to check on the facts by looking the story up in a book written by some other anthropologist. The oral tradition comes to itself rely on a written text.

12 The Divine Drum : Interpreting a Primal symbol and its correlates in the Vaisnava tradition, by Eric J.Lott. This paper was given as a faculty research seminar at the U.T.C. on the 29th Nov. 1984, but had originally been presented at a seminar of Vaisnava scholars at Srivilliputtur on Sri Andal, the woman Vaisnava Alvar.

13. Op cit. This paper, delivered at the U.T.C. in 1984 has influenced both myself, and Dr. Sati Clarke who studied under Eric Lott before going to Harvard, where he developed this idea of the drum as a metaphor of Dalit culture, for his doctoral thesis. I have painted a number of pictures related to the theme of the Cosmic Drum,

14 Dr Sati Clarke's book on the Drum is just now in the press, and will soon be published by O.U.P. He has tried to develop the idea of Christ as the Drum, as a Christology which will be meaningful for Dalits in India.

15. The process of re-interpretation as a process of re-appropriation is vital. Dr Sati has suggested that the idea that the drum is beaten, and only when it is struck does it emit a sound, also conveys the idea of the suffering of the drum. There are certain folk stories which tell of how an individual

goes and confesses a secret to a tree, and then later a drum is made from the tree, and when the drum is beaten, the secret is broadcasted. In other words, the drum does articulate certain deep seated thoughts of the heart, which could not come out into the open except through this liberative process of a human being sharing on an unconscious level with nature, and then nature speaking out what the individual lacks courage to announce.