The Irulans of the Gingee Hills.

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The Irulans are a widely distributed forest tribe living to the West and South of Madras and inhabiting the wild regions in the Districts of Chingleput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem, Trichinopoly, Coimbatore, Nilgiris and Malabar. In the region between Nilgiris and Coimbatore, they imperceptibly pass off into Kasubas, a name by which they are also known in the Gundlupet Taluk of the Mysore State. Except in Mysore, they speak a corrupt sort of Tamil in which a prominent feature is the marked elongation of vowel sounds. To ordinary Tamil people, their mode of speaking produces a jarring effect on their ears and it is not infrequently a matter for hilarious comment. I propose to restrict myself in this paper to the Irulans found in the Gingee Hills in the Tindivanam Taluk of South Arcot District, to whom I paid a recent visit. The Irulans here, so far as an Anthropological enquirer is concerned, are found in a compact area and are therefore easily studied. They number some 20,000 men and women, according to the last Madras census (1901).

The name Irula is usually derived from irul, darkness, which is supposed to refer either to their dwelling in dark and impenetrable jungles or to their complexion. In the Tamil Dictionary, Divokkara, the name Irula is not found, but the word Iravula occurs and this evidently refers to the same tribe. Some believe that there is possibly some connection between this and Yerravula, the name of a forest tribe in Coimbatore. Sir Harold Stuart, who throws out this suggestion, approvingly quotes Mr. Cox's suggestion that the Irulas are representatives of a band of Kurumbas who fled to the jungles after defeat by the Chola King Adondai, and he adds: "I think many of our forest tribes may be similarly accounted for". — The only criticism I have to offer against this view is that this widespread dispersion of a race of Kurumba Kings by the Cholas is yet unsubstantiated by evidence of a more reliable kind than legendary tales told in the Kongu Chronicle. Epigraphical researches have not as yet confirmed this often repeated tale. It may be that there were Kings, either Kurumbas or Gollas; and coins have been found which show that there were Kings of these castes, and the title Kon yet assumed by both the Tamil Idaiyans and the Telugu Gollas also points in the same direction. Also, there is a well known tradition that the founders of the Vijayanagar Kingdom were Kanarese Kurubas. But the moot point is whether any subjugation of an earlier line of Kurumba kings by the Cholas could have led to their oft repeated dispersion and subsequent lapse into barbary. Opinion now seems to converge to the more probable
view that the Irlans and other jungle folk represent the last remnants of an
erlier race of men who for want of a better name have been classed under
the general name of Pre-Dravidians.

Dr. CADDWELL describes their language as a “rude Tamil”. HODGSON
gives a vocabulary of their language in his well known “Essays relating to
Indian subjects” which leaves no doubt that this dialect is more Tamil than
Canarese. How far it is considered as a rude form of Tamil is brought out
curiously well by the figures appearing in the Madras Census Returns for
1891 and 1901. In the former year only 1614 persons returned Irla as their
parent-tongue, of whom 1196 were enumerated in the Nilgiris and 377 in
the adjoining district of Coimbatore. The number of Irlas given in the
caste table is 57339 — which shows that Tamil has been returned as the
parent tongue by the greater portion of Irlans. Mr. FRANCIS, in his report
on the Madras Census for 1901, says that less than 1000 out of the 85,000
members of the caste have returned Irla as their parent-tongue, it being
returned as the home language only by some few of the members of the caste
who live on the slopes of the Nilgiris and of the Coimbatore hills
adjoining it.

There is a great deal in the customs and manners of the Irlans living
round Gingee Hills to support this view. There is a well recognised code
of laws regulating their general conduct with the surrounding people that
brings the essential features of the wild life that these people live. At every
step, this code shows the contrast that exists between them and the culti-
vators living near them:

1. An Irlan should not live inside a village like the cultivator who
belongs usually to the Vanniyan caste in South Arcot District. He must live
outside it, in the forest.

2. An Irlan, unlike a cultivator, should not use sandals (made of
leather) for his feet to protect them against thorns.

3. An Irlan, unlike a cultivator, should not use the cocoanut leaf
umbrella, even against torrential rains.

4. An Irlan, unlike a cultivator, should carry a shoulder bag, which
should always contain (a) tobacco, (b) cigars, (c) chakmuki to make fire by
friction, and (d) green leaves for rolling the tobacco to make a cigar. For
the last of these, he should not use, like the cultivator, the leaves of the
Butea frondosa, and the banyan. He generally uses the leaves of the Indian
beech (Pongamia glabra).

5. An Irlan woman should not use the bodice (or petticoat) usually
worn by Hindu women to cover their breasts and back.

6. An Irlan woman can smoke, and she should, at marriage, exchange
thrice her husband’s lit cigar.

7. An Irlan should worship only the seven Kannimar (or the seven
Virgin goddesses) and not bow down before the gods of the Hindu
agriculturists.

8. Every Irlan woman should daily go into the paddyfields with the
pickaxe in hand, and dig out from rat holes at least 1½ seer of paddy.

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9. Every Irulan woman should follow her lord, carrying the pickaxe in her hands, in his hunting expeditions; he carrying a bow and at least a couple of arrows.

10. An Irulan should be his own priest — _Irula pújari_ as the ryots call him — and his insignia of priestly office is his drum, which he keeps beating about the whole night. "_Irula thappalai_" is a proverbial expression, meaning a noisy man. Irulans sing away to the drum, keeping time, and in their frantic frenzy moments are usually believed to prophesy coming events. They are daily consulted by the ryots who pay them in kind for their services.

11. While an Irulan is prohibited from becoming a ryot i. e. a cultivator (an Irulan proper must always be and is generally in this district a true forester living on jungle roots and the profits of the chace), a cultivator (i. e. Palli cultivator) is taken as a convert into the Irulan fold. There have been such conversions in this district. Others may also, I understand, join their tribe, except Pariyans and Woddars, who apparently are the lowest in their estimation. A convert must conform to the tribal customs as to the use of sandals, umbrellas, carrying the shoulder bag, and living a forester's life generally.

Such are some of the leading differences between the Irulans and the agriculturists round whom they live. It is difficult to infer from these, that they had the glorious past ascribed to them by the Adondai tale. It is in keeping, on the other hand with the theory that they represent the remnants of a primitive race of foresters, leading neither an agricultural nor a pastoral life but following the chace for the daily wants. It appears to me after an examination of these Irulan at places so widely distant as the Gingee Hills and the Eastern slopes of the Nilgiris, that the former represent a more primitive lot than the latter. While the latter have taken to agriculture (they were agriculturists at the time of Buchanan visited them a hundred years ago) the former have not exchange of the bow and the arrow for the plough.

But the march of civilization and the keener struggle for existence that has followed the British occupation of India, and more especially the rigidity of forest rules of Government, is daily driving these forest folk to the villages of the ryots, from whom they are so over anxious to distinguish themselves. It is thus that the Kându Irulan have sprung into existence from amongst them. These are resident nearer to villages than their other brethren, who call themselves Kátu Irulan. Kându Irulan are so named because they live in nest-like houses (kándu means a nest) circular in form and with a single small entrance on one side. The Kátu Irulan, on the other hand, live far away from villages, in the midst of forests or _topes_ (groups of trees). These latter are also known as _Villuwan_ (or Bowmen) a name by which the tribe appears to have been known in early times, as may be gathered from early Tamil texts) or _Vettalkaran_ meaning Hunters. The Kându nowadays are not so keen about following the chace, but the Kátu depend mainly on it. The Kându being nearer to villagers, work as rice pounders in the houses of Jain Vellala and Vanniyan and do other menial work as well for them.
But a true Irukan is of the Kātū type; he is a forester and nothing more. So much so, that the term Irukan has become in Tamil slang equivalent to a woodman; and from it a man of uncouth, rough manners and appearance; a slovenly sort of man.

Kātū or Kūndū Irukan however, intermarry with each other. There are no endogamous subdivisions amongst them. It is a curious fact that there is no regular marriage ceremony amongst them. The most proper marriages are: (1) the marriage of one’s mother’s or younger brother’s daughter, — in this case no bride-price needs be paid by the would-be husband; (2) the marrying of one’s own father’s elder or younger sister’s daughter, — in this case a bride-price of a varāhan (3½ Rs.) must be paid. The marriage ceremony varies with the sort of marriage connection adopted. In case (1) no ceremony is necessary. The would-be husband and the would-be wife pair together, having long known each other as first cousins. At times a Koracha woman, if available, is paid a quarter anna for tying a bead string round the neck of the wife which is said to be a “sort of tālī”. But this is in no way necessary for the marriage to take effect. Simple pairing after the girl attains age, is sufficient. Of course mutual agreement is not necessary for such pairing. It is the relationship between the parties as first cousins that settles the matter. But a condition precedent to the pairing taking effect must be fulfilled by the parties. The would-be husband must smoke a tobacco cheroot and then hand it over to his mate, who should smoke it a little and then pass it back to her would be partner in life. He smokes again and throws away the remnant. Then comes the dinner, which the parties must take out of a common dish. These things done, the marriage is completed and consummation takes place immediately. Marriages are commonly celebrated on Saturdays, when free food is obtained in the houses of ryots.

Constancy seems not uncommon amongst these foresters. Husband and wife are faithful to each other till the end of their lives. But there are exceptions to the case. A woman, who, without reasonable grounds, refuses to live with her husband, is not allowed to do so. The Kōlkāran or the caste headman assisted by a caste panchāyat settles the question. If the case goes against the wife, she is punished in a queer way, which is said to be the most reprehensible punishment amongst them. Her hands and legs are tied by strings and she is made to stand in the hot sun for a while motionless, with some basketfuls of street rubbish placed on her head. While the woman is thus punished for her playing the truant, the husband, if in fault, goes scot free. He can give up his good wife for no better reason than that another woman is better looking than her. In all such cases, children of the first marriage belong to the wife, and an option is allowed her as to her future conduct. If she wants, she can marry another person. If she does not choose to do so, she may live apart for herself, living by her own exertion and on her own earnings. Similarly, a widow can remarry or not, according to her own wishes. Widowers and widows can remarry with each other. Divorcees and widows can remarry with each other. Divorce
is very common; there are women who have obtained it as many as five times.

Confinement takes place in the hut in which a family generally lives and not outside of it. Persons having anything to do with tribal goddesses the seven Kannimar, must not even enter the hut. The husband can go in and is generally in the same hut but does not touch the woman or the child for 3 or 5 days, on one of which days the woman bathes and the pollution is washed away. If within that time, the husband or any body touches the wife or the child, such person must bathe over the head to wash away the pollution.

Another curious fact in connection with this forest tribe is that female children receive no names amongst them. Only male children receive names. Two or three months after the birth of a male child, it is taken to the Kannimar temple and there a rice offering is made to the goddesses and with it a tribal dinner is given. Then follows the naming of the child, the name being held to be “inspired” by the goddesses. The names generally given are Kuppan, Kundan, Chinamasami, Pachai, and Uppu. Female children are given no names and they grow, marry, procreate and die without possessing names.

The dead are carried in a bier, which is car-like in fashion. If the corpse is that of a woman, the bier is decorated with flowers; if it is that of a man, it is not. All dead bodies are buried and there appears no exception to this rule. Pollution lasts only for 3 days, when both the “milk ceremony” and “the funeral ending” ceremony take place. On a death happening in an Irulan household, he gives up his habitat and migrates to another spot. The Kându give up the hut; but carry the materials and build another, away from the old one. But when one of these builds a house (and this happens occasionally) he does not, however, give it up.

The only ornament women use is a string of beads suspended in their necks. If rich they use gold ear lobe ornaments.

All Kátù Irulan worship the Kannimar or goddesses, which are represented by wooden symbols which have female cloths tied round them and have ornaments bestowed on them. An animal festival takes place in April-May, when the tribe subscribes for the purchase of a goat which is sacrificed and partaken of by all the subscribers.

As stated already, the Irulan par excellence is a hunter. He is also the thief of the surrounding villages. Cattle lifting and highway robbery are his pastimes in this district, and cart drivers are afraid to proceed after nightfall because of his brutal manners. Ryots have found out by experience that the only way of gaining him over is to give him an interest in their crops, sometimes it is, I am told, as high as 50% of the gross return, and make him guard their crops. Knowing the country well as a tracker of game, he is an excellent guide, provided you agree to trust yourselves to him. He and tribesmen act, besides, as Forest coolies and temple watchmen in this district and receive payment in kind. The men are very fond of honey
The Iralans of the Gingee Hills.

They are even more fond of smoking tobacco. From spot to spot, an Iralan must smoke to proceed with his work. Women smoke the last few puffs of their husband’s cigars. In smoking, usually a puff is inhaled and slowly given out through the nostrils. Women should not only provide the amount of rice necessary for the household but they must also provide for the other necessaries of life. They usually manage to do this by digging the roots of date trees and exchanging them in the villages for chillies, salt &c., from Vellala and Pillai women.