

The Spiritual Ecology of the Toda: A Study of Toda Religious Practices and Sacred Spaces in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Tribal religions are rooted in oral traditions, with beliefs expressed in everyday language. These beliefs are closely tied to daily life, and rituals are performed to address practical issues. Tribes worship elements of nature such as trees, rivers, mountains, the sun, the moon, and the earth. Rituals are typically performed collectively and passed down orally from generation to generation. They are simple, descriptive, and easy to observe. In tribal communities, religious myths, values, and actions are not separate from other aspects of life like social, economic, or political activities.

However, to outsiders, tribal beliefs and practices may seem mysterious. This is because tribal religions often do not provide detailed explanations for their practices. Despite this, tribal religions are as meaningful and complete as more complex religions. Central to Toda spirituality is a profound reverence for nature, manifested in their worship of sacred buffaloes, holy dairies, and natural elements such as hills, rivers, and forests. This journal explores the intricacies of the Toda religion, emphasizing its polytheistic framework and its deep integration with the tribe's ecological and social systems.

The study examines the central elements of Toda religious practices, including their sacred spaces, rituals, and ceremonies, and their symbolic significance in maintaining the tribe's cultural identity. Furthermore, it highlights the role of religion in shaping the Toda worldview, fostering a harmonious relationship between their community and their natural surroundings. In addition, the journal addresses the challenges faced by the Toda tribe in preserving their religious traditions amidst the pressures of modernization and cultural assimilation. It also explores the adaptive strategies employed by the community to maintain their spiritual heritage. This study provides valuable insights into the Toda religion as a dynamic and resilient system, contributing to broader discussions on indigenous spirituality, cultural sustainability, and the importance of traditional ecological knowledge in contemporary contexts. However, tribal religion is no less complete than the highly developed form of complex religion to the extent that its implicit philosophy recognizes the same universal truth.

Keywords: Tribal religions, Oral traditions, Nature worship, Rituals, Sacred spaces, Polytheistic framework, Toda tribe, Ecological systems, social systems, Sacred buffaloes, Holy dairies, religious myths.

Introduction

The Toda tribe, a small pastoral community residing in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu, India, is renowned for its unique cultural practices and distinctive way of life. Among the various dimensions of their culture, religion holds a central place, deeply intertwined with their social, economic, and ecological systems. The Toda religion is characterized by its polytheistic beliefs and a profound reverence for nature, particularly buffaloes, which occupy a sacred position in their spiritual framework.

Religion among the Toda's is not merely a set of beliefs but a holistic system that governs their worldview and daily practices. It reflects their intimate relationship with the natural environment, evident in their sacred dairies, worship of hills and rivers, and the consecration of buffaloes as divine beings. This integration of religion with ecology and livelihood underscores the tribe's sustainable approach to life and their enduring respect for their ancestral traditions.

It reflects the tribe's polytheistic worldview and the profound reverence they hold for their environment, showcasing their religion as a harmonious blend of spirituality and ecological consciousness. The title draws attention to the anthropological significance of understanding the Toda religion in the context of their cultural resilience and ecological sustainability. The study of Toda religion offers

valuable insights into the broader themes of indigenous spirituality, ecological harmony, and cultural resilience. In a rapidly modernizing world, understanding such traditional systems is crucial for appreciating the diversity of human belief systems and their relevance in addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges. This article explores the fundamental aspects of the Toda religion, including their deities, rituals, sacred spaces, and the evolving dynamics of their spiritual practices in the context of modernization.

Significance of the Study

The Toda tribe's spiritual landscape uniquely blends religion, ecology, and identity. Their religious practices, centered around sacred dairies and buffalo worship, highlight a deep reverence for nature, making their belief system an example of sacred ecology.

Additionally, this research is relevant in the context of modernization, as external influences and environmental degradation threaten the continuity of Toda spiritual practices. By examining their sacred landscapes, this study contributes to discussions on indigenous rights, land preservation, and traditional ecological knowledge, which are increasingly important in global conservation efforts. Furthermore, it provides valuable insights into indigenous worldviews, strengthening interdisciplinary research in sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and environmental science.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

- The primary aim of this research is to explore and document the religious beliefs and practices of the Toda tribe, an indigenous community inhabiting the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu, India.
- This study also seeks to examine the intricate relationship between the Toda religion and their natural environment, highlighting the role of sacred buffaloes, holy dairies in their spiritual framework.
- Additionally, the research aims to analyse how Toda's religious practices reflect their socio-cultural identity and ecological harmony, emphasizing their sustainable lifestyle and deep connection with nature.

- Another critical aspect of this study is to investigate the challenges faced by the Toda tribe in preserving their religious traditions in the face of modernization and cultural assimilation.

Area and People

Tamil Nadu is the southernmost state of India, located on the southeastern coast of the Indian peninsula, defined by the lush green Western Ghats and the semi-arid Deccan Plateau in the west, the discontinuous Eastern Ghats in the North, the fertile Eastern Coastal Plains lining the Bay of Bengal in the east, the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait to the south-east, the Laccadive Sea at the southern cape of the peninsula Kanyakumari, and the river Kaveri bisecting the state. Ooty is officially known as Udhagamandalam, a popular hill station located in the Nilgiri Hills of the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu.

The Toda tribe is an indigenous community that geographically inhabits the Nilgiri Hill region of Tamil Nadu, India. This region is known for its scenic beauty and diverse flora and fauna. Their settlements are typically located in higher elevations. They speak their own language, known as Toda language. Their dwellings are known as 'munds', traditionally constructed using bamboo and thatch. These structures are often circular and have a conical roof, contributing to the unique landscape of the Nilgiri Hills. They often use various cultural symbols and artifacts, such as the distinctive embroidered shawl called 'putkuli'. These symbols often have cultural significance. Their society is structured into different clans, each with its own rituals and customs. The social structure plays a crucial role in their daily lives and decision-making processes. Their marital rituals are often unique and complex. Traditionally Toda marriages are polyandrous, with one woman married to several brothers. However, changes in societal norms and legal structures have led to adaptations in recent times.

Research Methodology

In anthropology, fieldwork is a critical aspect of studying and understanding tribes and indigenous communities. It involves living and interacting with the community being studied, often for an extended period of time, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their culture, beliefs, practices, and social dynamics. Various research methodologies are applied during fieldwork, depending on the specific

research objectives and the nature of the community being studied. Some common methodologies included during the fieldwork study of Toda Tribe were:

Participant observation: It is a valuable research method in the study of religion, particularly when studying the religious practices and beliefs of specific tribes or communities such as the Toda tribe. Participant observation involves the researcher immersing themselves in the group they want to study, observing their behaviors, interactions, and rituals, and actively participating in their activities.

Interview schedule: Interview is a direct method of data collection. Interview is universally used for the study of human behavior. Interview means conversation with a purpose. In the study of the Toda tribe, an interview schedule can be a valuable research method for exploring their religious beliefs and practices.

Ethnographic mapping: It is a research method used in anthropology and sociology to understand the social and cultural practices of a particular group. When applied to the study of religion, ethnographic mapping can provide insights into the beliefs, rituals, symbols, and practices of a specific religious community, such as the Toda tribe.

Review of Literature

A review of literature refers to the thorough examination of books, articles and other relevant sources on a particular topic. The main purpose of a review of literature is to provide an overview of the existing knowledge on the topic and suggest if any new dimensions can be looked upon.

The book 'History of God' written by author Karen Armstrong explores the evolution of God concept and its role in human history. The book talks about various religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and their understanding of God and how they developed their beliefs and practices over the year:

Armstrong dwells in ancient religions and explores how gods were worshipped in different cultures. She then goes on to discuss how monotheistic religions, i.e.; religions that worship only one God have evolved and how contemporary interpretations of God have changed with time. She also explores the role of God in modern society and asks provocative questions about the relevance of God in the face of scientific, social, and economic progress. Armstrong attempts to show that God is a human creation and his concepts, interpretations, and practices have evolved over time

according to the needs of different societies. Overall, 'History of God' attempts to look at the relationship between humans and God and how that relationship has evolved throughout human history. It highlights how humans have attempted to understand and make meaning of the world around them through the concept of God.

Armstrong K. (1993) – 'A History of God' published by Knopf.

The Golden Bough is a comparative study of mythology and religion by James George Frazer. The book discusses the similarities between various cultures' religious practices and beliefs. Frazer's central thesis is that all religions are rooted in an ancient belief in magic, which is gradually replaced by scientific and rational modes of thinking as societies evolve. The book covers topics such as the sacrifice of kings, the myth of the dying god, and the worship of trees and animals. It takes the reader on a journey across time and space, exploring the myths and legends of different cultures from around the world. The Golden Bough is a seminal work of anthropology and comparative religion, and it continues to influence scholars in these fields today.

Frazer G. J. (1890) 'The Golden Bough', published by McMillan

Myth, Ritual and the Oral is a book by Jack Goody which explores the relationship between myth, ritual, and the oral tradition. Goody argues that myth and ritual are closely interrelated and that the oral tradition plays a vital role in their formation and preservation. He asserts that the oral tradition is not simply a primitive form of communication but a complex system of memory and meaning making that can shape social structures and belief systems. Goody emphasizes the importance of context in understanding myth and ritual, showing how social, cultural, and historical factors can shape their interpretation and meaning across different societies and periods. He also discusses the significance of myth and ritual in shaping our understanding of the world and our place in it. Overall, Goody offers a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between myth, ritual, and the oral tradition, drawing on examples from various cultures and time periods to illustrate his arguments.

Goody J. (2010) 'Myth, Ritual and the oral' published by Cambridge

African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society by Jacob Olupona is a book that looks at how traditional African religious practices influence the lives of people in modern-day Africa. Olupona argues that despite the growing popularity of Christianity and Islam in Africa, traditional religious practices still hold significant meaning for many Africans. The book explores various aspects of African traditional

religion, including its beliefs, rituals, and practices. It analyzes the challenges that traditional religions face in contemporary African society, such as urbanization and globalization, and how they are coping with these changes. Olupona also looks at the role of gender in African traditional religion and the importance of sacred spaces. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive overview of traditional African religion and how it continues to evolve in the modern world.

Olupona J. (1991), 'African traditional religion in contemporary society', published by Paragon house

'The Invention of God in Indigenous Society' by James L. Cox argues that the concept of God is not universal and that many indigenous societies have no word or concept for a supreme being. Cox believes that the idea of a universal God was invented by Judeo Christian tradition and imposed on other cultures through colonization. Cox points out that many indigenous societies have their own beliefs and practices around the supernatural and their relationship with the natural world. He argues that the Western notion of God has often been used to justify oppressive practices against indigenous peoples and their cultures. Cox advocates for cultural understanding and respect, and suggests that Western society could benefit from learning from indigenous perspectives on spirituality.

L. Cox J. (2013) 'The invention of god in indigenous society' published by Acumen publishing

Exploring the vibrant world of Toda Religion

The Toda tribe, has a rich religious heritage characterized by their unique temple structures and religious practices. These religious aspects provide valuable insights into the deep-rooted traditions and beliefs of the Toda tribe, shedding light on their cultural identity and spiritual connection with the divine. Their religious beliefs are rooted in animism, a belief system that Attributes spiritual significance and life force to natural objects and phenomena like trees, mountains, rivers, and animals.

One of the central deities in Toda religion is known as Porshtit, the god of mountains. The Toda believe that mountains are dwelling place of their ancestors and powerful deities who protect them and their land. The highest mountain in the Nilgiri range, known as Toda Mund, is considered particularly sacred and is believed to be the abode of Aaichamy. The Toda often gather at the foothills of this mountain to perform rituals and offer prayers to their goddess.

The Kuruvan Kurumbar ritual is an important religious practice of the Toda tribe, performed annually during the "Pongal" festival. The Toda men meticulously select a buffalo for sacrifice, based on specific criteria such as physical attributes and behaviour. The chosen Buffalo is then adorned with colorful ornaments and taken to a sacred grove. The Toda men carry out a series of purification ceremonies to prepare themselves and the buffalo for the sacrifice. Finally, the buffalo is killed, and its blood is collected as an offering to the ancestors and deities.

The temples of Toda's are different in itself they are very unique structures. The temples in Toda language are known as Thi. They serve as a place of community gatherings and religious teachings and practices. There are two types of temples in the munds, the conical temple, and a polygons or semicircular temple.

Conical Temple: The conical temple holds great significance in the religious practices and beliefs of the Toda tribe. It is their holy place, where they perform various rituals and ceremonies. The temple is built in the shape of a cone, with a circular base and a pointed top. The structure is constructed using a thatched roof and bamboo or wooden supports. Each member contributes to the process, from collecting the necessary materials to assembling the structure. The Toda's believe that the temple should be built with pure and natural materials, such as bamboo, leaves, mud, and cow dung. On the top of the Conical temple, it is believed that a box made of is kept made of 5 metals Gold, Silver, Copper, Aluminum, Iron. The door of the temple is kept small since one needs to bow down in order to enter the temple. The sacred fire is burned using Nishh stem as it is considered sacred. The fire is considered a manifestation of the divine and is believed to have purifying qualities.

The conical temple serves as a gathering place for the Toda tribe. They come together to celebrate festivals, perform rituals, and seek guidance from their religious leaders like 'Priests' also known as Palol in Toda language. It is present at the chief mund 'The Muthunadmund' and 'Ebbanamund' however the prayers are done only at Muthunad and any celebration begins from here and then continues in other munds. The Muun (as in Toda language) that is a health prayer is done at conical temple every year around december for the health of buffaloes and people. The conical temple also acts as a symbol of unity and identity for the Toda tribe.

Semi-circular Temple: The semi-circular temple, also known as Polygous Temple is constructed using locally available materials such as bamboo, thatch, and wood that are present in village. The architecture of these temples is simple blending harmoniously with natural surroundings. Inside the temple, a sacred space is created,

typically housing a stone platform or altar where religious rituals are performed. The entrance of the temple usually faces east, symbolizing the direction of the rising sun, which holds great significance in Toda mythology.

The Dairy Temple: Pure milk is kept in this temple and is used for making buttermilk for lighting the fire in the temple and also to make Prasadam. Sacred buffaloes are used for same. These buffaloes are only milked by the priest and no common man could touch these buffaloes. The sacred buffaloes are a lineage of female buffaloes and they are kept near the Dairy temple.

BELIEFS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TEMPLE:

Firstly, the Toda temple is considered to be the abode of their deities or spirits known as "Panchpandavs." According to the Toda belief system, these Panchpandavs are celestial beings who reside in the temple and act as intermediaries between humans and the supreme Being. The Toda people believe that these spirits possess supernatural powers and can influence various aspects of their lives. Therefore, visiting the temple and offering prayers to these deities is an essential practice for the Toda community.

Only the Toda priests have access to the temple. The Todas believe that Prayers are a way to reach the supernatural. Their prayer is known as Parthati. They pray to the god Tekishy and also their ancestors whomever they believe protect them during the adversaries. Prayer is pronounced as Hunn, Hunn, Hunn three times. The way to pray is similar for both men and women.

If any women are sick, prayer is done at the temple for their wellbeing. Todas prayers are considered way too powerful. The men of the tribe go to the Porshdit mountains to pray for rain and well-being of their produce. During this time the women keep fast until the men return back. The religion of Toda is in nature they consider nature as their mother and also fear the fury it could cause so they not only protect it but also pray to it in order to be protected from the adversaries.

The Religious Narratives of Origin and Afterlife

From creation to Beyond: The origin of the Toda people is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices. According to their religious traditions, they believe that they are the chosen descendants of the god Tekishy, who created and nurtures the universe. In Toda religious beliefs, the god Tekishy is considered the

supreme deity and creator of the universe. Tekishy is believed to have formed seven sacred hills, which hold great significance for them. These hills are considered the abode of various gods and spirits, and each one has its own unique attributes and powers.

The stories of Origin: Toda's believe that they are the first human on the earth and before Toda's only trees and water was on earth. The Todas, believe that the Goddess Teikirshy created Toda's and their sacred buffaloes in the great Nilgiris. Teikirshy first created the buffaloes by tapping her cane stick on the earth. Then she created the men by tapping at a place on the ground next to the buffaloes. From the right rib of a Toda man, she then created the first Toda woman and then divided the Toda's into 15 clans and the buffaloes into sacred and ordinary buffaloes to serve corresponding grades of temple dairies.

Tekishy then divided the Todas into two different sub-divisions, the Tharthor of ten patriclans, and the Thevith of five sub clans. He gave bows with the sacred names, to each clan, which is used in the 'bow and arrow' ceremonies that legitimize marriage during the 7th month of pregnancy. There are some stories among Todas that before Tekishy, her father Aen ruled over the few existing Toda's.

One of the myths in Todaism revolves around the creation of the first toda man and woman. According to myth, Theerthar endowed three spirits Hurkal (Sun), Pekal (Moon), and Muutunna- Kazh (Star) with the task of creating human beings. These three spirits produced a single seed, which was provided to a Toda couple named Korku and Kanni. They planted this seed in the ground, and it soon grew into a tall tree. From this tree, the first Toda man and woman, called Irulne-el R.Peru and Irulne-el-R.Muthu, emerged. They became the progenitors of the Toda people.

The Toda people believe that they are the direct descendants of Irulne-el-R.Peru and Irulne- elR.Muthu. They consider themselves to be a divinely chosen community with a unique and sacred heritage. This belief binds the Toda people together and instills a sense of unity and identity. The Toda religious practices are centered around this creation myth and revolve around maintaining a harmonious relationship with the gods and spirits.

The tales of Afterlife: According to their traditional beliefs, death is not seen as the end but rather as a transition to another realm. The Toda believes that the soul continues to exist after physical death and undergoes a journey through various stages before reaching its final destination.

In the Toda tribe, death is a significant event that is marked by elaborate rituals and customs. When a member of the tribe is nearing the end of their life, their family and community gather around them to provide support and comfort. The dying person is believed to be in a state of transition, and it is important for their loved ones to ensure a smooth passage into the afterlife. Once the individual has passed away, the tribe follows a series of rituals to guide the departed soul on its journey. First, the body is bathed and dressed in traditional Toda attire. It is then placed on a funeral pyre, which is set ablaze, such as mountains, rivers, and animals. Once the departed soul has successfully completed its journey through the afterlife, it is believed to attain a state of eternal bliss and unity with the deities.

The Temple Priest

The temple priest, known as "Palol" in the Toda language, is chosen by the community based on his knowledge, dedication, and spiritual abilities. This training is often passed down from generation to generation within certain families, making priesthood in the Toda Tribe somewhat hereditary. He performs various rituals, and offerings to appease the divine and seek their blessings. The rituals conducted by the Priest range from seasonal ceremonies to prayers for well-being of buffaloes, rain, as the Toda Tribe is primarily engaged in pastoral activities. The priest plays an important role in maintaining social harmony within the Toda tribe and is responsible beyond the mundane affairs of the tribe. These traditions include myths and religious teachings that are crucial in nurturing the tribe's unique identity. The priest is considered a powerful entity as per the beliefs, the priest is so powerful that during the colonial era the Britishers that used to come near the temple disrespecting the religious norms were converted to stone.

Shamans and their Mystic Powers

Shamanism forms the backbone of spiritual and healing practices within the Toda tribe. Shamans, known as "Kodarnad" are revered individuals who possess a profound connection with the spirit world. It is believed that Tekishy gave these individuals special powers. They act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, utilizing their unique abilities to heal the sick, communicate with ancestors, and divine the future. Through intricate rituals and chants shamans tap into the unseen forces that govern the universe, aiming to restore balance and well-being within the community.

Ceremonies and Rituals: Connecting with the Spirit World shamans play a pivotal role in various ceremonies and rituals conducted by the Todas, be it a request for rain, protection from evil spirits, or healing an ailing community member, shamans lead elaborate rituals that involve offerings, dances, and invocations. The belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings and the power of spiritual intervention is deeply ingrained in every aspect of Toda shamanistic practices.

Some women are believed to possess supernatural abilities associated with casting spells, healing, and protection. The informant Nozshthey Kutton told it in the manner that magic is not practiced but some older women even his grandmother who was 90 years of age and lived in some other village had knowledgeable of spells that could aid pain, fractures. However, these spells can't be told or discussed with any outsiders. The knowledge of the spells is almost fading away since the new generation is no more interested nor does believe in the existence of magic or spells.

INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RELIGION

Within the Toda tribe, we find a complex web of gender norms and expectations that are deeply rooted in religious traditions and beliefs. For instance, certain rituals and ceremonies are exclusively performed by men or women, reflecting a division of labor and social roles based on gender.

Religious beliefs in the Toda tribe shape gender roles, linking purity, sanctity, and divine order to gendered expectations during key life events like marriage, childbirth, and death. Women, as life bearers and custodians of matrilineal descent, play a vital role in the tribe's economy through dairy farming, challenging male dominance. While men lead primary rituals, women actively participate and support these practices, reflecting the complex interplay between gender and religious duties in Toda society.

The Toda tribe's social structure is shaped by their unique religion, where gender plays a key role in determining roles and power dynamics. The tribe is matrilineal, with descent and inheritance traced through the female line, challenging patriarchal norms seen in many other religious communities. This intersection of religion and gender is also influenced by the tribe's indigenous status and its relationship with the broader society of the Nilgiri Hills, affecting power and privilege within the community.

IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL CONTACT

Over time, the Todas of the Nilgiri Hills have experienced notable shifts in their religious rituals and ceremonies due to the effects of modernization and cross-cultural interactions. Traditionally, they had a complex and rich religious system, with rituals closely integrated into their daily lives. Conducted by appointed priests, these rituals were vital for ensuring harmony between the Todas and the divine spirits they revered. However, with the onset of modernization and the influence of other cultures, these rituals have been altered and adapted.

The decline in the number of Toda priests and their role in rituals is a key change, driven by younger generations seeking education and new opportunities, leading to a shortage of priests and modifications in ceremonial practices. External religious figures have occasionally stepped in, blending traditional and external elements. Exposure to diverse ideologies has prompted some to question or reinterpret traditional rituals, incorporating aspects from other religions or exploring new spiritual paths.

Despite these shifts, the Todas maintain their core religious beliefs and practices, with their religious identity remaining rooted in cultural heritage. These changes reflect the ongoing process of cultural evolution, balancing tradition with modernization. As the Todas have become more integrated into broader society, exposure to different religious ideologies and practices has shifted their religious worldview. Cross-cultural interactions, particularly with tourists, researchers, and outsiders, have significantly influenced their beliefs.

One notable change is the adoption of elements from Hinduism and Christianity. Traditionally animistic, with a focus on nature and ancestral spirits, the Todas have incorporated Hindu deities, such as Lord Shiva, and Christian prayers and hymns into their rituals. Additionally, increased access to modern technologies, including books, television, and the internet, has broadened their exposure to various religious traditions and philosophies, sparking curiosity and the incorporation of new ideas into their practices.

The Nilgiri Tribe, with a rich cultural heritage spanning centuries, has managed to preserve its traditions and religious practices despite the challenges of modernization and globalization.

Cultural assimilation is another threat, as societal pressures to conform to mainstream practices grow. Younger individuals, seeking acceptance and new opportunities, may distance themselves from their ancestral faith in favor of more widely recognized religions.

The rise of commercialization and tourism further complicates efforts to preserve religious traditions. While tourism brings economic benefits, it also risks commodifying sacred sites and rituals, undermining their authenticity. Additionally, the shift toward formal education systems prioritizes mainstream knowledge, eroding traditional wisdom and further disconnecting younger generations from their cultural heritage.

Despite these challenges, the Nilgiri Tribe shows resilience in preserving its religious practices. Efforts to document and pass down sacred knowledge through oral storytelling, cultural festivals, and community gatherings are vital. Collaborations with researchers and cultural preservation organizations also help raise awareness and support for the tribe's traditions. As the tribe navigates the pressures of globalization and modernization, it faces the ongoing challenge of reconciling its ancient customs with the demands of the modern world while maintaining its spiritual identity.

In response to these challenges, the Nilgiri Tribe has embraced adaptation by incorporating elements from other religions into their rituals, creating a unique syncretism that helps preserve their cultural identity while embracing change. The tribe has also taken proactive steps to engage the younger generation in their religious traditions. Acknowledging the importance of preserving their customs, they have established cultural centers and community programs to ensure the transmission of their religious heritage.

CONCLUSION

Religion is a complex and deeply rooted belief system that plays a central role in the lives of the Toda, the Toda religion is a vibrant and intricate belief system that reflects the deep connection between the Toda tribe and their natural surroundings. Their animistic worldview, centered on the worship of mountains and animals, informs their religious practices and rituals. The unique temple structures, the conical and semi-circular temples, are not only places of worship but also symbols of cultural identity and unity.

The Toda religion is a testament to the rich tapestry of indigenous belief systems and their harmonious relationship with the natural world. Their deep reverence for nature and the interconnectedness between humans, animals, and the environment serve as valuable lessons in preserving and respecting the world around us. The Toda tribe's religious practices, temple architecture, and sacred rituals are not just a part of their history but continue to shape their cultural identity and spiritual connection with the divine.

The religious narratives of the Toda people encompass both their origin story and beliefs surrounding the afterlife. These narratives are deeply intertwined with their religious practices and cultural identity. In Toda religious beliefs, the god Tekishy is regarded as the supreme deity and the creator of the universe. According to their origin story, Tekishy formed seven sacred hills, each with its unique attributes and powers. The Toda people consider themselves the chosen descendants of Tekishy and believe they are the first humans on Earth, created by the goddess Theikirshy.

The religious practices of the Toda tribe are deeply entwined with their daily lives, from the roles of temple priests and shamans to the rituals and beliefs that connect them with the spirit world. While the traditions of magic and spells persist in the memories of older generations, they are facing the challenge of fading away in the face of modernity and changing beliefs.

Furthermore, increased exposure to modern technologies and media has introduced the todas to a wider range of religious ideas and philosophies. They now have access to books, television, and the internet, which allows them to explore different religious traditions and philosophies beyond their immediate surroundings. The intersection of gender and religion within the Toda tribe reveals a complex interplay of traditional norms and practices, with women's roles and rituals distinct from those of men. Despite the gender disparities, women hold significant economic roles within the community.

Despite the substantial challenges they face in adapting to changes in their religious practices, the Nilgiri Tribe's resilience and willingness to evolve are commendable. By incorporating new influences while staying true to their roots, they are forging a path that allows them to navigate the complexities of today's religious landscape. As they continue to adapt and preserve their unique identity, the Nilgiri Tribe serves as an inspiring example of how cultural traditions can thrive amidst the winds of change.

Revitalization efforts play a significant role in reinvigorating and reinforcing the cultural fabric of a community. As external influences seep into the Todas lives, it becomes essential to revitalize their religious practices, ensuring they remain relevant, meaningful, and vibrant. To effectively preserve and revitalize their religious practices, the Todas must actively involve their community members, elders, and religious leaders. Empowering the younger generation with knowledge about their cultural heritage is crucial, as they are the torchbearers who will carry forward the traditions into the future.

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