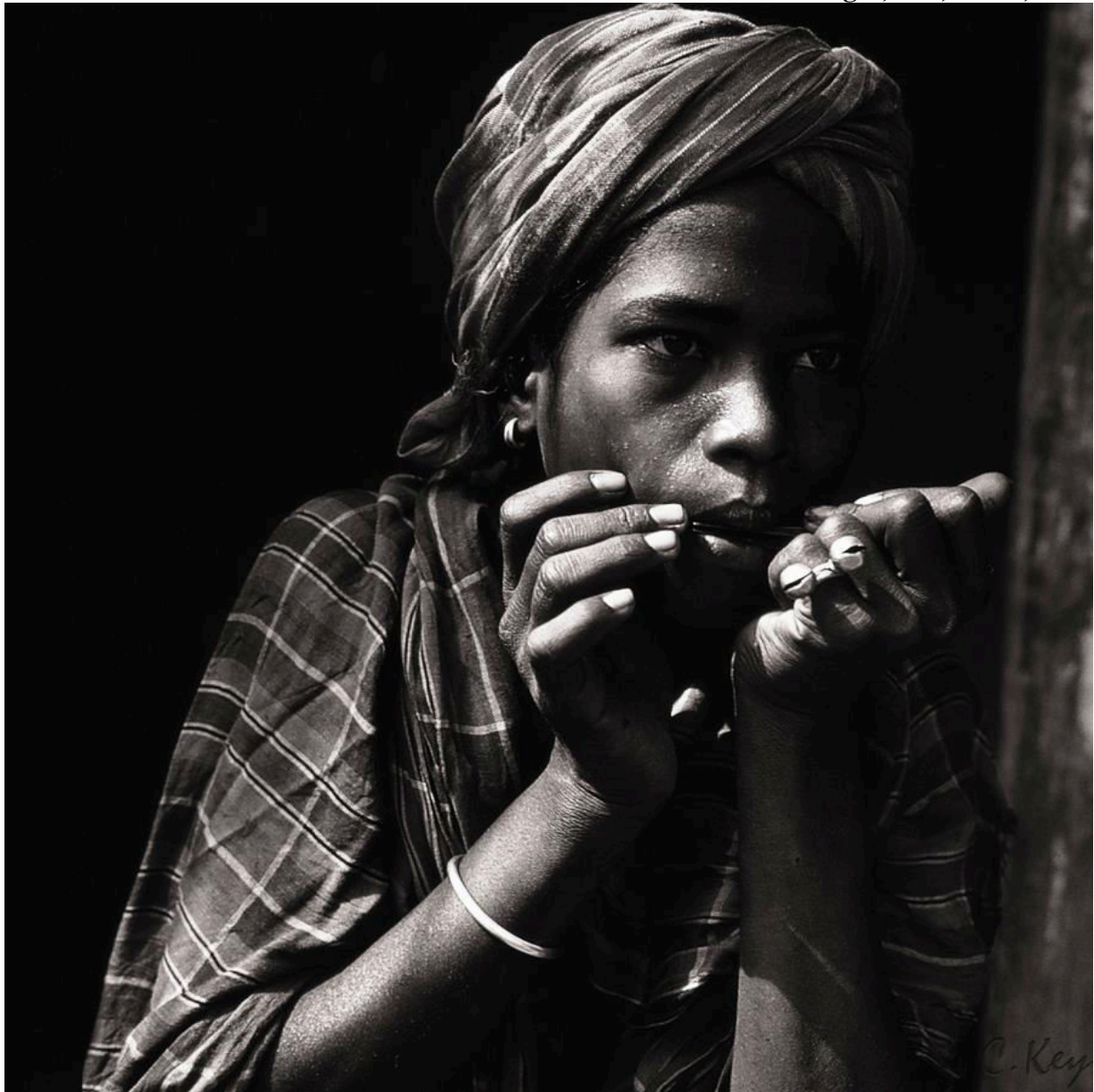


**CONSUMPTION RITUALS IN THE MEDIATION OF SOCIAL LIFE BY  
MURIA GONDS**

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*Muriya young man playing mouth organ by wearing 'Ghungroos' on his fingers.*

***Abstract***

*The prime theme of this article is consumption as a form of life style. Consumption goods are not merely good edibles but are objects made more or less desirable by the role they play in daily needs. I will develop this entirely uncontroversial proposition on the basis of my observations of consumption behavior among the Muria of the north-central part of Bastar division, Chattisgarh, India. The Muria belong to the "tribal" (adivasi) category established by the constitution of India, and according to the official records related to such groups they ought to be subjected to poverty and exploitation. The official record is not wide of the mark so far as most of the adivasi population is concerned but conditions in north-central Bastar are exceptional, for here the Muria enjoy considerable material advantages by*

*comparison with small peasants elsewhere in the subcontinent. Amid the modest prosperity, or at least security, now enjoyed by most of the Muria population in north-central Bastar, one or two families in each village have enriched themselves to a greater degree than most, and it is on the consumption behavior of such rich Muria families that I wish to focus particular attention. I feel that "rich" Muria are a relatively new phenomenon, dating back no more than sixty years or so, and that this may help explain why their consumption behavior, which is marked by an exaggerated conservatism, assumes the rather peculiar form it does. From an ethno historical point of view, traditional consumption ethos and mode of assigning goods to new life style categories lags behind objective changes in production techniques, which has resulted in enhanced economic productivity. Among the Muria production adheres to the premises of one kind of economy, whereas consumption continues to be based on the premise of a quite different economy. The net effect of this lag is that rich Muria accumulate wealth they flare not to spend and would have no real idea how to spend had they the inclination. To be possessed of conspicuous wealth, in this society, is to be in an unnatural condition, one that renders more problematic, not less, any contemplated act of consumption. The true miser admits both the possibility and the desirability of self-indulgent consumption, thereby enhancing in his own eyes the virtue of his own restraint. Such behavior is egotistical and anti-social. Muria accumulation arises in a completely different way. The Muria consumption bottleneck reflects an intense sensitivity to social pressures, within the family, the village, and the wider society. Acts of conspicuous consumption not falling within the framework of traditionally sanctioned public feasting and display are seen as socially threatening, hubristic, and disruptive.*

**Keyword : Egalitarian Muria Bastar Hindus, "consumption rituals" India Raj Gonds hedonism ghotul, anachronistic Mumbai silver jewelry rural markets Kallar.**

Consequently, the rich are obliged to consume as if they were poor, and as a result become still richer. The unintended consequence of a pattern of restraints on consumption geared to the maintenance at egalitarian norms has been the undermining of the economic basis for the traditional egalitarian ethos of Muria society. In the long run this may result in the emergence of clear economic stratification in what has been, historically, a homogeneous, clan-based society. A new category of rich peasants and quasi-entrepreneurs has come into existence in Muria villages, but this category has yet to define itself socially vis-a-vis the rest of Muria society, or to find an idiom for expressing its social and economic distinctiveness in the language of systematic consumption. For these families the wealth symbols displayed by the better-off Bastar Hindus, and the middle-class officials in the towns, that is, non-adivasis of comparable income are not acceptable life style of status precisely because they are associated with non-Muria identity.

### **Goods of necessity and personal identity**

Before come into the point I would like to offer some remarks on the subject of consumption as a life style. Douglas and Isher-wood (1980) have devoted an interesting monograph to this subject. I will Stress the central importance of "consumption rituals" in the mediation of social life by Muria Gonds. This approach rests squarely on the accumulated wisdom of traditional structural-functional anthropology, Countless ethnographies bear witness to the way social relations are expressed, or more precisely produced, in the form of highly structured occasions of commensality, drinking bouts, sharing the chilham and bidies, and so on.

These are very recognizable forms of consumption, ones that perhaps may mislead us into making the false equation "consumption equals destruction" because on these occasions meat, liquor, and other valued substances are made to vanish. But consumption as a general phenomenon really has nothing to do with the destruction of goods and wealth, but with their reincorporation into the social system that produced them in some other guise. All goods, from the standpoint of sociological analysis, are as indestructible as kula valuables — the valuables that circulate in the kula exchange system described by Mal-inowski (1922) for the Trobriands. What they mostly lack is the impartibility and permanent identifiability as historically remembered objects that kula valuables possess (Leach and Leach 1984). But

even quite ephemeral items, such as the comestibles served at a feast, live on in the form of the social relations they produce, and which are in turn responsible for reproducing the comestibles.

What constitutes the consumption of food at a feast is the transformation it effects - which may be minuscule or intensely significant, depending on the nature of the occasion - in the relative social identities of the parties to the host/guest, feeder/fad, transaction involved. This is analytically quite distinct from any contingent metabolic processes the food may undergo at the same time. In many feasts in New Guinea the food is not actually eaten by the participants, but the feasts remain consumption rituals in Douglas and Isherwood's sense (Brown 1978). What distinguishes consumption from exchange is not that consumption has a physiological dimension that exchange lacks, but that consumption involves the incorporation of the consumed item into the personal and social identity of the consumer.

I think of consumption as the appropriation of objects as part of one's personalia — food eaten at a feast, clothes worn and houses lived in. The incorporation of consumer goods into the definition of the social self arises out of a framework of social obligations and also perpetuates this framework. Consumption is part of a process that includes production and exchange, all three being distinct only as phases of the cyclical process of social reproduction, in which consumption is never terminal. Consumption is the phase of the cycle in which goods become attached to personal referents, when they cease to be favorite "goods," which could be owned by anybody and identified with anybody, and become attributes of some individual personality, badges of identity, and signifiers of specific interpersonal relationships and obligations.

Seen in this light, true misers of the variety are consumers too, consumers of money as a supremely valued attribute of personality, in defiance of transactional norms. But it is noticeable that we call misers greedy, the same word we employ to describe out-and-out consumers. Suggesting that we recognize the resemblance of all forms of excessive incorporation of value, we encounter what appears to resemble classic miserly behavior, but which in reality is something else. It is not love of money (self-love disguised as pseudo-dorational accumulation) that motivates the consumption patterns, but the impossibility of converting purchasing power into a socially coherent definition of the self, in accord with the "habitus" handed down by tradition and inculcated during the socialization process (Bourdieu 1977). Not the love of money but the unlikeliness of goods lies at the roots of the consumption dilemmas of rich Muria, since outside a narrow range of socially legitimized consumption possibilities, the goods commercially available in Bastar markets either have no meaning for Muria or are fraught with magical dangers.

I observed the extraordinary contrast that can exist between different groups experiencing improved economic conditions. Some societies take to consumerism without hesitation, and experience no difficulties elaborating a previously given set of status symbols and personality-marking possessions with goods previously unavailable or unknown. Others, including the Muria, are highly conservative in this respect.

The particular example that aroused my curiosity after going through the article presented by Jock Stirratt who in the course of seminar on the anthropology of money at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Graphically outlined the uses to which certain Sri Lankan fishermen who have prospered in recent times put their new-found wealth. These fishermen's incomes, having been very low, have much increased since the local availability of ice has made it possible for their fish to reach inland markets, where they fetch high prices, in good condition. The fishermen's villages are still very remote, however, and at the time of the study, boasted no electricity, roads, or piped water supply. Despite these apparent disincentives, the richer fishermen were spending their excess earnings to purchase unusable television sets, to build "garages" onto houses to which no automobiles had access, and to install rooftop cisterns into which water never flows. All this, according to Stirratt, comes about in enthusiastic imitation of urban Sri Lanka's upper-middle class.

It is easy to astonish at such crass conspicuous expenditure, which by its apparent lack of utilitarian purpose makes at least some of our own consumption seem comparatively rational. Because the objects these fishermen acquire seem functionless in their environment, we cannot see why they should want them. On the other hand, if they collected pieces of antique Chinese porcelain and buried them in the

earth, they would be considered sane but enchanted, like normal anthropological subjects. I would not wish to deny the obvious explanations for this kind of behavior — that is, status-seeking, keeping up with the Joneses, and so on. But I think one should also recognize the presence of a certain cultural vitality in these bold forays into new and untried fields of consumption: the ability to transcend the merely utilitarian aspect of consumption goods, so that they become something more like works of art, charged with personal expression.

In purchasing an item like television, to form the centerpiece of a personal collection of wealth-signifiers, the fisherman is totalizing his biography, his labor, his social milieu, in the form of an object whose technological associations dialectically negate the conditions under which the fisherman's wealth was actually obtained. By totalizing I mean, following Sartre (1968), bringing together disparate elements and reconciling their contradictions. In this instance, totalization applies to the elements of a biographical and social experience that are projected onto a collection of personal possessions that signify those experiences. The fisherman, to acquire wealth, has spent his days in a creaking, battered old boat, pursuing an all-too-familiar routine, and facing the all-too-familiar uncertainties of weather, movements of shoals or fish, and price fluctuations at the market. But he can turn all this labor, all this familiar messiness and uncertainty, into a smooth, dark cabinet of unidentifiable grain-less wood, geometrically pure lines, an inscrutable gray glass face, and within, just visible through the rows of little holes and slots at the back, an intricate jungle of wire, plastic, and shining metal. He presumably knows that given the necessary electricity and transmissions, the set can be made to give forth more or less exciting pictures and voices. But that is not the point; what matters is the leap of imagination required for such a man to acquire and identify with such an object, adopting it as the emblem not of his middle-class aspirations, but of his actual achievements as a fisherman.

The television set, in this context, serves to objectify the fisherman's productive career, but it also transforms that career by invoking a technical and aesthetic universe (straight lines, smooth textures, plastic, aluminum, glass), that dialectically negate the objective conditions, technical processes, and sensory qualities of the labor process that, through the market, produced this same television set. In other words, the television set is a work of art, functioning like all genuine works of art to negate/transcend the real world. It is, in Jaspers's sense, a "cypher of the transcendent" (Jaspers 1971). One can call this commodity fetishism if one wishes, and consider it vulgar, but I believe that there is a valid distinction between dull, unimaginative consumerism, which only reiterates the class habitus, and adventurous consumerism like this, which struggles against the limits of the known world. I prefer to see here a creative process, one not at all deserving of the contempt that most of the participants at the aforementioned seminar seemed to think appropriate.

And I was struck by the stark contrast between the daring purchases made by erstwhile poverty-stricken Catholic fishermen in Sri Lanka, and the obsessive conservatism displayed by the newly rich in that area. I have no explanation to offer for the Sri Lankan fishermen, though I suspect that it has something to do with the relatively atomistic nature of their social and religious organization, compared to the Muria's, and the presence of some degree of class awareness (as opposed to traditional hierarchy, which is all the Muria recognize). But I hope I can fare a little better in explaining the Muria response to economic betterment, which is the topic I must now take up in earnest.

### **The consumption method of the Muria**

Bastar division, still the richest in forests of all the districts of peninsular India, has been one of the last land frontiers of the subcontinent. Not much more than a century ago, the earliest travelers described its inhabitants as lacking even cloth (they wore leaves), and the market system, which has expanded rapidly in the last fifty years, was then not even vestigially present. Only isolated enclaves of Hindu settlement existed, especially in south Bastar, near the royal capital or Jagdalpur and along the valley of the Indrawati, and also along the north-south communication axis linking Jagdalpur to Raipur and Kanker to the north, and Warangal and Hyderabad to the south. Only in these areas were permanent fields in use the bulk of the tribal population relied on slash-and-burn techniques. The tribal population consists of the

Muria, the Maria, and the Bison-horn Maria, speakers of Gondi dialects and members of the congeries of "Gond" peoples found in a broad belt stretching between northern Andhra and Orissa.

Today only pockets of Maria subsist by means of techniques that appear to have been in general use when the country was first opened up to outside infiltration, following the imposition of political control by the British in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Large areas have been acquired by Hindu cultivating castes (though landlords are few and small in the area I know). But much greater areas still remain in the hands of the Muria, who now cultivate their extensive lands using techniques they have borrowed from their Hindu neighbors. Except where the forest is preserved for commercial exploitation, the land has been cleared, and has been divided into leveled fields with water-retaining dikes wherever the topography permits. Only in the mountainous northwest of Bastar, where the Maria lives is shifting agriculture still practiced. In other words, in the past one hundred years, Bastar district has joined India, has acquired an Indian appearance, and (to some extent) enjoys an Indian economy.

The inhabitants of the north-central plains of Bastar most affected by these changes are the Muria. The Muria are, by degrees, becoming a straightforward "dominant caste" of land-owning peasant cultivators. But this has not quite happened yet: the Muria still eat beef, marry late, and maintain their traditional institutions such as the mixed-sex ghotul dormitory (Elwin 1947) and the cult of village and clan deities outside the Hindu pantheon. Around the old centers of power to the south, however, one finds "Raj" Gonds among whom the process of transformation from tribe to caste is more or less complete. The Raj Gonds have become Hinduized, and have been settled cultivators for many generations. In other areas, as land came under Hindu occupation, the local Gond inhabitants typically sought new land elsewhere, which was easily done since land was plentiful in north Bastar and labor in short supply.

The Muria can perhaps best be understood not as a tribe with an immemorial culture and way of life, but as a phase in the historical process that has been converting people with a culture roughly like that of the Maria into people like the Raj Gonds and thence into straightforward cultivator castes, possibly even claimants to Rajput descent, like the Bhumia (Sinha 1962). In their locality the Muria have been the agents responsible for turning forest into India; and in so doing they are gradually turning themselves from a tribe into a caste. As I understand it, during the period of Hindu expansion in north Bastar during the last century, Muria moved into the forest, pushing out from the Hindu enclaves, felling trees and clearing fields, which then proved attractive to the incoming Hindus. The Hindus took over the land, expanding their enclaves, and the displaced Muria moved on, to repeat the process elsewhere. The Muria did not simply give way to force majeure; the land was ceded amicably against payment in animals, grain, liquor, and small quantities of gold and silver that would quickly be reconverted into food or, more likely, drink. Hindus we spoke to claimed that in the good old days it was possible to obtain large areas of land from Muria in exchange for a single gold earring or some other token payment. These Hindus attributed the Muria's fecklessness about land to their uncontrollable desire for intoxicating liquor.

I do not think such stories merely reflect ethnic stereotyping because they are consistent with the present-day distribution of land in north Bastar, and also with the current amicable relationships between Hindu and Muria cultivators in the countryside. The Muria are acknowledged to be the true owners of the land, and Hindus participate in the Muria ritual system because it is the Muria gods who ensure its fertility. This suggests that during the formative period, Muria-Hindu relationships assumed a stable configuration whereby Muria opened up new areas, cultivated them until they were exhausted, and when it was necessary for them to move on for eco-technological reasons of their own, turned them over to incoming Hindus for what seemed to the latter trifling sums and to the Muria pure profit. The Hindus could subsequently exploit the land using plows and animal fertilizers, techniques the Muria had not at that time adopted.

If this supposition is correct, as the virtual nonexistence of a landless category of Muria in the localities affected by Hindu immigration suggests it may be, then it may help explain the distinctive consumption ethos found in present-day Muria society. The stereotype of tribal innocence and hedonism, the eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die attitude, has a basis in fact. The Muria really do eat, drink, and enjoy themselves to a far greater degree than Indian peasants are commonly described as doing. This is particularly noticeable among poorer Muria, who think nothing of drinking away their last

rupee in the world, and treating you in the bargain. There is a basic assumption that there is more where that came from. This reflects the essentially unlimited resource base on which traditional Muria society rested (the forest), and the fact that prior to the transformation of Muria agricultural techniques in this century, wealth was not accumulated for lack of suitable stores of value (currency or cattle).

Muria hedonism is associated with collective (village and clan) institutions, all of which can be shown to be in some way associated with the Hindu/Muria interaction. The most famous of these institutions is the ghotul, the mixed-sex village dormitory described in detail by Elwin . It is notable that the Muria ghotul, the very academy of hedonistic attitudes, assumes its most elaborated form only in the parts of north Bastar where Hindus are present; outside the range of Hindu influence, in Maria country, the ghotul exists in the very much duller form of a males-only dormitory, with none of the cultural elaboration the Muria ghotul has received. Similarly, betrothals and marriages are celebrated with much greater ceremony and expense among the Muria than among the Maria, as are collective feasts for clan and village deities. One only has to compare Elwin's splendid photographs of Muria and Maria taken in the 1930's and 1940's (Elwin 1947, 1943; Grigson 1937) to perceive that the material wealth of the Muria, as measured by such indicators as the amount of cloth, beads, jewelry, and metal tools evidently in circulation at that time, far exceeded that of the Maria. If we can assume that only a small proportion of this wealth came from the sale of cash crops - regional markets being little developed at that time — the only logical explanation for the relative wealth of the Muria is their relationship with the Hindus. Elwin does not describe the Muria of his time as rich in any except a cultural sense, and it is clear that their wealth consisted mainly of finery worn on festive occasions, and stores of food and liquor, also for public consumption at village rituals, or semi-public hospitality at other times. I would argue, though I am aware that the point is far from proven, that the Muria have elaborated "feckless" consumption into a cultural theme because they have been accustomed to having a high-consumption lifestyle subsidized by periodic injections of Hindu wealth.

The Muria associate liquidity with the selling off of capital assets (now held as livestock, since the Muria, for reasons to be discussed, nowadays rarely deal in land) in order to finance immediate consumption on a grandiose scale, usually in public contexts of some kind. These losses, traditionally, could always be recouped by pioneering new land, and although that is no longer possible, the labor market is such that the disappearance of land as a source of income is more than offset by the easy availability of relatively remunerative forms of employment.

The social and religious life of the Muria is conducted as a series of large-scale eating and drinking occasions (festivals of the gods, marriages, settlements of disputes, etc.), in which the village as a whole must participate. There are also obligations to extend hospitality to visiting affines and other kin, to religious specialists, shamans, local officials, and the like. Outside these formal occasions, it is customary for men and middle-aged women to drink deeply in one another's company as frequently as possible, and the ghotul boys and girls also conduct feasts and drinking parties. The important point to note, however, is that this social feasting and drinking is not undertaken in a competitive spirit, in order to demonstrate superiority along the lines of Melanesian ceremonial exchange, but is intended to demonstrate commitment to the village and to Muria values. The Muria do not reveal any paranoia about getting the worst of an exchange, as do members of societies in which the mentality *ickangiste* holds sway; their fears always lie in the direction of suffering social ostracism, of which the most extreme form is outright expulsion from the village. In village feasts, contributions are standardized, and accounts are kept to ensure that each household has given an identical amount, regardless of wealth. When marriages are celebrated, the groom's family has to feast not only the bride's kin (who reciprocate), but the whole of their own village; the villagers are responsible, however, for amassing plenty of liquor, so that a good time is had by all. When disputes are settled, the pattern is the same: the party found guilty is fined a cow, a goat, or a quantity of rice and a feast is arranged. The most onerous financial obligations are incurred in connection with consumption rituals that bring the whole village together as a single com-mensual unit. Day-to-day expenditure is also largely devoted to acquiring the means, mainly in the form of liquor, to extend casual hospitality as freely as possible.

The need to finance public consumption establishes the major economic goals of a Muria household, and sets the standards whereby the Muria evaluate the world of goods. Objects are desirable if they have meaning within the context of public feasting; otherwise, they have no value. The main items the Muria buy at market are cloth, decorative trinkets, and jewelry. The Muria are addicted to finery, particularly the ghotul boys and girls, whose display and dancing during village ritual is a matter of deep concern to them and to the village as a whole. Each young dancer is responsible for purchasing his or her own finery, but it is always worn in the context of collective display and is selected with this in mind. In the year 2007, the ghotul girls of Edka all obtained new saris with identical border for the annual "Play of the Gods" (pen karsana), the highlight of the ritual calendar. The ghotul boys had uniform black singlets, voluminous white skirts, white turbans, and feather headdresses, for wear at all-night dances. The Muria propensity for contriving uniforms is not restricted to the young. The senior men of Edka all wear the same kind of blue shirt on public occasions, a village uniform that distinguishes them from men of other villages. This code or dress and adornment is not enforced by sanctions; the Muria themselves are not even particularly conscious of it. The stated criterion for making purchases of this kind is that such-and-such items are beautiful (sobla), not that they have overt symbolic meanings.

In fact, Muria dress is anachronistic rather than traditional, since in truly traditional times cloth and jewelry were unavailable. We can see this by studying Elwin's photographs of the Muria of sixty years ago. These pictures show the grandparents of the present-day ghotul boys and girls to have been just as dressy as their descendants, but wearing fashions that have been abandoned long since in the areas in which they originated. One plate (Elwin 1947, p. 420) shows a group of boys wearing remarkable short-sleeved, collarless buttoned shirts and strange flattened turbans of a style now never seen, but which appear to be distant echoes of courtly styles of the nineteenth century, or even earlier, filtered to the Muria via the Hindus. The present-day Muria male hairstyle, the hair on the forehead shaved to the crown of the head, with the hair in back left long and tied into a bun, is the classical Hindu bodi, a style seen only in attenuated forms now among Hindus themselves but jealously preserved by the beef-eating, hard-drinking Muria. The "tribal" sari is a shorter, narrower version of the standard sari worn by neighboring Hindu women, tied the same way but worn without a bodice, which until very recently most Muria women considered an immodest item of clothing, liable to attract attention to the breasts rather than divert it. Tribal saris are now almost all manufactured in Mumbai of flimsy cotton cloth, dyed in bright colors, especially for sale in the tribal areas: the much more durable local ganda cloth is now worn only by old ladies and conservative village elders. The Mumbai saris, regarded by outsiders as signs of authentic tribal identity, mainly because they are scanty and reveal the legs and upper body, are considered by the Muria themselves not only exotic (because they come from outside Bastar) but also respectable and modest; wearing the 4.5-meter standard sari is regarded as ostentatious.

In fact, none of the vestimentary signs that be taken tribal identity to outsiders are produced by the Muria themselves or originated indigenously. Tribal finery, turbans, loincloths, short saris, and "tribal" jewelry (heavy silver torques, gold, silver, and brass earrings, gold necklaces, massive silver and brass bracelets,) - all these arrived in the area with the Hindus, and were adopted by the Muria in imitation of their betters. These items are obtained from Hindu traders in the markets, never from other Muria, and are associated with superior status.

A case in point is silver jewelry, which is made in Rajasthan and has been traded in Bastar by Marwari merchants during this century. The design of the jewelry is traditional to Rajasthan, though I do not know if it is worn there anymore. The silver ornaments for sale in Bastar markets are mostly old, but are cleaned and repaired by the Marwari silversmiths so that to all appearances they are brand new. This is a source of perplexity to all visitors in search of old and authentic-looking tribal jewelry, it is old, it is authentic, but it is none of it tribal. According to a Marwari informant, silver jewelry circulates among both Hindus and Muria, but is little worn by the Hindus, who keep it as a store of value and as a component of dowry payments. The Muria do not have dowries, and the silver with which Muria girls adorn themselves has been purchased by them, using their own money, obtained by selling produce at market and by wage labor. Among the Hindus jewelry is essentially family property, significant as a store of capital; among the Muria it is personal property, primarily significant as personal adornment.

One can summarize the traditional Muria attitude toward prestige consumption goods available in the markets as follows: the items sought - cloth, finery, jewelry - are all associated with non-Muria groups considered by the Muria to be higher on the social scale. The definition of prestige goods has been imposed on the Muria by outsiders, and is perpetuated by a marketing system that is entirely non-Muria hands. But in taking over elements of a set of non-Muria prestige goods for internal consumption, the Muria have imposed their own set of social evaluations on them, which are quite distinct from the ones operative among the groups with whom these goods originated. Prestige consumption items are sought not because of an intra-village competition to be the most fashionably dressed, most bejeweled individual around, but because all villagers alike are attempting to live up to a particular collective image. The ghotul boys and girls are obliged to spend heavily on clothes and finery so as not to let the side down at festivals with dancers from other ghotuls. The older men are obliged to obtain the standard blue shirt so as to make a good show at market, sitting with their fellow villagers at their accustomed place (Gell 1982). Jewelry is worn so as to look respectable, rather than to dazzle. In other words, it is in order to express conformity, not originality or individuality, that such purchases are made. This has in turn had an effect on the selection of goods offered by traders to Muria at rural markets. One can now distinguish between a range of goods aimed specifically at tribal consumers, particularly saris, turbans, loincloths, decorations, and heavy silver jewelry, and a range of modern items that are not usually offered at the more rural markets, namely, shoes, trousers, jackets, woollens, 4.5-inch saris, printed cloth (Muria prefer plain colors and woven borders), intricate as opposed to massive jewelry, sunglasses, umbrellas, stationery, crockery, furniture, medicines, etc. These items are available from shops in the towns, which are very accessible to the Muria by local bus, but are not attractive to them.

Besides clothes and finery, the Muria also spend money on food and drink. In normal times, subsistence grains and pulses (dal, chickpeas, and lentils) are not obtained at market; most families are self-sufficient in food. But rice and vegetables such as radishes, eggplant, chilies, tomatoes, beans, and various greens are bought for important occasions, such as marriages. The luxury foods preferred by the Muria are all traditional - parched rice, dried fish, pakhoras (a deep-fried snack), leaf-tobacco — rather than modern delicacies such as sweets, cookies, tea, sugar, manufactured cigarettes, etc., which are popular with Hindus. The largest expenditure in this category goes for drink, which is sold on the fringes of the market and in the villages. Even this item is not really indigenous; distilling was traditionally a monopoly of the Kallar (distiller) caste, of higher ritual status than the Muria. Nowadays the Kallar are legally prohibited from plying their trade so the Muria have to make their own, which they claim to be inferior to the Kallar product. Liquor is an essential element in all aspects of social and ritual life; for the Muria, the very notion of sociability, of belonging to a social group and maintaining social relationships, is unthinkable without alcoholic accompaniments. The Muria passion for liquor, much remarked by outsiders, is by no means a symptom of anomie or despair, as alcoholism may well be in some tribal societies, but the outcome of the conformism, the paranoia about belonging, which marks all phases of Muria life.

In short, Muria consumption is bound up with the expression of collective identity and the need to assert commitment to the village as a political unit and to its institutions. Particular items are singled out from the range of Hindu prestige symbols and incorporated into a collective style, which all Muria try to approximate as best they can. Consumption is not associated with competition, but with the demonstration of adequacy, the ability to come up to the collective mark. The emphasis on the collective style, rather than on individual differences, explains the anachronistic nature of Muria tastes and their conservative approach to consumption. The Muria are dedicated followers of fashion, followers being the operative word. Their fashions are anachronistic because no one wants to defy the restraints of the collective style. Even now, when some young men are cutting their hair and dressing more like the local Hindus, their motive is not to look smarter than before, but to look less conspicuous in a world that is perceived as increasingly Hindu-dominated.

## **Changes in economics scenario**



This collectivist consumption ethos has its roots in a phase of the tribe-caste conversion process in which inter household economic differences was minimal and inequalities in wealth between households would be at most temporary, owing to the absence of media of capital accumulation. Since this pattern was set, however, there have been crucial changes in the economic basis of Muria society. Around the turn of the century, the government imposed controls on access to forest land, controls that have been applied more and more stringently, so that the Bastar land frontier is now effectively closed. The government ban on the free exploitation of the forest was believed to have precipitated an uprising in the countryside in 1910, and between the two world wars Muria lands were subjected to survey and land titles were registered. Owing to the fear of renewed outbreaks of anti-government feeling, the amount of land ceded to the Muria was rather generous in relation to their numbers. At the time of the settlement the Muria must have appeared both poor and dependent on access to large areas of uncleared forest.

Today almost all the forest ceded to the Muria has been cleared and more has been encroached on, with the result that official census figures give the average land-holding per cultivating Muria family at more than ten acres. By now, thanks to the cumulative labor of generations, this land has been converted into leveled paddy fields, with water-retaining dikes, of considerable agricultural potential even without irrigation. It is common to find families holding 20, 30, or even more acres of paddy field, enormous acreages by Indian standards. These fields can only be cultivated with animal-drawn plows, and many families cannot cultivate all the land they possess for lack of cattle or buffalo. But here again time is on their side: buffalo were rare in the area before the war, but now herds are gradually building up, as are cattle herds, enabling this initial shortage of agricultural capital to be overcome. New trade routes have opened up, bringing plow animals into the area. Land registered to adivasis cannot be sold to non-adivasis by government decree, so Muria land is no longer passing into the hands of Hindus. Moreover, the old easy come, easy go attitude to land has vanished with the introduction of permanent fields whose construction and upkeep represent years and years of accumulated labor. The population has also increased, so that labor shortage, once the most important constraint on production, is becoming less of a problem and land can be fully and more intensively cultivated (two crops, one of rice and one a dry-season crop such as millet or oil-seeds, are the norm).

Muria family farms are much more productive now than they were in the past. Moreover, the Muria have access to wage labor at high rates of pay in relation to their actual living costs. The government Public Works Department and the Forest Department are chronically short of labor, so that work is readily available during the agricultural slack season. Besides wage employment, Muria also employ one another as farm laborers for the standard rate of ten kilos of unhusked rice per laborer per day.

In short, the local economy is in a flourishing condition, prosperous in good years and well able to withstand the rigors of bad ones. Despite being a notoriously "backward" area, supposedly occupied by miserable, poverty-stricken tribals, Bastar district exports rice year after year, and that, in India, is the bottom line.

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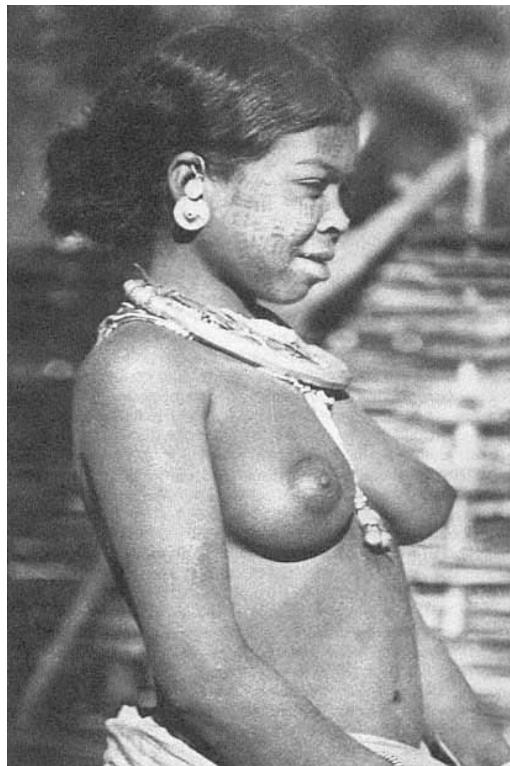
## Apendix



*Muria Gond girls of Bastar wearing solid silver necklaces and many strings of glass beads; their saris are invariably white Photo by Elvin*



*Maria girls of Bastar during a dance, wielding sticks with rattles attached; their necklaces and armbands are made of white metal.*



*Maria woman with extensive face tattoo wearing a hollow necklace of white metal and silver ear-rings. Photo by Elvin*



*Muria girl wearing silver nose-studs, ear-rings, and several strings of glass beads. Photo by Elvin*



*A Muria family ready to move out of their hut carrying small children*



*Muria girls colourfully dressed and ready for dance*



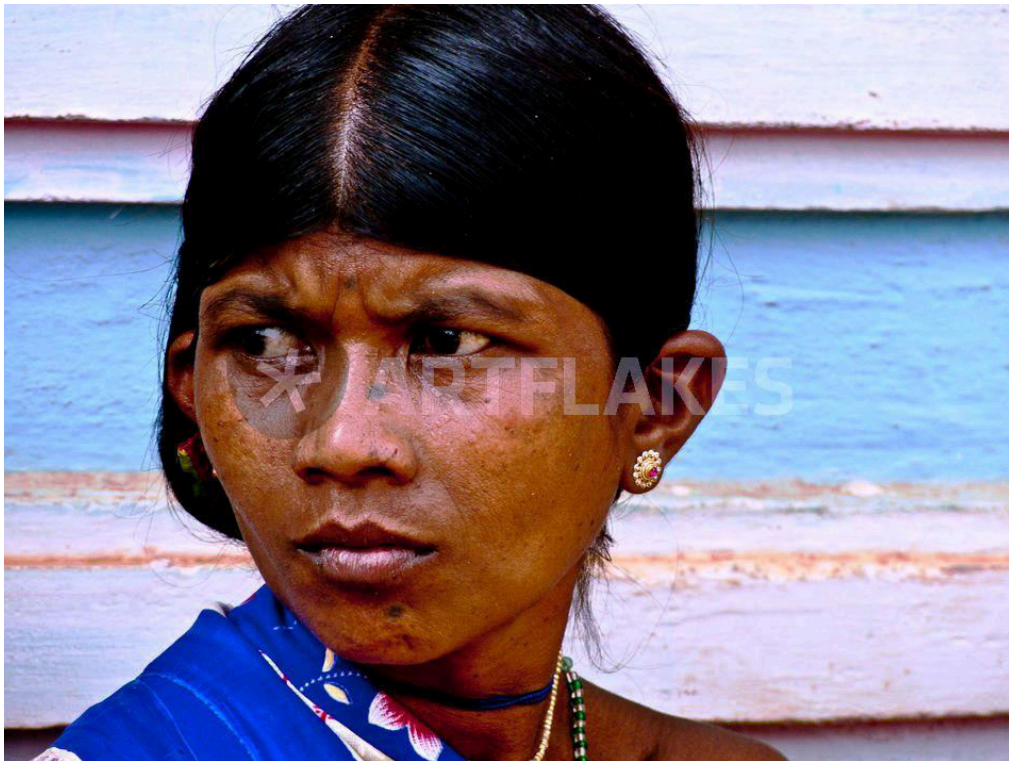
*A Muria Bride*



*A Maria boy wearing saffron coloured head dress.*



*A Maria women with tattoo marks on forehead wearing chain of colorful beads, hollow silver necklace, ear studs and hair clips.*



*Maria girl wearing saree, ear studs and colorful chain*



*A Muria tribal man from the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, Central India.*



*Muria men and women getting ready for dance*





*Photograph of half-naked Maria women wearing ornaments by Elvin*



*Well dressed Maria girl with her friend*



*An old Maria woman wearing traditional clothes*



*Maria teenagers going for dating*



*A Maria young man with colorful towel around his neck*



*Metal utensil shop*



*Maria woman with beautiful hair style*



*Maria woman with hair clips and golden ear studs*



(c) Vaibhav Arora

*Maria tobacco seller*



(c) Vaibhav Arora

*A lady Lantha seller*



*A lady Sulfy seller*



*Even today people are wearing their traditional attire*



*An old man wearing colorful turban*



*A Muria lady wearing with flowers clipped on hair and ear studs*