

Article

The Changing Landscape of Sacred Groves in Kerala (India): A Critical View on the Role of Religion in Nature Conservation

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Abstract: Sacred groves are an age-old and world-wide phenomenon, traditionally consisting of forest zones, protected by people based on their spiritual relationship with the deities or ancestral spirits believed to reside there. India alone counts nearly 50,000 sacred groves, with 2000 in Kerala where they are known as *kaavu*. Presently, the sacred groves are under serious threat with numbers of groves reducing drastically. In this article, the authors challenge one of the dominant theories that sacred groves, while previously protected by religion, now disappear due to the loss of traditional beliefs. Starting from the observation that the destruction of sacred groves has less to do with a loss of faith but more with a change of faith, the article focuses on the ambivalent role of religion and the impact the commercial offer of some specific Hindu rituals has on the declining number of sacred groves. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among grove-owners in Kerala, the authors argue that it may be true that religious perceptions maintained the sacred groves for centuries, but that the same religious tradition now provides both justifications and marketable rituals for cutting them down.

Keywords: sacred groves; religious change; environmental degradation; nature conservation; India; anthropology

1. Introduction

Sacred groves are an age-old and world-wide phenomenon [1,2]. Traditionally, they consist of forest zones, protected by local people based on their spiritual relationship with the deities or ancestral spirits believed to reside there. Although they have drastically diminished in number since nineteenth-century colonial reports [3], they still exist in many parts of India, and in Kerala in particular, where they are known as *kaavu* [1,4,5]. A traditional *kaavu* can be defined as a relatively undisturbed piece of evergreen vegetation, mostly dedicated to female deities (often snake gods) who have been approached with reverence by local populations for centuries. Such groves are home to various types of (medical) plants, reptiles, birds and butterflies and also often contain water resources like ponds, streams or wells. In Kerala, snake worship has long been a major part of religious life; testimony of this goes back as far as the eighth century [6–8]. Many Malayalees assume that the prosperity of the family depends on the blessing of snake gods because they are associated with fertility and life-giving powers [9,10]. Traditionally people tread cautiously when entering sacred groves. They are

afraid to anger the deities when damaging the vegetation as it is strongly believed that the deities will punish by bringing illness, deaths, or misfortune [11]. However, deities are also thought to exact devotional services from the villagers. This tension between relative isolation and the demand for acknowledgement, regular visits, and occasional offerings indicates the careful attention given to such groves in local communities.

In previous studies on sacred groves in India, there was a tendency to argue that these sites had been preserved on religious grounds before and now tend to disappear due to a loss of faith and religious maintenance [1]. The role of religious sentiments in the conservation of sacred groves around the globe is particularly emphasized in the field of Religion and Ecology [10,12–15]. In this article, we aim to critically reconsider the assumption that religion is effective in nature conservation. Acknowledging the role of religions in the conservation of sacred groves is not the same as stating that such patches of forest have survived and will survive thanks to religion-based reverence. It may be true that religious perceptions created and maintained the sacred groves for centuries, yet it appears that now the same religious tradition provides both justifications and marketable rituals for cutting them down and shifting the deity to more sophisticated living quarters.

There is no denying that presently the sacred groves appear to be seriously threatened. Some authors acknowledge that the number of sacred groves in Kerala has been reduced drastically [16], though no systematic statistics exist so far.¹ The social threats to sacred groves in Kerala that have been indicated in the literature include a variety of processes, including the transition from extended to nuclear family systems and subsequent changes in property ownership and house building [17]. From a cultural-religious perspective, the arrival and spread of Christianity and Islam replacing “indigenous beliefs”, as well as rational-scientific campaigns against “superstitions” [2], also played a role. In popular discourse in India there is also a marked tendency to blame a Dark Era-related decline in religiosity (*dharma*) for today’s predicament [18–22], assuming that an erosion of traditional religious sensitivity has made the groves more vulnerable targets of economic reform.

During field research on sacred groves in Kerala from 2011 onwards, we noticed that groves got cleared and transformed, not so much due to a decline in people’s religiosity but, on the contrary, due to various religious strategies that people deployed to remove the greenery and clear the groves for other purposes. Different kinds of clearing rituals, in which residing gods were shifted from the sacred grove to another spot appeared to take place regularly. They were advertised to the public and priests supported the clearing of the groves, all in the name of religion. Moreover, these religious rituals were not only supporting the destruction of groves, they simultaneously boosted people’s devotion to the shifted deities. The deities were conveniently made more accessible, and by introducing money and precious material gifts as an important part of the devotional rituals the deities’ abodes could be upgraded, thus drawing an increasing clientele. These religious dynamics—producing more built environment and a more complicated money circulation, but resulting in less old growth and biodiversity—will be the focal point of this article and the basis of our critical view on the role of religion in conservation debates.

Much has been written in a critical vein about religiously inspired environmental discourses and the religious environmentalist paradigm in India [5,10,15,22–32]. However, others, especially those who take a “romanticist”, “religionist” or “chauvinist-nationalist” stance, are inclined to saying that Hinduism is the crucial factor for protecting and conserving the biodiversity of the sacred groves [13,33,34]. In this perspective, there is a tendency to uncritically and a-historically apply notions of “ecological wisdom” and “bio-divinity” to an idealized and timeless Hinduism and its tribal counterparts. According to Dwivedi [35], for example, “from the perspective of Hindu

¹ In India some counts may indicate nearly 50,000 sacred groves, although this number includes many places that deserve the term merely because of a single remaining tree on the original spot symbolizing the former grove. Around 2000 are found in Kerala. Although some district-wise inventories are going on, such numbers are hard to rely on. When counts include small family-owned sacred groves, numerous in the state of Kerala, this number may still be justified.

culture, abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is unjust and sacrilegious.” This ought-is fallacy of confusing—in a necessarily selective way—some of a religion’s scriptural norms concerning proper behavior toward nature with what Hindus actually did long ago or how they behave today is widespread especially among India’s Sanskrit scholars [36]. Principles and precepts are normative, not descriptive. Moreover, popular-devotional, locally-defined and indigenous practices should be taken seriously in themselves. Hindu quotidian behavior and lived religion today do not necessarily conform to brahminic prescriptions in ancient texts. Many of the earlier publications on Hinduism’s supposed environmental friendliness suffer from such biases. Additionally, the impact of colonial rule on India’s landscapes and the role of conversion to Christianity or Islam in the decline of sacred groves are indicated in many studies in which the blame is put on “external” others [2,5,37]. In the general tendency to glorify India’s past and present biodiversity, there is insufficient attention to Hinduism’s own duplicities and multiplicities. Even more so than other religions, through its layeredness and elasticity it easily lends itself to justifying and legitimating the entire range of human behavior. The accommodating and facilitating role that ritual mitigation may play as an accomplice to processes of environmental degradation has been under-explored so far.

In this article, we thus reconsider the role of religion, and in particular Hinduism, in people’s attitude towards sacred groves. Looking at people’s lived religion—the ways that religion is *practiced* in everyday life rather than how it is *prescribed* by religious authorities—, we aim to add complexity to some of the more idealistic work in the field of Religion and Ecology. We challenge, or at least nuance, one of the dominant theories—that sacred groves are protected by religion and now disappearing due to the loss of “traditional” beliefs [38]. We simultaneously dispute the supposed dichotomy between religious devotion and economic exploitation by showing how both may go hand in hand in the lived religion of both priests and grove-owners. Starting from the observation that the destruction of sacred groves may not have to do with a loss of faith but rather with a change of faith, we address the question: what entangled socio-religious-economic rationale underlies the contemporary destruction, attenuation, transformation or shifting of sacred groves in Kerala? To answer this question, our central focus will be on the extensive case study of Sarala, a female grove-owner who gradually changed her sacred grove into a newly built temple complex. Her case will provide insight into the particularities of how people live their religiously influenced lives and accordingly manage their sacred groves, as well as into the impact the commercial offer of some specific Hindu rituals has on the current change in sacred landscapes.

2. Research Methodology

The findings in this article are based on literature research and ethnographic field research. Ethnographic data were collected in Kerala by Sunny during three months in 2011, the entire year 2012, and another three months in 2013. From 2014 onwards, she revisited the field for shorter periods and with larger intervals. Based on their own long-term research experience in India, Notermans and Nugteren contributed to the literature research, assisted in building up the main case-study as well as structured and analyzed the data. During her fieldwork Sunny was based in one village but extended her research to seven other villages in the region of Mukundapuram Taluk in Thrissur district in Kerala. This region was selected because of the researcher’s acquaintance with the locality. With a radius of 45 kilometers, it contained more than one hundred groves, varying from very small plots to larger sites containing water bodies and a large floral diversity. Almost all sites were dedicated to (female) snake gods.

Sunny visited 35 groves and studied 18 grove-owning families of whom she interviewed the couples who were in charge. Because of the predominantly matrilineal kinship system in Kerala, many groves are headed by women who are assisted by their husbands in the site’s maintenance. The grove-owning families were selected from the researcher’s personal network and subsequently through snowball sampling. This approach was required because of the controversial topic of the study and the identity of the researcher. As a Christian woman Sunny was not allowed to directly

approach the sacred grove-owners for research purposes since the owners generally hesitate to show the grove and its surroundings to people belonging to other castes and religions, based on their fear of pollution. Moreover, because of social pressures and state government's campaigns to protect the sacred groves on account of their functioning as pockets of biodiversity, people tend to hide that they may fully or largely clear their sacred plots of land. As the informants were selected from within Sunny's personal network they willingly shared their intimate knowledge about the groves.

From the start, systematic information was collected on families' attitudes, beliefs, practices, and religious rituals facilitating the destruction of the groves. Qualitative research methods were used, such as participant observation in rituals of "shifting the deity" and worship practices, and in-depth interviews with grove-owners. As the research developed, information was also gathered from the religious authorities who perform the removal rituals as business in order to understand why the natural landscape of sacred groves was disappearing through religious interventions. Four Brahmin priests, six Pulluva priests (four men, two women) and four astrologers were interviewed.

Although Sunny remained in contact with the selected families during her research, one of the grove-owners she intensively followed during all periods of fieldwork was the 46-years old Sarala. In addition to regular interviews, she did on-site participant observation during the rituals at Sarala's grove. Until now, Sarala keeps her informed about the developments going on at her sacred site through regular telephone conversations. Sunny, from her side, revisited her eight times for regular updates. Sarala's case will be described in detail as it turned out to illustrate in a fascinating way the crucial role religion may play in the clearing of groves. By putting this qualitative in-depth case-study central in this article we aim to add a new perspective to the research on Kerala's groves that is highly dominated by large-scale, quantitative studies inventorying the number and size of Kerala sites, and exploring the number of species of plants and birds present there. We will first present some context to Sarala's case by briefly sketching the change in attitudes towards sacred groves in Kerala, and by describing three types of priestly rituals that grove-owners commission when they want to clear their grove.

3. Socio-Economic Changes

Several social transformations in Kerala have led to changing attitudes toward sacred groves. The first concerns the land reforms introduced by the Communist government in 1957 and the actual implementation (such as redistribution of surplus land) till the mid-1970s that caused a large-scale fragmentation of the land [39–41]. Many sacred grove-owning upper castes were forced to distribute their land and the peasants receiving it cleared such lands for commercial farming. A second change is the transformation from joint to nuclear families [42]. The joint family system abolition act of 1975 led to the fragmentation of family lands as they got subdivided among the various heirs, and so were the sacred groves that were part of such plots [2]. A third change acting upon the clearing of sacred groves is the growing population density, intensifying people's house building activities. It is common practice in Kerala that before constructing a house a priest-astrologer is consulted about its favorable positioning. If the best location is determined near or inside a sacred grove then the owner is forced to neutralize the site (*i.e.*, destroy that sacred grove, accompanied by proper rituals) for reasons of ritual purity. Impure activities going on inside the house, such as making and eating non-vegetarian food, alcohol consumption, menstruation, child birth, death, as well as having a septic tank nearby, is thought to anger the snake gods, which should be avoided.

From the 1980s onwards, monetary elements increasingly played a role in the decline of sacred groves as well. From the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, there was a 2000 percent increase in land prices in Kerala [43]. Many families then cleared the sacred groves for the construction of houses or in order to sell the adjoining piece of land [2]. Moreover, the value of land, in urban as well as rural areas, increased as a result of the large inflow of remittances from the Gulf States which gave some families more buying power than others [44]. According to the interviewed priests, migration from Kerala to other states and abroad also forced people to clear the sacred groves existing in their courtyards.

The inevitable indifference and lack of proper care in their absence might anger the serpent gods who would retaliate by giving the family, even at a distance, numerous problems. To avoid the deity's displeasure the emigrants often cleared their abandoned groves with the appropriate religious rituals supplied by Hindu priests.

Although religion (*i.e.*, Hinduism as a worldview) was not the direct cause of the destruction of the groves, families started employing ritual strategies, supplied by the same religion, to mitigate possible consequences. This shows us Hinduism—and by extension possibly other religions as well—both as a continuum and as elastic, adjustable and inventive. If the situation requires that changing needs and values are accommodated, the same tradition may well prove versatile and varied enough to offer transition rituals that benefit both client and priest, even when this is at the cost of old-growth green pockets of biodiversity.

4. Religious Clearing Rituals

The ritual repertoire offered by Hindu priests involves three ceremonies that respectively relocate, reduce, or destroy the deity's home. The first is called *kaavumattam* and entails shifting the deity to another location inside the owner's garden itself. The entire sacred grove is cleared and the deity (either merely its spirit or its existing material form, *i.e.*, the aniconic stone symbol or the iconic statue) shifted from the original *kaavu* to another location inside the owners' garden where a single new tree is planted. This ritual is relatively simple and can be finished in a day.

The second ritual is called *punaprathishtta* and is the most common ritual among the three. It entails limiting the size of the sacred grove and restricting the abode of the deity to a single fixed spot inside the reduced grove. The ritual became accepted practice nearly fifty years ago and is now widely applied. The biggest part of the ground is cleared and all vegetation cut except for one big tree, which symbolically represents the ancient grove. The priest restricts the deity's space to no more than a concrete strip of floor on which a pyramid-shaped stone is placed. The serpent deity is then ritually invoked to take this open-air shrine as its abode [7]. In certain groves, a concrete structure covering the deity with some kind of roof or shelter may be added. In that case the god has changed status, has become a more prestigious indoor god, and the structure is called a temple. Once the original vegetation has been destroyed and the deity is supposed to reside in a single concrete structure, the rest of the site can be utilized for alternative purposes.

Another third ritual is called *ozhippikkal* and entails expelling the deity from the grove to an existing, man-made serpent shrine in the compound of a major temple elsewhere. When this has been accomplished, the owners need to wait twenty-one days before the sacred grove area can be permanently cleared of trees and other vegetation. We observed that this ritual is conducted mainly when owners intend to sell the whole plot or construct a house. Pulluva priests (non-brahmin priests specialized in serving the serpent deities) say they take one to three days to finish the ritual according to the power of the deity. In some cases the Brahmin priests spend a mere three hours on the actual site of the sacred grove and conduct the rest of the ceremonies in their higher status temple compound. Pulluva priests may also take merely the spirit of an evicted deity to a famous regional temple containing a serpent shrine. They have to pay a yearly fee to the serpent shrines where they ritually propitiate the spirits of moved deities. The Brahmin priests recommend the families to make an annual pilgrimage to offer prayers and all kinds of material offerings and money to that specific serpent shrine temple.

All interviewed grove-owners remarked that the shifting and clearing rituals are very expensive. There is no standard rate for the rituals. The priests will state an amount in accordance with the financial condition of the grove-owner, the status of the priest performing the ritual, the time the ceremony requires, the day on which the ceremony takes place, and the power of the deity residing in the grove. Rates for *punaprathishtta* rituals range from 5000 rupees (71 EUR) to 20,000 rupees (284 EUR); rates for *kaavumattam* rituals range from 50,000 rupees (710 EUR) to 20,000 rupees (284 EUR); and rates for *ozhippikkal* rituals range from 80,000 rupees (1136 EUR) to 3,00,000 rupees (4263 EUR).

Three different categories of priests are involved in these rituals: Brahmin priests, Pulluva priests and priests belonging to the village temples. The rates differ for upper-caste Brahmin and lower-caste Pulluva priests. Some people prefer to have the rituals performed by Brahmin priests and others will trust the Pulluvas more, as the latter are specialized in matters concerning snake worship [45]. The availability of certain priests on specific auspicious days may also be a factor of consideration in clients' selection of the priests. In the high season (September to March) all three types of priests may be booked most of the days.²

Formerly, only Brahmin priests conducted the shifting and clearing rituals, but nowadays the Pulluvas also perform them, along with their usual songs and prayers. The monetary factor induces them to do so, though opinions differ among the various priests. A younger priest stated that the rituals of evicting the deity from its original dwelling place may bring misfortune to his family. Earlier he too had been performing the rituals but recently he had stopped. According to him the Pulluva community will only survive if there continue to be sacred groves. In contrast, a senior Pulluva priest with forty years of experience stated that Pulluvas are entitled to do all the clearing rituals and have the exclusive right to have the trees in sacred groves cut down and sell the timber. All stakeholders involved in the clearing rituals confirm that nowadays the rituals are a kind of business and that money is the main consideration for performing them. Priests even advertise the rituals on the Internet for purely financial motives, and prospective clients likewise use Internet for seeking their services and comparing their rates and conditions.

In addition to the different groups of priests, astrologers also take part in the business of clearing rituals. They usually, through consultation of charts and other forms of divination, announce the names of the god(s) present in the sacred grove, the wishes these gods may have, whether the gods are happy or angry, and the nature of the gods (whether they are kind or more of a ferocious character). They determine the auspicious day(s) for the ceremonies, the varieties of rituals to be performed and the favorite priest of the god(s) concerned. The astrologers too charge fees based on the financial condition of the grove-owner. The seniority and popularity of the astrologer is also a factor in fixing the fee. The rates vary from 10 to 200 EUR for one sitting.

5. Sarala's Case: From Sacred Grove to Sacred Economy

In the course of 2012, Sarala's case was selected as a principal one and started to be intensively studied for several reasons: Sarala was open about the clearance of her grove and thus enabled us to follow her in all her activities and considerations regarding the grove; her clearing and temple-building activities resonated with the activities undertaken by other (often female) grove-owners; and yet she was unique in organizing elaborate yearly rituals that could be attended by the researcher. These rituals enabled us to do on-site participant observation, to cross-check the information collected during interviews, and to gain a more profound and intimate understanding of religion's ambivalent role in the (de-)construction of the sacred sites. Moreover, the clearing and building activities in Sarala's grove appeared to develop rapidly during the fieldwork period. This acceleration of events made it possible to closely follow the various stages in the shrine's development which added much to the data collected in retrospective. Sunny gradually built a close and intimate relationship with Sarala and followed her in all her grove-related activities. In this way, the domain of lived religion—so often hidden from the perception of researchers whose visits tend to be overly determined by time restraints and structured interviews—along with the gradual changes in sacred sites could be fully explored.

² As neither priests nor grove-owning families eagerly reveal any insider's information about sacred groves and the clearance of such sites, it is difficult to determine exact numbers of shifting and clearing rituals. While priests' estimates varied from 10 to 100 such rituals a year, others declared not to be willing to reveal the numbers "as it would make the snake gods angry with them". The same argument was also occasionally made by the grove-owners themselves, which highlights the controversial character of the research topic.

Sarala's grove is situated in the village of Kaavupuram in Thrissur district (central Kerala).³ This is a relatively large village (15,000 inhabitants) with all modern facilities like schools, Internet cafés and sports clubs. Sarala (46 years old at the time of the first interview) was born in an upper-caste Nair, matrilineal family and her husband (then 55 years old) belongs to the lower Vettuva caste, which is patrilineal. They had an arranged inter-caste marriage and have two children, a girl (at that time 25 years old) and a boy (23 years old). The girl is married and lives in a nearby village with her husband's family. The boy stays with his parents and is on and off searching for a job. Despite her high-caste status, Sarala works as a sweeper in a school and her husband is a daily wage worker in the village, constructing temporary party halls for ceremonies. Sarala had received a share of the ancestral property on the occasion of her wedding, since her mother did not have money or gold to give her as a dowry. Her two sisters had received an equal piece of land when they married. Sarala, her husband and children used to live in a rented house near her maternal family in the village. When in 2002, seven years after her mother's death, they decided to construct a house on Sarala's ancestral land, they approached an astrologer who told them there was a sacred grove (0.1 ha) in that plot. They then built a new house near the sacred grove. This is where they now live.

When Sarala heard about the grove, she decided to start lighting a lamp on that spot and continued doing so daily. As she is a devout Hindu she was still concerned about her mother's death, which had happened because of a snake bite. This had made the prediction of an astrologer come true who had attested that her mother, who suffered a mental illness, was cursed by a snake god and would die as the result of a snake bite. Sarala consulted an astrologer who told her to have the *punaprathishtta* ritual performed as the grove had been in a neglected state for many years. Sarala was told to clean the site: removing plants, creepers and grass, lopping off the branches of trees and trimming the hedges. She also had to bring her family members together in the sacred grove for rituals and ceremonies to please the snake gods. Sarala contacted a Brahmin priest for conducting the ritual. He told her that many snake gods and goddesses were residing in the sacred grove, "attracted by a treasure inside": gold, diamonds and precious stones would be there in pots, allegedly inside the well. Impressed by the news, Sarala's husband and son started to clear the sacred grove for *punaprathishtta* and made, adjacent to the well, a stone enclosure of about 50 cms high, surfaced with cement. They placed three concrete *naga* (serpent) statues on concrete bases inside, close to the only tree that had survived the clearing activities. Although Sarala continued to light a lamp in the sacred grove each evening, some family problems started: Sarala's son got involved in a police case and Sarala herself got skin diseases. This was interpreted as a sign that the snake gods were unhappy with the work the family had done in the grove.

In 2009, they again approached the astrologer for learning what the gods were trying to tell them. The astrologer suggested that the serpent deities were unhappy as there were no offerings. The astrologer divined that the snake gods and two *devis* (female manifestations of the supreme god) wish to sit in a proper temple—not an open-air shrine as was the state of things at that time, but instead a roofed concrete construction—their bodies adorned by all varieties of gold ornaments. As Sarala was a poor lady, lacking the cash to fulfill these demands, she had to pledge her gold bangles in order to have gold ornaments made (necklace, chain, ear rings, bangles and anklets) for the snake gods and *devis*. She then decorated the deities with all these ornaments, which made them sit in the small open-air shrine happily. In November 2011, two years after the astrologer's divinations, Sarala managed to construct a small temporary building for the *devis*, called *balalayam*, and to perform an expensive ceremony for its consecration, the *balalaya-prathishtta*. It is mandatory to build a *balalayam* before constructing a proper temple. It enables people to start visiting the sacred grove and give offerings long before the required amount of money for the temple has been collected. During the inauguration ceremony of the temporary building the deities are invoked and asked to sit inside.

³ For privacy reasons the names of both grove-owner and the villages are changed to pseudonyms.

As soon as the construction of the proper temple will be finished, the spirits of the deities will be transferred from the *balalayam* to the newly built temple. Soon after the *balalaya-prathishtta* Sarala began to notice that miracles were happening to some of the devotees: several couples got children after having prayed there, and many skin diseases were cured. One person found a job, and another visitor was cured from a serious disease. Those who believed to have received these blessings from the gods used to give devotional offerings, cash and other gifts in return.

In early 2012, Sarala started constructing the temple that would replace the *balalayam* with the help of the money donated by devotees, neighbors, relatives and local sponsors. When Sarala asked people for money on behalf of the serpent deities, they were willing to give, as people consider them to be great wish-fulfillers. The effectiveness of petitions made in the *balalayam* helped her to get the construction of the temple started. Through mobilizing the support of people in her social network, she was able to finish the temple construction by mid-2012. She intended to continue the costly constructions and ceremonies demanded by the gods even though she was getting deeply into debt. Huge amounts of money had already been spent on clearing the grove, building the abodes and having priests perform the required ceremonies. At that time, however, again some issues in the family came up. Her son applied for a passport to travel and take up a job abroad but the application was rejected. Sarala again approached the astrologer who told her that two goddesses—Bhuvaneswari Devi and Sathyabhairavi Devi—wish to have separate temples. Because of envy Sathyabhairavi Devi even insisted on having a bigger temple than Bhuvaneswari Devi and the snake gods. Soon after, Sarala again managed to collect money, now for the construction of three temples: one for the serpent deities, one larger construction for Sathyabhairavi Devi and a very modest one for Bhuvaneswari Devi. Moreover, the astrologer said that adjacent to the temples there should be a kitchen built purposely for preparing food for the gods and an office near the temples to store the ritual materials and administer the offerings and monetary revenues. To mobilize people for financing all this, Sarala placed banners and posters inside the grove claiming that it was a serpent shrine. She also circulated announcements explaining the condition of the sacred grove, the reasons for having more rituals performed and the names of the priests conducting these rituals.

When in 2013 the sacred grove further developed into a temple complex containing a serpent shrine and two goddess temples, the deities appeared to become even more demanding. This put Sarala in a precarious position between domains of purity and impurity, since on top of ornaments and a separate temple, Bhuvaneswari Devi now asked for non-vegetarian food and liquor. This meant that Sarala had to prepare such food and offer it to her every week. Moreover, she was told by an astrologer that an evil spirit named Karimkutty, residing there in the open air, demanded rice flakes and three varieties of liquor, full glasses of each. Sarala learned that if the glasses would not be full the god would cause some misfortune in the family. Alcohol offerings exist only in lower-caste people's sacred groves. As Sarala's husband belongs to a lower caste, these demands could be fulfilled along caste lines; otherwise this would not have been possible in a Nair shrine. Alcohol and non-vegetarian food offerings to lower deities are habitually to be placed in the *puja* (worship) room inside the house; after some time Sarala and her family would consume it. The rest of the offerings, vegetarian substances such as turmeric, rice flour and coconut pieces meant for the higher deities, are to be given inside the grove. A priest recommended that she should not cook non-vegetarian food even for the family in the traditional cooking style (in the open fire with firewood inside the kitchen), since the deities in the grove (except Bhuvaneswari Devi) might condemn it. Flaws in divine diets may have serious consequences for those who provide them. Sarala's life began to become more complicated by the day. She now cooked non-vegetarian food on the gas stove in her own kitchen in order to follow the various dietary rules. Snake gods apparently did not have a problem when non-vegetarian food was prepared on a modern gas stove. Though Sarala, as she is married into the lower caste of her husband, did consume non-vegetarian food, she would not enter the grove on the day she did so. The grove is considered as purer than the house. Sarala and her daughter will enter the grove only after having taken a bath, and they will not enter the grove at the time of menstruation.

Whenever they can manage to raise some money from devotees or from their relatives they continue to modify the deities' housing arrangements in the grove. Periodically Sarala will call the astrologers to know the will of snake gods and *devis* in the grove and have the necessary rituals performed. Whenever the gods demand rituals on a grander scale Sarala will have printed notices distributed in the village and its surroundings, in which she invites people to participate in the auspicious functions. Now that the three temples are established, many people continue visiting the sacred site, taking along many types of offerings: cash payments, milk, turmeric, rice, oil, pudding, flowers, silk, coconuts, sweets, incense, or whatever they wish to give. Besides the daily visits to the grove, people also come for special occasions, such as weddings and *choroonu* (feeding rice to a baby for the first time). Another important offering is *thulabharam*, the traditional offering of the equivalent of one's body-weight in such materials as flour, sugar, jaggery, butter, ghee, coconut, gold, silver or any other precious material. These rituals show that, by 2013, people in the community were appropriating and supporting the site and making it part of their personal and family history.

The money obtained from selling the material offerings and the cash donations are managed by Sarala alone. The devotees usually put money in the *bhandaram* (collection box) when they visit the deities and Sarala collects the money intermittently. She uses it for the maintenance of the site and the temples. She also uses the money for giving fees to the priests performing the rituals and for buying *puja* (daily ritual) necessities and temple commodities. Sometimes she gives free meals to people associated with the temple ceremonies. She also uses part of the money for settling her debts associated with temple construction. Devotees belonging to a wide range of castes have given her monetary support for building the temples, for buying the ritual commodities and for having special prayers said. Sarala never asks money from relatives. She rather takes loans from banks and money lenders and from the societies in which she owns a share (so-called *chit* funds: savings schemes existing all over India and a common tool for raising money among lower middleclass in Kerala). She also borrows money from her work-place. In a room inside her home, Sarala keeps a store of *nilavilakku* lamps (traditional bronze lamps, used in rituals and ceremonies) that she received from the devotees by way of gratitude for having had their wishes fulfilled. Sometimes she sells these lamps to make some money for meeting temple-related expenses. She intends to continue the costly constructions and ceremonies demanded by the gods even though she is getting deeply into debt. She spent nearly one million rupees (14,210 EUR) on clearing the grove, building the temples and doing the related ceremonies. She is hopeful that she can settle her debts once her grove starts attracting higher numbers of devotees, bringing cash and other offerings to her place. Early 2013, Sarala finished the construction of the three temples but she still has to raise the money for making a kitchen and an office inside the sacred grove.

To attract public attention and more devotees to her shrine, she celebrated a temple festival in January 2013, right after the consecration of the three temples. More than 2000 EUR were spent on the function. The fee alone for the Brahmin priest already amounted to 1000 EUR. During this festival, prayer rituals were conducted for three days. On the fourth day the *ashttanagakalam* ceremony, a special invocation for pleasing eight serpent deities, was performed. It is usually conducted in the night time, as it is believed that the snake gods will come out quickly at that moment. The sacred grove and the temples inside the grove were nicely decorated with lights and flowers. Abstract drawings of intertwined snake gods, made of different colors, were drawn on the floor. Pulluva priests recited songs to invoke the serpent deities. It is expected that on such occasions the spirits of snake gods may enter especially some of the female devotees. As soon as the gods take possession of the young girls, these girls start to dance in trance, undulating like snakes. Sarala's daughter, her relative, a neighbor and a small girl danced in acrobatic style and indeed became oracles. Among them especially Sarala's daughter performed vigorously and in her trance she mediated between men and deities. Brahmin priests asked questions to the oracles on matters raised by devotees. Sarala's grandchild was playing joyfully while watching the ceremonies and the priest predicted that by the age of 12 he will also become an oracle. In this way, the line of inheriting property and religious skills—from

Sarala's mother's death till her great-grandson becoming an oracle—seems to be inscribed into the development of this particular sacred grove.

Ever since that first time in 2013, Sarala organizes an elaborate version of the *punaprathishtta* ceremony every year in January. It is called a festival because of the high number of devotees coming, the elaborate ritual program offered to the audience and the temples being “properly” built now. Even the open-air temple for the snake gods has a more proper appearance by now as the height of the surrounding wall has doubled and has to be closed with an iron gate. Although the place is still called a grove, there is, with only one relatively small tree left from what used to be a *kaavu*, a predominance of bricks, cement, paint and iron locks. While the ritual and gift economies are flourishing in this bustling and crowded built environment, any claim to “untouched” vegetation or “biodiversity” has gone. Even when grove-owners like Sarala feel less shameful when the devastation of nature takes place under the guidance of religious authorities and with religious rituals, the clearing and subsequent economic operation of the site still remain contested in society. Sarala's sisters who married Christian husbands do not visit the site and condemn the way she exploits her land. Additionally, many villagers accuse her of making profit on her grove, which she firmly denies. Since the state protects the sacred groves in Kerala, government officials visit the sites and offer financial help to those who properly conserve the nature in their *kaavu*. When in 2015 officials visited Sarala's grove, they were not happy with the condition of the flora, said it did not look like a grove at all and refused any financial help. Sarala then planted some saplings in pots and kept them near the grove, but the effort does not look very convincing since the plants are ailing.

6. Less Green, More Money, but Also Increasing Debts: Discussion and Conclusion

In our focus on Sarala's case—an ongoing entanglement of religious devotion, fears of demanding and revengeful deities, consultations with various priestly specialists, and ever more complicated patterns of religious gift-giving—we have shown an intriguing example of the ambiguity and ambivalence of religious practice. We found that priests of various castes accommodated their ritual repertoire to changing social and spatial conditions, just as local people were apt to pragmatically adjust their priorities when their socio-economic conditions changed.

For priests of various castes, astrologers, and small-scale religious entrepreneurs, clearing sacred groves is booming business. In times of change and new opportunities they respond to people's need for spiritual protection and effective cures by offering mitigating rituals from the same ritual toolkit which used to thrive on fears of the forces of untamed nature. Religious specialists thus do not keep people from economically exploiting the land; they even accommodate and facilitate the process of environmental degradation by offering, on the one hand, soothing rituals to their clients in need of dwellings and blessings, and, on the other hand, gentrified places to the deities, with a constant supply of offerings guaranteed. They herewith frustrate the government's science-inspired campaign to protect the groves as crucial pockets of biodiversity. On the clients' side the sacred obviously keeps pulling at human hearts, at purse strings, and at hopes in an otherwise often vulnerable existence. Although tradition-instilled fears of the sacred may incite them to avoid the wrath of deities living non-domesticated lives among patches of relatively undisturbed forest, daily living conditions make human interaction (as well as intervention) with the deities' favored habitat increasingly common. One of the points of encounter between human habitats and the domain of the naturally sacred is man's need of land: for roads, for food, for raw material, for building activities. In people's effort to save the grove when using the land for other purposes, it is the deity who stands center stage, not the tree, the greenery, or the forest. People's ethical problem with clearing the groves apparently is the disturbance of the gods, and not so much the destruction of nature.

Not everything is rosy for those involved, though. Some forward-looking ritual specialists face the predicament that in assiduously assisting the clearing of sacred groves their next generation may be out of business altogether. Grove-owners like Sarala (who merely wanted to build a house on her ancestral land) get caught up in an intensified and at times maddening circle of debts and divine

demands. Whereas formerly the forces in nature were satisfied with occasional simple offerings in the forest, once these entities have been shifted and installed as part of human habitats they begin to voice ever more exacting demands.

Rather than finding a relationship between the clearing of groves and a loss of religion we thus found that the clearing resulted in an intensification of both religion and the grove's economy, with more and more temples built, rituals done, offerings given, and the claims of the gods becoming ever more complicated and compelling. The grove's wealth developed in what we call a sacred economy: people's balanced reciprocal relationship with the spiritual world produced by a careful management of spiritual resources based on gift-exchange [46,47], while also negotiating prices and offers with religious specialists in the cash economy of the ritual market. Today, Sarala's shrine management looks like running a business: advertising, collecting incomes, building and maintaining the temples, preparing food for different gods and large numbers of devotees, shopping for and selling offerings, pledging gold, leasing property, hiring and mobilizing people for practical, ritual and financial support, negotiating best prices with priests, purchasing the necessary ritual items, paying debts, contracting loans, finding new funds, and last but not least, doing a time-consuming financial administration. Grove-owners like Sarala make a determined effort to maximize the benefits and minimize the detriments of spiritual powers by investing money and devoting lots of attention and physical work to these powers. These efforts appear to result in a multilayered economy of gifts and cash payments, circulating between gods and devotees and between owners and priests. This intrinsic relationship between religion and economy explains why nature could disappear without taking the gods and the related religious practices along. Though the groves have cultural capital—the vegetation along with the dances and songs performed there—people's need of the day is money. They therefore build economic capital at the expense of cultural capital but simultaneously gain social and symbolic capital that give both deities and devotees more power.

Apart from the downsides of the damaging developments (like deforestation, ethical problems, deep debts, and conflicting demands) we thus also see empowerment. Lower-caste priests claim privileged access to the possibly dangerous deities and the potentially lucrative timber business. Comfort- and prestige-loving deities keep the construction business revolving. Spacious temple complexes cater to increasing crowds. Additionally, Sarala, being a female grove-owner, although being married to a lower-class husband and being a sweeper by profession, has become a religious entrepreneur in her own right: instead of restricting the abode of the deities or having them relocated to one of the famous snake temples, she opted for constructing increasingly prestigious housing for the deities on her own plot of land. Though she classes the transformation of her grove under *punaprathishtha* (which would entail a restriction of the deity's dwelling), her intense devotion to and interaction with the gods has brought her as well as the gods much expansion. She now finds herself, to her own surprise, to be managing a business, functioning as a religious intermediary, and even transmitting this priestly position to her daughter and grandchild. The devotees recognize her spiritual leadership: they accept her as an oracle, mediating between the priests, local people and the powerful gods. Sarala quotes, as evidence for her authority, that she has exceptional commanding power over snakes, "which are feared by everyone". While scriptural religion may be restrictive by imposing taboos and interdictions concerning nature conservation, people apparently find in their lived religion a variety of strategic possibilities that oppose prescribed religion but effectively help to improve their day-to-day circumstances [48].

What may be the rationale keeping these sacred economies and cultural complexities going, admittedly at the cost of green habitats and crucial biodiversities? We have seen that the socio-religious and socio-economic entanglements revolve around the core issue of mixed benefits and multiple stakeholders: spiritual solace, monetary gains, social capital, and female empowerment. However, these come with a price in terms of a de-natured alienation. Priests who were supposed to act as representatives of grove-dwelling entities now find themselves selling out the last green niches. Former grove-owners have become managers of a brick, mortar and cement compound in which

humans and gods appear to flourish but nature obviously does not. In worldwide debates on the relations between religion and nature the sacred groves of Kerala are often referred to as felicitous examples of the conserving power of religious reverence. This may have been so in the past. Today many of the socio-economic and spatial transformations, in tandem with duplicities and ambiguities so characteristic of lived religion, indicate that people in Kerala have not become less religious today, but rather religious in a different way. Initial fear of the wild and awe of the sacred is overwritten with rituals of domestication, gentrification and templeization and with economic rituals of reciprocity and gift-giving.

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