

## **Journey to the Center of the World Indigenous Cosmogony of Kuttia Kondh in Odisha**

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### **Abstract**

Recent studies in anthropology have stressed the need to reconsider the issue of otherness and pluralism by drawing inspiration from indigenous ontologies and, thus, reassessing human/non-human relations. Starting from this premise, this article develops an analogous paradigm by offering the case study of ethnographic research on an aboriginal group (*ādivāsī*), the Kuttia Kondhs, living in one of the most remote and pristine jungles of India (Odisha). It presents a twofold journey through the symbolic analysis of the Myth of Creation (Kui Gaani) and the unprecedented documentation of a sacred site that is believed to be the centre of the cosmos. This is Sopāngadā, a sacred hill covered with forest, the womb of mother earth, from which beings emerged. One of the earliest pieces evidence is the close kinship and consubstantiality among human/non-human agencies composing the hill, a real living entity that embodies the *ādivāsī* macrocosm.

### **Keywords**

Kuttia Kondh, Sopangada (Sapangada), cosmology, shamanism, animism, Odisha

### **Introduction**

In the past century, and especially in the last two decades, the West has become more open to multiplicity and bridging the ethical and epistemological monism that has so persistently determined our cultural line. Inspired by the cultures of the Amazon, Philippe Descola (2005) has outlined ontologies that pay particular attention to the cosmological visions of indigenous peoples. From his perspective, all entities share the same interiority, while differentiating in their specific exteriorities; i.e., all observe the world from a particular perspective and define it through a specific set of relationships. Using the same framework, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2002) has observed

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how the conception of the world is populated by a number of other entities or persons besides human beings who perceive reality in a different fashion. Hence, he proposes assuming indigenous conceptual systems as pathways of philosophy, as experiences of thought, not in the sense of “imagine an experience”, but in that of “experience a thought” (Viveiros de Castro 1996: 131–132). For instance, he notes how a universal notion encountered in myths is that of an original state of non-differentiation between humans and animals. Myths are populated with beings whose shapes – and names and behaviours – are inextricably mixed with human and animal attributes in a shared context of inter-communicability identical to what is defined as the intra-human world. The differentiation between culture and nature shown by Claude Lévi-Strauss to be a central theme in Amerindian mythology is not a process of differentiation of humans from animals as in our evolutionary mythology. The common original condition, for both humans and animals is, therefore, not that of animality, but humanity (Lévi-Strauss 1985: 14, 190). The great mythical separation does not reveal how the culture distinguishes itself from nature; rather, it describes how nature moves away from culture: myths tell us much about how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans. In short, the common reference for all beings, and not just humans as a species, is that of humanity as a condition (Descola 1986: 120). This article will try to show how the paradigm of these South-American studies is largely applicable to the *ādivāsī* cultures of India as well. The case study is based on the culture of a small indigenous community in the state of Odisha, the Kuttia Kondhs.<sup>1</sup> The empathy and non-discrimination among entities is theorized by the cosmogonic myth embodied today in the ancestral place of creation and perceived as a physical site which constitutes an integral part of sacred geography.

The Kondhs are a major scheduled tribe of Odisha, today listed as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), and have many subsections. According to the latest Census of India, the total population exceeds 900,000 people, some of whom live in the neighbouring states of Andhra and Madhya Pradesh (Singh 2001: 590–596).<sup>2</sup> The Kuttia subgroup is one of the smallest of these subgroups, amounting to a few thousand people concentrated in the jungles of the highlands near Phulbani (Khandmal district). In Tumudibandh Block, subdivision and *tahasīl* of Balliguda a total of 68 settlements are divided into the *grām pañcāyat* of Belghar (36 villages)

<sup>1</sup> For an initial solid ethnography of this indigenous community of Odisha see Hermann Niggemeyer (1964).

<sup>2</sup> Data updated at the website of Ministry of Home Affairs - Census of India, Government of India: <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/> (15 April 2014).

and Guma (32 villages). The territory (at altitude: 2,255 ft; location: 19.45'–20.5' N; 83.30'–83.45' E) covers 16,174.46 acres, which includes 12,298.02 acres of reserve forest; the rest is land that is barely cultivable. According to data of Kuttia Kondh Development Agency of Belghar, the total population of the area comprises more than 7,000 Hindus and ca. 5,000 Kuttia Kondhs.<sup>3</sup>

### Sopāngaḍā – the centre of the universe

Hidden deep in the forest of Khandmal there is a magical site considered by the indigenous communities of the area as the centre of the Universe, a place where in the remote past creation originated. The site is located on top of a sacred hill known as Sopāngaḍā (or Sapāngaḍā), which is naturally protected by the geography of the place. Here, according to the Kuttia Kondh, the first men and founders of all clans are said to have taken the first steps on earth. According to the cosmological myth, the human race – alongside the ranks of the most diverse animal species and classes of subtle beings – first saw the light of day through an opening in the ground, emerging in a primal birth from the womb of Mother Earth. This crevice in the land surface symbolizes access to the dimensions that compose the cosmos; according to the animistic/shamanic cult of the local community it represents a passage to access the recursive “Time of the Origins” and Creation. Sopāngaḍā is a real place. The site guarded by an arboreal amphitheatre is itself an inner *sanctum* of Kondh religiosity, where only a few priests and shamans are allowed to celebrate a series of extraordinary annual rites.

During fieldwork in this area, I was told innumerable myths and legends about the sacred hill, the scenario of many wondrous events and mythological stories involving the deities of the Kondh pantheon, so that eventually I decided to visit the site. However, a preliminary clarification of some cosmological features is necessary. The Kondhs, as well as other groups of the area, have quite an articulate conception of the sacred geography. The reality of the village and the natural universe, i.e., the chaotic and wild surrounding jungle, are seen as expressions of the complexity of

<sup>3</sup> The discontinuous fieldwork was carried out in the villages of Guma GP between 1998 and 2012: October 1998 / February 1999 M.A. fieldwork in Kandhamal and Rayagada; January / April 2001 Research Project funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; November / December 2002 Research and development cooperation in Khandmal (“Orissa Mission”) funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Government of the Veneto Region; September / October 2005 PhD fieldwork; research with Academy of Tribal Languages and Cultures of Bhubaneswar; January / February 2007 individual research; December 2011 / January 2012 individual research.

the space. This entire space is considered sacred and every element in it is a manifestation of the cosmogonic act and consubstantial with the Universe itself. This vision is supported by the continuity between empirical reality and the subtle world which in *ādivāsī* cultures corresponds exactly to the dimension of nature. This space comprises all divine manifestations which appear to man, and through which man interacts with the sacred. Hence, every site with particular natural morphological characteristics, every cross-road, every altar, is considered a microcosm.

It is a matter of “worlds”, not imaginary, but rather conceived, perceived or often represented graphically and artistically or even evoked through words in the enunciation of the ritual liturgy, reproducing the structure of the cosmos and its orientation. It goes without saying that the orientation of the sacred space takes place through the identification of its centre. The complex grid of sacred geography is here generally understood as the *summa* of the locations of sacred spaces of a specific religious group. However, as in many other cultures in the world, for the Kondhs, too, the centre of space coincides with the place of foundation of the Universe.

In this sense, the representations of the cosmos in the shape of *maṇḍalas* (“circles”) drawn with rice flour or the *jakhri*, i.e., the place of sacrifice to the goddess, often improperly translated as “altar” and usually composed by aligned stones set up during ceremonies with other wooden structures, branches and bamboo, are fascinating features of tribal cosmogonic imagination. Alongside the *jakhri*, often prepared as relief maps (with each stone placed to represent a kind of scale model of the surrounding hills/deities, see Figure 1), rises the *kurumunda*, the aniconic image of the deity consisting of a wooden pole. The *kurumunda* comes from the trunk of the *sāl* tree (*Shorea robusta*) and is often decorated with carved geometric motifs (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Two types are found among the Kondhs: those neatly carved and square on the top and those with a fork on their upper part, symbol of the cosmic dualism of Dharani and Bura Penu, the main female/male deities of the Kondh pantheon. Each village is called to renew *kurumunda* at the sacrifice of Meriā, the annual buffalo sacrifice in honour

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<sup>4</sup> The *sāl* chosen for this rite appears in a dream to the *kuttaka* (medicine man/shaman); an expedition consecrated by the *janis* (ordinary priests) of the surrounding villages have the task of cutting the tree and carry it to the settlement. There are also many auspicious or inauspicious signs for the choice of the plant which makes clear the strong affinity between this practice and that of the substitution, every 12 years, of the image of Jagannāth in the temple in Puri.

of the goddess.<sup>5</sup> Today, the Meriā sacrifice celebrates mainly fertility and the renewal of the world,<sup>6</sup> during which the victim, after being linked to these *kurumundas* that here represent simultaneously the goddess and the *axis mundi*, is offered to the goddess.

FIGURE 1: A *jakhri*, representing the hill-gods (Pedam village).



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- <sup>5</sup> In this context, it is important to remember that the Meriā sacrifice is the most sumptuous ritual in Kondh religiosity, and may be considered a spring festival. Originally, human beings whose blood was believed to fertilize the territory in times to come, were offered to Dharani Penu, the Earth-goddess. As a result of British campaigns (Meriah Wars, 1836-1862), some of them aimed at suppressing this ritual (Padel 2000; Beggiora 2010b), but above all as a result of a process of simplification and updating of the tradition, the victim of the sacrifice has been gradually replaced with a buffalo (Boal 1997; Padel 2000).
- <sup>6</sup> The festival lasts for eight days and the auspicious date is calculated according to the lunar phases starting from the Pūrṇimā Pūjā in the month of *māgha* (January/February), and sometimes culminating in the celebration in the month of *caitra* (March/April). In any case, the last day should coincide with the last full moon before the beginning of the new year (or the arrival of spring), a slack season between most of the harvesting and sowing.

FIGURE 2: The *kurumundas* at Sopāngadā hill.

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Beside Dharani Penu, there is a pantheon of deities (Jena 2006: 123–150) that includes ancestral spirits presiding over natural phenomena that are perceived as a quasi-personification of the hills of the area (Seeland 1997: 101–112). Among the many Kondh subgroups of Odisha two sites play a major role in their mythical and cosmogonic universe: the Niyamgiri hill, the sacred mountain for the Dongaria Kondhs (Kalahandi district; see Beggiora 2010a), and Sopāngadā, in the very heart of the Kuttia Kondh territory. Notably, both sites represent a *topos*, the archaic symbolism of the mountain and the sacred grove. Local traditions look at these sacred sites as “centres” or as peripheral access to the centre of the Universe. For this reason these places are mentioned in mythological cycles, songs and epic narratives transmitted orally from generation to generation. Many elements of this oral tradition, however, are variable and often overlap. However, to judge by the topics covered by the corpus of Kui Gaani (Jena 2006: 308–440), the cosmogonic epic of the Kuttia Kondhs, the site of Sopāngadā is probably the oldest in the entire Kondh territory.

From the plateau of Khandmal with the settlements of Kranja, Pedam, Deogadha and Nuamunda a small jungle track leads to the “centre of the world”. Leaving behind the cultivated fields and villages and proceeding eastwards it reaches the woodlands. There are no steep gradients, only a

depression marked by a low waterway along the slopes of Sopāngadā. It is not easy to distinguish the exact trail leading to the hill in the uneven terrain from among the many other trails that intersect the area.<sup>7</sup>

Inside the sacred site, at some distance from the gap from which the first men are believed to have emerged, our group came across a large clearing surrounded by trees of considerable size, the branches and creepers of which fork off to form a canopy at some height from the ground (*kambani*).<sup>8</sup> There, we found some *kurumunda* poles erected in honour of Dharani Penu, at the foot of which we noticed some bones, presumably of sacrificial victims, mostly buffaloes, offered to the deity. A little further on we noticed that in the area of the “primordial hole” there was a slope covered by grass. Apparently, today it is impossible to identify the exact spot, which not all villagers are allowed to access.<sup>9</sup> The place I was shown by local *pūjārī* (priests) is a slight depression in the terrain. Probably, this was a pit or natural basin that filled up with soil over time, thereby smoothing out its contours and allowing a cover of vegetation to build up.

### **On *omphalos*, *nāgas* and water spirits**

The stream running through the place is called Kadakambeli. Next to it I noticed the remnants of a low brick wall overgrown with creepers. The documents of the colonial era do not mention the presence of fortifications in the area; it could have been more ancient, but I had no means to determine that. The villagers believe that the structure has been there since the beginning of time. In their belief, this is the home of Bendi Alu and Rani Alu, a mythical king and queen of an ancient kingdom nowadays revered as *penu* (spirit or deity) and as ancestral entities of the place.

Interestingly, next to a spring water course, a white, oval-shaped stone has been driven into the ground, a pair of spans (approx. 40–50 cm) high. Although it was impossible to define the exact nature of the stone, it certainly is an anomalous element in the landscape, its whiteness standing

<sup>7</sup> For this study the author would like to acknowledge our guides and most important informants: Lokonath Majhi, head of the *mutha* (a section including several Kondh villages); Buda *pūjārī* of Sopāngadā; Korme *kuttaka* of Kranja; Sakadadu Majhi, *kuttakaru* of Kadapana; Sidha Majhi, *kuttaka* of Deogada; Kabanga Majhi, *kuttaka* of Pedam; Janluka Majhi, *jani* of Pedam; and Kodala Majhi, *jani* of Pedam (after the Janluka’s premature death).

<sup>8</sup> This high vegetation that typically covers the top of the hills is especially sacred and is associated with Soru Penu, the Kondh hill-deity.

<sup>9</sup> As we will see later, the cult is restricted to certain clans of the village of Kranja. For reasons of purity, women are excluded from some major rituals.

out in the dark green undergrowth of the landscape. It was impossible to determine whether the stone was part of the natural environment or was brought there from elsewhere. However, a careful examination of the surface showed it to be smooth, with particular irregularities on the front that seemed to be crossed by a winding relief, similar to the tail of a *nāga* or *nāginī* (snake god or goddess). The theme of the arched stone placed at the centre of the Universe or in the city of the gods is well known. In the absence of other specific references and details, I imagine this site as a real cosmic ὀμφαλός (*omphalos*)<sup>10</sup> of Kondh tradition.<sup>11</sup>

In classical studies and archeology the snake is regarded as the protector of the ὀμφαλός or even as the symbolic umbilical cord of the world. On the other hand, in India there is a close relationship between the *nāga* and water. Broadly speaking, Hinduism considers *nāgas* as spirits that govern natural events such as storms or as guardians of wells, lakes and streams as well as inhabitants of the *pātālas*, the underworld, chthonic extensions of the Universe that in cosmological tradition are characterized by an aqueous, oceanic dimension. Similar figures exist in local *ādivāsī* traditions. Dynamism and impetuous movement is the main feature of different classes of spirits, whose name usually repeats the onomatopoeic sound of the roar of a stream or water on rocks, etc. (Beggiora 2010a: 136). These spirits, similar to naiads or nymphs, live in waterfalls, streams or springs in the forest. Although all subtle entities of this shamanic pantheon are intended in both their masculine and feminine forms, most of the testimonies and legends I have encountered concern feminine aquatic beings. These spirits or deities, Ganghī Penu, are frequently depicted in the shape of beautiful girls with loose raven hair, sometimes wearing long robes (*dhotī*) and floating trains. More often they take the shape of water snakes and their manifestation is imagined as the glare of reflected and fleeting light on the surface of the waves. Similar in every way to the *nāginī* of the classical tradition, they escort the main deities, entertaining them with dance and music, and sometimes they are even understood as emanations of a superior deity.

In Odisha, a historical cultural osmosis occurred between *śākta* traditions and *ādivāsī* religiosity, so that many goddesses became identified with each other (Schnepel 1995: 145–166). In this process, the association of

<sup>10</sup> In Hellenic religious symbolism, the *omphalos* (“navel”) has a cosmological connotation representing the centre of the world. The sacred stone or *baetylus* distinguishes a holy place.

<sup>11</sup> Similar depictions are encountered in many different and distant cultures, such as the Greek (Python of Delphi), Etruscan, Egyptian and even the prehistoric-megalithic cultures (Ogden 2013: 88, 172–178; Muscarella 2013: 171, 541, 795–798).



female water-spirits of the indigenous tradition (*penu*) with the Hindu *nāginī* appears plausible. However, these *penu*, if benevolent, act as guardians of holy places, whereas if angry they are depicted as evil spirits causing dangerous accidents for travellers. In general, they attack man, causing circulatory problems, such as collapse, bleeding and other signs of a loss/absorption of the vital fluid, similar to the *vetāla*<sup>12</sup> in Hindu tradition. Interestingly, these deities preside over springs – or sources of the whole water circulation system of the cosmos – while at the same time they have the power to influence the human cardiovascular system. Further down the qualitative scale of manifestation, the *vetāla* is situated in the sphere of magic/witchcraft, similar to what we encounter in folklore and tribal traditions.

As a benevolent deity, Ganghī Penu is the patron of crops, whereas in her wrathful appearance she is depicted as a frightening goddess that lives in streams and headwaters. These places are believed to be populated by some child-spirits, understood to be her victims and consequently linked with water. Rather than the souls of the deceased, these child-spirits are the “sons of the river”, predestined to die prematurely or to remain imprisoned in an embryonic state. Similarly, in Kondh culture, too, water represents a transitional phase, possessing both destructive and germinative properties. Some *kuttaka* or shamans (f. *kuttakaru*) describe the afterlife in the sublimated image of a watery expanse (*pātāla loka*). Nevertheless, the spring appears as a symbol of the potential gate between the world of the living and the dead or between the manifested and un-manifested world.<sup>13</sup>

In my view, the most interesting aspect is that Sopāngaḍā represents a way through. Similarly, in the tradition of *ādivāsī* cultures, springs are believed to be the gates to the underworld, *in extenso* the afterlife. Again, the water flowing from the rock is imagined as a *tūrtha*, i.e., the ford joining the dimensions that comprise the cosmos.

Some villagers also told us about the presence at the top of Sopāngaḍā of a huge *sāl* tree, again reiterating the axial symbolism. The *sāl* tree is extremely important because it is considered the hallmark of the forest called *tuleni*, or the burial ground (or of timber collection for a cremation pyre, if needed).<sup>14</sup> Consequently, access to the *tuleni* forest is generally taboo, granted

<sup>12</sup> A demon inclined to absorb the life energy of his victims.

<sup>13</sup> For a reference to the birth of children and the river at the site of Sopāngaḍā, see Jena 2006: 145.

<sup>14</sup> The funeral ritual is based on cremation and the burial of ashes. An offering of food is necessary to the dead as viaticum for the afterlife. Only in case of the premature death of children or pregnant women do the Kondhs bury the corpses and sacrifice a pig to appease evil spirits.

only to the shamans during their search for medicinal plants or for ritual use. This sacred site is the home of Dukkali Penu, a guardian deity of the ancestors. As ancestral entity presiding over this part of the jungle, he resembles a *banadevatā*<sup>15</sup> in a context in which both the living and the dead, gods and plants seem to share a strong affinity and kinship.

### The song of creation – Kui Gaani

According to an attempted etymological reconstruction, although not definitive given the variations and different inflections from village to village, the ancient name of Sopāngaḍā indicates the act of Creation of man from the gap on the ground, as mentioned above. Literally in Kui,<sup>16</sup> the language of the Kuttia Kondhs, the term derives from *sapāni* indicating the birth, whereas the term *gaḍā*, rather than indicating a generic hole, refers more properly to a well.<sup>17</sup>

Kui Gaani is a Kondh saga telling the epic story of Creation. It is a narrative cycle transmitted orally. Several versions exist. Most sources report only fragments of it, while a minority provide more or less complete versions (AA.VV. 1993; Jena 2006: 308–440).<sup>18</sup> Although the Kui Gaani develops several stories and legends, the original corpus is actually a song with interchangeable and recurring modules, as if they were real bars of a song, an epic cycle, as it were, in stanzas.

<sup>15</sup> In the Hindu context, they are the gods and goddesses of the forest, presiding over the holy and ancestral sites of the jungle (*van/ban*, forest; *devatā*, gods).

<sup>16</sup> Kui belongs to the Dravidian family of languages.

<sup>17</sup> This agrees with the theory of the waters we mentioned above. Some informants claimed that the term *kutti* is a synonym for hole or pit, and therefore the name Kuttia Kondh would indicate precisely the “people of the pit”. Other sources suggest its origin lies in the Oriya – or other non-tribal – roots (*kut*) of “mountain” or “hut” (Behera 2013: 196).

<sup>18</sup> I recorded 50 stanzas (relating to the order of appearance of beings) during a lengthy interview with Lokonath Majhi in 2002 at the village of Pedam. As the interviewee had trouble speaking due to malaria, it is difficult to clearly identify this section in the version of Jena. Sara Todeschini recorded the whole opening section during fieldwork in 2006–2007; it appears to be relevant to Jena (Sara Todeschini, *Kuttaka e Kuttakaḍu, tradizione sciamanica tra i Kuttia Kondh dell’Orissa*, MA thesis, University Ca’ Foscari of Venice, unpublished). It is a collection of hundreds of verses clustered in songs that evoke scenes of hunting, farming and mythical events, without any evident logical thread. It is in fact a sequence of visions, of awesomenesses that do not necessarily appear linked by a narrative sequence. However, this is oral tradition, an indigenous literature that should be seen as flexible and mutable and that is today one of the clearest examples of intangible cultural heritage.

According to the legend, the first men lived in the subsoil, described as a gloomy place very different from the reality at the surface, seen as a fleeting image reflected in a mirror. This idea of a cosmos that at the same time mediates between empirical reality and an underlying parallel dimension is quite widespread among the *ādivāsī* cultures of the area. However, in the opening of the cosmogonic cycle as described by the Kondhs this dimension resembles a prenatal limbo. The first men, seeing a ray of sunlight penetrating the darkness of the underworld through the Sopāngaḍā hole, began to climb towards the dazzling light. They eventually emerged through the hole and, with the blessing of the goddess Nirantali, began their life in the new earthly world. If Dharani is a sublimated image that expresses the power of the divine (*śakti* in Hindu terms), in what is probably the oldest corpus of legends Nirantali is the primordial form of the same goddess in the shape of a teenage girl.

It is interesting to note that according to the myth of Sopāngaḍā the unborn beings are not actually created in that instant by Nirantali (or Dharani Penu), but have already been born. Thus, it would not be a creation *ex nihilo*, but the manifestation of an embryonic, latent state, similar to that of a chrysalis. According to a more widespread concept encountered in Kondh cosmology, the manifest universe and the chthonic dimension are two parallel levels, one being a reflection of the other. On several occasions, the *kuttakas* testified that everything that exists on earth exists in the underground too; similarly, the two worlds are apparently identical and divided only by the ephemeral line of the Earth's surface. Consequently, creation – which had already occurred in the underground – reiterates the appearance of the manifested world in the empirical dimension. On the other hand, the Kondh contemplate a *post mortem* vision that envisages the return of the soul to the underground and, hence, reiterate the commonly found concept of cyclic and recursive time in this *ādivāsī* culture too.

In the myth of creation narrated in the sacred songs of the Kuttia people it is said that the primordial beings were mixed together as seeds of various plants collected in a clay pot. This interesting image keeps returning in most stanzas in many versions of the song. A single representation expresses all the power of the *in fieri* creation in an agricultural setting. From this primordial admixture of seeds originates a strict chronological order of appearance of various plant and animal species of the earthly world. In the song, they are imagined as coming out in a row, one after another, sometimes as aligned seeds and sometimes as progressively more complex beings, but in principle still undifferentiated. We also notice that the sequential line in the order of appearance provides an idea of the beginning of the passage of time.

The Kondh recognize themselves as a socially distinct group separated by individuals from other areas and claim for their clans the primogeniture of humanity at the sacred site of Sopāngaḍā. The song contains some references to the Oriya people and foreigners, but with regard to the Kuttia community there is a term that in Kui translates the concept of lineage: *gochi*, i.e., major clans of the various villages. The *gochi* differ in number depending on the area, from a minimum of nine to a maximum of 21. As the Kui Gaani states, the Kondh people born of Sopāngaḍā are divided into 21 lineages: Nundruka (or Nondruka), Timaka, Saraka, Gunjika, Sukubicaka, Andaka, Nindaka (or Mindaka), Ulaka (or Urlaka), Bandalaka, Damanaka, Rodomika, Sukunga, Prepanga, Sunamudanga, Pangranga, Shidanja, Kamralinga, Dulaka, Bidraka, Sakadaka and Garanka.<sup>19</sup>

The myth tells how the first-born among the Kondh clans were the Timakas, a group chosen for celebrating the rites of the Goddess, among whom the most powerful among the shamans and the only ones claiming the right to guard the cult at Sopāngaḍā would be born. Later the Nundrukas were born and subsequently all other *gochi*. Even today, those belonging to the Timaka and Nundruka clans boast that they are endowed with the birth-right of all humanity. A second version of the myth describes the Nundrukas as the first born from the womb of Mother Earth and beloved of Nirantali for their veneration. However, at a later stage the divinity, annoyed by the arrogance and boldness of this group due to their extraordinary innate athleticism and warlike attitude, decided to disown them, preferring the foresight and wisdom of the Timakas with regard to the office of the cult. However, it is interesting to note that in both versions of the myth the supreme authority of the descendants of the Timakas in religious matters is not questioned; the rivalry among the two clans is focused on the issue of birthright, suggesting a past struggle for supremacy between these two dominant groups. The former is characterized by a religious-priestly function, whereas among the latter martial aptitudes predominate.

The chief of the Kuttia settlements (*mutha*), Lokonath Majhi of Pedom village, told us the legend of Nirantali: the hesitant goddess decided for the birth of man in two places close to each other with similar characteristics, Kroilipanga and Damanapanga, on the top of the Sopāngaḍā hill. These names indicate the two species of bamboo, from the waterlogged habitats of which the Nundrukas and Timakas are also born. Some sources report a

<sup>19</sup> Although there are precise rules for metrics transliteration from Dravidian languages, the Kui is fundamentally still an unwritten dialect. Given the diversity of pronunciation of these names, varying from area to area, and considering that there is no agreement on a standard transliteration commonly accepted in the sources, diacritical marks are omitted here.

myth concerning the existence of two groups of people descended from two mythical brothers, Dambinguera and Minguera. These allegedly challenged each other in a trial of strength, thereafter becoming the founders of the human races. From the Kondh group sprang the Timaka and Nundruka clans and after them all the others in the birthplace of the bamboo or Knehelpanga and Damanpanga (perhaps Kroilipanga and Damanapanga?) (Jena 2000: 278–283). Regarding the primordial kinship between humans and animals and the ability of certain clans to perform a terianthropomorphic metamorphosis (Beggiora 2013: 93–107), William Macpherson reports in the colonial era a similar story of primeval opposing clans with regard to the worship of the goddess (Macpherson 1865: 108–109).

The bamboo plant is frequently linked to Nirantali (Dharani Penu). Yet another legend concerning Creation tells that once the goddess accidentally injured herself while cutting bamboo, and her blood dropped to the ground and immediately made it fertile. She then ordered men to cut her body into pieces, but they refused, opting instead for early human sacrifices. This is a clear reference to the primordial self-sacrifice of God (or the first man) and to the etiology of human sacrifice as a direct derivation (Patnaik 1992: 227–230). In the Kui Gaani, Nirantali is represented as a young village woman leading a life like any other Kondh girl. Everyday life, interspersed with unexpected and prodigious events, serves as a pretext to narrate the birth of all the elements of the cosmos. The bamboo arises flowering from the water, when the goddess immerses her body sprinkled with turmeric paste in a pond. Occasionally episodes seem to belong to another time, apparently suspending the narrative with the Kui Gaani. Conceivably, some episodes belong to an older cycle, such as the myth in which the male principle, Bura Penu, intent in Creation, opposes Dharani Penu, the chaotic and dynamic feminine principle, throwing clods of earth at her and creating turmoil in the cosmogonic plan, which is quite a well-known *topos* in the history of religions (Macpherson 1865: 84–85).

The Kui Gaani contains a delicate and touching image of the first men emerging from the womb of Mother Earth by following the light that filters through a sort of tunnel, a clear symbolic representation of primordial child-birth. Human groups, among which the future professions are enumerated, are crammed, crowded and compressed in the chthonic dimension. One theme that often recurs in the song is that these were Nirantali's creatures, but being far too numerous they appeared inappropriate for that place. The theme is paradoxical considering that these communities have always lived in at least partial isolation. Thus, the goddess began to wander towards the

primordial world carrying a lamp<sup>20</sup> to illuminate her steps. On several occasions, she pondered deeply, looking for a solution, imagining and considering all possible places of creation (*in fieri*) suitable for holding man and his birth. Unable to find a solution she is said to have sat holding her head in her hands, in a state of deep meditation.

At this point a tear is said to have fallen on her face, immediately followed by the spring of water from the nostrils of the deity. The light cut through the darkness, while simultaneously the goddess imagined the major stars, manifesting them in their primordial form. The appearance of the sun and moon simultaneously revealed the extension of heaven, the atmospheric and uranian dimension. Much later, beings who brought new life to the earthly world began to swarm out of the Sopāngaḍā hole.

I consider this primeval image of Nirantali almost unaware of her boundless creative power, seemingly wandering like a lost girl in the primordial dimension, an extremely suggestive one. Outwardly unable to solve the enigma of Creation, she curls up on herself in darkness. This posture of the goddess resembles the fetal *āsana* (posture) encountered in some Hindu *sādhanā* (spiritual practices), through which the ascetic reaches the contemplative state of *samādhi* (ultimate state of meditation), and here a symbol of cosmic birth. Moreover it is interesting to note that in these cultures every aspect of the manifestation seems to be conceived as a reaction to a previous state. For example, light comes from a physical source, the star, which in turn requires a celestial vault for its revolution. This dome is the more rarefied environment of the empirical dimension, but becomes increasingly dense, materializing the forms of the terrestrial surface: the trees, the jungle, etc. Peculiar to this vision is the prominence of the leading primordial elements: water and light.

With regard to the forest, a true synthesis of the Kondh shamanic cosmos in the Creation myth assumes specific features and functions. Tall trees, usually characterized by a large umbrella towards the top, serve to hold up the sky (*kambani*). As seen above, all plants are characterized by specific sexual connotations. Hence, after the recurring theme of the union/separation of the god and goddess, the “marital union” between trees of opposite gender gives rise to a lush forest. Similarly, the spirits or ancestral entities

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<sup>20</sup> The theme of the lamp is undoubtedly of great interest and very popular among the *ādivāsī* of the area. The soul of the shamans who wander in the underground is imagined to carry a light. The lamp becomes a symbol of the journey through darkness and substantially a symbol of rebirth. Among the Saoras, for example, the elderly shaman offers a lamp to the young initiate; by accepting it, the latter will be consecrated (reborn) as a new religious leader of the village. Among the Kondhs, the ritual of divination that precedes the establishment of a new settlement provides for the consecration of a lamp at the chosen site.

dwelling and governing these plants, although theoretically preserving the potential to manifest themselves as male or female, are generally understood to have the gendered shape of the associated tree or plant. In this sense, the spiritualization of the plants seems to be as important as the spiritualization of the meteorological phenomena or the animals (see below). These agents are the extra-human prototypes of the Other; therefore, man has a special relationship as an affine with other prototypical figures of otherness. This is attested by the fact that the different kinds of forest, such as *kambani* or *tuleni*, are considered like the *gochi*: clans, lineages, etc. The forests are, therefore, considered as “people of the trees”; as men they live a life of relationships in continuous change and development throughout time.

### The cosmic symbolism of the anthill

In the cycle of manifestation even animals are a result of subdivision in families, roughly following the chronological order of appearance. In the stories related in the Kui Gaani, there is a progression from the simplest species to the most complex, for instance from terrestrial beings to birds. Interestingly, the *kuttakas* and *janis* had a passionate discussion about ants and termites. They classified these according to colour, shape, winged or not, etc. These insects are among the animal regulators of the development of the forest, an important “living gear” of the whole environmental system. In nature the ant nest presents a striking structural analogy with the legendary site of Sopāngaḍā. Its striking features includes a hole in the ground from which, one by one in single file, the primeval elements, the first beings, emerge. The small size of the anthill – or rather of the termite mound – and its inhabitants seems to recall the idea of the primordial mixture of seeds that lined up one after the other symbolize the primordial families and the castes characterizing humanity. The termites are a perfect allegory, in which the structure of the anthill is a microcosmic representation. Another legend, part of the same cycle, sees the termites shaped from the blood of a primordial cow (Jena 2000: 279).

Moreover, I notice that even today the veneration of these natural structures is widespread in different areas of the Indian subcontinent. In some tribal areas, vermilion paste made from sindoor powder is applied on top of the anthill and religious rituals for the worship of Śiva<sup>21</sup> performed, as

<sup>21</sup> While the similarity between the structure of termite mounds and non-iconic representations of the god is pretty obvious, these often become the home of the cobra which takes shelter in the interior of the abandoned nests. These, like many trees chosen as refuge for

it were a natural *lingam*, a common symbol representing this god. I also observe that in many indigenous cultures around the world, the anthill is a symbol of the primeval mound/sacred hill and centre/origin of the world.

Yet another interesting example is the primordial tunnel through which the first beings appeared. According to one version of the myth, it was dug by a porcupine, an animal sacred to Nirantali and a shamanic animal in these cultures. The *kuttakas* argue that porcupines are able to find and show the way, as indicated by the song of creation. More generally, in the ancient hunter and gatherer cultures all animals called “diggers”, i.e. that build their dwelling in the ground, are considered shamanic, perhaps because symbolically they move from one dimension to another. The Kondhs also make amulets from the shoulder blades of the porcupine to protect against witchcraft. At Pedom village, I witnessed how one of these objects was fashioned into a ring. Besides the anthill and tunnel, other religious traditions as well as *ādivāsī* cultures emphasize a relationship between man and animals. This conception gave birth to the idea of a metamorphosis from man to animal that still today is a widespread belief and – rather than being a mere hint of folklore – reveal a deep relevance.

### Sacrifice to the gods

On the Kuttia side of Kondh tribes celebrate numerous annual religious festivals that differ from area to area. Some of them are common to most Kondh groups, whereas others are specific to the Khandmal area. For the Kuttia Kondh community the most important celebrations and highest in order of sacredness are those that take place in the heart of their ancestral land, i.e. the Sopāngaḍā.

Unlike the sacrifice of Meriā, which is held annually, the so-called Sopāngaḍā Pūjā is celebrated only on the occasion of exceptional or dramatic events, if deemed necessary by the *janis* of the villages and at the request of the Dharani Penu through the mouth of her *kuttakas*, otherwise on a regular five-year cycle, i.e. every five, ten or fifteen years. The testimonies collected are contradictory because access to the sacred site and participation at the

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similar reasons, are revered as sites of the divinity itself. Further, the cult of the termite mounds is important in the consecration of temples, in protecting access to villages from harmful influences and against evil spirits. Although the issue is complex and difficult to reconstruct from its somewhat mysterious origins, it is worth mentioning that the cult in India dates back to Vedic times and was ritually associated with the transition moments of human life, such as birth, marriage, illness and death (Irwin 1982: 339-360).



ritual is not generally granted; however, the event is coordinated for the whole plateau by the inhabitants of the village of Kranja.

Reflecting the hierarchical order of the *gochis*, those belonging to the Timaka clan are chosen to preside over the most sacred rite at the so-called centre of the world. Unlike the sacrifice of Meriā – a unique community festival held in rotation in the villages most affected by poor harvests or similar problems – the rite of Sopāngaḍā always begins in Kranja. Although the village is not inhabited exclusively by Timakas, it is considered to be one of their pristine settlements and is the closest to the track leading up the slopes of the sacred hill.

According to the social customs of the tribe, when a boy gets married he leaves the house of his father to settle elsewhere with his family, usually in a nearby village. Only the youngest male is allowed to remain in the parental home. The villages were quite flexible and in ancient times were frequently abandoned, as the tribe moved to new arable land. However, Kranja has an exceptional status. The Timakas, the Nundrukas and other *gochis* are usually distributed in the area. Nevertheless, in Kranja, the highest religious office for the Kuttia Kondhs is held by a single person, who is put in charge of the sacred site of Sopāngaḍā and elected by the will of the Goddess from among the Timaka *janis* or *kuttakas*.<sup>22</sup> If there are no impediments of any kind, the office of Sopāngaḍā *pūjārī* is hereditary and is transmitted from father to son; according to the strict patrilineal rules of the *gochi*, it is the first-born male who is chosen for this office.

The young *pūjārī* receives the typical call from the spirits to become *kuttaka* and is consecrated as formal heir to the office. Although not mandatory, the managing of Sopāngaḍā is undertaken mainly by shamans. Traditionally, it is also necessary for this figure to have a substitute, consecrated to the same office and chosen among the *janis*, *kuttakas* or other ritualists belonging to other clans who qualify on the basis of their authority, wisdom or knowledge of the Sopāngaḍā myth. In the event that the *pūjārī* of Timakas is incapacitated (for illness or for various kinds of impurities, such as births or deaths in the family of origin), the substitute performs the ritual actions. To confirm this practice, I note that when I arrived in Kranja, the Sopāngaḍā *pūjārī*, the elder Buda, was replaced by the *kuttaka* Korme. He confirmed

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<sup>22</sup> The sacred performers among the Kuttia Kondhs are commonly divided into two main ranks. The *jani* is the *pūjārī*, or the ordinary priest, who performs the customary rituals of village and is generally the depository of religious traditions and myths of the group. See footnotes 4 and 7. The *kuttaka* (or *kuttakaru* if female) is the shaman, the medicine-man (*bejju* or *bejjuni* in the area of Dongaria Kondhs). Since he can induce a state of trance in order to communicate with the divine, the *kuttaka* is considered to be of higher rank.

that he had settled in Kranja only later, after a particular apparition in a dream (or trance) and at the behest of the gods. His family came from elsewhere, though his father had been a *pūjārī*. Eventually, due to his advanced age, he recently passed the office to his son, Viśvanath *pūjārī*, who lives at the same site.

The Sopāngaḍā Pūjā follows a rite called Puni Kalu, a rite celebrated in every Kondh settlement in December/January in order to guarantee the prosperity of the territory. The date chosen for celebrating the Puni Kalu depends on the lunar calendar and coincides with the full moon. Generally, chicken or goats are sacrificed to the goddess, while the *kuttaka* or *kuttakaru* falls into trance in front of *kurumunda*, invoking the spirits. This is clearly a spring festival, the celebration of the harvest and a good omen for the success of agricultural activities and marks the beginning of the festival cycle. The houses are wiped down and cleaned inside and outside and the walls are plastered with fresh cow dung. The first millet, a small variety known as *kusla* or *kuiṛi*, depending on the area, is cooked and eaten. This millet is also used to produce, *katul*, a famous fermented liqueur. On the day of the full moon, while in all other villages the shamans and *pūjārīs* individually perform offerings to the major deities of the pantheon, the priests of Kranja set off towards the top of the Sopāngaḍā hill. On this occasion, all ritual taboos designed to preserve the purity of the officiant are observed, such as fasting, abstaining from alcohol and tobacco, avoiding any potentially contaminating situation, such as the presence of *kuttaka* alongside sick, dying or dead bodies, but also newborn babies and women who have just given birth.

Women are barred from the highest part of the Sopāngaḍā hill enclosing the most sacred site of the Mother-Earth goddess during the ritual. When menstruating, they are not to even meet the glance of the priests who travel to perform the rites or who, after completing the celebration, return from the sacred hill. Instead, the men of the Kranja village accompany the officiants into the forest, where they prepare the *kurumundas* for the rite and the required altars, arranging according to custom the animals that will be sacrificed and the *kuiṛi*, the long boiled millet gruel. After the sacrificial killings, the Sopāngaḍā *pūjārī* carries the severed heads and collected blood – accompanied by others bearing offerings – to different places within the sacred site and celebrates several rituals, offering gifts to the deity. After the *jakhṛis* and *kurumundas*, he visits the aforementioned white stone and another flat stone situated on the edge of the stream. There, they envisage the place where Nirantali dipped the first-born humans in the cosmos to wash and purify them – like a mother would do with her own baby.

FIGURE 3: Goat sacrifice near Sopāngaḍā hill.



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Among the animals sacrificed to the deities on the occasion of the Sopāngaḍā Pūjā the victim *par excellence*, as for Meriā, is the buffalo. The parallel between the two rituals performed not far apart in time from each other in honour of Dharani Penu is evident: both are meant to ensure good crops and fertile land for the community and for future generations. Conversely, I note that whereas the former is public, the latter is reserved for a small group; the former is performed during the day, whereas the sacrifices on the hill are mainly nocturnal; and, as mentioned above, the former takes place annually, whereas the other is far less frequent.

In this regard, I was told that the ritual paraphernalia used for Meriā are brought to the site for the Sopāngaḍā ritual too. These can vary from village to village, but chiefly consist of a sacrificial axe, a bamboo and a chain and handcuffs. The axe is known as *tangi* or *malatangi*. The use of this weapon is specific inasmuch as the killing must shed blood on the ground (the stroke is usually directed at the neck). This is necessary in order to perform the offering to the goddess. I was told that these sacred instruments should be soaked in the blood of the victims. All these paraphernalia are striking: although said to be of symbolic value only, the irons and shackles are clearly intended not for a buffalo, but a human being. The detail of the handcuffs too seems anomalous, since the instrument appears to be of recent origin. The sacredness of the object is a very clear symbol that tradition is evidently alive and changes and adapts. With regard to human sacrifice, I asked my informants why this was replaced with that of the

buffalo. Leaving aside the colonial wars, I tried to understand the relationship between these two human/non-human entities. No one ever mentioned historical issues; instead the villagers gave practical reasons, such as: the animal does not run away, it contains more blood, etc. According to some shamans, however, “the human and the buffalo blood are the same thing”. Therefore, man and buffalo would be bound by an ancestral relationship in which they shared the same essence. It is also interesting to note that in Indian mythology, the tiger and the buffalo are often antithetical, symbolizing respectively the wild and the tamed (*mṛga* and *paśu*), chaos and order, nature and man. This symbolism has also filtered into *ādivāsī* culture, with the distinction that the social and ancestral tie predominates. If man and buffalo are closely related, the tiger and the man/buffalo are brothers in the cosmogonic myth (Elwin 1954: 355–356; 406–415). Blood and strength, the essence of these entities, blends and fades again in an original state of non-differentiation between humans and non-humans (plants, animals and spirits).

## Conclusion

With the myth of Sopāngaḍā, the Kondhs rationalize their history through the cosmogonic narrative: on one hand they create a kind of dynamic hierarchy internal to their clans and on the other distinguish themselves not only from the other entities, but also from the rest of humanity. The theme of the birth through the hole, from the womb of Mother Earth, is a very popular element in the cultures of the world, and through the Kui Gaani a kind of implicit universality is expressed, a consubstantiality between agencies, the conception of an original common culture of all beings, human or non-human. Perhaps the paradigm of Sopāngaḍā cannot be applied in this form to the neighbouring indigenous communities. However, I have the clear impression that a concept very much like this one is shared by many *ādivāsī* groups. In conclusion, it seems appropriate to consider that the ontology of the forest – or rather of the hill – is presented as a theory of “joint participation” that on one hand defies the boundaries of the autopoietic anthropic systems and on the other expresses its maximum potential through the development of cosmological myth.

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