

The Toda Women's Embroidery Enterprise: The Commercialization of a Traditional Craft in South India

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The Todas are a small but very well documented indigenous community of erstwhile buffalo pastoralists, who live atop the Nilgiri Mountains in the far northwestern area of Tamil Nadu State in South India. The Toda women's long tradition of embroidering items of clothing—notably cloaks and loincloths—to be used within the community and as important items of exchange with neighboring indigenous communities, has developed exponentially over the past hundred years or so. It is now a significant cash earner for many Toda women and their households. Over the past fifty or more years, this unique embroidery enterprise—the sole preserve of the community's womenfolk—has increasingly caught the attention of textile and design specialists working for India's fast-developing fashion industry. The data in this paper are organized in three major parts: the first introduces some of the principal socio-cultural characteristics of the Toda community, the second examines the traditional situation of women in this patriarchal society, while the final section concentrates on the development of the Toda women's embroidery enterprise, in terms of design, production skills and commercial prospects.

Keywords: *Todas, Nilgiri Mountains, South India, embroidery, commerce, fashion*

INTRODUCTION: THE TODAS AS A PEOPLE BETWEEN TRADITION AND CHANGE

'There are no [formal] teachers for Toda embroidery. The girls learn it from their mothers at five or six, master it by ten, then create new patterns by fifteen.'

'Nobody is going to pay four thousand rupees for a Toda cloak, so cheaper, smaller articles such as table runners, luncheon sets and tablecloths are being sold through government centers.'

(Words attributed by Aditi De [2001] and by Sabita Radhakrishnan [2001]) to the late Evam Piljen-Wiedemann, Christian Toda nurse, activist and major sponsor of the Toda women's embroidery enterprise.)

Numbering only about 1,600 people (Sathyaranayanan 2016: 270), the Todas—in their own language simply *awll(zh)*¹ ‘the people’—are nonetheless very well represented in the annals of world ethnography.

¹In the manuscript of this paper the author transcribed Toda words according to the system devised by University of California linguist, the late Professor M.B. Emeneau (1957: 19; 1984: 5-49), which has by now become more-or-less standard in the scholarly literature on Toda society, culture and language. Regrettably, the *International Journal of Business Anthropology* has been unable to reproduce several of the characters that are used in Emeneau's orthography.

In the ‘Bibliography of References Cited’ for my forthcoming book, ‘The Todas and their Buffaloes: Sacred and Secular Dimensions of a South Indian Mountain Community’ (MS completed, 2021), I have listed well over a thousand works that refer, in one way or another, to the Todas and to the special breed of water buffaloes they have herded for countless centuries.

The earliest relatively-detailed account that we have of the community appears in a letter written in Portuguese by an Italian Jesuit priest who, four centuries ago, in 1603, met with Todas and reported, *inter alia*, on his visit to a Toda hamlet (Alberti in Rivers 1906: 721-30; cf. Walker 2012a: 314-321).² The first full-length book devoted largely to this community was published in London, close to two centuries ago (Harkness 1832), while a second work, again more-or-less exclusively devoted to the Todas, appeared forty years later (Marshall 1873). In 1906, W.H.R. Rivers, arguably the founder of the fieldwork tradition in British social anthropology (cf. Slobodin 1978; Walker 2012d), published his classic study, *The Todas*, one of the earliest professional anthropological monographs devoted to a single community. But already in 1897, almost a decade before the appearance of Rivers’s masterpiece, the ethnographic literature on the Toda community was so extensive that Helen Annan, then a graduate student in sociology at Columbia University, New York, was able to produce a very competent 200-plus page ‘Master’s Essay’, ‘The Todas of the Nilgiri Hills: A Sociological Study ...’. (It is unfortunate that Annan never published any of her Toda research, especially in the light of her subsequent marriage to Arthur Scribner, President of Charles Scribner & Sons publishers of New York!)

Among the precursors and founders of the modern academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology who delved into the growing amateur and, we may say from 1906, professional corpus of Toda ethnography were such illustrious names as James Pritchard (1844 [1813]), Herbert Spencer (1876-97), Charles Darwin (1882), John Lubbock (1870), William Robertson Smith (1889), Edvard Westermarck (1901 [1891]), Robert Marett (1912), James G. Frazer (1910) Robert Hertz (1907), Arnold Van Gennep (1909) and Marcel Mauss (1910). For more recent times, we may add the names of Robert Lowie (1914, 1920), George Peter Murdock (1934), Bronislaw Malinowski (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) and Edmund Leach (1978)—not to mention a bevy of authors, too numerous to name here, but mostly Americans, who have introduced the Todas to generations of college and university undergraduate students in the United States and beyond through their introductory texts to cultural anthropology.

The appeal the Todas have had for visitors—academic or otherwise—to their Nilgiri mountain homeland, located at the meeting point of peninsular India’s two mountain chains, the Western and Eastern Ghats, has revolved around a number of the community’s distinctive economic, physical and socio-cultural characteristics.

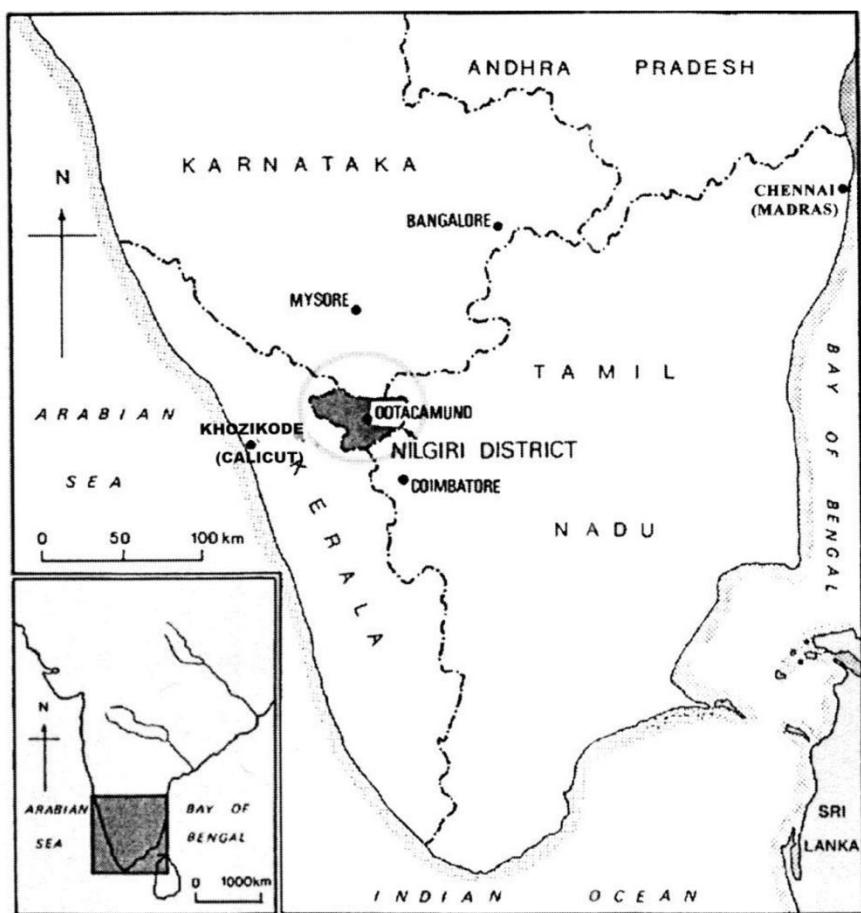
The Traditional Society

One of the special characteristics that have caught the attention of generations of sojourners, residents and researchers alike has been the Todas’ devotion to their buffalo herds. Until quite recently, this animal—a distinct breed of the Indian Riverine Buffalo (cf. Karthikeyan, *et al.* 2002; Kathiravan, *et al.* 2012)—was at the center both of the community’s economic and of its ritual life (cf. Walker 1986, 98-238 and Chs. 6-

Consequently, rather than withdraw this contribution entirely, the author has substituted Emeneau’s orthography with the more easily reproducible system recently devised by Tarun Chhabra for his 2015 book on the Todas, in which he also provides “A Guide to the Transliteration of Toda” (pp. xxxvii-xliii) and specifically relates his orthography to that of Emeneau. The interested reader is invited to consult Chhabra’s work, where she or he will also find explanations for cases of unusual transcription, such as the parenthetical and unpronounced “zh” in the word *awll(zh)*, meaning “people”, or in *Taihhfill(zh)y*, one of the two Toda subcastes, or the parenthetical “r” in *Tawrrta(r)sh*, the other Toda subcaste.

²I examine this topic in greater detail in my forthcoming book, ‘The Todas and their Buffaloes ...’, but because the present paper is likely to be published long before the book, I generally cite my already-published materials rather than the more detailed forthcoming work.

9 of my forthcoming book). Particularly fascinating in this connection is that Todas distinguish among their female buffaloes between domestic and temple animals, the attribution descending in the female line exclusively, the male sires having no ritual significance for these people. The herding of the temple animals is the responsibility of ritually purified dairymen-priests, who alone may milk them, then process that milk in special dairies that are the community's divinely-infused temples. But more than this: these dairy-temples are hierarchically-graded, from the most sacred and most pure to the less sacred and less pure. The higher the grade of a dairy-temple, the higher the grade of its associated buffaloes and the degree of ritual purity required of the dairyman-priest who tends them. Every activity associated with these temple buffaloes is ritualized: milking the animals, churning the milk into butter and buttermilk, then clarifying the butter into ghee, giving the animals salt, taking them on migration to fresh pastures and, in times past, burning their pastures to allow for the growth of more succulent fodder, etc. (cf.



Map. Location of the Toda homeland in South India

Emeneau 1938: 111-12). Moreover, the higher the associated dairy-temple, the greater is the complexity of the ritual activities involving these buffaloes and their milk.

Another Toda characteristic that has fostered special interest has been the people's prepossessing physical appearance, which, in the eyes of many a visitor to these Nilgiri Hills (actually mountains, but so named by the British), singled them out as notably different from their local neighbors, not to mention from the peoples living on the plains below (cf. Walker 1991).



Figure 1. Thoroughbred Toda buffaloes, a special breed of the Indian Riverine Water Buffalo (Photo: A.R.Walker, 1980s.)



Figures 2 & 3. The Todas: Elegant people clad in finely embroidered cloaks (Photos: A.R. Walker 1963 & 1974.)

The Todas' unique, on the Indian subcontinent, religious and domestic architecture (cf. Noble 1966; 1997; 2012; also Figs.4-6 in this paper) also have attracted much attention. Then again, there was their practice, now completely abandoned, of a rare form of marriage alliance—adelphic or fraternal polyandry—in which several brothers shared a common wife (cf. Rivers 1906: 515-521; Peter 1963: 240-300), a marital institution that was coupled with the even longer-abandoned custom of female infanticide (cf. Rivers 1906: 478-480).



Figure 4. Distinctive Toda Architecture—1. Maintaining Tradition in the early 1970s: All four domestic dwellings retain the traditional barrel-vaulted structure; one set of calf sheds is located in the middle foreground, another downhill to the right; there are two large buffalo pens: one (circular) behind and downhill from the domestic area and the other (rectangular) downhill from the main calf shed cluster); a smaller circular pen for calves is downhill and to the right of the larger rectangular pen; recently installed electricity pylons reach to the hamlet's edge but, at the time (1974), were not yet bringing electricity to the hamlet. (Photo: Pauline H. Walker 1974, © Anthony R. Walker.)



Figures 5 & 6. Distinctive Toda Architecture—2. The two styles of Toda dairy temple: usual barrel-vaulted (Fig. 5, photo courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris) and rare conical shape (Fig.6, Photo: A.R. Walker, *circa* 2001)



Figure 7. Dairyman-priest (wearing ritually-mandated, non-embroidered, black loincloth and shawl) milking a temple buffalo associated with the dairy-temple in the background; his assistant (wearing elaborately embroidered cloak) prevents the calf from approaching its dam (this man too wears a black loincloth, but this is not traditional Toda practice, rather it indicates that he will shortly be undertaking a pilgrimage to an important Hindu shrine in Kerala). (Photo courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

The manner in which Todas organize their society more generally has also intrigued many students of sociology and anthropology, ever since the early days of both these disciplines. The community is bifurcated into hierarchically ordered (again on the basis of relative ritual purity) endogamous subcastes. The higher-ranking of these divisions, Tawrrta(r)sh, is the traditional owner of the community's most sacred dairy-temples, together with the associated, highest-ranking, of their buffalo herds. The lower-ranking subcaste, Taihhfill(zh)y, once had (the institution is now defunct) the exclusive right to provide dairyman-priests to operate these most sacred of the community's institutions (cf. Walker 1986: 145-57). The endogamy of these Toda subcastes was (as it still is) partially modified due to the institutional recognition that permits a formal relationship between a man and woman of opposing subcastes, one that involves sexual relations and even, occasionally, prolonged cohabitation, but always with the caveat that any offspring from the woman's womb belongs to her husband in her own subcaste, not to her partner in the opposite one (Rivers 1906: 526-29; Walker 1986: 211-12).

Each Toda subcaste, in turn, is divided into a number of named, exogamous patriclans, owners of the Todas' domestic settlements and religious sites. There are also parallel exogamous matriclans, of considerable importance in kinship and marital relationships but lacking corporate unity, there being no occasion on which members of a matriclan co-operate as a functioning social group (cf. Emeneau 1941; Peter 1952; Walker 1986: 76-79). In other words, applying Roger Keesing's (1975: 9-11) terminology, the patriclan is a *social group*, while the matriclan is a *cultural category*.

Finally, we must note that the traditionally more-or-less exclusively pastoral Todas and their immediate neighbors: artisan Kotas (Wolf 1992: 2005), swidden-farming Badagas (Hockings 2013) and gatherer-hunting Kurumbas (Kapp & Hockings 1989)³ used to interact with one another, not as so many independent ‘tribes’, but rather—in typically Indic fashion—as caste-like communities, the links between them being inter-familial, rather than between whole communities, and ones that were inherited in the male line, from one generation to the next. These links involved much more than economic transactions, entailing important—frequently essential—ritual and social obligations as well. Again, following the Indic norm, these indigenous Nilgiri communities were ordered in a, admittedly not-uncontested, hierarchy, predicated on a ritually pure—ritually impure continuum. On the basis of their buffalo-centered and largely vegetarian lifestyle, as well as on inter-community recognition of the sanctity and supernatural power of their highest ranking dairy-temples, the Todas claimed (as they still do) top position in this local Nilgiri caste system, though Badagas, politically and economically dominant on the Nilgiri uplands and, in demographic terms, dwarfing the other communities, were at best ambivalent in their acceptance of this Toda claim (cf. Mandelbaum 1956, 1968; Walker 1986: 20-35; Hockings 2013: 133-72).

The Changing Toda World

Over the past two centuries, the Toda community has witnessed massive socio-cultural, environmental and economic change. The architect of this ‘strange new world’ in which the Toda community and its mountain-dwelling neighbors now found themselves was the British administration in India. At first it was the London-based East India Company and then, from 1857, the imperial *raj* of British India in the guise of the Government of the Madras Presidency. Change came slowly at first. For the first two decades of its imposition, British politico-administrative authority over the Nilgiris was, at best, nominal. It began—on paper at least—in 1799, following the East India Company’s defeat of the titular lord of these mountains, the Muslim ruler of Mysore (now Maisuru). But it was not until 1819, or a little thereafter, that the new rulers began to set in motion a chain of events that would transform the Todas’ homeland from the relatively isolated abode of buffalo graziers, swidden farmers, village-based artisans and forest gatherers-and-hunters into the hot-weather headquarters—at times for up to eight months of the year (Kennedy 1996: 165)—of the government of the Madras Presidency, which administered most of South India from Ootacamund (now renamed, without etymological foundation or historical precedent, ‘Udhagamandalam’). The Nilgiri highlands also became the location of a major military cantonment, Wellington, as well as, in British colonial parlance, three ‘hill stations’: Ootacamund, Coonoor and Kotagiri. Connecting roads replaced former pathways (cf. Hockings 2012d) and a narrow-gauge mountain rack-railway extended from the plains to the east of the mountains up to Coonoor, and thence on to Ootacamund (cf. Hockings 2012c). The new roads and mountain railway provided both highlanders and lowlanders with much easier access to once remote and distant places and peoples.

In the wake of government administrators and as a consequence of much improved means of access, maharajas and rajas of Indian protected states and other wealthy men, both Indians and Europeans, began to come to these mountains, building palaces and bungalows for themselves in and around the fast-growing urban places. But it was not only the rich who came to the Nilgiris. From the 1820s onwards the immigrants included servants, laborers, minor government officials, merchants and others in search of a living: Hindus, Muslims and Christians; speakers of Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Hindustani, among other Indian languages (cf. Kennedy 1996: 187-88). By 1847, reportedly (cf. Ouchterlony 1848: 50), the immigrant population had already outnumbered that of the indigenous peoples, a demographic it still retains today (Hockings 2013: 10).

³ It is to be noted that a community’s principal occupation was not necessarily its only one. It is true Todas were once more-or-less exclusively buffalo herdsman, although now and again they would engage in forest foraging. But Kotas added farming and herding to their artisan pursuits, Badagas herded buffaloes in addition to planting crops and Kurumbas practiced some swidden farming alongside their forest-gathering and hunting mainstay.

As early as 1826, a British observer (Hough 1829: 44-5) was able to write of Ootacamund that the new immigrants ‘now form a large village, where a bazaar is established and merchants freely bring their grains and other commodities from great distances, some coming as far as eighty miles [*circa* 129 km].’ Bazaars flourished in the other hill centers too, bringing with them the intimation of a cash economy. Meanwhile, British commercial interests had discovered how admirably suited Nilgiri soils and climate were for the production of a whole range of cool-weather crops and exotic trees. Soon, extensive areas of former grasslands and forests were planted to tea, coffee and, later, to cinchona, acacia and eucalyptus, while European vegetables and fruits began to be cultivated in gardens and on small farms (cf. Tanna 1969; Muthiah 2012).

These agricultural innovations, no less than the growth of urban places, radically altered both the physical appearance and the traditional socio-economic organization of the Nilgiri uplands. Many indigenous Nilgiri peoples, although very few Todas, it is true, took up wage-labor on the British plantations; meanwhile, as the plantation sector expanded, lowland laborers, principally from Kannarese-, Tamil- and Malayalam-speaking castes, flocked into the hills. As land became an increasingly valuable commodity, in 1863 the British administration prohibited the practice of ‘slash-and-burn’ cultivation on land not actually owned by the farmers concerned (Francis 1908: 269). This prompted further economic change, especially among Badagas and Kurumbas, as many of the former began to take up commercial tea and potato cultivation, while more-and-more of the latter joined the labor force on the larger, British-owned, estates.



Figure 8. One consequence of a changing world: A Toda village with only its temples retaining traditional architecture (cf. Fig. 4). (Photo: Pauline H. Walker, 1974, ©AnthonyR.Walker.)

The establishment of market centers (Hockings 2012e) and plantation agriculture (Tanna 1969; Muthiah 2012) soon demonstrated the economic advantages of cash-crop production and of the ability to earn wages

in hard cash. This, in turn, led to the break-up of the old economic interdependence that had sustained the indigenous Nilgiri peoples for countless generations. First to take advantage of the new economic circumstances were the Badagas and as this pivotal community of staple-food producers gradually opted out of its traditional food-providing obligations in favor of joining the fast-developing cash economy, the whole of traditional Nilgiri society felt the consequences, not least the Todas who were largely dependent on Badagas for their subsistence cereals. Consequently, even as early as 1826 some Todas were to be seen selling dairy products and buying rice in the Nilgiri bazaars, rather than relying exclusively on Badaga millets obtained through the traditional inter-community exchange system (Hough 1829: 73). As the nineteenth century advanced, this situation would increasingly become the norm. But up to the 1930s, at least some Todas were still receiving traditional Badaga grain contributions (Emeneau 1938: 103).

Meanwhile, the newly-established townships soon developed, not merely as administrative and commercial hubs but as centers for medical, educational and recreational activities, including, significantly, Christian missionary endeavors. They also fostered multi-cultural urban lifestyles previously inconceivable to the indigenous inhabitants of these mountains.

For the Todas the consequences of such urbanization and inward migration of lowland peoples have been manifold. Beyond the increasing attraction of a cash-based market economy, they have included the widespread adoption of Tamil as the language of communication outside of the community, at first mostly by the Toda menfolk, but later by the women as well. This, in turn, resulted in increasing interaction with immigrant peoples and, among some, a desire to acquire, or else have their children acquire, a formal education. Included also was the replacement of millets with rice as the Todas' major subsistence grain and the adoption, in considerable part, of South Indian cooking styles (cf. Chhabra 2017). Then again, there came about an increasing acceptance of the beliefs and practices of mainstream South Indian Hinduism, including the worship of, and vow-making to its principal deities, manifested particularly by Toda patronage of Hindu temples in the Nilgiris and by their pilgrimages to major Hindu shrines in the surrounding lowlands, sometimes at great distances from their homeland (cf. Walker 2018: 412-16). It also resulted in some Todas accepting the teachings of urban-based Christian missionaries, culminating in the establishment of a small, but educationally proactive, Toda Christian community (cf. Walker 2012a; 2018: 416-20). As for urban-centered lifestyles, they encouraged a good many Todas to acquire a taste for socializing in coffee shops, patronizing cinemas and consuming alcoholic beverages (the Todas are a rare example of a people with absolutely no tradition of alcohol production or consumption [cf. Rivers 1906: 581]), also for travelling by bus, taxi or railway.

It is against the backdrop of this new world for Todas that we must examine the development of their womenfolk's embroidery enterprise.

TODA WOMEN AND THEIR EMBROIDERY ENTERPRISE

Toda Women

Traditional Toda society is quintessentially patriarchal (cf. Parthasarathy 1991: 23-24); this despite the existence of matrilineal as well as patrilineal clans and every Toda, female or male, having both patriclan and matriclan affiliation. In most spheres of life, however—barring only kinship and, particularly, marital and sexual relationships—the patriclan far outstrips the matriclan in importance. In this community, as traditionally constituted, political authority and the right to the ownership of houses, lands, buffaloes and most other property is held exclusively by its menfolk and, as such, by its patriclans.

The patriclan owns, minimally, one domestic residential site and, in many cases, several. If it has more than a single hamlet, one of these will be designated its 'chief settlement', from which the patriclan usually, but not invariably, takes its name. The dairy-temples located within the patriclan's chief hamlet are the principal, settlement-based, sacred places for all the clan members. In addition, the patriclan may own sacred dairy-temple sites located quite apart from its domestic settlements (cf. Noble 1998), as well as at least one male and one female funeral place. If the patriclan has multiple male or female funeral places, one of them will be designated its 'chief male (or chief female) funeral place'. The matriclan, by contrast, has

no comparable domestic or religious institutions; indeed it is not a property-owning unit at all. The patriclans, in addition, have both consultative and judicial assemblies, whereas the matriclans being, as noted earlier, ‘cultural categories’, not ‘social groups’, have none. Moreover, participation in the patriclan assemblies is exclusively a male prerogative. A woman’s voice in these gatherings may be heard only through that of her husband or father; moreover, she cannot be summoned to such meetings but must be represented, again by her husband or father who, in judicial assemblies, is responsible for the payment of any fines, in cash or in buffaloes, that may be levied against her for behavior deemed unacceptable by these assemblies of males.

Within the domestic unit, it is the senior active male, the *pater familias*, or, if he is too old and feeble to exercise his responsibilities, his eldest co-resident son, who is the final authority and who represents the household within the hamlet, among his fellow patriclansmen and in the community at large. While it is possible for a woman to be reckoned as ‘household head’, this situation occurs only if she is a widow living alone, or else, if her co-resident son has yet to achieve adulthood, at which time he will succeed his mother as the leader of this domestic group. Moreover, it is understood by all that a female household head is only the custodian, not the owner, of the household’s land, buffaloes and all other property, apart only from the dowry she brought with her when she came to reside with her husband and to fully affiliate with his patriclan.

Toda culture, as is common in Indic societies, ascribes greater ritual purity to its male members than to its females, doubtless the principal reason for the latter’s near total exclusion from the activities of the dairy-temples and associated temple buffaloes. For Todas, among the principal sources of ritual pollution are such feminine bodily functions as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth.

Female participation in the community’s sacred dairying cult is indeed minimal. They may neither enter nor even approach within the vicinity of the sacred dairy-temples, the closest permissible proximity for them being the stone or stones that mark the place where women and girls receive the buttermilk (Fig. 9) that a dairyman-priest has prepared inside the dairy-temple. Females may not milk any buffalo, be it domestic or temple. When a Toda woman dies, no temple buffalo may be sacrificed at her funeral and, unlike a deceased male, a woman’s body may never be taken to a dairy-temple to receive milk (cf. Walker 1986: 219 and Plate 29a therein), nor is her hand made to clasp the horn of a buffalo sacrificed for her, thus symbolizing their journey together to the afterworld; instead, her feet are made to touch the dead animal’s nostrils (Walker 1986: 224). In days gone by, when the now-abandoned custom of performing a second funeral, during which a bodily relic, or relics, of the deceased would be cremated (cf. Hockings & Walker 1983; Walker 1986: 228-33), unlike for a male, no special funerary dairy-temple would be set up at the funeral place to receive a female’s relic or relics, only a fairly rough hut (Rivers 1906: 339), not inappropriately called a ‘house of sticks’), which, unlike the funerary temple for males, would be burned down at the conclusion of the rites.

It has been suggested (among others by media specialist Jayaprakash [cf. 2000: 234-35; 2002: 89]) that it has been the community’s failure to permit its womenfolk meaningful participation in its dairy-centered ritual life that has provoked a notable interest in Christianity among Toda women that, for the most part, is quite absent among its menfolk. I too lean towards this interpretation.

Modern Indian researchers studying Toda socio-cultural institutions, mostly women (with the notable exception of one male ‘women’s studies’ graduate student [see below]) tend to paint a quite dismal picture of women’s status in Toda society. Some examples: Roshini Philips, in her Master’s thesis for the Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women (Deemed University) in Coimbatore, writes (Philips 2000, 2): ‘Toda women have [a] subordinate position in their community. The discrimination … starts right from birth. … The birth of a boy is considered a privilege but not [that] of [a] girl.’ Philips (pp. 8-9) observes also that ‘[i]n Toda families, husbands have more power than wives. The traditional power of men is a reflection of their higher status in society. Men … [have] more access and control over … resources than [do] women. Further, due to the inferior sex roles enforced on [Toda] women through customs, mores and laws, women’s struggle for freedom could not make much headway’. These views Philips (2011: 68) repeats in the published synopsis of her Master’s thesis, in a section entitled, ‘Social Religious Restriction’ [*sic.*] (pp. 70-71). Here she discusses Toda women’s exclusion from the activities of the sacred dairying cult,

claiming them to be no more than ‘spectators’ not participants in many Toda ceremonies; she tells too of their inability to own property, apart from their dowry, and she stresses that judicial and administrative affairs are exclusively male preserves.



Figure 9. Women receiving buttermilk at the stone marker beyond which no female may pass; the buttermilk, produced by a dairyman-priest inside the dairy-temple, is brought from there to the stone by a layman who pours it from a low-grade bamboo vessel from the dairy-temple into vessels the women have brought with them from the domestic area of the hamlet. (Photo courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

Another graduate student, Neha Singh from the University of Allahabad’s Department of Anthropology, posted an undated on-line paper about Toda women, claiming it to be ‘a feminist’s view’. In her essay, Singh observes, *inter alia*, that ‘Toda women, like ... [those in] other patriarchal societies are still far from achieving socio-political parity with their men folk ... the Toda woman has to reside in the house of her husband ... [who] is head of the family and enjoys higher status in every way. Property and wealth ... [descend] from the father to the son. ... myths and beliefs derogatory to the status of women are prevalent’, and so on (N. Singh n.d.).

The first Ph.D.-level research to be focused on Toda (along with Kota) womanhood, interestingly, is the work of a male graduate student, R. Murali, working out of the Department of Women’s Studies at Alagappa University in Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu. Murali’s principal theoretical proposition for his Toda and Kota study is that Toda women (as also Kota women, though, for the purposes of my paper I am concerned only with his Toda research) constitute not only a specific subculture that may be investigated as such, but more than this, they represent an ‘outsider subculture’ in that its membership is excluded (in the Toda case, especially in the religious and judicial domains) from full participation in the socio-cultural life of the community into which they were born. In addition, Murali (2001: 54) declares that ‘[f]rom the birth of a girl child to her death, she is subjected to discriminatory rituals’; he writes that it is interesting to note from a Toda myth that the creation of the first Toda woman was from the rib of the first Toda man [cf. Emeneau 1974: 242, Text 21, par. 24]’. This, says Murali, ‘underscore[s] ... the idea that a woman is an addendum to man not an entity by herself.’ And in discussing Toda puberty customs, Murali (55-6) talks of ‘the vast

difference' between Toda conceptions of puberty in boys and in girls. For boys, he writes, puberty 'is a matter of adjusting to physical changes which signify his growth into a heroic manhood, attaining a social status to behave as a master. In the case of a girl ... the rituals relating to menarche socialize the girl to a powerless status to be conditioned and reinforced throughout her life.'

As much as these latter-day researchers bemoan (not always without justification, I hasten to add [cf. Parthasarathy 1991: 23]) the tyrannies to which Toda men subject their women in this patriarchal society, they do also frequently (and significantly) note the role their embroidery enterprise plays in improving the women's socio-economic lot and, importantly, also their self-esteem. These are subjects to which I will return in a subsequent sub-section of this paper. Before embarking on them, however, I believe it important to consider another facet of women in Toda society—one frequently quite overshadowed by considerations of gender inequality—namely that, among the tradition-rooted societies of South India, even of India as a whole, the Todas are notable for their outgoing, unselfconscious womenfolk.

Time and again, visitors have remarked on this characteristic of Toda womanhood, which certainly concurs with my own experience during several spells of fieldwork in the community between 1962 and 2020. It is also reported in some of the earliest extant first-hand accounts of these people. Some examples: in an anonymously submitted communication to the editor of the *Madras Government Gazette*,⁴ (subsequently published in *The Madras Courier* for 23 February 1819), the correspondent writes, 'The lady [in a Toda polyandrous household] is exempt from household cares and duties, she is served by the men, whose duty it is to prepare and cook the victuals, and it is her privilege also to be carried on the shoulders of her husbands when she makes visits or journeys.⁵ She selects whom she pleases of the family as her companion at bed and board, and this freedom of choice produces no interruption of domestic harmony' (reprinted in Grigg 1880: liv). Advance another thirteen years, to 1832, and we find Henry Harkness, in his (also the first-ever) book on the Todas, acknowledging their womenfolk's 'modest and retiring demeanour', but simultaneously reporting that 'they are perfectly free from the ungracious and menial-like timidity of the generality of the sex of the low country; and enter into conversation with a stranger, with a confidence and self-possession becoming in the eyes of Europeans, and strongly characteristic of a system of manners and mores, widely differing from those of their neighbours' (Harkness 1832: 8). Then again, we have the words of an early tourist to the Nilgiris, a British military man, that Toda women 'evince the least timidity at the approach of a visitor. On the contrary, they appear rather to court his presence; and have no shyness or reserve ...' (Mignan 1834: 128). In another example, dating to 1845 (quite likely borrowed from Harkness' book, though the author, a Christian cleric resident in Ootacamund, did have personal acquaintance with Todas), we find a comment on Toda women that, while acknowledging their 'modest, retiring demeanour', reports also that 'they are perfectly free from the ungracious, menial-like timidity of the generality of the[ir] sex in the low countries. They enter into a conversation with a stranger freely, having a very proper share of that confidence which, in the eyes of the Europeans, is so becoming' (Muzzy 1845: 397). To the words of Rev. Muzzy and the Captains Mignan and Harkness, we may add those of American missionary John Dulles, who likewise had personal encounters with members of the community. In a book published a decade after Muzzy's report, Dulles (1855: 446) wrote that Toda women 'have a self-possession with strangers quite unknown among the Hindus of the plains. They are ready to chat with the stranger, and have smiles almost constantly on their faces.' And then there are the observations of Lt. Col. William Marshall, author of the second full-length book on the Todas, to the effect that 'Toda women indeed, hold a position in the family quite unlike what is ordinarily witnessed amongst Oriental nations. They are treated with respect, and permitted a remarkable amount of freedom' (Marshall 1873: 43).

⁴I believe the author must have been Evans Macpherson who, in a subsequent report identifies himself as 'Superintendent, Neelgherry Road' (see Walker 1998: 160-61, n. 4).

⁵In modern times food preparation exclusively by males is limited to major ritual occasions, while carrying women on journeys (usually in a cloak slung from both ends of a bamboo pole and born by two men on their shoulders) is restricted exclusively to elderly or infirm ladies.

To these several descriptions of, and reactions to, Toda womanhood, I cannot refrain from including the amusing, but instructive, words of a contributor to a tail-end-of-the-nineteenth-century issue of *The South of India Observer*, the Nilgiris' local English language newspaper. The correspondent writes of his experiences at a Toda funeral and of his meeting with a young Toda lady, 'a piquant vision of female loveliness', who was 'shading her bare head with a silken parasol' and who was wearing 'a tight bodice, and a white robe of some gauzy texture [that] descended to her ankles ... 'Judge my amazement', the correspondent continues, 'when I learnt that this pretty aristocrat was a Todaess! ...'. He enquired of the young lady whether she liked what she saw of the young Toda men wrestling with the sacrificial buffaloes. Her response: "I don't like it one damn!"... ripped out in English with a vivacity which made me jump' (Anon. 1889).

And so we come to William Rivers's 1906 monograph, as told earlier, the first professional ethnographic book devoted exclusively to the Todas and one that includes a section 'The Position of Women' (pp. 566-69). Here Rivers states categorically that '[t]here is no doubt that women have a subordinate position in the Toda community ... [their] exclusion ... from any share in [the ceremonial of the dairy] must have influenced the attitude of the community towards the sex ... [as also must have the prohibition against their taking] part in the milking of the ordinary buffaloes or in the churning of their milk ...'⁶ But then he goes on to observe that Toda women, 'though ... unimportant in [the] ceremonial [of the sacred dairies] and of little influence in the regulation of social affairs, have nevertheless much freedom. In general social intercourse the two sexes always seemed to be on the best of terms, and I never saw or heard anything to indicate that women are treated harshly or contemptuously' (Rivers 1906: 566-67). (To these words we might add the much earlier—indeed among the earliest [1821]—if somewhat cruder observation of Surveyor Ward, to the effect that 'Toda men are very much attached to ... [their womenfolk], and carry their affection for the sex to a most voluptuous degree' (Ward 1821: lxxiv). All this—hyperbolical or not—undoubtedly captures the flip side of the story of the subjugation of Toda womanhood, as indeed, much more recently, do Sharma and Bhagat (2018: 4), in a paper that happens to focus particularly on the Todas' embroidery enterprise. Here they write that, for Toda women, it is the embroidery group that is:

the hub of their social, community and cultural interaction, sharing and bonding. When household commitments ... [have been] met, women in each mund [hamlet] get together and sit out in a common area and embroider their shawls [cloaks]. During this crucial time, not only craft skills and experiences are shared, but also community and family issues are discussed and often resolved. Interestingly, although *it may appear to the outsider that in Toda Society, it is the men who are in charge, in fact it is the women who are the backbone of the community* ... [emphasis added].

The Craft of Toda Embroidery

In their 2018 paper, "Revival of Toda Embroidery Needlecraft of Nilgiris", Garima Sharma and Simmi Bhagat, textile specialists and designers, declare the aim of their study of this traditional Toda handicraft is to 'document the embroidery of [the] Toda community with respect to technique, material, color, designs and motifs used in it—all topics I intend to mention in this paper, in addition to the relatively in-depth ethnographic and sociological backgrounds presented above, observations one might not necessarily expect from the pens of fashion designers.

⁶ This, likewise, is the situation I have encountered, but I note that Alok Pandey, a Hyderabad University based anthropologist, reports in his M. Phil. thesis (2007: 63) and, subsequently, in its published synopsis (2011: 80,) on the basis of 2006 fieldwork among the Todas, that 'there are households where women do the churning on a regular basis'. Perhaps he is documenting a recent innovation, or, possibly, he refers to the churning of cow's milk (until quite recently Todas did not herd oxen) rather than that of buffaloes. Certainly, I have never seen Toda women churning milk at home, or anywhere else. In any case, Pandey does go on to say (*ibid.*), 'no case of women milking errs [=ehr, buffaloes] was observed.'



Figure 10. End portion of Toda cloak: Two red bands and one black are in-woven at the textile factory; the unembroidered off-white coarse cloth is seen at top and bottom; the remaining embroidery work on both cloaks is hand-made by Toda women. The less-commonly used blue thread has been extensively used in this example. (Photo courtesy Manjulika Pramod, New Delhi-based writer and travel blogger.)



Figure 11. Another example of the end portion of a Toda cloak, this one with the black band below, not above, the two red bands; this example shows the more common use of black thread rather than blue in recent times. (Photo: courtesy Sheela Powell of Shalom Self-help Group, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

Toda women's skill in embroidering cloth, for which the community is now so well known,⁷ is certainly no recent innovation. Two hundred years ago, Surveyor Benjamin Ward wrote in his report on

⁷ See, for example, newspaper and on-line postings, book chapters, booklets and encyclopedia entries, *inter alia* by (in chronological order) Devasahayam & Sali (1992); De 2001a; Radhakrishna 2001); Mani (2003); Wiedemann &

his 1821 survey of the Nilgiris that Toda women ‘when at leisure amuse themselves with needle-work, darning the hems of cloth with red and blue thread’. And to this he adds, ‘in this performance they display some taste, and are by the Badagers [sic], for whom they work, recompensed with grain or small money according to exigencies’ (Ward reprinted in Grigg 1880: lxxv). Echoing Ward’s words, James Hough, an Anglican cleric in the service of the Madras Presidency government, wrote in an 1826 letter that Toda women, ‘[i]n their needlework, which is confined to the stitching together and the embroidering of their clothes, ... display more taste than a stranger would expect from a people so unacquainted with the world. They are employed in this way by the Buddagurs [sic] also, who generally remunerate them with grain’ (Hough 1832: 74). A century on, in 1937, North American linguist Murray Emeneau, anthropologically-informed as to be expected of a student of Edward Sapir, published the first comprehensive—in fashion designer Padmini Balaram’s (2012: 918) words ‘seminal’—description of Toda women’s embroidery skills. Since then, the principal contributions to the explication of Toda embroidery techniques (*contra* aesthetics, uses, work requirements and sales) are those by P.K. Nambiar (1965) of the Indian Administrative Service, Tarun Chhabra, an Ootacamund dentist and long-time contributor to Toda ethnography (2009, reprinted in 2015, with an earlier version in 2000)⁸, Eevam Piljen-Wiedemann with Sunita Shahaney (2004) and a number of students of fashion and textile design, notably Padmini Balaram (2012), Carolin Baby with Susan Paul (2017), and Garima Sharma with Simmi Bhagat (2020).

Until the beginnings of the commercialization of this Toda craft (see below), the principal items destined for decorative embroidery were *pootkhull(zh)y* (cloaks [Figs. 2, 3, 7, 9 above, Figs. 10, 11, 17, 25 below], but frequently termed ‘shawls’ in the fashion literature) and *todrp* (loincloths, Fig. 24 below), both items fabricated from hand-woven lengths of the coarse off-white *khaddar* (Indian homespun cotton cloth), which Todas call *parry*. This cloth used to be made to order for Nilgiri indigenes by Chetti weavers on the Coimbatore side of the mountains (Emeneau 1937: 278; Chhabra 2009: 193; Balaram 2012: 916) and was brought up to the highlands by Chetti (Emeneau 1937: 279), or else by Badaga (cf. Chhabra 2009: 193; Hockings 2013: 182-83) intermediaries.⁹

From around the mid-twentieth century, or a little earlier, Todas began to purchase with cash lengths of similarly coarse, but now mill-spun cloth with two red and one black in-woven bands, between which

Shahaney (2004); Maheswaran (2010); S. Singh (2011); Balaram (2012); Mustafah (2013); Nagar 2014; Joseph (2015a,b); Mutukumaraswamy (2015); Anon. (2016a,c); Baby & Paul 2017; Backia Lakshmi & Vasanthi 2017; Khuntale (2017); Verghese (2017); David (2019); Tyagi (2019); Pramod (2019); Kalawadwala (2020) and Abbiramy (2020).

⁸At first sight, C. Maheswaran’s 2010 booklet, *The Embroidered Textiles of the Toda Tribes [sic] of the Nilgiris*, put out by the Government Museum, Chennai, appears to be an important recent addition to the literature on Toda embroidery. Unfortunately, however, despite the author’s somewhat immodest claim (on p. 13) that his is ‘a pioneer attempt in the art historical study of the tribal arts and crafts of the Nilgiris’, which he carried out ‘during 2009-2010 [p. v]’, apart from some interesting color plates, this booklet adds almost nothing to what is already well known about this topic, particularly due to the prior works of Emeneau (1937) and Chhabra (2009; 2015). Indeed most of what Maheswaran has to say about Toda embroidery he has taken from Chhabra’s (2009; 2015) study.

⁹Piljen-Weidermann [sic, it should read ‘Wiedemann’] & Shahaney (2004: 185-86) claim that the ‘rough cotton’ fabric from which Todas made their clothes was ‘woven especially for the Todas by weavers who are Kotas and live in the Nilgiris. These weavers used to barter cloth for buffaloes, bull or calf. Now they sell them for cash.’ It is certainly not inconceivable that Kota women, skilled potters as they are, were once weavers as well. Indeed, during the course of his field research in the early 1960s, American cultural geographer William Noble came across some Kotas who claimed ‘their ancestors wove coarse cloth from spun nettle fibre’ (Noble 1968: 161-62); but Noble makes no mention of Kotas supplying cloth to Todas. Indeed, it is a little strange that, apart from Kotas, Piljen-Wiedemann & Shahaney mention no other suppliers of cloth to Todas, either in the past or more recently. To my knowledge there is no mention of such Kota-Toda transactions anywhere else in the very extensive corpus of Nilgiris ethnography, nor have I heard anything of it during my own field trips to the Nilgiris. By contrast, there is relatively frequent mention of Coimbatore Chettis as the suppliers of cloth in the days before the Nilgiri bazaars made these transactions redundant. It is stranger still, in light of the fact that Eevam was very conversant with the workings of traditional Toda society and also well versed in the relevant literature.

the embroiderers execute their finest workmanship (cf. Joseph 2015: 3-4). This cloth is produced in the industrial mills of Tirupur and Sirumugai and sold in the Nilgiri markets, particularly in the Ootacamund bazaar (cf. Chhabra 2009: 193; 2015: 127; Baby & Paul 2017a: 18). The last-mentioned authors (*ibid.*) report some Toda women ordering the cloth in 1,000 meter rolls. The modern mill-produced cloth is very suitable for embroidering cloaks, but not for embellishing the loincloths that are now commonly worn both by Toda men and women. These latter have in-woven borders, but their tight weave renders them unsuitable for Toda-style embroidered embellishments (see just below).

The use of coarsely-woven cloth is imperative for the production of traditional-style Toda embroidery. This is because the women's basic technique (*awtt.y* 'to stitch') is to count threads and then darn by cross-stitching, a technique textile specialists Baby & Paul (2017: 16; also Baby & Kavitha 2018: 8) characterize as 'the combined methods of darning and embroidery', thereby producing the desired pattern (*pukhoor* in Toda) on a piece of cloth, the final product being an *awtt.yvoy*, literally, 'that which has been

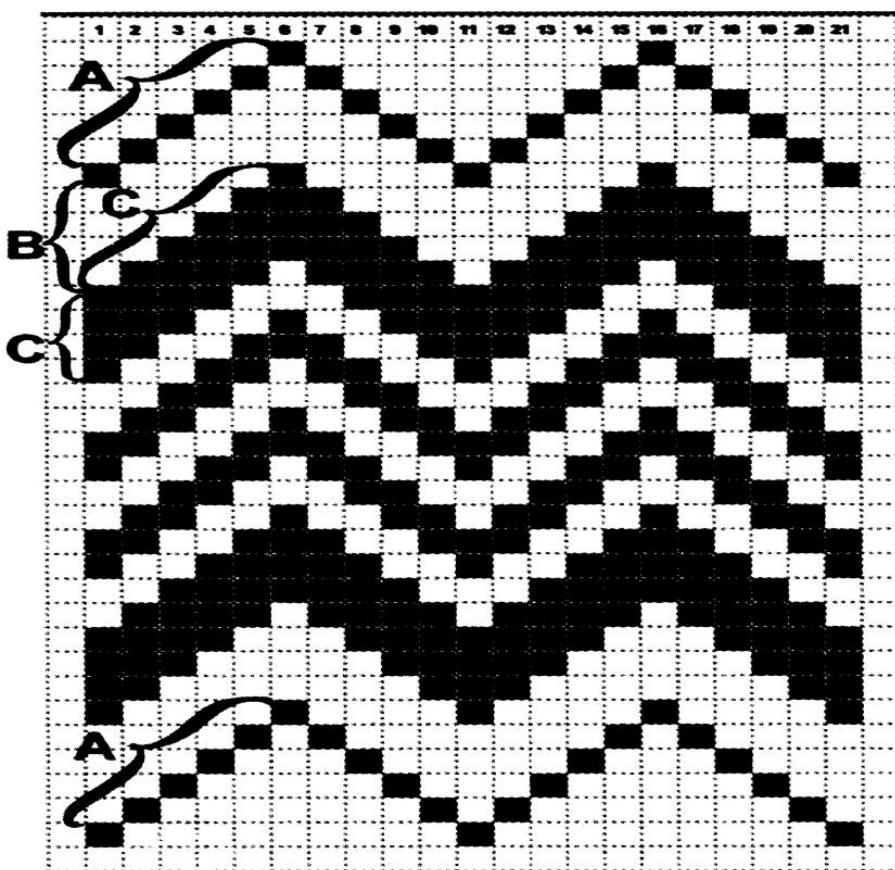


Figure 12. Tarun Chhabra's (see 2009: 207 & 2015: 138) grid-based representation (reproduced with permission) of a *twehhdr pukhoor*, lit. 'pattern in pairs', said to be the most ancient of surviving Toda embroidery patterns.

stitched' or, that which she has stitched' (cf. Emeneau 1937: 283).¹⁰

¹⁰ Much of the popular literature on Toda embroidery suggests that *pukhoor* (spelled in numerous different ways!) is the Toda verb meaning 'to embroider'; it is not. It is not a verb but a noun that specifically refers to an embroidered pattern.

The most detailed explanation of the Toda women's embroidery technique of which I am aware—far superior to anything I can produce—is that of Tarun Chhabra (2009: 206-08; 2015: 137-39), who is also the creator of the explanatory diagram that I have reproduced for this paper as Fig. 12. Here, basically, I shall follow Chhabra's explication, adding a word or two from Piljain [also written as Piljen] & Shahaney's chapter in the 2004 book, *Asian Embroidery*, edited by Jasleen Dhamija, as well as from the earlier mentioned papers: 'Toda Embroidery Needlecraft' by Garima Sharma and Simmi Bhagat published in 2020 and Carolin Baby and Susan Paul's 2017 article 'Toda Embroidery'.

Tarun Chhabra (2009: 206; 2015: 136), with reference to his diagram I have reproduced as Fig. 12, describes the Toda women's embroidery process thus:

The Todas' basic embroidery technique is to count the threads of the off-white base woven material and then cross stitch to form the desired pattern. In the figure [12] the numbered rows [1-21] of the design are vertical. Black boxes represent stitches that are visible on the obverse [side] (the side that would normally be visible) and white boxes represent stitches where the thread passes on the reverse. In the areas labelled 'obverse loop' [by bold letter 'A'] at the top and bottom of each vertical row, the stitch forms an unusual loose loop that some embroiderers employ at the ends, top and bottom for a special effect. It is precisely due to the loose looping of this obverse stitch that most non-Todas see the obverse side of an embroidered cloth as having a relatively untidy appearance and are surprised to learn that, for Todas themselves, this is the display side. ...Each row consists of a pair of threads. Row 1 is worked beginning at the bottom, row 2 is worked in the opposite direction, row 3 is again worked beginning at the bottom, and so on.¹¹

Evan Piljen and Sunita Shahaney's (2004: 155-56) useful observations concerning, in particular, the embellishment of Toda cloaks, emphasize that:

The embroidery, an intricate form of needle-weaving, is done on a *Puthukuli* [*pootkhull(zh)y*] in continuous bands in lengthwise strips—rather than across the width. The more elaborate designs are embroidered on the length, and the less elaborate work is done on the reverse end of the width of the *puthukuli*. The color of the threads used is black and red. The main and only stitch used in this type of embroidery is [the] darning stitch, done from *the back of the fabric* [emphasis added]. A long darning needle is used. The needle weaves short distances—then the fabric is turned around, and the needle weaves back. At each turn a loop is left forming a thick line as a border. Patterns are embroidered *by counting the threads of the woven material* [again. emphasis added]. Toda embroidery is reversible—so one can use [display?] both sides [Figs. 14, 15]. The Todas consider the rough side as the right [display] side—while others [non-Todas] feel quite the opposite.

And to this we may add Baby & Paul's (2017: 18) observation that '[i]t was very striking and surprising [to us] that the embroidery was done without transferring the design on to the fabric surface, and also ... [without reference to] any book.' For Toda women, these writers say (p. 16), embroidery requires 'the co-ordination of mind and hand' (repeated in Baby & Kavitha 2018: 8).

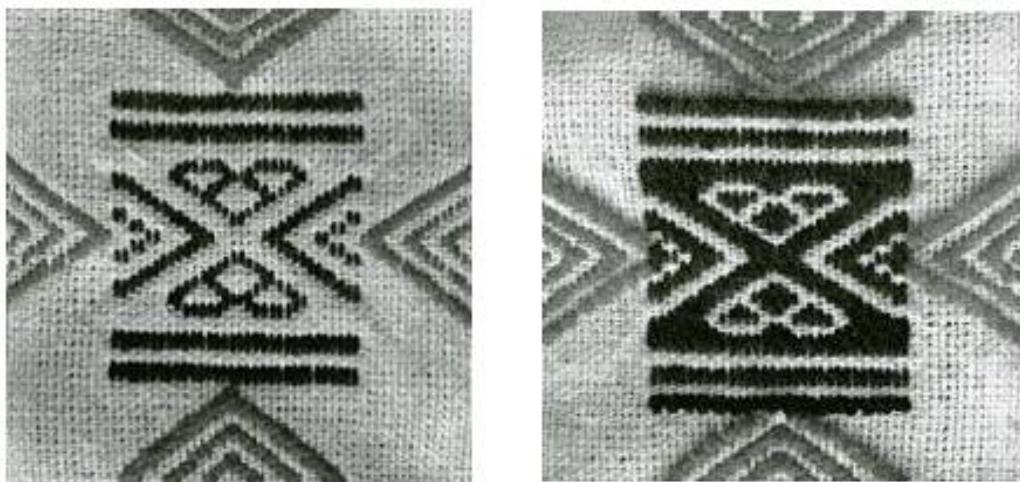
Until comparatively recent times (certainly up to the late 1930s (cf. Emeneau 1937: 280) and likely into the early 1950s, Toda women used coarsely spun, three-to-four strand, dark-blue, black and red colored cotton (David 2019: 1-5) threads. In Toda, the word *kaag* refers specifically to black thread, while red, blue and green colored ones are all known as *noo(r)sh*, which translates as 'thread of any color except black'. The women purchased their coarse cotton thread in the Nilgiri markets. These days, superior quality thread, still coarsely spun but now from wool, is available to Todas, either for self-purchase in the Nilgiri bazaars or else supplied (apparently free-of-charge) by the All-India Handicrafts Board (cf. Nambiar 1965: 100) or by one or another of the NGOs working among Todas. The modern darning thread that Toda women use is mostly black or red in color, although dark blue, light blue, green and orange colors are sometimes used. (Until the 1930s and 1940s, blue-colored thread seems to have been more commonly employed than the currently-favored jet black and it is this color—not black—that is mentioned in the earliest reports of Toda needlecraft that we possess.)

¹¹ For more details on the embroidery technique than I have space for in this paper, follow the references to Chhabra's work I have given above.

Along with their purchase of thread, Toda women also buy their factory-manufactured darning needles in the Nilgiri bazaars. The presence (since 1950) of Needle Industries (India) Limited's manufacturing plant at Ketti (Gopalakrishnan 199: 531), on the Coonoor Road, just a few kilometers from Ootacamund, doubtless more-or-less guarantees the Todas an uninterrupted supply of darning



Figure 13. An embroidery stitch. (Photo: Courtesy Sheela Powell of Shalom Self-help Group, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)



Figures 14 & 15. Left (non-Todas' display preference) and right (Todas' display preference) sides of the same section of embroidered cloth. (Photos: A.R. Walker, 2007.)

needles. In pre-modern times, I understand, they had to rely on the much cruder products of Kota forges, or else, according to Chhabra's (2015: 129) hearing, 'employ ...the thorn of a particular [unidentified] plant.'

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the work of embroidering a host of traditional and non-traditional (see below) items, consumes the greater part of an average, hamlet-based, Toda woman's leisure time, once she has completed her domestic and, increasingly these days, farming duties (cf., among a host of other observers, Mani 2003: 1). Of course, in these modern times many girls and young women are absent from their hamlets for most of the day, attending primary, secondary and, some of them, tertiary educational institutions; also, among the more educated adult women, some are employed full-time in retail stores and in private and government offices. But for the majority of Toda women, embroidery is one of their principal hamlet-based activities. The remark by Piljen-Wiedemann & Shahaney (2004: 186) that '[t]here are very few ladies doing their embroidery at present, and hence the danger of its being given up totally' hardly seems warranted by today's situation, although, it is true, these are not the only voices to express such an opinion (cf. Baby & Kavitha 2018: 8; Tyagi 2019: 7 and the hints in David 2019).

Young Toda girls begin to assist in the embroidery enterprise from a young age, first substituting for their mothers, aunts and elder sisters in stitching a simple pattern, but slowly, as Chhabra (2015: 129) writes, 'developing their skills so that, sooner or later, they will be able to produce entire embroidery pieces on their own' (cf. Muthukumaraswamy 2015; Anon. 2016b). A very common sight in a Toda hamlet—provided the weather is fair—is to see a group of women and girls, ranging in age from 70 plus



Figure 16. A group of women, close by their homes, busily engaged in their embroidery work in the limited shade provided by the withering leafy branches of a small tree during the season of cloudless skies and bright, piercing, sunlight during daytime and heavy frost coverage at night. (Photo, Pauline H. Walker, 1974, © Anthony R. Walker.)



Figure 17. The notable concentration on the faces of Toda women as they work on embroidering cloaks. (Photo courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)



Figure 18. Ladies discussing the progress of their work. (Photo, Pauline H. Walker, 1974, © Anthony R. Walker.)



Figure 19. The ‘pattern in pairs’ said to be the most important of all traditional Toda embroidery patterns and to represent the mountains, peaks, hillside slopes, wood-lands and valleys that characterize the Toda homeland. (Photo courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)



Figure 20. The ‘crouching vulture’ pattern; this figure and the one below clearly show the coarse nature of the weave that permits Toda women to count both the warp and weft rows as they embroider (Photo: courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

to, perhaps, ten to twelve, seated together under the branches of a shade tree (Fig. 16), all of them painstakingly engaged in embellishing various sizes of cloth with marvelous designs produced with darning needle and thread (Figs. 13, 14).

Turning now to the embellishments these Toda embroiderers generate on the coarse cloth they work, I am fully in agreement with Tarun Chhabra (2009: 294; 2015: 129), when he writes of them as being ‘among the most visible expressions of the community’s artistic heritage.’ I concur also—and without hesitation—with S.S. Chitra, at the time of her writing, a Ph.D. candidate at The University of Kerala’s Department of Communications and Journalism, when she reports (Chitra 1995: 255) that ‘Toda women

excel in embroidery. The Putkulis [*pootkhull(zh)y*] ... worn by both men and women are exquisitely embroidered by the women themselves.'

Chitra (1995: 255) goes on to mention that '[m]arketing facilities have been provided on and off for a long time now ... and ... [Toda embroidery items] are at present being marketed through the Toda Cooperative Society in Ootacamund [Fig. 26] as well as through the Kotagiri Women's Co-Operative Cottage Industrial Society [Fig. 27], which is run by the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association, so as to encourage the Adivasi [indigenous] women in their traditional art as well as to provide [them with] a source of independent income.'

The Toda word for an embroidered pattern or motif, as mentioned above, is *pukhoor* and the inspiration for most of them comes from the community's natural surroundings and from various elements of its material culture, including such modern items as the wristwatch (Fig. 23i). But among all their *pukhoor*, the one known as the *twehhdr pukhoor* (Fig. 19), literally the 'pattern in pairs', is probably the most important (cf. Chhabra 2009: 205). Indeed, in his revision of his 2009 paper for his 2015 book, Chhabra (2015: 137) declares, emphatically: '[t]here is no doubt that this is the most important of all Toda embroidery patterns, and the only one that the Todas refer to as ... [*ehtwehdd pukhoor*], the big [or principal] pattern. Even today, when younger women seldom embroider traditional patterns, they still execute this one.' In his earlier paper Chhabra (2009: 205) wrote, additionally, that '[i]t seems that this...['pattern in pairs'] is the most ancient surviving Toda embroidery pattern, the inspiration for which appears to have been the hills, their summits and their slopes, the woodlands and the valleys of the Toda homeland.' Another popular embroidery pattern is the *meettoofy-kon pukhoor*, 'the eyes (*kon*) of the peacock's feathers (*meettoofy*)' (Fig. 23e), referring to the bird's tail feathers, conspicuous for their eye-like patterning. As Chhabra (2015, 132) writes, 'peacocks are glamorous, if rare, visitors to the Upper Nilgiris, so it is not surprising that they [have] inspired Toda embroiderers to create this attractive pattern, comprising various elaborations of an essentially diamond shape.' Another avian-inspired pattern is the *paθt pukhoor* or 'vulture (*paθt*) pattern', representing this scavenger bird in its characteristically crouched posture (Fig. 20). Then there is the *kopaan pukhoor* or 'butterfly (*kopaan*) pattern', with several variants (Fig. 23a & 23f), inspired by the patterned wings of many of these beautiful creatures.

Todas are enthusiastic gatherers of wild honey (cf. Chhabra 1999), so it comes as no surprise that the 'honeycomb pattern' (Fig. 23d) is among the many other nature-inspired motifs.¹² And how could Toda embroiderers fail to be inspired by the community's beloved buffaloes? So there is, of course, an *ehr-kwehhdr pukhoor* or 'buffalo (*ehr*) horns (*kwehhdr*) pattern' (Fig. 21).



Figure 21. The 'Buffalo horns' Pattern. (Photo: Courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

¹² According to Chhabra (2015, 136), this honeycomb pattern is known as *kwudrkorrpukhoor*, literally "the brood of infant bees pattern".

Among Toda embroidery patterns inspired by plant life are the *poddwa(r)shk pukhoor* or ‘cobra lily (*Arisaema, spp.*) pattern’ (Fig. 23b) that is said, as Chhabra (2015: 140) tells us, ‘to replicate the ribbing on the spathe of the inflorescence’ and the *modhery pukhoor* ‘mat pattern’, named after the sedge plant *Carex nubigena* which, Chhabra (2015: 133) explains, has ‘distinctly stiff and spiky flowers’.

Sun and moon—symbols frequently represented in carved form on Toda dairy-temples and figuring significantly in Toda folklore—are also represented in the women’s embroidery inventory. The *peer(r)shk pukhoor* or ‘sun motif’ (Fig. 23c) seeks to replicate the sun’s rays, while the *tigall pukhoor* ‘moon pattern’ (Fig. 22) is a more obvious representation (more correctly, multiple representations of this celestial body).



Figure 22. The ‘moon pattern’. (Photo: courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)



Figure 23. A collage of some of the motifs Toda women use in their embroidery work. First row from left: (a) butterfly pattern, (b) cobra lily pattern, (c) sun pattern. Second row from left, (d) honeycomb pattern, (e) eye of the peacock pattern, (f) butterfly pattern. Third row from left (g) mat plant pattern, (h) lamp pattern, (i) wristwatch pattern. (Photos courtesy Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

Toda embroidery, as Chhabra (2009: 212; 2015: 142) rightly emphasizes, is a far from static art form; it is constantly evolving, both with respect to the designs Toda women are able to execute and to the purposes for which they engage in their embroidery activities. At one time, so it appears, embroidering was no more than a strategy to decorate, with quite simple designs, cloaks and loincloths mostly destined for immediate family use, but with some fulfilling traditional obligations to Badaga and Kota neighbors, for whom a Toda cloak symbolized high social status (cf. Hockings 1979: 169; 2012a: 228). But within less than a century, the enterprise has evolved into one that produces the often magnificent, intricate and colorful works of art with which Toda women, no less than their menfolk, love to adorn themselves, particularly on important ritual occasions. Not only this: the women's embroidery enterprise has also become a significant means by which the community has been able to enhance its economic welfare and its womenfolk, their socio-economic status and their self-esteem within this traditionally patriarchal society.

I will begin with the evolution of the traditional styles and uses of Toda embroidery and treat with its commercialization and the consequences thereof in the final section of my paper.

Modern embroidery motifs, not so intimately associated with the surrounding natural world that so obviously has inspired many of the traditional patterns, include the *pell(zh)k pukhoor* (Fig. 23h) or 'lamp pattern' (though the image of the lamp reproduced is certainly a traditional South Indian, not a modern one). A more striking innovation is the *kaddoryem pukhoor* or 'wristwatch pattern' (Fig. 23i); another is the *H-pukhoor* or 'H pattern', so called by Todas themselves because it appears to replicate the roman letter of that name (not illustrated here but see Chhabra 2009: 214, Fig. 11.40).

As for the elaboration of garment embroidery over the past century or more, while the dress itself: cloak and loincloth, remain essentially the same, the degree to which they are decorated, as Figs. 24 & 25 demonstrate, has developed spectacularly, a trend that has further accelerated since I first began studying the Todas in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. the woman in Fig. 25 [1974] and those in Fig. 17 above [*circa* 2000]).



Figures 24 & 25. The elaboration of garment decoration between 1872 (left) and 1974 (right). Left hand illustration from Kieppert [1883: 245]); right hand photograph by Pauline H. Walker, © Anthony R. Walker.)

Toda Embroidery as a Commercial Enterprise

P.K. Nambiar, a former Collector (civil servant and district administrative head) of the Nilgiris and superintendent of the 1961 Census of India operations for Madras State (now Tamil Nadu), wrote—and correctly so—in his 1965 monograph on the Todas (prepared as part of the census operation) that much credit for the development of Toda embroidery must go to Christian missionaries who were able to channel the Toda women's 'unique abilities' into the manufacture of such marketable commodities as table cloths, napkins, curtains and women's shawls (Nambiar 1965: 101).¹³

As a matter of fact, it was Catharine Ling (1861-1951), the leading light in the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society's Toda Mission (cf. Walker 2012b: 535-41), who initiated the commercialization of the Toda embroidery enterprise. Way back in 1904, Ling penned an article entitled, 'An Industrial Column' for her London-based missionary magazine, *India's Women and China's Daughters*, in which she described how it all began. Ling informed her readers that the women 'embroider small course cloths in dark blue cotton, which can be used as table-cloths for afternoon tea, toilet covers, or chair backs for large armchairs. They wash beautifully and wear forever. The profits gained after paying the women for their needlework go to the Toda Mission' (Ling 1904: 80). Continuing with her story, Ling (*ibid.*) wrote:

The women used to beg from me when I went to visit them, as they had been accustomed to do from English visitors who went solely out of curiosity to see their curious huts and to examine their strange manners and customs. To stop this begging I began to give them needlework to do.

The women who do the work are neither widows nor converts, but any Toda woman, whose husband comes to the mission-house and fetches the work [i.e. item to be embellished with embroidery] for his wife and brings it home [presumably to the Toda Mission's headquarters in Ootacamund] again, is allowed to do it, when we have sufficient orders. ...

The work is not anything we have taught them [emphasis added], but their own national [ethnic] work, used by them for embroidering their husbands' *putkulis* [*pootkhull(zh)y*] or sheets [cloaks], which they use for wrapping themselves in. We mostly sell the work privately ... visitors to the Nilgiris generally like to have something peculiar to the place to take away and on my deputation tours in England, I was asked for more work than I was able to supply.

Miss Ling ended her tale by reporting that '[h]anging in the mission house at Ootacamund there is a grand certificate awarded to Toda women by the Society for the Preservation of Indian Art for embroidering the *putkulis*¹⁴ and making rope from the fibre of the Indian nettle.'¹⁵

¹³Maheswaran (2010: 4) confuses the issue of missionary involvement in the commercialization of Toda embroidery by attributing to 'neighbouring Badaga people' [by which he probably means a single Badaga informant, see his p. v] the claim that the embroidery 'was introduced ... [to the Todas] by Ms. Catherine [sic] Ling of the Church of England Zenana Mission Society' and then debunking this claim by pointing to photographic evidence of embroidered *pootkhull(zh)y* in Marshall's 1873 book on the Todas. In fact, Miss Ling made no claim to have introduced embroidery to the Todas. Quite the contrary, as is evident from the material quoted just below. Nor is there any hard evidence for Maheswaran's (p. 5) theory that Ling 'might have encouraged the Toda womenfolk to incorporate elaborate designs in their embroidery so as to craft the craftefact [sic, his inelegant neologism to differentiate 'process' (viz., 'craft') ...[from] 'product' [craftefact] (p. 16 n.2). Again, note that Ling's actual words, cited below, viz. 'the work is not anything we have taught them', provide quite contrary evidence.

¹⁴I should caution here that best ignored (like most of what she wrote about the Todas) is Gervée Baronte's (see Hockings 2012b for a brief biography) observation that '[s]ince the opening of the bazaars, ... [Toda women] have done a little embroidery, which they try to sell. But it is very crude, and not greatly in demand' (Miles [Baronte's *nom de plume*] 1934: 91).

¹⁵It seems that Toda women spun these fibers to produce thread with which to stitch and embellish clothing.

In 1958 the Servants of India Society (SIS), in co-operation with the All-India Handicrafts Board, established a ‘Toda Embroidery Development Centre’ for the purpose of marketing a range of utilitarian merchandise: curtains, tablecloths, napkins, pillowcases, borders for skirts, blouses and frocks, etc. (Venkataraman 1958: 169), all suitably embellished with the Toda women’s expert needlework. At first, this center was based at the SIS residential school for Toda and Kota children located at a Toda hamlet a little less than 13 km from Ootacamund. Here, during the first three years of its existence, the Centre employed ten Toda women and was able to sell almost 75% of its stock, in those days valued at Rs. 21,000 (Nambiar 1965: 101).¹⁶ In 1962 the facility was moved to Charing Cross, in the heart of Ootacamund, where it was more accessible to Toda embroiderers from widely-scattered hamlets who visited, or whose menfolk visited, the town most Tuesdays, Ootacamund’s long-established ‘market day’. This central location, obviously, was much more convenient for the many tourists the outlet hoped to attract.

In addition, the Nilgiri Adivasi [Indigenous Peoples] Welfare Association founded in 1958 and based in Kotagiri (cf. Misra & Misra 1988: 44; Řeznčková 2012) set up its own ‘Women’s Embroidery Cooperative Society’ to market embroidery items produced by Toda women living in hamlets within the Kodanad area, close by Kotagiri (cf. Chitra 1995: 255; Rao 2013; Baby & Paul 2017: 34; Kalawadwala 2020; Anon. 2021). This unit also provides training to Toda women under its ‘Income Generating Project’ (NAWA 1991: 27).



Figure 26. Sign advertising its wares: shawls, mufflers, handbags, table mats, etc. in front of the Toda Embroidery Centre near Charing Cross in Ootacamund. (Photo: Chhobi Walker, 2017)

In the mid-1970s Evam Piljen-Wiedemann, a trained nurse, social activist and leading light in the Toda Christian community (cf. Walker 2012d; also Shaposhnikova 1968; Radhakrishna 1988, 2001; Kumar

¹⁶ In 1958 the value of the rupee was 4.76 to the US dollar, therefore about US\$ 4,412 . (Today’s rate is about 76 rupees to the dollar!)

2000a,b; De 2001b; Reddy 2001; Radhakrishnan 2005) began to organize, at first quite informally, Toda embroidery sales from her home in Ootacamund. Thirty years later, in 2006, Evam's more-or-less informal organization officially registered as an NGO under the name 'Piljen Toda Women's Welfare' (Chhabra 2009: 195.)

Today there are multiple outlets for Toda handicrafts, among the most important is the 'Toda Cooperative Centre' (Fig. 26) near Charing Cross in the heart of Ootacamund, successor to the SIS-inaugurated center that moved here in 1962 and which is now operated under the auspices of Poompuhar, Tamil Nadu Government's Handicrafts Board. Another successful outlet, due particularly to its location in Ootacamund's famous Botanical Gardens, where its sales room is a traditional Toda dwelling (Fig. 28), sponsored by the 'Toda Nalavaazvu Sangam' (Toda Welfare Society), is operated by one of fifteen Toda self-help groups, this one named the 'Toda Thein Malar (Toda Honey Flower) Self Help Group'.

These relatively new 'self-help groups' represent, I would judge, among the most important—if not the most important—developments in the story of the social and economic uplifting of Toda women in modern times. And since they are also intimately associated with the women's embroidery enterprise (cf. Parthasarathy 2008: 69), it is imperative that I provide an account of them in this paper. So far as I am aware, the fullest description of these groups among Todas (a topic that might well constitute the focus of a new field study) is to be found in Alok Pandey's 2007 M. Phil. thesis, 'Changing Livelihoods of a Pastoral Community'.

The self-help groups, known by their Tamil designation, *magalir*, were established under the auspices of the Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Housing and Development Corporation, not only for Todas but for the economic advancement of the women of all of Tamil Nadu State's 'scheduled castes and tribes'¹⁷. In the Toda case, due to the small size of their settlements, a *magalir* typically comprises womenfolk from two or more neighboring hamlets, who give their group a special name, often that of a flower, as in the 'Honey Flower Group' mentioned above. Every *magalir* chooses its own president, secretary and assistant to serve a one-year term as the group's leaders. The president and secretary are charged with the responsibility of organizing and notifying the membership of group meetings and also of 'new programmes and schemes implemented by the government' (Pandey 2007: 93). Together with the assistant, the president and secretary also act as custodians of the group's financial assets, held in the group's name 'at the nearest bank' (Pandey *ibid.*). All three must sign off on any money released as a loan to a member of the group. Members are expected to make a specific weekly or monthly cash contribution to the self-help group's account, at a rate decided within the group itself. When a member receives a loan from the group's bank account, the amount of interest that the recipient must pay likewise depends on the decision of the self-help group itself.

As a concrete example of one such Toda women's self-help group and its president, Pandey (2007: 93-96) gives the 'Chrysanthemum Flower Group', with its three-term (at the time of Pandey's research) president. The women of two neighboring hamlets (less than half a kilometer apart) set up this *magalir* in

¹⁷Officially-designated and constitutionally-protected groups among India's multi-ethnic and linguistically-diverse peoples. During the British period they were generally known as the 'depressed classes'. The term 'scheduled caste' refers mostly to groups once known as 'outcastes', whom Mahatma Gandhi renamed as *Harijen* 'people of God' in Hindi, and B.R. Ambedkar, nationalist, social reformer and political activist, designated as *Dalit*, a Marathi word meaning 'broken' or 'dispersed', which has become the preferred usage over much of India today. In Tamil Nadu, '*Harijen*' was the commonly employed designation up until the late 1960s to 1970s, when 'Adi Dravidar', literally 'Original Dravidians' in Tamil, replaced it. The term 'scheduled tribe' is applied to certain ethnic groups who, besides being considered economically 'backward', are recognized as the aboriginal peoples of the country and thus are usually designated as *Adivasi* or 'indigenes'. The term 'scheduled' refers to the fact that there is an official list or schedule for selected castes and another for selected 'tribes', with those groups listed in one or another of the schedules receiving special 'affirmative action' or 'positive discrimination' benefits, in terms of access to educational, employment, health and socio-economic services provided by the central and state governments.



Figure 27. Outlet for Toda embroidery products in Kotagiri Town, Nilgiris. (Photo courtesy Carolin Baby, Institute of Fashion Technology, Kerala.)

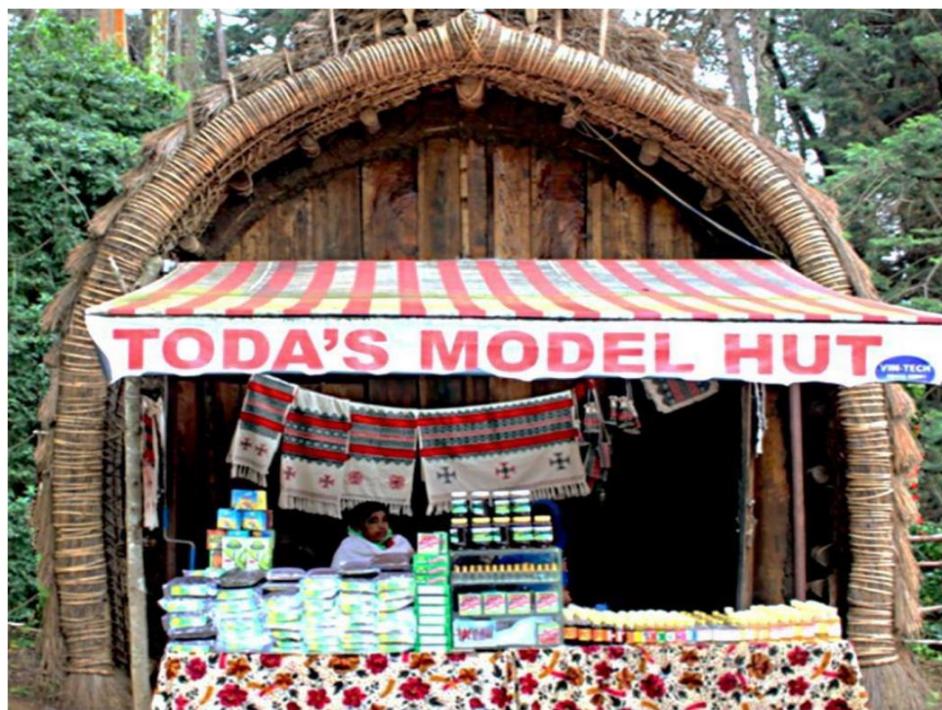


Figure 28. Toda Thein Malar (Toda Honey Flower) Self-Help Group's embroidery sales outlet on the grounds of Ootacamund's Botanical Gardens. (Photo: Courtesy Manjulika Pramod, New Delhi-based writer and travel blogger.)

2001. In 2006 the membership comprised sixteen women, who contributed either Rs.10 weekly or else Rs.

40 monthly,¹⁸ depositing their contributions in the group's account at their closest bank, six kilometers away (Pandey 2007: 94). The members of the group meet fortnightly at a convenient grassy spot between the two hamlets.

As for Chrysanthemum Flower *Magalir*'s president, then a twenty-seven year old mother of three, educated up to 9th standard, and the wife of a herdsman-cum-farmer, she told Pandey that she feels more independent and more confident in herself since joining the self-help group, from which she has taken a loan to finance her children's education, as well as to help cover her household's expenses. 'During times of need she gives money to her husband', Pandey (*ibid.*) adds.

A relatively recent project to promote embroidery production and sales is directly linked to these Toda self-help groups. Initiated by the Ministry of Textiles, Central Government of India, the project, Pandey (2007: 100) relates:

encourages workshops where women discuss issues related to ... embroidery. Toda women develop prototypes and have helped in documenting the various designs in Toda embroidery. Exhibitions of handicrafts ... have been held in cities like Chennai, Bangalore and other places to promote ... [Toda embroidery]. The embroidery centres at Ooty [Ootacamund] and Kotagiri provide the women with cloth and wool free of charge. The Toda women embroider shawls, purses, handbags, table cloths, bed spread[s], etc. [The Toda women are paid according to] the design and quality of the embroidery ... Rs 400/- to Rs 700/- for shawl embroidery ... [while] smaller items ... are sold for Rs 250/- or more.¹⁹ Apart from the government offices there are private buyers of Toda handicraft[s] in Ooty. They purchase the crafts and sell them in other parts of India and abroad.

A less positive picture of the benefits accruing to Toda women from these workshops—particularly with regards to design manipulation by non-Todas—comes from the pen of S.R. Abbirama, a Master's graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology in Kolkata. Abbirama (2020) writes:

... attempts have been made by NGOs to 'train' and 'help' the Todas in commercialising their craft. As part of such training initiatives, the women are introduced to new designs and embroidery work is done on a new range of products which has no relevance to Toda culture. Cooperative societies are set up which attempt to mass produce [see Fig. 30] the embroidery work to cater to the tourism market. Though this might seem as social empowerment for the Todas, such practices could lead to cultural appropriation. The Todas feel that new motifs taught by NGOs are not authentic. They feel the copying of their motifs has resulted in a loss of exclusivity of their craft.

Abbirama's comments certainly raise important questions, though I think that of non-Toda enterprises copying Toda designs is currently more important to the community than is design manipulation. Nonetheless, it is evident from the reports of fashion designers visiting Toda embroiderers that the latter are quite resistant to the idea of producing anything other than traditional motifs. Baby & Kavitha (2018: 9), for example, write: 'Since ... Toda embroidery has ... [received] (GI) Geographical Identification [status]' (see below) 'they [the Toda embroiderers] do not prefer changing the [traditional] motifs.' And in an earlier paper Baby & Paul (2017: 18) wrote that since 'Toda embroidery has been given GI certification, *no changes or modifications in the design* [emphasis added] have [been] allowed.'

Foreseeing the dangers posed to Toda cultural and economic interests by unauthorized replication, in 2009 the Ootacamund-based Toda Nalavaazvu Sangam (Toda Welfare Association) and the Keystone Foundation of Kotagiri (both NGOs), along with Poompuhar, Tamil Nadu Government's Handicrafts Board, with its headquarters in Chennai, joined forces to petition, on behalf of the Toda community, the

¹⁸ In 2006 the value of the Indian rupee against the US dollar was 26.9 rupees to one US dollar, therefore a group member's contribution was either US 37 cents weekly or \$1.5 monthly.

¹⁹ Approximately US \$15-26 or, for smaller items, under \$10.



Figure 29. Toda women attending a workshop on new developments for Toda embroidery.
(Photo courtesy Sheela Powell of Shalom Self-help Group, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)



Figure 30. Toda women embroiderers employed by Shalom Self-help Group. (Photo courtesy Sheela Powell of Shalom Self-help Group, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

Registrar of Geographical Indications for India for ‘Toda embroidery’ to be granted ‘Geographical Indications (GI)’ status (GOI 2009).²⁰

²⁰ Citing directly from Thiagarajan (2013), ‘GI is a sign used on goods that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities, reputation or characteristics that can be attributed to that place of origin. India, as a member of the

If *Times of India* correspondent Shantha Thiagarajan (2013) is correct, the initial impetus for such registration came from a Bengaluru-based law student Zaheda Mulla, whom Thiagarajan (*ibid.*) quotes as saying: ‘it struck me that the distinctive craft of the Toda tribals should be protected from imitation. I initiated the move for a GI tag for it … [w]ith GI registry and prompt marketing, the economic status of the Toda community will improve.’ Continuing in her own words, Thiagarajan (*ibid.*) writes:

Zaheda approached the local agencies working with the Toda community. She identified Keystone Foundation and Dr.Tarun Chhabra, who runs [the] Toda Nalavaazhv Sangam in the Nilgiris. In 2008, Zaheda proceeded further as a legal consultant for the project. Later the government agency Poompuhar was included in the applicants’ list. Though the process of applying for [a] GI tag started in 2008, it took five years to get the registry.²¹

In 2013 this application was declared successful and the Registrar duly issued GI No. 135, with the three claimants jointly designated ‘registered proprietors’ of the GI ‘Toda Embroidery’. Henceforth, only persons or organizations registered with the three ‘proprietors’ would be permitted under law to deal in matters related to the production and sale of Toda embroidery (cf. Radhakrishnan 2013; Thiagarajan 2013).

Despite this new legal right to exclusivity, however, the marketing of imitation Toda embroidery has not ceased. In May of 2019, Priti David, a reporter and education editor with the on-line site, *People’s Archive of Rural India*, authored an article ‘Copying Our Designs is Not Correct’, in which, among other informants, she has Toda woman social activist, Vasamalli, telling her that, ‘despite the GI, big companies outside the Nilgiris are copying our embroidery using machines, or as a print and calling it Toda embroidery. How can they do this?’ A couple of months later, Roshan Premkumar, *The Hindu* newspaper’s Nilgiris correspondent, authored a piece, ‘Toda Embroidery Duplicates Threaten Artisans’ Livelihood’ (Premkumar 2019). Here he wrote that ‘artisans from the Toda community fear … duplication of their traditional hand woven textile designs may soon edge them out of the market, leading to the more than 300 women²² who depend on the sale of traditional Toda-embroidered clothing being out of business in the next few years.’ Premkumar notes that mass-produced duplicates of Toda hand-crafted items are being sold at a fraction of the price that has to be charged for the originals, due to the labor-intensive input required to produce them. In addition, Premkumar tells of the Toda president of the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association of Kotagiri saying that ‘handcrafted textiles … [are] a part of the Todas’ tradition, with deep cultural roots, and that their duplication was causing much distress among members of the community.’

The Economics of Embroidery for Toda Women and Their Households

By now I have described the production technique, the aesthetics and the uses of the Toda women’s embroidery enterprise. Finally, I need to say something about the economics of modern-day Toda embroidering, both with regards to the embroiderers themselves and to their households.

For her 2000 study, ‘The Status of Working Toda Women in the Family and Community’, Roshini Philips selected as her respondents 100 Toda women between the ages of 25 to 35 years. These she divided into two subgroups: those belonging to ‘low income’ households (44 respondents) and those to ‘middle

World Trade Organization, enacted the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, which came into force in September 2003.’

²¹Priti David’s (2019) on-line article for the *People’s Archive of Rural India* suggests a slightly different role for Zaheda Mulla, now no longer simply a Bengaluru-based law student, but a ‘Bengaluru-based lawyer … who specialises in intellectual property rights, patents and copyrights, and who was commissioned by the Keystone Foundation for the Toda embroidery GI [emphasis added].’

²² Apparently a ‘guesstimate’, most likely one that is attributable to Toda social activist Vasamalli (cf. David 2019).

income' households (56 respondents).²³ Respondents from both low- and middle-income households listed as their household's principal sources of income: embroidery, agriculture and, what Philips labels 'coolie work' (by which she means women working as hired laborers on the lands of others [Philips 2000: 17]). Among these three income sources, 42% of the respondents listed embroidery as being primary, 36% gave hired laboring and 32%, reported farming on their own household lands. But the overall primacy of embroidery work occurred only among the forty-four respondents from low-income families, of whom twenty-three (52%) listed embroidery sales as their major source of income. For those from middle income households, 50% of the respondents gave the cultivation of their own lands as their primary source of income, 34% gave embroidery and 5%, agricultural laboring for others (Philips 2000: 22).

Women in the low-income group were able to contribute an average of Rs. 780 or 39% of the household's total monthly income, of which about Rs. 304 was realized from embroidery sales. By contrast, women in the middle-income households contributed an average of Rs. 1,662, close to half their household's average monthly total, of which around Rs. 565 or 34% came from embroidery sales (Philips, *ibid.*)



Figure 31. A collection of Toda embroidered items: top, table runner; bottom left to right; handbag, purse, ladies' evening pouch. (Photos courtesy Carolin Baby, Institute of Fashion Technology, Kerala.)

Philips (2000: 27, 37) makes two important observations with regards to her respondents' feelings as moneymakers. First, regardless of the size of their income, '[a]ll the women ... expressed satisfaction in spending their earnings for personal ...and family [use]. Second, '[a]ll the women ... [maintained] that every time they received their income their self-esteem was built up.' Quantifying her data, Philips goes on to note (p. 38) that '68 percent of the women from the middle-income group [though only 36% from the lower-income households] felt that their sense of worth in their community was enhanced when they were recognized as earning members by others.' In the conclusion to her thesis, Philips (2000: 42) notes both the 'keen interest' Toda women take in their embroidery enterprise and also that 'cloth [formerly] embroidered

²³Philips identified as being in the lower-income group, households earning between Rs.1,250-Rs. 2,650) per month, while those in the middle-income group realized between Rs. 2,651-Rs. 4,450 for the same period. (At that time, the year 2000, US\$1 = *circa* Rs 32.)

... [solely for their own consumption] is now [being] sold in the markets ...[helping] to procure a good income for the family.'

A second study focused on Toda women's issues soon followed Roshini Philips' 2000 work. This was Women's Studies student R. Murali's Ph.D. thesis, 'Socio-economic Development of the Toda and Kota Women of Nilgiris'. For the Toda component of this work (I am not concerned here with his Kota materials), Murali interviewed 125 women from thirty-four of the then extant sixty-eight Toda settlements (Murali 2001: 103). Unfortunately, however, the Toda women's embroidery enterprise does not loom large in Murali's study; unlike Philips, he does not identify it as a 'main occupation' (cf. Murali's 2001: 157). He does, however, mention (p. 161) that Toda women devote much of their leisure time to embroidery and that this includes, besides working on traditional cloaks, also the embellishment of 'tablecloths, bedcovers, etc., [which] [t]hey sell ... through their men in the bazaars and also supply ... to [the] Toda Cooperative Society for sale.' Moreover, towards the end of his thesis (p. 193), Murali mentions that 'one-third [of his respondents] were involved in their traditional embroidery work.' Unfortunately, he provides no data on the income his respondents received from their labors, although he does confirm Philips' finding that women from lower-income households (those he identifies as realizing Rs. 12,000 or less per annum) have slightly more women engaged in commercial embroidery than those from households where the annual income is between Rs. 24,000 and Rs. 12,000 (Murali's 2001: 173). But the difference: twenty-four women in the former group against twenty-two in the latter, seems hardly to be very significant.

Finally, we come to data provided by J. Martin Selvaraj in his chapter 'Economic Conditions of the Toda' for his 2008 Ph.D. thesis, 'Socio-Cultural Study of the Toda ...' In this document, Selvaraj (2008: 131) mentions that in all but three of the twenty-five Toda hamlets he sampled '*all the ladies* [emphasis added] ... do embroidery ... which is marketed through [the] Toda's Co-operative Society.' But like Murali, he provides no data on the amount of cash the women realized from such sales.

None of the three academic theses discussed above provides data—except in the most general of terms—on the time Toda women devote to their embroidery work (such data would, of course, involve intensive observation over a considerable period of time and require also detailed recording and careful sampling). Nor do these works tell us, with any great precision, just how much cash, on average, a Toda woman might expect to earn from her handicraft labors for a specified period of work. The fullest account I have yet come across on the subject of work time comes from Baby & Paul's 2017 paper 'Toda Embroidery' for the *International Journal of Textile and Fashion Technology*, wherein the authors state clearly (p. 23) the difficulties involved in data collection when 'respondents were not ...[devoting] specific time [periods] for embroidery, but ... [engaged in it] as and when they get the time.' And another important point that Baby and Paul (*ibid.*) stress is that the embroiderers do not simply engage in the craft to generate a cash income but also do so 'for preserving their tradition'—words I think we may interpret as referring principally to the embroidery of cloaks (and now also waistcoats [Fig. 32]), not for sale but to meet their own and their menfolk's traditional needs and ritual requirements.



Figure 32. Innovation for internal consumption: A lavishly embroidered waistcoat adds to the Toda's sartorial splendor (Photo courtesy, Tarun Chhabra, Ootacamund, Nilgiris)

Notwithstanding the acknowledged difficulty in data collection, Baby and Paul (*ibid.*) provide a table on the required time required to complete different kinds of product, as follows: traditional cloak: 75-80 days; shawl, 22 days; *dupatta* (Indian stole), 15 days; cell phone pouch, 3 days; tablecloth, 5 days, purse, 2 days; wall hanging, 4 days, cushion cover, 3 days, shoulder bag, 4 days. Unfortunately, these authors do not state the remuneration the embroiderers might expect to receive for their work on these items. Sharma & Bhagat (2018: 7-8), on the other hand, give us some inkling of what this might be when they write that ‘Toda embroidered articles that are available nowadays are mostly small articles [Fig. 31] like cushion covers, mobile pouches, bag tags, handbag[s], table runners and mats, etc. … [The] amount paid to the artisans for these small articles is not very inspiring or motivating for the younger generation to continue with this as an income generating activity. They are paid in the range of Rs. 100 to 500 for such products.’²⁴ In this connection, Priti David (2019) reports on a particularly significant conversation she had with a twenty-three-year-old Toda woman embroiderer, who told her, ‘[this embroidery] work is … [hard] and it takes a long time. As a laborer in a [tea] estate I can get 300 rupees or more per day. For this [embroidery work I spend two to six hours a day and get only about 2,000 rupees at the end of the month.’ In other words, this young Toda woman could expect to earn in excess of Rs. 9,000 per month as an estate laborer, against less than a quarter of that amount, viz. Rs. 2,000, for her production of Toda embroidery. We need to keep in mind, moreover, that there is an ever-increasing number of educated Toda women who certainly expect to realize monthly salaries well above that of a tea-estate laborer.



Figure 33. Designers' ideas for the future commercial use of Toda embroidery in the Indian fashion industry. (Figures executed by Carolin Baby, Institute of Fashion Technology, Kerala.)

²⁴ In 2018 US \$1.00 = *circa* Rs 68, therefore Rs 300 = US\$4.40; Rs 2,000 = US\$29.4; Rs 9,000 = US\$132.40.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE FATE OF THE TODAS' EMBROIDERY ENTERPRISE—REVIVAL, DECLINE OR COLLAPSE?

Since those far off days, all of two centuries ago, when Deputy Surveyor-General Ward wrote of Toda women ‘amusing themselves with needle-work, darning the hems of cloth with red and blue thread’, the Todas’ embroidery enterprise has advanced dramatically, enhancing both the economic and social situations of the women embroiders, contributing, often significantly, to the women’s household economies and enhancing the sophistication of this increasingly visible dimension of the Toda community’s material culture, making it among the principal cultural icons of the modern-day Nilgiris.



Figure 34. A fashion designer’s idea for the future of Toda embroidery as a viable commercial enterprise. (Photo courtesy Carolin Baby, Institute of Fashion Technology, Kerala.)

If the hopes of textile specialists Sharma and Bhagat are realized, the future for Toda embroidery as a viable commercial prospect seems bright indeed. As these authors tell us, ‘[Indian] Designers today are using a lot of Indian embroideries in their collections [e.g. Figs. 33, 34]. The collaboration with designers can help local craftsmen to improve their skill, adapt to modern times ... [and] generate better incomes ... The base fabric used in Toda embroidery is cotton which is a wearable fabric in summer and winter as well. Since only threads are used for [Toda] embroidery, ... it can be comfortably used on clothing items ... in a manner that maintains the authenticity of the craft by incorporating original stitches, motifs and colors ...’. But will this talent for embroidering continue to generate the desirable incomes that a younger, better-educated, generation of Toda women will surely aspire to obtain? The jury is still out on this question. But

those who love the Todas and hold in great esteem the embroidery talents of their womenfolk, will surely delight in the community's quick commercial response to the current covid-19 pandemic: to embellish face masks with Toda embroidery motifs (Premkumar 2010; see also Figs. 35 & 36 below).



Figures 35 & 36. A Toda response to Covid-19. (Photos courtesy Sheela Powell of Shalom Self-help Group, Ootacamund, Nilgiris.)

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