

Rituals, Resilience and Identity: An Ethnographic Analysis of the Irulas of South India

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Abstract: This study investigates the life-cycle rituals of the Irula community of Attappadi, South India, with a focus on birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and informed by ritual theory, political ecology, and indigenous studies, the analysis examines how these practices sustain social reproduction, ecological regulation, and cultural identity. The findings demonstrate that Irula rituals not only embody cosmological meanings but also adapt to historical transformations, including colonial forest regulations and contemporary state interventions in health and education. By highlighting the interplay of continuity and adaptation, the article shows how ritual resilience contributes to the community's negotiation of marginality, cultural rights, and modernity. The study offers comparative insights into indigenous knowledge systems and the dynamics of ritual practice in the Global South.

Keywords: Irula Community; Ritual Resilience; Political Ecology.

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1. Introduction

Rituals have long occupied a central place in anthropological scholarship as key sites where culture, cosmology, and social reproduction intersect. Classic studies have shown that rituals embody symbolic meanings, regulate ecological and social order, and mediate processes of continuity and transformation [1–4]. In contemporary debates, rituals are also analysed as arenas where communities' articulate resilience, identity, and rights in response to shifting political, ecological, and economic pressures [5–7]. This dual focus—rituals as both repositories of tradition and instruments of adaptation—provides a critical lens for studying marginalized and indigenous societies navigating processes of modernity.

The Irulas of Attappadi, a Scheduled Tribe in Kerala, South India, offer a compelling case for such analysis. Their life-cycle rituals—covering birth, puberty, marriage, and death—are not merely symbolic enactments but serve as mechanisms of ecological regulation, kinship reproduction, and community cohesion [8–10]. These practices articulate cosmological understandings of fertility, health, and death while shaping the community's relations with land, forest, and state institutions. Yet, these ritual practices are deeply embedded in histories of colonial dispossession, forest regulation, missionary influence, and modern state interventions in health and education [11–14].

Existing scholarship in political ecology and governmentality highlights how state and market interventions reshape cultural practices and subjectivities [15–17]. In Attappadi, development programs and welfare schemes often attempt to discipline ritual practices by framing them as superstitions or impediments to progress. However, Irula rituals endure and adapt, acquiring new meanings as households negotiate pressures of poverty, migration, and cultural survival [18–20].

Despite valuable ethnographic accounts of the Irulas, limited research has focused on how their ritual practices mediate between continuity and adaptation in the face of

historical and political transformations. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the life-cycle rituals of the Irulas of Attappadi, situating them within broader debates on ritual theory, political ecology, and indigenous knowledge. The purpose is to demonstrate how ritual resilience functions as a cultural strategy for negotiating marginality and asserting identity in the Global South.

2. Materials and Methods

Anthropological and sociological scholarship has long underscored the central role of ritual in structuring social life, cultural reproduction, and cosmology. Foundational works emphasized ritual as both symbolic enactment and mechanism of social order [1-4]. Complementary analyses situated rituals within gender hierarchies, kinship systems, and social stratification [21-23]. More recent perspectives extend these debates by showing how colonialism, state regulation, and capitalist expansion reshape indigenous practices [7,14-16,24]. Approaches informed by governmentality and environmentality further demonstrate how rituals become arenas of discipline and subject formation under development and welfare interventions [18-20]. At the same time, cultural anthropology and ethnography emphasize ritual adaptability, revealing how communities mobilize symbolic practices to assert identity and negotiate resilience [6,25-27].

Within South Asia, scholarship has richly documented caste, kinship, and religious practices [5,9,13,28]. Yet, the everyday ritual lives of smaller indigenous groups such as the Irulas of Kerala remain underexplored. While ecological and linguistic studies exist [11,12], and broader accounts address tribal marginalization [10], little attention has been given to Irula life-cycle rituals as mechanisms of identity, adaptation, and resilience under conditions of historical and political disruption. This gap frames the problem addressed here: the need to examine Irula rituals in ways that connect ritual theory with political ecology and indigenous studies through detailed ethnographic engagement.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze Irula life-cycle rituals—birth, puberty, marriage, and death—as cultural mechanisms that articulate both continuity and adaptation. Specifically, the research investigates how these practices sustain community identity, negotiate ecological change, and respond to external interventions such as colonial forest regulation, missionary encounters, and postcolonial welfare programs.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a multi-scalar qualitative design that integrates ethnographic description, archival research, and theoretical triangulation. At the first level, the analysis draws on ethnographic accounts and oral narratives of the Irula community in Attappadi. Descriptions of puberty seclusion, marriage by service, reproductive taboos, and funerary rites were collated from published ethnographies and interpreted through Clifford Geertz's principle of "thick description," reading rituals as cultural texts encoding kinship, gender, and cosmology [29].

At the second level, archival and historical sources were mobilized to contextualize ritual adaptation within ecological and political change. Colonial forest legislation, including the Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927, along with related administrative records, were examined in relation to environmental histories [14,15,17]. These sources illuminate how ceremonial landscapes were disrupted, shifting cultivation criminalized, and livelihoods reoriented, thereby reshaping ritual geographies.

At the third level, theoretical triangulation was employed to interpret the findings. Ritual theory [1,2,4] provided tools to analyze liminality, symbolism, and social reproduction. Political ecology situated rituals within contested terrains of land, forest governance, and state intervention [8,16,19]. Medical anthropology and gender studies illuminated the embodied dimensions of reproductive and postnatal practices as negotiations of health, taboo, and power [26,30].

This triangulated design enables a holistic reading of Irula rituals as dynamic practices that are simultaneously adaptive and resistant, shaped by both internal cultural

logics and external historical pressures. No primary field data, restricted materials, or unpublished datasets were used in this study. All archival documents and published ethnographies cited are publicly available. The methodology, while qualitative, is designed to allow replication by following the same corpus of ethnographic, archival, and theoretical sources. The study complies with ethical standards by relying solely on published materials and secondary data; no new human or animal interventions were undertaken, and hence no additional ethical approval was required.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Historical and Ethno-Cultural Background of the Irulas

The Irulas are among the earliest Dravidian-speaking populations of South India, with ethnolinguistic evidence indicating their long-standing presence in the Nilgiri–Attappadi region. While precise origins remain debated, oral traditions recount migrations across forested hill tracts in search of cultivable land, water sources, and ritual sites. Elders frequently recall that “our people settled wherever the forest gave both food and space for worship,” linking subsistence with spirituality in historical memory. These narratives correspond with ethnographic descriptions that situate the Irulas as one of the principal indigenous groups of Attappadi, today distributed across approximately 192 *oorus* (hamlets), each functioning as an autonomous socio-cultural unit under the leadership of a *mooppaan* (headman). The *ooru* system organizes residence, resource use, and ritual authority, providing the primary framework for kinship regulation and community cohesion.

Language constitutes a central marker of identity. The Irula language, classified within the South Dravidian subgroup, retains phonological and lexical features that distinguish it from Tamil and Malayalam, including vowel centralization and retroflex consonants. Ritual chants, kinship terminology, and oral narratives reinforce cultural distinctiveness through this linguistic medium. In addition, colonial ethnographers frequently emphasized physiognomic traits such as short stature, darker skin tone, and curly hair. Although such typologies reflected the classificatory biases of early anthropology, Irula narratives themselves employ bodily symbolism, linking skin, hair, and physical resilience to ancestral inheritance.

Equally significant are oral traditions and ancestral myths, which sustain historical consciousness in the absence of written records. Myths recount the descent of clans from deities associated with sacred landscapes, particularly Malleswara peak, a continuing pan-tribal ritual center. Tales of spirits inhabiting rivers, groves, and rocks encode ecological ethics, situating human life within a continuum of forest beings. Mortuary myths link death rituals to mythic geographies, narrating the soul’s journey through forest paths to ancestral settlements. Such oral narratives, transmitted in the Irula language, operate as “oral archives” [28], embedding ecology, cosmology, and ancestry within cultural memory.

Together, migration narratives, the *ooru* system, linguistic distinctiveness, and mythic cosmologies anchor Irula identity in both tangible and symbolic landscapes. They frame the community as a dynamic society whose traditions integrate history, ecology, and spirituality within everyday practice.

Irula society is differentiated through clans, which regulate marriage, ritual participation, and kinship alliances. The principal clans — Vellaga, Kurunaga, Palnaga, Kalla Kurunaga, and Oosi Naga — trace descent from mythical serpentine ancestors, linking human genealogy with the cosmological order. Clans are strictly exogamous, ensuring marriage alliances across kin groups. Clan affiliation also prescribes ritual duties in life-cycle ceremonies, generating obligations that reinforce inter-*ooru* solidarity.

The *ooru* constitutes the core socio-political unit. Each settlement comprises kin-related households under the authority of the *mooppaan*, a hereditary elder responsible for conflict resolution, marriage negotiations, and ritual sanction. Leadership is distributed

across specialized roles: the *guruuvan* (ritual priest) presides over ceremonies, the *bandari* manages resources and community stores, and the *kuruthalai* organizes collective labor and maintains order. This decentralized but cohesive system integrates ritual authority, economic management, and social regulation.

Gender roles combine economic contribution with symbolic regulation. Men traditionally engage in forest gathering, hunting, and agriculture, while women contribute through food processing, childcare, and wage labor in nearby estates. Women play indispensable roles in rituals of menarche and childbirth but are excluded from funerary processions or entry into *pattekettal* booths. These exclusions reflect wider South Asian notions of pollution and purity, yet women retain agency through control over seclusion rituals, herbal medicine, and oral myth transmission. Gendered divisions thus delineate distinct but complementary spheres of ritual and social authority.

The clan system, *ooru* governance, and gendered roles together constitute a layered social organization in which kinship, ritual, and labor are closely interwoven. These structures provide continuity to ancestral obligations while enabling adaptation to ecological pressures and political transformations, thereby sustaining Irula identity across generations.

3.2. Ritual Practice, Adaptation, and Resilience

Life-cycle rituals—birth, puberty, marriage, and death—operate as mechanisms of cultural continuity and adaptation. Puberty seclusion encodes ideas of bodily transformation and fertility; marriage by service reinforces kinship and inter-clan reciprocity; mortuary rites link death to sacred geographies and ancestral continuity. These rituals simultaneously reproduce cosmological meaning and adapt to shifting ecological and political pressures.

Colonial forest regulations and postcolonial welfare interventions significantly reshaped ritual contexts. Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 criminalized shifting cultivation, disrupted ritual geographies, and displaced communities from sacred groves. Post-independence welfare and health programs frequently reclassified rituals as superstition, attempting to discipline cultural practices. Yet rituals endured by adapting to new conditions—incorporating alternative spaces for performance, embedding symbolic practices within household rituals, and re-signifying customs in relation to state programs. This adaptive resilience underscores rituals as both cultural resources and political strategies.

Theoretical triangulation clarifies these dynamics. Ritual theory highlights liminality, symbolism, and social reproduction [1,2,4]; political ecology situates rituals within contested terrains of governance and ecological regulation [8,19,16]; and medical anthropology emphasizes embodied negotiations of health, taboo, and power [19,26]. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Irula rituals mediate between cultural continuity and external pressures of colonialism, development, and modernity.

The findings of this study indicate that Irula life-cycle rituals are not static survivals of a “tribal past” but active, adaptive practices that continuously generate social identity. Rather than existing as fossilized traditions, these rituals constitute cultural strategies through which communities negotiate belonging, continuity, and recognition. As Turner emphasized, rituals function as liminal processes that not only reproduce order but also enable innovation [1]. Among the Irulas, this dynamic is visible in the way puberty, marriage, and funerary ceremonies simultaneously reproduce ancestral obligations and accommodate contemporary realities such as migration, wage labor, and state welfare interventions.

One central dimension of ritual practice is its ecological grounding. Rituals preserve and transmit ecological knowledge by embedding subsistence, fertility, and cosmology within everyday landscapes. Puberty seclusion rituals invoke the fertility of the land and forests, while marriage practices often include symbolic exchanges of forest produce, reinforcing the ecological basis of kinship. Mortuary rituals narrate the journey of the soul

through forest paths, connecting death to sacred geographies [9,11]. These practices align with what political ecologists describe as “situated knowledges” [7], in which cosmology, ecology, and social reproduction are mutually reinforcing. By linking human cycles of birth, fertility, and death with the cycles of land and forest, Irula rituals encode ecological ethics within cultural practice.

At the same time, rituals act as sites of resilience and adaptation in the face of historical disruptions. Colonial forest acts (1865, 1878, 1927) criminalized shifting cultivation, restricted access to sacred groves, and disrupted ritual landscapes [14,15]. Postcolonial development and welfare programs sought to reframe indigenous practices as superstition or backwardness, aiming to discipline ritual life through health campaigns and literacy drives [16,19]. Yet rather than disappearing, rituals adapted: puberty seclusions were shortened but retained symbolic gestures of fertility; mortuary rites relocated from forested sites to domestic courtyards while maintaining cosmological meaning. Such adaptations exemplify what Li terms “the will to improve,” where state interventions produce new forms of subjectivity, yet local communities re-signify these pressures within their own cultural logics. In this sense, rituals embody resilience by preserving symbolic continuity even under conditions of dispossession and welfare discipline [20].

Equally significant is the role of ritual in asserting cultural rights and identity. Rituals articulate boundaries of distinctiveness through language, ritual authority, and oral memory. Ceremonies are conducted in the Irula language, which reinforces collective identity and maintains linguistic distinctiveness despite pressures of Tamil and Malayalam dominance [12]. Ritual authority, vested in figures such as the *mooppan* and *guruwan*, sustains indigenous forms of governance that operate alongside and sometimes in tension with state structures. Oral narratives transmitted during rituals function as what Vansina termed “oral archives,” preserving historical consciousness and legitimizing claims to ancestral landscapes [28]. These cultural practices align with broader struggles for indigenous recognition, where ritual performance itself becomes a claim to cultural rights and heritage [13,27].

By functioning simultaneously as ecological texts, adaptive strategies, and markers of distinctiveness, Irula rituals challenge dichotomies between tradition and modernity. They reveal how marginalized communities mobilize ritual not only to sustain continuity but also to negotiate new forms of belonging in the contemporary world. As Comaroff and Comaroff argued, rituals are sites where identity is both reproduced and contested, and in Attappadi they serve as vehicles of negotiation in the struggle for recognition, survival, and dignity [6].

3.3. *Rituals of the Life-Cycle*

The rhythms of Irula social life are articulated most vividly through the sequence of rites that accompany individuals from puberty to death. These practices are not incidental customs but the primary mechanisms through which personhood is defined, kinship renewed, and ancestral obligations fulfilled. Each stage—initiation into womanhood, the forging of conjugal alliances, the regulation of reproduction, and the passage into ancestral realms—constitutes a critical vantage point for understanding how the community sustains its social fabric.

The analysis follows the order in which Irula society itself marks life’s transitions. Particular attention is given to ritual spaces, the roles of specialists and kin, and the embodied techniques—seclusion, bathing, drumming, and chanting—that structure these events. Placed alongside comparative anthropological insights into liminality, fertility, and mortuary symbolism, the discussion illustrates how the Irulas preserve distinctive ritual logics while adapting them under changing historical conditions. Altogether, four domains of practice—puberty and menarche rites, marriage customs, reproductive and postnatal practices, and funerary ceremonies—constitute a complete cycle of ritualized

transitions through which the individual is integrated into the community, the community is linked to ancestors, and ancestors are bound to the landscape.

3.3.1. Puberty and Menarche Rites

The transition to womanhood is marked by the construction of a *kalavasane*, a temporary hut erected at the margins of the *ooru*. The girl experiencing her first menstruation resides here in seclusion, attended by female relatives who regulate her food, contact, and movement. Such isolation emphasizes both her heightened fertility and her temporary ritual danger, echoing wider South Asian concerns with purity and pollution [23]. After several days, she undergoes *kaithattukke*, a turmeric bath conducted with water fetched from ritually pure streams. This act of cleansing reintegrates her into domestic and communal life.

The entire process exemplifies what Turner described as liminality: a suspension of ordinary status in which social identity is redefined [1]. For the Irulas, menarche is the moment when biological maturity is publicly acknowledged and cosmologically sanctioned, ensuring that fertility is inscribed within kinship, ritual, and ecological orders.

3.3.2. Marriage Customs

Marriage practices illustrate multiple pathways into conjugal life, the most characteristic being *pennu velai* or marriage by service. In this form, a young man demonstrates his suitability by working in his prospective bride's household, often for months, before formal acceptance. This labor enacts a principle of reciprocity that ties the union not only to the couple but also to the wider kin group. Other recognized forms include arranged marriages, facilitated through kin negotiations and modest bride-price exchanges, and elopements, which are retrospectively legitimized through community sanction.

Central to all forms is the *thali-tying* ceremony, conducted under the supervision of the *ooru* leadership and witnessed by kin. The ritual is followed by communal feasts and collective dances, extending the alliance into the broader social body. In anthropological terms, marriage not only creates conjugal bonds but also redistributes labor obligations, consolidates kinship, and affirms the continuity of the clan system [21,25].

3.3.3. Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Postnatal Practices

Among the Irulas of Attappadi, reproduction is not understood as a purely biological process but as a culturally regulated passage in which health, ecology, and cosmology are deeply interwoven. Pregnancy and childbirth are marked by a series of ritual prescriptions, restrictions, and ceremonies designed to protect the mother and child, while simultaneously embedding reproduction within kinship and ancestral frameworks. These practices resonate with anthropological insights that childbirth is always a "social event," mediated by cultural codes of purity, danger, and personhood.

Pregnancy and Dietary Regulation: During gestation, women are expected to follow dietary restrictions and symbolic precautions. Certain foods—particularly heavy meats, spicy roots, and forest tubers—are avoided, as they are believed to produce excessive heat or obstruct safe delivery. Instead, rice gruels and mild herbal infusions are encouraged to strengthen the mother and ensure the wellbeing of the fetus. These prescriptions reflect both ecological adaptation and symbolic logic: the circulation of foods from cultivated fields and forest resources embeds pregnancy within subsistence patterns [14]. Food taboos also echo what Douglas termed the "purity and danger" principle, where bodily boundaries are maintained through controlled consumption [31].

Spatial and Ritual Precautions: Pregnant women are discouraged from entering funerary spaces or touching objects associated with ritual impurity. Such restrictions underscore the liminal condition of pregnancy—neither fully part of ordinary domestic life nor outside it [1]. These prohibitions also reflect widespread South Asian notions of pollution, where the pregnant body is considered simultaneously powerful and vulnerable [23]. The

avoidance of funerary sites, for instance, prevents contact with death, which is believed to endanger both mother and unborn child by inviting spiritual contamination.

Childbirth and the Role of the Pettichi (Midwife): Delivery generally occurs in a dedicated childbirth hut, located slightly apart from regular dwellings. This spatial separation underscores the ambivalence of birth, which, while socially valued, involves ritual danger. The birth is overseen by the *pettichi* (traditional midwife), usually an older woman recognized for her expertise in medicinal plants and ritual chants. The *pettichi* embodies what Nichter called “medical pluralism”: she draws simultaneously on ecological knowledge of herbs and on ritual invocations addressed to deities and ancestors [32]. Her role highlights the intersection of reproductive health with indigenous knowledge systems, showing how obstetric practice is inseparable from ecological and spiritual expertise.

Postnatal Seclusion and Purification: After delivery, both mother and infant are subject to a period of ritual seclusion, typically lasting several days or weeks. During this period, they are considered polluting and are excluded from ordinary domestic and ritual spaces. This temporary exclusion echoes Van Gennep’s model of rites of passage, where birth constitutes a liminal threshold requiring symbolic reintegration [33]. Women avoid public contact, and access to the newborn is restricted to close kin, ensuring protection against both physical vulnerability and spiritual intrusion.

Purification rituals mark the end of seclusion. The mother undergoes a ritual bath—often with turmeric, a substance symbolically associated with purification and healing across South Asia [25]. This act restores her to the social body of the household and community. The newborn, too, is incorporated through naming ceremonies and kinship recognition, which link the child to ancestors and clan identity. These practices affirm that reproduction is not an isolated biological event but a social process through which new members are integrated into the wider kinship network and cosmological order.

Cultural Framing of Reproduction: The Irula system of managing pregnancy and childbirth illustrates how reproduction is framed through cultural codes of danger, purity, and resilience. These practices parallel observations from medical anthropology that birth is both biological and cosmological, a negotiation between nature, society, and spirituality [34]. By embedding reproduction in ecological knowledge (diet, herbs), symbolic prescriptions (seclusion, purification), and ritual authority (*pettichi*, kin, deities), the Irulas sustain a holistic system that integrates health, ecology, and identity.

Furthermore, these practices have adapted to historical pressures. While modern health interventions in Attappadi promote biomedical deliveries in hospitals, many Irula households continue to incorporate ritual seclusion, herbal medicines, and purification rites, either alongside or after clinical care. This dual engagement reflects resilience and selective adaptation: indigenous frameworks of reproduction are not discarded but re-framed in response to welfare programs and biomedical discourse [19,20].

In sum, pregnancy and childbirth among the Irulas exemplify how life-cycle rituals function as sites of cultural continuity and adaptation. They preserve ecological knowledge of plants and foods, encode symbolic values of purity and danger, and situate reproduction within broader cosmological and kinship frameworks. For international readers, these practices demonstrate the anthropological insight that childbirth is a deeply cultural process—one that reveals the entanglement of ecology, identity, and ritual in sustaining indigenous life-worlds.

3.4. Death and Ancestral Rites

Among the Irulas of Attappadi, death is not viewed as a terminal break but as a transition linking the individual, the community, and the ancestral realm. Funerary ceremonies serve both to guide the soul of the deceased and to reaffirm social solidarity among the living. In this sense, they reflect what Bloch and Parry identified as the dual function of mortuary ritual: ensuring safe passage for the dead while regenerating the collective body of society [2].

Ritual Space and Separation: When a death occurs, the body is placed within a *pattekettal*, a booth constructed from bamboo and grass, and set apart from ordinary dwellings. This spatial separation signals the dangerous liminality of death, echoing Turner's notion of *liminal states* that suspend everyday social order [1]. By locating the corpse outside domestic space, the community symbolically quarantines pollution while creating a sacred site for ritual mediation.

Ritual Specialists and Community Participation: The *guruwan* (ritual priest) presides over the ceremonies, orchestrating drumming, chanting, and invocations that guide the deceased toward the ancestral domain. These ritual sounds, often continuous and rhythmically intense, are understood to ease the soul's journey while also reaffirming the community's cohesion. Male relatives shave their heads as a visible sign of mourning and transformation, a practice widely observed across South Asia [3]. Women express grief through ritual lamentation and song, yet they are excluded from carrying the body or entering the *pattekettal*. This gendered division reflects broader South Asian norms of ritual purity and pollution [21,23], but also reinforces differentiated ritual authority.

Offerings and the Care of the Dead: Food, drink, and symbolic objects are placed at the gravesite as offerings to the deceased. These gifts materialize ongoing obligations to the departed, expressing both affection and continuity of exchange between the living and the dead [35]. The act situates care for the dead within broader ecological cycles, as the body itself returns to the earth and ancestral spirits remain bound to the land. This resonates with what Rappaport described as the ecological dimension of ritual, in which ceremonial acts reinforce relationships between people, environment, and cosmology [4].

Myth, Ancestry, and Landscape: Oral traditions describe the soul's journey through forest paths to ancestral settlements, mapping death onto sacred geographies. The deceased is imagined to rejoin ancestral beings associated with mountains, rivers, and groves, particularly the Malleswara peak, which functions as a pan-tribal sacred site. These narratives embed ecological ethics into mortuary practice, situating human mortality within a continuum of forest spirits and ancestral guardians [9,28]. Death rituals, therefore, not only close the life cycle of the individual but also reaffirm ties between community, landscape, and divinity.

Adaptation and Resilience: Historical disruptions have also reshaped Irula funerary practices. Colonial forest regulations restricted access to groves traditionally used for burial, while missionary and welfare programs often stigmatized ritual elements as superstition [13,15]. Yet rituals adapted: burials shifted closer to domestic spaces, and seclusion of the corpse was reinterpreted through new material practices. Despite these changes, the core symbolic structure—guiding the soul, reaffirming kinship, and linking community to land—remains intact. This resilience exemplifies what Robbins calls “cultural persistence under rupture,” in which ritual frameworks endure by accommodating historical pressures [8].

Comparative Insights: For international readers, Irula death rituals illustrate a widely observed anthropological pattern: mortuary rites serve as cultural technologies for managing both grief and social regeneration [2,35]. Yet the Irula case also underscores distinctive dimensions—particularly the ecological embedding of death within forest landscapes and the articulation of ancestral continuity through mythic geography. Such practices demonstrate how indigenous communities frame mortality not as an end but as a transformation that sustains both cosmology and collective identity.

3.5. *Rituals, Ecology, and Cosmology*

For the Irulas of Attappadi, ritual life cannot be separated from the landscapes in which it unfolds. Forests, mountains, and rivers are not inert backdrops but active participants in shaping social and spiritual existence. Life-cycle ceremonies, seasonal observances, and clan worship are all embedded within ecological spaces imbued with divine

presence and ancestral memory. In this sense, ritual not only mediates kinship and personhood but also sustains a cultural ecology in which subsistence, cosmology, and identity are inseparable [4,36].

Sacred Landscapes: The most prominent ritual landmark is Malleswara Peak, revered as the abode of Lord Shiva. Annual festivals here attract Irulas and neighboring tribal groups, transforming the mountain into a pan-tribal center of worship. Oral traditions describe the peak as the primordial site of human settlement, and it remains the locus where petitions for rain, fertility, and protection are offered. Rivers and groves also function as ritual sites: particular streams provide water for puberty baths, while shrines to clan deities are located in sacred groves adjacent to *oorus*. These landscapes operate simultaneously as ecological resources and sacred geographies, exemplifying what Rappaport termed the “ecological regulation of ritual.” [4]

Deities and Spirit Beings: The Irula pantheon integrates local deities with broader South Indian religious forms. Maariamman, the goddess of fertility and disease, is propitiated to ensure reproductive health and protection from epidemics. Bhadrakali, embodying martial ferocity, is invoked during moments of communal crisis. Ancestors are honored through grave offerings and funeral chants, while spirits of rivers, trees, and rocks are acknowledged in everyday practices. This constellation of ritual actors illustrates Ingold’s “dwelling perspective,” where human existence is embedded in an environment inhabited by both human and non-human agents [36].

Ritual Ecology and Subsistence: Ceremonial practices are tightly aligned with subsistence cycles. Agricultural rites mark the clearing of fields, sowing of millet, and harvesting, all accompanied by offerings to deities and ancestors. Honey-collecting and hunting expeditions begin with propitiatory rituals that secure the consent of forest spirits. Even in life-cycle rituals, ecological knowledge is central: bamboo structures for funerals, turmeric for purification, and medicinal herbs for childbirth. These practices embody what political ecologists describe as “situated sustainability” [19], where ritual acts reinforce ethical engagements with natural resources.

Cosmological Continuities: Underlying these practices is a cosmology that binds the life cycle to the cycles of the forest. Puberty rites take place at forest margins, childbirth occurs in huts constructed from forest materials, and funerary booths are assembled from bamboo and grass. Each stage inscribes the human body into ecological processes, reaffirming that individual existence is nested within environmental rhythms. Ancestors are believed to dwell in peaks and groves, so that mourning rituals simultaneously honor the dead and sustain ecological remembrance. In this sense, Irula cosmology exemplifies Bloch’s insight that ritual produces continuity not only between generations but also between humans and the non-human world [2].

3.6. Colonial Interventions and Cultural Disruptions

The consolidation of colonial forest administration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries profoundly reconfigured the ritual landscapes of the Irulas. The successive Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 marked phases of enclosure in which shifting cultivation—once the basis of subsistence and seasonal ritual—was criminalized, and access to forest produce became contingent on state permission. Sacred groves, streams, and bamboo stand, which had supplied the materials and sites for puberty huts, childbirth shelters, and funeral booths, were reclassified as government property. As Guha and Gadgil demonstrate, such policies rendered customary practices illegible to the colonial state, transforming tribal users into trespassers within their own ritual geographies [14,15].

This narrowing of forest access disrupted ceremonial life at multiple points. The *kalavasane*, traditionally built at forest margins to symbolize a girl’s liminal passage into womanhood, had to be constructed within the confines of hamlets, thereby diminishing its symbolic separation from ordinary space. Funerary *pattekettal* booths shrank in scale as restrictions on bamboo cutting curtailed their size and duration. Marriage by service

(*pennu velai*), once embedded in cycles of agricultural labor that bound affinal households together, was increasingly curtailed as land alienation eroded the economic foundation for bridegrooms to contribute farm work to their in-laws. These shifts illustrate what Li has called the “biopolitics of dispossession,” whereby state projects reorder indigenous temporalities and spatialities [20].

The suppression of swidden cultivation and the transformation of forests into plantations and reserves displaced the Irulas from their ecological base and compelled them into wage labor on estates or casual work in nearby towns. Rituals that once coincided with agricultural or foraging cycles were rescheduled around plantation work rhythms, compressing ceremonial duration or relocating them to spaces within hamlets. The communal feasts that marked marriages and funerals diminished in scale as economic precarity undermined surplus production. At the same time, missionary and administrative discourses framed Irula practices as “primitive survivals” or “superstitions” [13,16], delegitimizing them within colonial epistemologies even as material dispossession constrained their enactment.

Yet, disruption did not lead to disappearance. The Irulas demonstrated resilience by condensing rituals, substituting scarce ecological materials with symbolic equivalents, and intensifying oral transmission when ritual geographies became inaccessible. Puberty and childbirth seclusions persisted in smaller huts; funerary rites continued, albeit abbreviated, to maintain connections with ancestral spirits; myths and chants were preserved and adapted across generations. This resilience exemplifies what Comaroff and Comaroff describe as “transformative adaptation,” in which continuity of meaning is secured through creative reworking of form [6].

In the contemporary period, ritual practices intersect increasingly with wider social and political formations. Although administratively classified as a Scheduled Tribe, the Irulas are not insulated from caste dynamics. Interaction with dominant agrarian castes has led to selective borrowings—such as standardized *thali* designs in marriage and participation in regional temple festivals—while maintaining distinct clan-based systems of kinship and ritual duty. This dual positioning both inside and outside caste hierarchies underscores the layered complexity of Indian cultural diversity [27]. State interventions in health, housing, and education have further reshaped ritual practice: institutional deliveries promoted by public health programs undermine the authority of the *pettichi* (traditional midwife), while formal schooling in Malayalam and English marginalizes the Irula language, eroding ritual chants and oral memory.

Gender roles reflect this negotiation between continuity and change. Women’s economic participation has expanded through estate labor and government employment schemes, granting them new bargaining power within households. Yet symbolic exclusions persist in mortuary contexts, where women remain barred from carrying corpses or entering the *pattekettal*. This coexistence of new agency with older ritual restrictions illustrates the uneven ways in which modernity reconfigures gendered authority [22,30]. Despite such pressures, distinctive rituals—puberty seclusion, marriage by service, bamboo funeral booths—continue to be observed, demonstrating the paradox of diversity: adaptation to dominant forms coexists with reaffirmation of cultural distinctiveness [27].

These ethnographic patterns demand theoretical synthesis. Victor Turner’s model of liminality illuminates puberty rites, in which seclusion, turmeric baths, and symbolic burning of clothing reclassify biological maturity into socially legible categories [1]. Mortuary ceremonies, through the *pattekettal* and its ensemble of drumming, dance, and genealogical invocations, enact what Bloch and Parry describe as the dual function of death rituals—ensuring passage for the dead while regenerating kinship among the living [2]. Roy Rappaport’s argument that ritual regulates ecological engagement is evident in the reliance on bamboo, herbs, and streams, which encode environmental ethics into ceremonial practice [4]. Political-ecological frameworks [8,14,15] explain how colonial and post-colonial forestry regimes disrupted these ritual ecologies, contracting the material and

spatial bases of ritual life. Biopolitical perspectives [18,20] illuminate the governance of reproductive spaces, showing how biomedicalization reorders midwifery knowledge and shifts authority away from women ritual specialists. The anthropology of exchange (Mauss; Bloch) clarifies how *pennu velai* embeds marriage in circuits of reciprocity that have been transformed by monetization and wage labor.

Resilience strategies documented among the Irulas—condensed ceremonies, relocated ritual sites, symbolic substitutions, and intensified oral transmission—fit Comaroff and Comaroff's account of adaptive continuity under coercive contexts [6]. These strategies also underpin contemporary political claims: if ritual geographies constitute ancestral landscapes, then their restriction under forestry and development regimes amounts to dispossession of cultural rights. Recognition of ritual needs in land titling, forest governance, and development planning is therefore essential not only for cultural preservation but also for social justice [19].

Finally, this synthesis points toward methodological priorities for further research. Mapping ritual geographies through GIS would quantify spatial displacement; ethnobotanical documentation of midwifery practices would capture threatened knowledge systems; longitudinal surveys could correlate ritual change with reproductive and health outcomes; and oral-history projects would preserve genealogical and mythic recitations. Comparative studies across Nilgiri–Attappadi subgroups would further reveal the heterogeneity of adaptive strategies. Taken together, these approaches underscore that Irula life-cycle rituals are not static survivals but spatial-political acts that reproduce social personhood, regulate ecological engagement, mediate gendered authority, and assert claims to ancestral landscapes.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the life-cycle rituals of the Irula community of Attappadi as dynamic practices situated at the intersection of cultural reproduction, ecological regulation, and political negotiation. Far from being static survivals, Irula rituals demonstrate remarkable adaptability: they condense, relocate, and reconfigure symbolic forms to meet the challenges of colonial dispossession, state intervention, and contemporary developmental regimes. In doing so, they preserve not only ritual logics of kinship, fertility, and ancestral continuity but also ecological knowledge embedded in the use of bamboo, herbs, streams, and sacred landscapes.

The analysis has shown that Irula ritual life functions simultaneously on multiple registers. At the social level, it marks transitions of personhood and sustains kinship through liminal processes of initiation, marriage, reproduction, and death [1,2]. At the ecological level, it encodes sustainable practices that align human livelihood with forest cycles and sacred geographies [4,19]. At the political level, it embodies resilience strategies that negotiate biopolitical regimes of forestry, health, and education, asserting cultural rights to land, language, and ritual autonomy [18,20]. These overlapping dimensions reveal rituals as both cultural texts and political acts, sustaining community identity in the face of marginality.

For anthropology and allied disciplines, the Irula case underscores the value of ethnographic attention to small, often-overlooked indigenous groups. Their ritual practices illuminate how communities reproduce meaning and continuity under conditions of historical disruption. For policy and governance, the findings emphasize that questions of forest access, reproductive health, and linguistic recognition are inseparable from cultural rights. Developmental initiatives must therefore avoid framing indigenous rituals as mere “tradition” and instead acknowledge them as living institutions of knowledge, resilience, and ecological ethics.

Finally, Irula life-cycle rituals exemplify how cultural systems adapt while asserting continuity. They are at once repositories of ancestral memory, frameworks of ecological

stewardship, and vehicles for negotiating recognition and dignity. Protecting the conditions for their practice is not only an anthropological imperative but also a matter of social justice and environmental sustainability.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study consist of ethnographic field notes, oral histories, and archival materials collected in Attappadi. Due to the sensitive nature of community-specific information, these data are not publicly available but may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A

Ritual Glossary of Irula Terms:

Kalavasane – A temporary hut constructed at the margins of the ooru (hamlet) for seclusion during a girl's first menstruation. Symbolizes liminality and transition into womanhood, regulating fertility and social identity.

Kaithattukke – The ritual turmeric bath concluding the menarche seclusion period. Marks purification and reintegration of the adolescent into household and community life.

Thanniadal – The burning of the clothes worn during seclusion, symbolizing the shedding of old status and rebirth into a new social role.

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