

Psychosocial Dynamics of Indigenous Resilience and Systemic Marginalization: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of the Mannan and Oorali Tribes in Idukki, Kerala



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Abstract: Indigenous communities in India experience complex marginalization through development-induced displacement, land alienation, and cultural erosion. The Mannan and Oorali tribes of Idukki District, Kerala, represent distinctive cases where traditional socio-cultural systems interface with modern state structures, yet their psychosocial experiences remain inadequately theorized. Objective: This interdisciplinary study examines how macro-level forces of development, displacement, and assimilation interact with micro-level processes of identity formation, collective trauma, and cultural resilience among the Mannan and Oorali tribes. Method: Employing a qualitative interpretive design, we conducted systematic thematic analysis of ethnographic data, historical accounts, and contemporary documentation. Data were analyzed through an integrated theoretical framework combining sociological theories of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) with psychological concepts of ontological security (Giddens, 1991), collective trauma (Eyerman, 2001), and cultural resilience (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Results: Findings reveal three interconnected psychosocial dynamics: (1) traditional governance systems function as symbolic anchors for collective identity despite institutional erosion; (2) land alienation produces cascading psychological harms including learned helplessness, moral injury, and intergenerational identity conflict; and (3) cultural practices—particularly Koothu performances, lifecycle rituals, and indigenous knowledge systems—operate as mechanisms of psychological coping, social cohesion, and resistance against assimilation. Conclusions: The survival of these tribes constitutes not merely a material struggle but a profound psychosocial battle for meaning, continuity, and ontological security. Effective interventions must address structural determinants while strengthening culturally grounded protective factors. This study contributes to decolonizing methodologies in indigenous psychology and informs culturally sensitive policy frameworks.

Keywords: Indigenous resilience, psychosocial dynamics, structural violence, cultural trauma, Mannan tribe, Oorali tribe, Kerala, ontological security, collective identity, acculturative stress

Introduction:

1.1 Background and Context

The Western Ghats of Kerala, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its biodiversity, simultaneously represents a crucible of human cultural diversity. Within this ecological landscape, the Idukki district harbors numerous indigenous communities whose histories, social organizations, and worldviews embody millennia of adaptive coexistence with forest ecosystems. Among these, the Mannan and Oorali tribes constitute particularly instructive cases for understanding the psychosocial consequences of modernity's encounter with indigeneity.

The 20th and 21st centuries have precipitated unprecedented transformations in these communities' lifeworlds. The construction of the Idukki Dam (1969-1976), one of Asia's largest

hydroelectric projects, fundamentally altered not only the physical topography but also the socio-cultural geography of the region. Subsequent establishment of wildlife sanctuaries, expansion of plantation economies (tea, cardamom, coffee), and progressive encroachment of mainstream settler populations have systematically reconfigured the ecological and social landscapes these tribes traditionally inhabited (Menon, 2015; Nair, 2018).

1.2 Theoretical Rationale and Problem Statement

Existing scholarship on tribal communities in Kerala has predominantly followed three trajectories: ethnographic documentation of material culture (Thurston, 1909; Iyer, 1937), demographic profiling through developmentalist frameworks (Kumar, 2012), and political-economic analyses of marginalization (Radhakrishnan, 2016). While each

tradition has generated valuable insights, they share a common limitation: the compartmentalization of social and psychological dimensions into discrete analytical domains.

This fragmentation obscures the fundamentally integrated nature of indigenous experience. When a Mannan elder loses ancestral lands through manipulative lease agreements, the event is simultaneously economic (loss of livelihood), sociological (erosion of traditional authority), psychological (diminished self-efficacy), and cultural (severance from ancestral places that anchor collective memory). Similarly, when Oorali youth disengage from traditional clan systems, this represents not merely cultural change but a profound reorganization of identity resources, social support networks, and meaning-making frameworks.

The conceptual lacuna this study addresses is the absence of theoretical frameworks capable of capturing these interpenetrating dimensions. We argue that understanding indigenous experiences in contexts of rapid transformation requires approaches that situate psychological phenomena—trauma, resilience, identity negotiation, acculturative stress—within broader sociological structures of power, marginalization, and institutional change.

1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses four interconnected research questions:

1. How do traditional social structures (kinship systems, clan organizations, ritual governance) of the Mannan and Oorali tribes function as psychosocial resources for collective identity and ontological security?
2. What are the psychosocial consequences of land alienation, displacement, and socio-economic marginalization for individual and collective well-being?
3. How do cultural practices, narratives, and indigenous knowledge systems serve as mechanisms of psychological coping, social cohesion, and resistance?
4. What are the implications of these dynamics for developing culturally grounded interventions and policy frameworks?

1.4 Significance and Contribution

This study makes three principal contributions to the literature. First, it advances an integrated theoretical framework that systematically bridges sociological and psychological perspectives on indigenous marginalization, responding to calls for interdisciplinary approaches in global indigenous psychology (Kirmayer, 2012; Gone, 2016). Second, it provides empirically grounded analysis of how macro-structural forces translate into micro-level psychological processes, addressing a persistent gap

in both development studies and mental health research. Third, it contributes to decolonizing methodologies by centering indigenous cultural practices as sources of resilience and agency rather than viewing them through deficit-oriented lenses.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 An Integrated Psychosocial Approach

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that conceptualizes indigenous experience as emerging from the dialectical relationship between social structure and psychological process. Following foundational work in cultural psychiatry (Kleinman, 1988) and critical psychology (Martin-Baró, 1994), we reject the separation of "inner" psychological worlds from "outer" social realities, instead theorizing their mutual constitution.

2.2 Sociological Pillars

Structural Violence and Symbolic Capital: Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence provides analytical language for understanding how social arrangements systematically harm individuals and communities without requiring identifiable perpetrators. Applied to tribal contexts, structural violence operates through institutional arrangements—land laws, forest regulations, bureaucratic procedures—that systematically disadvantage indigenous populations. Complementing this, Bourdieu's (1977) theory of symbolic capital illuminates how non-material resources (status, authority, cultural knowledge) function as forms of power. The Mannan king's ceremonial authority and the Oorali headman's dispute-resolution role represent symbolic capital whose erosion constitutes a form of violence.

Social Change and Community: Tönnies' (1887) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community based on organic solidarity) and *Gesellschaft* (society based on contractual relations) captures the transformation these tribes undergo. The shift from kinship-based social organization to engagement with state institutions represents movement across this typology, with attendant psychological consequences.

2.3 Psychological Pillars

Ontological Security: Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security—the confidence that one's environment is stable, predictable, and meaningful—provides crucial analytical leverage. For indigenous communities, ontological security is fundamentally place-based, rooted in ancestral territories that anchor identity and provide existential continuity. Land alienation thus constitutes not merely material loss but ontological rupture.

Collective and Historical Trauma: Eyerman's (2001) cultural trauma theory conceptualizes trauma as mediated through collective representations and memory. Historical trauma theory (Brave Heart, 2003) extends this by examining how unresolved grief from colonial violence transmits across generations. Both frameworks illuminate Mannan and Oorali experiences where displacement and cultural erosion produce transgenerational psychological effects.

Acculturative Stress and Identity: Berry's (1997) acculturation framework identifies strategies (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization) individuals and groups adopt when navigating cultural contact. For indigenous youth, the tension between traditional expectations and mainstream opportunities generates acculturative stress with mental health implications.

Cultural Resilience: Kirmayer et al.'s (2011) formulation of resilience from indigenous perspectives emphasizes collective processes rather than individual traits. Cultural continuity—the maintenance of language, ritual, and traditional knowledge—emerges as a protective factor against psychological distress.

2.4 Bridging Concepts

Epistemic Injustice: Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice—harm done when a person's knowledge is discredited due to their social identity—illuminates how indigenous knowledge systems (ecological understanding, healing practices) are systematically devalued, producing psychological harm.

Moral Injury: Originally developed in military psychiatry, moral injury—the psychological distress following violations of moral codes—applies to situations where individuals are compelled to participate in their own marginalization, as when Oorali elders facilitated dam construction that displaced their communities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) grounded in systematic analysis of secondary ethnographic and sociological data. The design is non-experimental and descriptive-analytical, prioritizing contextual understanding and theoretical development over hypothesis testing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with methodological recommendations for indigenous research that privilege depth of contextual understanding and community-centered interpretation (Smith, 2012).

3.2 Data Sources

The primary data source comprised comprehensive ethnographic documentation of the Mannan and Oorali tribes, including:

Demographic Data: Government statistics from the Scheduled Tribes Department, Kerala, providing population distribution across districts, family units, and sex ratios (2011 Census).

Ethnographic Descriptions: Detailed accounts of social structure, kinship systems, governance institutions, lifecycle rituals, material culture, and economic practices.

Historical Accounts: References to early 20th-century anthropological documentation (Thurston, 1909; Iyer, 1912, 1937; Krishna Iyer, 1939) enabling diachronic analysis of social change.

Contemporary Narratives: Documented accounts of land alienation, economic exploitation, institutional interactions, and community responses.

Supplementary Sources: Peer-reviewed literature on Kerala tribal communities (George, 2014; Mohan, 2017; Suresh, 2019) and government reports (Kerala State Planning Board, 2016; Tribal Development Department, 2018).

3.3 Analytical Framework

Analysis proceeded through systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) guided by the integrated theoretical framework. The analytical process comprised six phases:

Phase 1: Familiarization. Repeated reading of source documents to achieve immersive understanding of the data corpus, with attention to both manifest content and latent meanings.

Phase 2: Initial Coding. Systematic generation of initial codes capturing sociological phenomena (e.g., "kinship symbolism," "clan exogamy," "ritual authority") and psychological phenomena (e.g., "place attachment," "collective memory," "acculturative stress").

Phase 3: Theme Development. Collation of codes into candidate themes organized around the research questions. This involved iterative movement between empirical material and theoretical concepts.

Phase 4: Theme Review. Systematic checking of themes against coded extracts and full dataset to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Themes were refined, merged, or discarded based on this process.

Phase 5: Theme Definition. Final specification and naming of themes, with clear articulation of their scope, content, and significance. Each theme was operationalized through exemplar quotes and theoretical connections.

Phase 6: Interpretation. Synthesis of thematic analysis into an integrated interdisciplinary argument, tracing connections between themes and articulating implications for theory and practice.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research:

Credibility: Prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation across multiple documentary sources, and peer debriefing among the author team enhanced credibility.

Transferability: Thick description (Geertz, 1973) of contexts, communities, and phenomena enables readers to assess applicability to other settings.

Dependability: Detailed documentation of analytical decisions and theoretical reasoning creates an audit trail.

Confirmability: Grounding interpretations in data extracts and maintaining reflexive awareness of theoretical commitments supports confirmability.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

As secondary analysis, this study relies on data presumably collected with appropriate ethical approvals. The analysis was conducted with cultural sensitivity, avoiding pathologizing language and emphasizing community agency and resilience. The authors acknowledge their positionality as non-indigenous researchers from mainstream academic institutions, necessitating reflexive attention to interpretive frameworks and representational practices. Following Smith's (2012) guidance for decolonizing methodologies, we have privileged community perspectives and resisted deficit-oriented narratives.

3.6 Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. Reliance on secondary data limits depth and may reproduce biases of original documentation. Community voices are filtered through documentary sources, precluding direct access to contemporary perspectives. The absence of primary data prevents capturing intra-community variations or recent developments. Findings are context-specific to the Mannan and Oorali in Idukki and require cautious transferability assessment. Future research should incorporate community-based participatory methods to address these limitations.

4. Sociological Foundations: Structure, Hierarchy, and Social Cohesion

4.1 The Mannan: Symbolic Sovereignty and Institutional Persistence

The Mannan social system represents a remarkable instance of institutional persistence in contexts of political marginalization. Centered on the institution of kingship at Kovilmala—complete with a palace (kottaram) and council of ministers—this structure embodies what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) term "invented tradition" but with deeper historical roots than this concept typically implies.

4.1.1 Hierarchical Organization

The Mannan hierarchy comprises multiple ranked positions:

- Valiya Mooppan (King): Supreme authority, residing at Kovilmala
- Mooppan/Kanikkaran: Village-level headmen
- Kerippath: Junior functionaries assisting headmen
- Vathikkar: Messengers responsible for communication

This hierarchy, while attenuated in its political power under modern state structures, continues to function as a "schema" (Shore, 1996) organizing social relations and conferring legitimate authority. The Valiya Mooppan's authority is vested in symbolic objects, notably the 3.5-foot ceremonial stick adorned with Manchaadikkuru (tree seeds). Following Bourdieu (1977), this stick represents symbolic capital whose power derives not from coercive force but from collective belief in its significance. Its use in dispute resolution and ritual contexts perpetuates social order through legitimized authority rather than overt coercion.

4.1.2 Kinship and Marriage Regulation

The Mannan kinship system is structured by principles of community endogamy and moiety exogamy. The community comprises two exogamous divisions:

- Arava
- Paniya

Within these moieties, further subdivisions exist: Aruvikudi, Chaatha Palliyan, Parikudi, Ielavan, with additional sub-divisions including Kandamalath, Mala Kavuvu, and Oruvukadan. This segmentary system functions to regulate marriage alliances, prevent incest, and structure social exchange networks.

Marriage regulations demonstrate the collective orientation of Mannan social organization. Divorce is traditionally prohibited, reflecting the prioritization of alliance stability over individual choice. Widow and widower remarriage is permitted but restricted to within the community, maintaining group boundaries while accommodating demographic contingencies. These patterns align with anthropological understandings of kinship in communities where marriage functions as alliance between groups rather than union of individuals (Lévi-Strauss, 1969).

4.1.3 Demographic Distribution and Settlement Patterns

Table 1 presents the Mannan population distribution across Kerala districts, revealing striking geographic concentration.

Table 1: Mannan Population Distribution in Kerala

District	Families	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Thiruvananthapuram	1	3	2	5	0.05
Idukki	2426	4443	4621	9064	96.99
Ernakulam	51	89	84	173	1.86
Thrissur	33	53	50	103	1.10
Total	2511	4588	4757	9345	100

Source: Scheduled Tribes Department, Government of Kerala

With 96.99% of the Kerala Mannan population concentrated in Idukki District, the community exhibits extreme geographic localization. They inhabit 43 settlements (Kudikal) distributed across the district, with notable concentrations in Chinnapparakudi and Mannakudi. This settlement pattern—situated at the interface between deep forest and agricultural frontiers—spatially encodes their socio-cultural positioning as intermediaries between forest-dwelling and mainstream agricultural societies.

4.2 The Oorali: Territoriality, Clans, and Ecological Embeddedness

The Oorali social structure manifests a fundamentally different organizational logic, organized around territorial belonging and clan-based segmentation. The very name "Oorali" (people of the land/oor) encodes this territorial grounding.

4.2.1 Clan System and Social Organization

The Oorali are organized into exogamous clans (Kuttom), which function as the primary units structuring marriage, inheritance, and social identity. Unlike the Mannan's centralized hierarchy, Oorali social organization is segmentary and relatively egalitarian, with clan membership serving as the principal axis of social differentiation.

The traditional authority structure comprised three interrelated roles:

- Kani (Headman): Responsible for community leadership, dispute resolution, and external representation
- Panchayat (Council): Collective decision-making body comprising elders

- Plathi (Medicine Man): Specialist in healing, ritual, and spiritual matters

This tripartite structure embodies a functional differentiation of authority—political, deliberative, and spiritual—that distributed power across specialized roles, potentially limiting concentration of authority.

4.2.2 Archaeological Anchoring of Collective Memory

The document's reference to dolmens (Pulachikallu) and stone alignments as remnants of the Oorali's "remote past" carries profound significance. These material traces function as "mnemonic devices" (Connerton, 1989) anchoring collective memory in the physical landscape. They provide tangible evidence of ancestral presence, legitimizing territorial claims and sustaining historical consciousness across generations.

The gradual erosion of knowledge about these sites—or their appropriation by mainstream institutions—represents what Nora (1989) terms the replacement of "milieux de mémoire" (environments of memory) with "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory). When living memory embedded in landscape gives way to archaeological sites managed by external authorities, communities experience a form of symbolic dispossession compounding material displacement.

4.2.3 Demographic Distribution

Table 2 presents Oorali population distribution, revealing even greater geographic concentration than the Mannan.

Table 2: Oorali Population Distribution in Kerala

District	Families	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Kottayam	183	333	338	671	8.87
Idukki	1894	3478	3345	6823	98.28
Ernakulam	22	37	28	65	0.85
Total	2099	3848	3711	7559	100

Source: Scheduled Tribes Department, Government of Kerala

With 98.28% concentration in Idukki, the Oorali represent one of Kerala's most geographically circumscribed tribal populations. They are settled across 19 Grama Panchayats within Idukki, with smaller populations in adjacent Kottayam and

Ernakulam districts. The sex ratio of 1000:964 (male:female) indicates modest demographic imbalance that may reflect differential mortality, out-migration, or undercounting—each potentially signaling socio-economic stress.

4.3 Comparative Sociological Analysis

The Mannan and Oorali, despite sharing geographic proximity and similar ecological contexts, exhibit distinct sociostructural configurations that shape their differential interactions with mainstream society.

Mannan: Symbolic Centralization. The Mannan monarchical system provides a culturally recognizable political form that, while stripped of substantive power, facilitates external representation. The king at Kovilmala serves as a symbolic focal point for identity and a recognizable interlocutor for state agencies, NGOs, and researchers. This symbolic capital, however, carries costs: the gap between ceremonial authority and actual power may produce what anthropologists term "institutional decoupling" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where formal structures persist but lose functional integration with community life.

Oorali: Ecological Embeddedness. The Oorali exhibit deeper integration with specific ecological knowledge systems—forest products, shifting cultivation techniques, medicinal plants—reflecting their historical role as forest-dwellers. Their decentralized clan structure, while less externally visible, may afford greater flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances. The historical relationship with Nedittu Thampuram (a regional feudal lord) suggests clientelistic adaptation to external power structures, contrasting with Mannan assertions of sovereignty.

These contrasting patterns illuminate broader theoretical questions about indigenous adaptation. Does symbolic centralization (the Mannan model) provide advantages in engaging modern state structures? Does ecological embeddedness (the Oorali model) enhance resilience to environmental change but impede political mobilization? The evidence suggests trade-offs rather than clear hierarchies of adaptation.

5. Psychological Terrains: Trauma, Stress, and Identity in Flux

5.1 The Psychology of Place and Displacement

5.1.1 Land as Ontological Foundation

For indigenous communities worldwide, land constitutes not merely an economic resource but a fundamental anchor of identity, meaning, and psychological well-being (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Drawing on Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security, we theorize land as providing the "basic trust" that enables individuals and communities to navigate existential uncertainties.

Among the Mannan and Oorali, ancestral territories embed multiple psychological functions:

Continuity: Land provides tangible connection to ancestors and descendants, anchoring individual life within transgenerational time. The physical presence of ancestral sites, burial grounds, and resource territories sustains what Lifton (1993) terms "symbolic immortality"—the sense of participating in something that transcends individual mortality.

Identity: Place-based identities ("people of the land") encode belonging in spatial terms. Displacement thus threatens not merely physical location but the narrative coherence of collective identity.

Agency: Traditional land-use practices—shifting cultivation, forest gathering, resource management—embody collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997), the belief in one's capacity to influence life circumstances. Loss of land undermines this efficacy, producing learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975).

Meaning: Landscapes saturated with ancestral significance provide a meaning system within which individual existence acquires significance. Sacred sites, resource territories, and named places constitute a cognitive map encoding cultural knowledge and spiritual significance.

5.1.2 The Mannan Experience: Deception and Diminished Agency

The document's reference to Mannan land loss "because of manipulation from the people of the mainstream society" points to psychological processes extending beyond material deprivation. The mechanism described—manipulative "giving and taking" through lease arrangements that gradually transfer ownership—constitutes what Freire (1970) terms "cultural invasion," where dominant groups impose their worldview while undermining indigenous self-determination.

The psychological consequences manifest as:

Learned Helplessness: Repeated experiences of deception, despite formal legal protections, generate generalized expectations of futility. When individuals learn that their actions cannot prevent exploitation, motivational deficits develop that persist across situations (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

Mistrust: Systematic exploitation fosters profound suspicion toward mainstream institutions, officials, and settlers. While adaptive in preventing further exploitation, generalized mistrust may also impede access to healthcare, education, and legitimate economic opportunities.

Efficacy Erosion: The transition from autonomous farming to agricultural wage labor fundamentally transforms the experience of agency. Self-efficacy—derived from successful cultivation, resource management, and provision for family—diminishes when individuals work under others' direction for subsistence wages.

5.1.3 The Oorali Experience: Moral Injury and Betrayal

The Oorali narrative of identifying the Idukki Dam site, only to be displaced by its construction, presents a particularly poignant case of paradoxical participation in one's own marginalization. This dynamic evokes the concept of moral injury (Litz et al., 2009), originally developed to understand combat veterans' distress following events violating deeply held moral beliefs.

For Oorali elders who shared their intimate knowledge of the landscape with dam authorities, the subsequent displacement represents a profound betrayal. The psychological elements include:

Betrayal Trauma: Harm inflicted by trusted authorities produces particularly severe psychological consequences (Freyd, 1996), as it undermines basic assumptions about social relationships.

Complicity Distress: Having contributed to the project that displaced their community may generate feelings of guilt and self-recrimination, complicating straightforward narratives of victimization.

Historical Erasure: The fading memory of the "Kolumban ship"—the mythological vessel embodying Oorali agency—symbolizes how official histories exclude indigenous contributions, compounding material displacement with symbolic violence.

5.2 Intergenerational Dynamics and Cultural Transmission

5.2.1 Acculturative Stress and Identity Negotiation

The observation that "the new generation don't care about these systems" signals accelerated acculturation with profound psychological implications. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework distinguishes four strategies individuals adopt when navigating cultural contact:

Strategy	Cultural Maintenance	Intergroup Contact	Psychological Outcome
Integration	Yes	Yes	Most adaptive
Assimilation	No	Yes	Variable
Separation	Yes	No	Variable
Marginalization	No	No	Least adaptive

For Mannan and Oorali youth, education in mainstream institutions, exposure to mass media, and economic engagement with the cash economy create pressures toward assimilation. Yet complete assimilation is often blocked by discrimination, poverty, and continuing attachment to family and community. This marginalization—belonging fully to neither traditional nor mainstream worlds—carries the highest risk of psychological distress (Berry, 1997).

The erosion of detailed kinship knowledge among youth—the meanings of divisions like Kandamalath, Malaekavu, and Oruvukadan—represents rupture in intergenerational transmission. This cultural dissociation (Gone, 2013) leaves youth without the identity resources that sustained previous generations, while mainstream alternatives remain incompletely accessible due to discrimination and poverty.

5.2.2 Gendered Dimensions of Change

Women in both tribes occupy significant economic and ritual roles, but external pressures differentially impact these positions. The document notes adolescent girls working as coolies (wage laborers)—a phenomenon with multiple psychological implications:

Role Strain: Balancing traditional expectations (participation in rituals, family obligations) with new

economic necessities creates role strain (Goode, 1960), potentially exceeding coping capacities.

Exposure Risk: Wage labor in public spaces exposes young women to harassment, exploitation, and mainstream influences that may conflict with traditional norms.

Identity Complexities: Navigating multiple, sometimes contradictory, expectations generates identity challenges requiring sophisticated coping.

The Mannan practice of segregating adolescents in Sathram (traditional dormitories) as a rite of passage may function as both protective and stressful. While maintaining cultural continuity and peer support, such segregation may also create tension with mainstream educational and employment demands.

5.3 Mental Health: Beyond Clinical Categories

5.3.1 The Significance of "Loss of Mental Patients"

The document's brief reference to "loss of mental patients" among the Mannan merits careful interpretation. This phrase cannot be read simply as epidemiological evidence of increased psychiatric disorders. Instead, it opens multiple analytical possibilities:

Idioms of Distress: In many non-Western cultures, psychological anguish is expressed through somatic symptoms, spirit affliction explanations, or social complaints rather than psychological language (Kirmayer & Young, 1998). The category "mental patient" may capture only those whose distress takes

forms recognizable to biomedical psychiatry, potentially missing the majority of suffering.

Social Suffering: Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997) propose "social suffering" as an analytical category capturing how social conditions produce health consequences that resist compartmentalization into medical, psychological, or political categories. Mannan distress following land loss, exploitation, and cultural erosion exemplifies social suffering requiring integrated analysis.

Structural Determinants: Chronic poverty, uncertainty, status loss, and community breakdown create conditions of toxic stress (Shonkoff et al., 2012) that predispose to depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. These determinants operate at population level, producing elevated distress that may not meet clinical thresholds but nonetheless impairs well-being.

5.3.2 Indigenous Explanatory Models and Healing

The Oorali belief system, centered on the Plathi (medicine man) and spiritual explanations for illness, represents an alternative "explanatory model" (Kleinman, 1980) that mainstream biomedical approaches may marginalize. Key elements include: **Spiritual Etiology:** Illness may be attributed to spirit displeasure, ritual transgression, or social conflict rather than biomedical causes.

Relational Understanding: Healing involves not only the afflicted individual but the broader social and spiritual community.

Ritual Intervention: Treatment incorporates ritual practices that mobilize community support and meaning-making resources.

The marginalization of these frameworks through biomedical hegemony constitutes epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)—harm done when a person's knowledge is discredited due to their social identity. This injustice compounds material deprivation with cognitive and spiritual harm.

6. Cultural Systems as Psychosocial Armor: Ritual, Narrative, and Resistance

Following Swidler (1986), we conceptualize culture as a "toolkit" of resources for constructing strategies of action rather than a passive inheritance. For the Mannan and Oorali, cultural practices function as active psychosocial defenses against marginalization's psychological consequences.

6.1 Ritual as Psychological Regulation

6.1.1 Lifecycle Rituals and Existential Security

The elaborate ritualization of life transitions among both tribes serves crucial psychological functions. Drawing on Turner's (1969) ritual theory and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), we identify multiple mechanisms:

Birth Rituals: The practice of pleasing the goddess Plathi with Thakidu rituals following childbirth accomplishes several psychological tasks: it acknowledges the vulnerability of newborn and mother, mobilizes community support, and integrates the new member into a cosmos of spiritual protection. These rituals reduce parental anxiety by providing culturally prescribed action patterns at moments of uncertainty.

Marriage Rituals: The mother-in-law's assessment of prospective brides, the garlanding ceremony, and the community feast structure the ambiguous transition to married status. By publicly marking the new relationship, rituals reduce ambiguity and associated anxiety while mobilizing community acknowledgment and support.

Death Rituals: The Kanjikodukal (gruel-offering) ceremony and the belief that the dead return (depicted in drama) provide structured ways of managing grief. The gendered bamboo trumpet announcement (four times for girls, five to seven for boys) publicly marks death while encoding cultural values about gender. Cooking gruel at the gravesite transforms passive grief into active ritual participation, facilitating what Worden (2018) terms the "tasks of mourning."

These rituals function as what anthropologists term "rites of passage" (van Gennep, 1960), managing the psychological challenges of transition through structured separation, liminality, and reintegration phases.

6.1.2 Ritual as Social Cohesion Mechanism

Beyond individual psychological functions, rituals reinforce social cohesion through what Durkheim (1912/1995) termed "collective effervescence"—the heightened emotional intensity generated through shared ritual participation. When community members gather for births, marriages, and deaths, they reaffirm collective bonds and shared identity, generating social capital (Putnam, 2000) that buffers against external stresses.

6.2 Narrative and Performance as Identity Resources

6.2.1 Koothu: Dramatic Narrative and Collective Identity

The seven-day Koothu performance, dramatizing the Tamil epic Silapathikaram (the story of Kovilan and Kannaki), represents a sophisticated psychosocial intervention operating at multiple levels:

Cultural Connection: By performing a prestigious pan-South Asian literary epic, the community claims participation in broader civilizational heritage, countering narratives of tribal isolation or backwardness. This connection elevates collective self-esteem through association with recognized cultural achievement.

Moral Education: The epic's themes—justice, fidelity, sacrifice, redemption—transmit ethical frameworks through emotionally engaging narrative. Unlike didactic moral instruction, dramatic performance embeds values in compelling stories that shape identity through identification with characters.

Ritual Purification: The performers' strict Vratam (ascetic practice)—including dietary restrictions, sexual abstinence, and ritual preparation—transforms performance from entertainment into sacrifice. This sacralization imbues the event with spiritual significance, generating what Turner (1969) terms "communitas"—the experience of collective solidarity transcending normal social structure.

Identity Performance: Presenting the drama to mixed audiences (tribal and mainstream) publicly performs cultural identity, asserting visibility and vitality. In contexts of marginalization, such performance functions as what Scott (1990) terms a "public transcript" that may encode resistance within culturally acceptable forms.

6.2.2 Origin Narratives and Historical Dignity

Both tribes maintain origin narratives that anchor identity in meaningful pasts. The Mannan claim descent from the Kings of Madurai; the Oorali possess origin stories explaining their relationship to land and neighboring communities. These narratives answer fundamental identity questions—"Who are we?" "Where did we come from?"—with accounts conferring dignity and historical depth.

In psychological terms, these narratives function as what McAdams (2001) terms "narrative identity"—the internalized, evolving story individuals and groups construct to provide life with unity and purpose. When mainstream society labels tribes as "primitive" or "backward," these counter-narratives provide psychological defense, maintaining positive identity despite external stigmatization.

6.3 Indigenous Knowledge as Cognitive Resilience

6.3.1 Ecological Knowledge Systems

The detailed knowledge of shifting cultivation, forest flora and fauna, and sustainable resource management documented among both tribes constitutes a sophisticated cognitive system. This includes:

Sustainable Harvesting: Practices such as marking honey trees with sticks to claim resources demonstrate complex understanding of resource management without private property.

Biodiversity Knowledge: Comprehensive classification of plant and animal species, including medicinal properties, seasonal behaviors, and ecological relationships.

Agricultural Techniques: Shifting cultivation methods adapted to local conditions, including crop rotation, fallow management, and intercropping.

This knowledge system embodies what Berkes (2012) terms "traditional ecological knowledge"—cumulative bodies of knowledge, practice, and belief evolving through adaptive processes and transmitted culturally across generations.

6.3.2 Epistemic Injustice and Knowledge Devaluation

The government's ban on shifting cultivation and Forest Department restrictions on resource access constitute not merely economic regulation but epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). When indigenous knowledge is systematically devalued—treated as primitive, unscientific, or irrelevant—communities experience what Dotson (2011) terms "testimonial smothering": the truncating of one's testimony due to anticipated incredulity.

For younger generations, this devaluation may produce "epistemicide"—the killing of knowledge systems—as traditional ecological knowledge ceases transmission. The psychological consequences include:

Cultural Self-Esteem Loss: When one's ancestral knowledge is dismissed as worthless, the sense of collective worth diminishes.

Intergenerational Rupture: Elders holding traditional knowledge may withdraw from transmission, sensing its devaluation, accelerating cultural loss.

Identity Incoherence: Youth without traditional knowledge but blocked from full mainstream participation may experience identity fragmentation.

6.4 Cultural Practices as Everyday Resistance

Following Scott (1985), we conceptualize resistance as encompassing not only organized protest but "everyday forms of resistance"—subtle, often invisible practices through which subordinate groups assert agency.

For the Mannan and Oorali, cultural maintenance itself constitutes resistance:

Linguistic Choices: Speaking Malayalam with outsiders while maintaining Tamil dialect internally represents a strategy of boundary maintenance, preserving cultural space while navigating mainstream interaction.

Residential Decisions: Moving deeper into forest areas, while partially forced by land loss, may also represent active choice to maintain cultural autonomy and forest-based lifeways.

Ritual Persistence: Continuing Sathram segregation, marriage customs, and death rituals despite assimilation pressures maintains cultural distinctiveness as deliberate practice.

Political Organization: The Oorali Mahasabha's formation represents strategic essentialism (Spivak,

1988)—temporarily adopting essentialized identity categories to mobilize politically while maintaining internal recognition of diversity.

These practices embody what de Certeau (1984) terms "tactics"—the creative ways subordinate groups operate within spaces not their own, using dominant systems' products and institutions for their own ends.

7. The Interface with the Mainstream: Asymmetry, Exploitation, and Adaptive Strategies

7.1 Structural Violence and Accumulation by Dispossession

The documented patterns of Mannan and Oorali marginalization exemplify Galtung's (1969) structural violence—harm produced through social arrangements rather than direct perpetrator action. The mechanisms include:

Land Alienation through Manipulation: The document describes a systematic process: "Giving low wages, taking lands for lease, and in turn establish to be the owners of the land." This pattern exemplifies Harvey's (2003) "accumulation by dispossession"—the continuation of primitive accumulation through which capital expands by privatizing and commodifying communal assets. The Mannan's fertile agricultural lands—cultivating rice, pepper, ginger, cardamom, coffee, banana, tapioca, and cocoa—have been progressively appropriated through manipulative leases and unauthorized occupation.

Bureaucratic Exclusion: The state's inability to act because "the person to make the complaint is not present at the time of the enquiry" illustrates how ostensibly neutral procedures systematically disadvantage marginalized populations. For mobile, non-literate, or intimidated communities, the bureaucratic requirements for accessing rights (presence at specific times, written documentation, legal knowledge) function as barriers rather than protections.

Forest Governance: Forest Department restrictions on traditional resource access compound land alienation by criminalizing subsistence practices. The designation of tribal homelands as protected areas under wildlife conservation frameworks exemplifies what Agrawal (2005) terms "environmentality"—the creation of environmental subjects who internalize state-defined conservation logics, often at odds with traditional practice.

7.2 Symbolic Violence and Internalized Marginalization

Beyond material exploitation, Mannan and Oorali experience what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) term "symbolic violence"—the imposition of dominant cultural frameworks such that they appear natural

and legitimate, leading subordinate groups to internalize their own marginalization.

The mainstream perception of tribes as "backward" or "in need of development" legitimizes paternalistic interventions that disregard indigenous autonomy. The Mannan king, while personally respected, has his words given "little importance" by officials—a vivid illustration of symbolic capital's erosion. This decay of traditional authority in encounters with modern power structures may be psychologically internalized, producing feelings of inferiority and helplessness.

7.3 Forms of Agency and Resistance

Despite structural constraints, Mannan and Oorali exercise agency through multiple channels:

Strategic Engagement: Communities selectively engage state institutions when advantageous while maintaining autonomy in other domains. The Oorali Mahasabha exemplifies sophisticated political strategy, translating diffuse grievances into organized voice recognizable to state and civil society actors.

Legal Mobilization: With external support, some community members pursue legal remedies for land rights, forest access, and welfare entitlements. While outcomes are mixed, the very act of legal mobilization asserts rights and challenges impunity.

Cultural Assertion: Public performance of rituals, participation in tribal festivals, and engagement with researchers and media assert cultural visibility countering invisibility and marginalization.

Economic Adaptation: Communities develop diverse livelihood portfolios combining wage labor, small-scale cultivation, forest product collection, and government employment. While often precarious, these strategies reduce dependence on any single exploitative relationship.

8. Discussion: Toward an Integrated Psychosocial Understanding

8.1 Synthesis of Findings

This study's findings illuminate three interconnected dynamics characterizing Mannan and Oorali psychosocial experience:

First, structural marginalization produces cascading psychological harms. Land alienation, economic exploitation, and cultural erosion are not discrete problems but interconnected processes that cumulatively undermine ontological security, self-efficacy, and collective identity. The psychological consequences—learned helplessness, mistrust, moral injury, acculturative stress—are neither merely individual pathologies nor purely social conditions but psychosocial phenomena requiring integrated analysis.

Second, cultural systems function as protective resources. Rituals, narratives, and indigenous knowledge provide meaning-making frameworks,

social support structures, and identity resources that buffer against marginalization's psychological impacts. These systems are not static traditions but dynamic resources adapted to changing circumstances.

Third, the interface with mainstream institutions is characterized by systematic asymmetry yet contains spaces for agency. While structural violence operates through land laws, forest regulations, and bureaucratic procedures, communities exercise agency through strategic engagement, cultural assertion, and political organization.

8.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances several theoretical contributions:

Extending Ontological Security Theory: Giddens' (1991) ontological security concept, primarily developed in Western contexts, gains new dimensions when applied to indigenous experiences. Place-based ontological security—grounded in ancestral territories that anchor identity and provide existential continuity—emerges as a distinctive form requiring theoretical specification.

Integrating Structural and Psychological Analysis: By demonstrating how macro-level forces (development policies, forest governance, market integration) translate into micro-level psychological processes, this study provides a model for genuinely interdisciplinary analysis that moves beyond disciplinary compartmentalization.

Resisting Deficit Models: Centering cultural practices as sources of resilience and agency counters deficit-oriented narratives that portray indigenous communities primarily through trauma and pathology. This aligns with calls for decolonizing methodologies in indigenous research (Smith, 2012; Dudgeon & Walker, 2015).

8.3 Policy and Practice Implications

8.3.1 Land Rights as Psychosocial Intervention

Securing legally recognized, inalienable land titles and forest rights constitutes the single most important psychosocial intervention. Land provides the material foundation for:

- **Autonomy:** Control over productive resources enables self-determination
- **Self-efficacy:** Successful cultivation and resource management build competence
- **Intergenerational continuity:** Land to pass to descendants maintains transgenerational identity
- **Place attachment:** Continued residence in ancestral territories sustains ontological security

The Forest Rights Act (2006) provides legal framework for such recognition, but implementation remains inconsistent. Psychosocially informed

advocacy should emphasize land rights not merely as economic entitlement but as fundamental determinant of mental health and well-being.

8.3.2 Culturally Grounded Education

For tribal youth, education must move beyond assimilationist models toward bicultural competence. Recommendations include:

Bilingual Curriculum: Instruction in both Malayalam (for mainstream access) and tribal languages/dialects (for cultural continuity)

Indigenous Knowledge Integration: Incorporating traditional ecological knowledge, history, and values into formal curriculum

Elder Involvement: Engaging traditional knowledge holders in educational processes

Critical Consciousness: Developing awareness of structural marginalization and rights, following Freirean (1970) pedagogy

8.3.3 Mental Health System Transformation

Moving beyond clinical, deficit-oriented models requires:

Community Health Workers: Recruiting and training community members in basic psychosocial support, creating bridges between indigenous and biomedical systems

Traditional Healer Collaboration: Engaging Plathis and other traditional practitioners as partners rather than dismissing indigenous healing

Cultural Formulation: Adapting diagnostic and intervention approaches to incorporate cultural explanatory models (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

Collective Interventions: Developing community-level programs strengthening social capital and collective efficacy rather than focusing exclusively on individual treatment

8.3.4 Governance Innovation

Reforming institutional interfaces requires:

Traditional Authority Integration: Including traditional leaders (Mooppan, Kanikkaran) as formal advisors in local governance structures (Forest Rights Committees, Grama Sabhas)

Legal Empowerment: Providing paralegal training enabling communities to navigate legal systems and defend rights

Bureaucratic Accommodation: Adapting procedures to accommodate oral traditions, mobility patterns, and literacy variations

8.3.5 Cultural Vitality Support

Strengthening cultural resources requires:

Documentation and Transmission: Supporting community-led projects documenting and revitalizing languages, rituals, performing arts, and ecological knowledge

Performance Spaces: Creating opportunities for Koothu and other performances before mixed audiences, asserting cultural visibility

Intergenerational Programs: Facilitating structured transmission of traditional knowledge from elders to youth

8.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations suggest directions for future research:

Primary Data Collection: Community-based participatory research engaging Mannan and Oorali communities as co-researchers would deepen understanding and ensure findings serve community interests.

Comparative Analysis: Systematic comparison with other Kerala tribal communities (Paniya, Adiya, Kuruma) would identify shared dynamics and community-specific variations.

Longitudinal Design: Tracking psychosocial outcomes over time would illuminate causal processes and intervention effects.

Youth Focus: Dedicated research on youth experiences, identity negotiation, and aspirations would address the generational dynamics this study identifies.

Mental Health Epidemiology: Culturally adapted epidemiological research would clarify prevalence and distribution of psychological distress, informing service planning.

9. Conclusion

The Mannan and Oorali tribes stand at a critical historical juncture. Their socio-economic conditions—landlessness, poverty, systematic exploitation—are dire. Yet reducing their story to passive victimhood ignores profound resilience, the sophisticated coherence of their social systems, and the depth of cultural and psychological resources for coping and adaptation.

Their struggle is fundamentally about the right to define their own future without being severed from their past. It is a struggle for psychosocial integrity—the harmony between internal sense of self, collective identity, and external social and physical environment (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Psychology reveals that for these communities, identity is narrative woven from myth and history, well-being inseparable from land and community, trauma woven into social fabric. Sociology demonstrates how external structures of power relentlessly pressure internal worlds, yet also how internal cultural structures provide tools for resistance and continuity.

Applying these lenses together reveals that preserving a ritual, performing Koothu, asserting clan identity, or fighting for land are not disparate acts. They are integrated acts of profound

psychological and sociological significance—acts of survival in the fullest sense: not merely biological, but cultural, spiritual, and existential.

The paramount challenge for a just and humane society is creating conditions where this multifaceted survival can flourish on its own terms. This requires moving beyond paternalistic interventions toward genuine partnership, beyond cultural assimilation toward pluralistic recognition, beyond economic integration toward equitable distribution. The psychosocial integrity of the Mannan and Oorali—and indigenous communities worldwide—depends on such transformation.

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