

Toda Songs And Singing A Way Of Life

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Abstract

The Toda people of the Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu, India, maintain a unique cultural heritage, largely preserved through their rich oral traditions. Central to their way of life are their songs, which serve as a medium to express their spirituality, social practices, and ecological consciousness. These songs accompany rituals, such as funerals and buffalo sacrifices, emphasizing their cosmological beliefs and community cohesion. They celebrate the environment, transmit cultural knowledge, and foster a collective identity. This paper examines the role of Toda songs in defining and preserving their cultural and ecological landscape, providing insights into their ritualistic, social, and environmental significance. Drawing on the works of scholars like M.B. Emeneau and W.H.R. Rivers, the study highlights how these oral traditions act as living archives of Toda heritage and resilience amidst modernization.

Keywords: Toda songs, Nilgiri Hills, cultural preservation, ecological consciousness, ritual songs, oral traditions, M.B. Emeneau, indigenous heritage.

The Toda people, an indigenous community of the Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu, India, represent a unique and fascinating way of life deeply intertwined with their environment and buffalo-centric rituals. Their cosmology and language reflect the vibrancy of their oral traditions, environmental interactions, and social organization. The Nilgiri Hills, located at the intersection of the Eastern and Western Ghats, are characterized by grasslands, shola forests, and rich biodiversity. The Todas inhabit these highlands in settlements called munds, comprising hut clusters, sacred dairy temples, buffalo pens, and grazing lands. Their lifestyle is primarily pastoral, centred on buffaloes, which are considered sacred and integral to their rituals. The Toda huts (arsh) are distinctive, semi-cylindrical structures made of bamboo, grass, and reeds, designed to shield inhabitants from the cold and dampness of the hills. Each mund has access to a nearby stream and forest cover, essential for sustenance and ritual practices.

The Toda cosmology revolves around the sacredness of nature and buffaloes. Their religious practices are intertwined with animistic beliefs, where every natural element and buffalo is regarded as sacred. The rituals involve offerings to deities and spirits, with elaborate ceremonies marking milestones such as births, marriages, and funerals. The buffalo cult holds a central place in Toda cosmology. The buffalo is not only a source of livelihood but also a symbol of spiritual connection. Sacred dairies, tended by Toda priests, are sites of religious importance, where rituals are performed with strict adherence to traditional norms. The Toda language, a member of the Dravidian family, is unique and serves as a repository of their oral heritage. It lacks a written script, but their songs and chants preserve myths, historical accounts, and cultural values. M.B. Emeneau, in his seminal work **Toda Songs**, emphasizes the formulaic oral traditions of the community, drawing parallels with Vedic and Homeric poetic techniques. The songs are repetitive, rhythmic, and steeped in symbolic language. They celebrate the landscape, buffaloes, and communal bonds while also expressing philosophical musings on life and death. These oral traditions have been essential in sustaining Toda culture across generations. The arrival of tea plantations, eucalyptus forests, and urbanization during colonial rule disrupted the Toda way of life.

Environmental degradation and socio-economic changes posed significant challenges to their traditional practices. However, efforts have been made to revive their cultural identity, such as promoting Toda embroidery, which showcases their artistic skills. In recent years, Toda rituals, songs, and traditional crafts have gained recognition as vital aspects of India's cultural heritage. Conservation initiatives and sustainable tourism have also contributed to the preservation of their environment and cultural practices. The Toda cosmology and language offer a profound understanding of their symbiotic relationship with nature. As custodians of a rich oral tradition and an eco-friendly lifestyle, the Todas serve as a testament to the resilience of indigenous cultures in the face of modernization. Continued efforts to document and support their traditions are crucial for preserving this invaluable heritage. Toda community, has a rich oral tradition, with songs playing a central role in their cultural, spiritual, and social practices. Toda songs are not merely artistic expressions; they are integral to their way of life, encapsulating their cosmology, social structures, and relationship with nature. These songs serve as living archives of their history, rituals, and beliefs, connecting past and present generations. These songs are deeply rooted in their religious and spiritual practices. Their cosmology revolves around sacred buffaloes, dairies, and natural elements, and songs often accompany rituals associated with these aspects.

For instance:

Funeral songs are sung during funerals to guide the soul of the deceased and honor the sacred buffaloes sacrificed for the afterlife. These songs symbolize the spiritual journey and the connection between the living and the dead. Rituals at sacred dairy temples include songs dedicated to buffaloes, the gods, and the land, reflecting their animistic beliefs. Toda songs act as a unifying force within the community. They are performed collectively during important ceremonies such as marriages, where men and women sing and dance together, reinforcing social bonds. Songs often narrate the community's history, celebrate clan identities, and provide a shared sense of belonging. The songs vividly depict the Toda's intimate relationship with nature, describing the landscape of the Nilgiri Hills, including its grasslands, forests, and streams. They celebrate the buffaloes, the hills, and the seasons, highlighting the symbiotic connection between the Todas and their environment.

As an oral society, the Toda community relies on songs to transmit cultural knowledge across generations. These songs preserve their myths, legends, and ethical values. The formulaic and repetitive nature of the songs aids memorization and ensures their survival in the absence of a written script. Toda songs are characterized by their symbolic language, rhythmic structure, and poetic imagery. They capture the beauty of nature and the complexity of human emotions, from love and joy to grief and spirituality.

The most significant study on Toda songs was conducted by M.B. Emeneau, a renowned linguist and ethnologist. His seminal work, (1971), is a comprehensive collection and analysis of these oral compositions. Emeneau's research highlighted the formulaic nature of Toda songs, drawing parallels with the oral traditions of Vedic hymns and Homeric epics.

Ethnographic Context: Each song in **Toda Songs** is accompanied by a detailed explanation of its cultural and ritualistic context.

Symbolism: Emeneau analyzed the symbolic language and themes of the songs, emphasizing their role in reflecting the Toda cosmology and worldview. His work on Toda songs contributed to a deeper understanding of the Toda language, part of the Dravidian family.

W.H.R. Rivers, a pioneer in Toda studies, conducted ethnographic research on the community in the early 20th century. Although his primary focus was on Toda kinship and rituals, his two-volume work, **The Todas** (1906), provides valuable insights into their songs and their connection to rituals like funerals and buffalo sacrifices.

Anthony Walker, a social anthropologist, extensively studied the socio-cultural life of the Todas. In his works, **The Toda of South India: A New Look** (1986) and **Between Tradition and Modernity** (1998), Walker highlights the evolving role of Toda songs in the context of modernization and cultural change.

Paul Hockings contributed significantly to the study of Nilgiri tribes, including the Todas. In his edited collections, **Blue Mountains: The Ethnography and Biogeography of a South Indian Region** (1989) and **Blue Mountains Revisited** (1997), Hockings contextualized Toda songs within their environmental and social setting.

Formulaic Structure, repetition and fixed phrases are central to Toda songs, making them easier to memorize and pass down orally. The songs revolve around buffaloes, rituals, landscapes, and emotions. They also narrate origin stories and mythological events. Songs are performed during rituals, social gatherings, and personal moments of reflection, emphasizing their dynamic role in Toda life. With the advent of modernization, Toda songs face the risk of extinction. Younger generations are moving away from traditional practices, and the oral transmission of songs is declining. Efforts by scholars like Emeneau and Rivers have been instrumental in documenting Toda songs. Additionally, cultural preservation initiatives in the Nilgiris, such as promoting Toda rituals and crafts, have revived interest in their oral traditions. Toda songs and embroidery are being showcased at cultural festivals and tourism events, providing economic opportunities for the community while preserving their heritage. These songs are a profound expression of their cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and connection with nature. The work of scholars like M.B. Emeneau, W.H.R. Rivers, and Anthony Walker has been pivotal in preserving this oral tradition, offering valuable insights into the Toda way of life. As modernization continues to impact indigenous cultures, documenting and promoting such traditions becomes essential for ensuring their survival and celebrating their contributions to the broader tapestry of human heritage. Murray Barnson Emeneau, one of the most distinguished linguists and ethnographers of the 20th century, made groundbreaking contributions to the study of the Toda people of the Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu, India. His work not only enriched the field of Indian ethnography but also set a high standard for the interdisciplinary study of language, culture, and oral traditions. This article explores Emeneau's seminal contributions to Toda studies and situates his work in the broader context of Indian ethnography. Born in 1904, Emeneau was a renowned scholar in Sanskrit and Dravidian linguistics, whose academic curiosity extended to ethnography and cultural studies. Trained at Yale University and influenced by eminent scholars like Edward Sapir, Emeneau's work reflected a unique blend of linguistic precision and cultural sensitivity. His association with the Toda community, beginning in the mid-1930s, resulted in one of the most detailed and respected studies of an Indian tribal community. Emeneau's magnum opus, **Toda Songs** (1971), is a monumental contribution to Indian ethnography. This work systematically documents the oral traditions of the Toda people, offering insights into their culture, rituals, and worldview.

Emeneau identified the songs as living repositories of Toda myths, history, and cosmology. He noted their central role in rituals, social cohesion, and the transmission of traditional knowledge. By studying the language of the songs, he provided an in-depth understanding of the Toda language, which belongs to the Dravidian family. His work highlighted the complex symbolic structure and formulaic repetition in Toda songs, linking them to broader oral traditions such as Vedic hymns and Homeric epics. Each song in **Toda Songs** was accompanied by an explanation of its cultural and ritualistic context, making the collection not just a linguistic achievement but also a rich ethnographic resource.

Emeneau's earlier work, **Toda Grammar and Texts** (1984), was a pioneering linguistic study that documented the Toda language. It included: phonology and grammar - a detailed analysis of the phonetic and grammatical structures of the language. The inclusion of Toda mythology and folklore provided a cultural lens to understand their oral narratives. His study positioned the Toda language within the Dravidian family, contributing to the broader understanding of South Indian languages. Emeneau explored the symbiotic relationship between the Toda people and their environment, particularly the centrality of buffaloes in their rituals and cosmology. His work illuminated the spiritual dimensions of the Toda way of life, showing how rituals and songs intertwine to sustain their worldview. Emeneau's work exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of ethnography. By combining linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies, he offered a holistic understanding of the Todas. His methodological rigor inspired future scholars to adopt interdisciplinary approaches in ethnographic studies. His focus on oral traditions as a legitimate and rich source of historical and cultural knowledge was revolutionary for Indian ethnography. He argued that oral narratives, such as the Toda songs, serve as historical records that challenge the dominance of written texts in understanding India's cultural heritage. Emeneau's work influenced subsequent studies of Indian tribal communities by emphasizing the importance of documentation. His meticulous linguistic analysis encouraged other scholars to document endangered languages of India. Emeneau's empathetic approach to fieldwork set a precedent for respectful and in-depth engagement with indigenous communities. As a leading figure in Dravidian linguistics, Emeneau not only advanced the study of South Indian languages but also demonstrated how linguistic research could enrich ethnographic understanding. Emeneau's work has played a crucial role in preserving the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Toda community. In an era of rapid cultural change, his documentation remains a vital resource for understanding and reviving Toda traditions. His research brought international attention to Indian tribal communities, highlighting their unique cultural and linguistic attributes. It also positioned Indian ethnography as a field of global relevance. His interdisciplinary and holistic approach continues to inspire ethnographers, linguists, and anthropologists to explore the rich tapestry of India's diverse cultures. His contributions to Toda studies and Indian ethnography are unparalleled. His meticulous documentation of Toda songs, deep linguistic analysis, and sensitive portrayal of their culture have made him a towering figure in the field. By bridging linguistics and ethnography, Emeneau not only preserved the Toda heritage but also enriched the broader understanding of India's cultural diversity. His legacy serves as a guiding light for scholars dedicated to studying and preserving indigenous cultures.

Toda songs are not merely artistic expressions but are deeply woven into the cultural, spiritual, and social fabric of their lives. Each song serves a specific purpose, is tied to particular contexts, and reflects the unique worldview of the Todas. Categorizing these songs provides insights into their rituals, social structures, and interactions with nature.

Ritual songs are central to the religious and ceremonial life of the Toda people. These songs are performed during sacred rituals and are essential for maintaining the spiritual order and connection with the divine.

Funeral songs are performed to honor the deceased and facilitate their journey to the afterlife. These songs are intrinsically linked to the buffalo cult, as the sacrificial buffaloes are believed to accompany the deceased to the land of the dead. Songs sung during the **kedr** (funeral ritual) describe the buffaloes sacrificed for the deceased and narrate the journey of the soul. The song also invokes blessings from the gods to ensure the safe passage of the deceased.

The sacred dairies, central to Toda spirituality, are associated with unique songs performed by dairy priests. These songs are invocations to the deities associated with the sacred buffaloes and the temple. Songs dedicated to **Teikirzi**, the deity of the sacred buffalo temple, celebrate the sanctity of the buffaloes and their role as mediators between humans and the divine. There are songs that are performed during significant social events, such as marriages, and mark important life-cycle transitions. They provide a platform for communal bonding

and celebration. Songs performed during weddings celebrate the union of two individuals and the coming together of clans. They often include blessings for prosperity and harmony. A wedding song might describe the beauty of the bride, the accomplishments of the groom, and the joy of the community in witnessing the marriage. When a child is named, songs are sung to bless the child and express hopes for their future. These songs highlight the Toda belief in the continuity of their lineage and traditions. As a pastoral community, the Todas' songs reflect their deep connection with buffaloes, which are both their primary livelihood and sacred animals. These songs celebrate the buffaloes, grazing lands, and the pastoral lifestyle. These songs are sung while tending buffaloes in the grasslands. They often describe the beauty of the Nilgiri landscape, the buffaloes' movements, and the daily activities of the herders. A grazing song might praise the lush grasslands and express gratitude for the buffaloes' role in sustaining the community. There are songs that are dedicated to the sacred buffaloes, particularly during rituals involving them. They reflect the Todas' reverence for the animals and their belief in the buffaloes' spiritual significance. Toda songs vividly depict the natural beauty of the Nilgiri Hills and the community's intimate relationship with their environment. These songs often include descriptions of landscapes, seasons, and the flora and fauna of the region. Songs associated with specific seasons celebrate the changes in nature and their impact on the community's activities. A song celebrating the arrival of the monsoon might describe the rejuvenation of the grasslands and the abundance it brings for the buffaloes. These songs are poetic descriptions of the Nilgiri Hills, including its streams, shola forests, and peaks. They often evoke a sense of awe and gratitude for the natural world. A song might describe the beauty of the Mukurti peak or the serenity of the Pykara River, emphasizing the spiritual connection between the Todas and their land. Toda songs also serve as repositories of myths and historical events. They narrate origin stories, legends, and significant events in the community's history, preserving their oral heritage. These songs narrate the creation myths of the Todas, including the origin of sacred buffaloes and temples. They often invoke deities and recount the establishment of the Toda way of life. A song might describe how the deity **Teikirzi** created the first buffalo and gifted it to the Todas, establishing their sacred duty to care for these animals. Songs specific to clans narrate their unique history, achievements, and identity. These songs strengthen clan bonds and reinforce a sense of belonging. Apart from communal and ritualistic contexts, Toda songs also express individual emotions and personal reflections. These songs are introspective and often explore themes of love, loss, and longing. Songs of love describe romantic emotions, the beauty of nature as a backdrop for courtship, and the joy of companionship. A love song might compare the beloved's beauty to the blooming Kurinji flowers, a symbol of the Nilgiri landscape. These songs express personal sorrow, often reflecting on the loss of loved ones or hardships faced by the community. A song of grief might lament the death of a family member while seeking solace in the community's collective strength.

M.B. Emeneau's **Toda Songs** is the most comprehensive study of Toda oral traditions. He categorized the songs, provided their linguistic analysis, and contextualized them within the Toda cultural framework. His work remains the cornerstone of Toda ethnomusicology. In **The Todas** (1906), Rivers documented the cultural and ritualistic aspects of Toda life, including their songs, emphasizing their role in rituals like funerals and buffalo worship. Anthony Walker's sociological studies highlight the changes in the role of Toda songs due to modernization, emphasizing their resilience as a cultural marker. Paul Hockings' works on the Nilgiris provide a broader ecological and cultural context for understanding Toda songs as part of the region's rich ethnographic heritage. Toda songs are a vital aspect of their cultural identity, reflecting their spirituality, social structures, and connection with nature. Categorizing these songs reveals their multifaceted roles in rituals, social bonding, and emotional expression. Scholars like M.B. Emeneau and W.H.R. Rivers have played a crucial role in preserving this oral tradition, ensuring that the unique heritage of the Todas continues to inspire and inform future generations. As the community navigates the challenges of modernization, these songs remain a testament to their resilience and cultural richness. Toda songs, an integral part of the Toda oral tradition, reflect the community's way of life, spiritual beliefs, and relationship with their environment. Their songs are deeply

symbolic, contextualized by rituals, pastoralism, and their cosmological worldview. This analysis examines the content and context of selected Toda songs, emphasizing their thematic depth and cultural significance.

Song Examples and their contexts: Funeral Rites

**“The buffaloes that we sacrificed,
Shall accompany the one who has departed.
The path they take is filled with hills,
Where gods await with open arms.”**

This song, performed during funerals, brings out the spiritual journey of the deceased. The buffaloes sacrificed in the ritual are believed to guide and accompany the departed to the afterlife. Context: This song is sung during the **kedr** (funeral ritual), where the Toda belief in the interconnectedness of life, death, and the sacred buffalo is expressed. The buffaloes are seen as spiritual mediators. The song portrays the hills as sacred spaces where gods reside, reflecting the Toda cosmology. The repetition of phrases emphasizes the ritual’s solemnity, while the imagery of hills and gods connects the physical and metaphysical realms.

Song about grazing Lands

**“O my friend,
We have sat at a place with a good view.
We have sat at the great sacred place.
All the three directions are seen,
The buffaloes that we own are grazing,
And the winds carry our songs afar.”**

This song celebrates the Toda’s connection with their environment and pastoral lifestyle. It highlights their reverence for the grasslands and the sacred spaces they inhabit. Grazing songs are sung by herders as they tend to buffaloes, often in the serene Nilgiri landscape. These songs blend daily activities with spiritual reflection. The song conveys a sense of contentment and spiritual fulfillment. The mention of “three directions” and “sacred place” underscores the community’s holistic worldview, where nature and spirituality coexist harmoniously.

Song about wedding blessings

**“The bride walks adorned in colors bright,
Her shawl embroidered with the hands of love.
The groom stands tall as the sacred peaks,
Together they unite as the gods above smile.”**

This song, sung during weddings, reflects the joy of union and the blessings of the community. Wedding songs are performed to bless the couple and celebrate their union. These events are significant social gatherings, reinforcing communal ties. The bride’s embroidered shawl symbolizes Toda women’s craftsmanship, while the groom is compared to the peaks, symbolizing strength and stability. The imagery of gods smiling conveys divine approval, integrating spirituality with social rituals.

Origin Stories

Song Example: Creation of Buffaloes

**“Teikirzi, the great god,
Gave us the buffalo to tend.
With horns reaching the sky,
They are sacred, they are life.”**

This song narrates the mythological origin of buffaloes, gifted to the Todas by the deity **Teikirzi**. Origin songs are performed during rituals or communal gatherings to retell myths and reinforce cultural identity. These songs are a medium for transmitting oral history. The buffalo is described as sacred and life-giving, emphasizing its centrality in Toda culture. The imagery of horns reaching the sky signifies the buffalo's divine nature and its role as a bridge between humans and gods.

Song of Grief

**“O hills that echo my cries,
The buffalo that stood by me is no more.
The grasslands feel empty,
And the stream flows with my tears.”**

This song expresses personal grief, blending the mourner's emotions with the surrounding landscape. Songs of grief are deeply personal yet resonate with communal experiences of loss. They are often sung to seek solace in nature and the community. The hills and streams symbolize the mourner's emotional state, reflecting the Toda belief in the interconnectedness of nature and human emotions. The buffalo is portrayed as both a companion and a spiritual symbol, emphasizing its significance in everyday life.

Song about the arrival of monsoon

**“The skies darken,
The grass grows greener than before.
The buffaloes graze with joy,
And the earth breathes anew.”**

This song celebrates the monsoon, a crucial season for the grasslands and the community's livelihood. Seasonal songs mark changes in the environment and their impact on the community. They are often sung during communal activities or while tending to the buffaloes. The song captures the rejuvenating effect of the monsoon on the landscape and the community. The imagery of “earth breathing anew” reflects the Toda's ecological awareness and gratitude for nature's cycles.

Symbolism in Toda Song

Buffaloes are central symbols in Toda songs, representing life, sustenance, and spirituality. They are often depicted as divine gifts and are integral to rituals. The landscape of the Nilgiris, with its hills, streams, and grasslands, is a recurring motif in Toda songs. It reflects their deep connection with their environment and their belief in the sacredness of nature. Repetition in Toda songs emphasizes their oral nature and aids memorization. It also conveys the rhythmic and meditative quality of their performances. Toda songs are a profound expression

of their cultural identity, reflecting their spirituality, pastoral lifestyle, and emotional depth. Each song is a blend of context and content, serving as a living document of their beliefs and traditions. By analyzing these songs, we gain insights into the Toda worldview and the rich oral tradition that sustains it. Scholars like M.B. Emeneau have played a pivotal role in documenting and preserving these songs, ensuring that the Toda heritage continues to inspire and educate future generations. The Toda people of the Nilgiri Hills are known for their deep connection to their environment and unique cultural practices, many of which revolve around their oral traditions. Songs hold a central place in their way of life, functioning as a repository of their history, spirituality, and ecological consciousness. These songs not only reflect the Todas' worldview but also play a defining role in preserving their land, culture, and identity amidst changing socio-economic conditions. Toda songs encapsulate their cultural identity, narrating their myths, rituals, and collective memory. By embedding their beliefs and practices in songs, the Toda people ensure their transmission across generations, safeguarding their intangible heritage. Ritual songs performed during buffalo sacrifices highlight the spiritual connection between the Todas and their sacred animals, emphasizing the importance of buffaloes as both livelihood and divine beings. This reinforces their identity as caretakers of sacred land and animals. Songs serve as a unifying force in the Toda community, fostering social cohesion and a shared sense of belonging. They are performed collectively during rituals, weddings, and communal gatherings, strengthening interpersonal bonds. Toda songs often describe the Nilgiri Hills, including their shola forests, grasslands, and streams. This poetic engagement with nature reflects the community's deep ecological consciousness and their belief in the sacredness of their environment. Grazing songs sung while tending buffaloes celebrate the lush grasslands, emphasizing the Toda role in maintaining these ecosystems through traditional practices like controlled burning to regenerate pastures. Songs serve as an informal means of education, teaching the community about their environment, sustainable practices, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Seasonal songs highlight the importance of natural cycles, such as the monsoon's role in replenishing the grasslands and sustaining the buffaloes.

For the Toda people, songs are more than artistic expressions; they are lifelines that connect their land, life, and spiritual beliefs. As a dynamic tradition, these songs play a critical role in preserving their cultural identity and advocating for ecological and land conservation. In a rapidly modernizing world, the toda songs remain a testament to the resilience and adaptability of indigenous cultures, ensuring that their land and way of life continue to thrive.

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