

Newcomers to the world of goods: consumption among the Muria Gonds

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The theme of this paper is consumption as a form of symbolic action. Consumption goods are more than mere packets of neutral "utility." They are objects made more or less desirable by the role they play in a symbolic system. I will develop this entirely uncontroversial proposition on the basis of my observations of consumption behavior among the Muria of the north-central part of Bastar district, Madhya Pradesh, India.

The Muria belong to the "tribal" (*adivasi*) category established by the constitution of India, and according to the official stereotype of such groups they ought to be mired in poverty and exploitation. The official stereotype is not wide of the mark so far as most of the *adivasi* population are concerned (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982), but conditions in north-central Bastar are exceptional, for here the Muria enjoy considerable material advantages by comparison with small peasants elsewhere in the subcontinent (see Hill 1983). I will try to explain how this has come about in due course.

Amid the modest prosperity, or at least security, now enjoyed by most of the Muria population in north-central Bastar, one or two families in each village have enriched themselves to a greater degree than most, and it is on the consumption behavior of such rich Muria families that I wish to focus particular attention. I believe that "rich" Muria are a relatively new phenomenon, dating back no more than fifty years or so, and that this may help explain why their consumption behavior, which is marked by an exaggerated conservatism, assumes the rather peculiar form it does.

From an ethnohistorical point of view, then, I am dealing with a case in which a traditional consumption ethos and mode of assigning goods to symbolic categories lags behind objective changes in production techniques, which has resulted in enhanced economic productivity. Among the Muria production adheres to the premises of one kind of economy, whereas consumption continues to be based on the premise of a quite different economy. The net effect of this lag

is that rich Muria accumulate wealth they dare not spend and would have no real idea how to spend had they the inclination.

To be possessed of conspicuous wealth, in this society, is to be in an unnatural condition, one that renders more problematic, not less, any contemplated act of consumption. The response of the rich Muria is to behave with what looks like excessive parsimony, but which is not really true miserliness of the Scrooge-Volpone variety. The true miser admits both the possibility and the desirability of self-indulgent consumption, thereby enhancing in his own eyes the virtue of his own restraint. Such behavior is egotistical and anti-social. Muria accumulation arises in a completely different way. The Muria consumption bottleneck reflects an intense sensitivity to social pressures, within the family, the village, and the wider society. Acts of conspicuous consumption not falling within the framework of traditionally sanctioned public feasting and display are seen as socially threatening, hubristic, and disruptive.

Consequently, the rich are obliged to consume as if they were poor, and as a result become still richer. The unintended consequence of a pattern of restraints on consumption geared to the maintenance of egalitarian norms has been the undermining of the economic basis for the traditional egalitarian ethos of Muria society. In the long run this may result in the emergence of clear economic stratification in what has been, historically, a homogeneous, clan-based society. A new category of rich peasants and quasi-entrepreneurs has come into existence in Muria villages, but this category has yet to define itself socially vis-à-vis the rest of Muria society, or to find an idiom for expressing its social and economic distinctiveness in the language of symbolic consumption. For these families the material symbols of wealth displayed by the better-off Bastar Hindus, and the middle-class officials in the towns, that is, non-*adivasi* of comparable income, are not acceptable symbols of status precisely because they are associated with non-Muria identity. I will provide detailed descriptions of two families facing this kind of consumption dilemma below.

Consumer goods and personal identity

Before turning to particular cases I would like to offer some remarks on the subject of consumption as a symbolic act. Douglas and Isherwood (1980) have devoted an interesting monograph to this subject, stressing the central importance of "consumption rituals" in the mediation of social life. This approach rests squarely on the accumulated

wisdom of traditional structural-functional anthropology, particularly the branch of it that is summed up in the tag "the right hindquarters of the ox. . . ." Countless ethnographies bear witness to the way social relations are expressed, or more precisely produced, in the form of highly structured occasions of commensality, drinking bouts, sharing the pipe, and so on.

These are very recognizable forms of consumption, ones that perhaps may mislead us into making the false equation "consumption equals destruction" because on these occasions meat, liquor, and other valued substances are made to vanish. But consumption as a general phenomenon really has nothing to do with the destruction of goods and wealth, but with their reincorporation into the social system that produced them in some other guise. All goods, from the standpoint of sociological analysis, are as indestructible as kula valuables – the valuables that circulate in the kula exchange system described by Malinowski (1922) for the Trobriands. What they mostly lack is the impartibility and permanent identifiability as historically remembered objects that kula valuables possess (Leach and Leach 1984). But even quite ephemeral items, such as the comestibles served at a feast, live on in the form of the social relations they produce, and which are in turn responsible for reproducing the comestibles.

What constitutes the consumption of food at a feast is the transformation it effects – which may be minuscule or intensely significant, depending on the nature of the occasion – in the relative social identities of the parties to the host/guest, feeder/fed, transaction involved. This is analytically quite distinct from any contingent metabolic processes the food may undergo at the same time. In many feasts in New Guinea the food is not actually eaten by the participants, but the feasts remain consumption rituals in Douglas and Isherwood's sense (Brown 1978). What distinguishes consumption from exchange is not that consumption has a physiological dimension that exchange lacks, but that consumption involves the incorporation of the consumed item into the personal and social identity of the consumer.

For instance, Lord Rothschild has a Cézanne hanging on the wall of his sitting room. That makes him a member of the elite group of consumers of works by Cézanne, a category from which I am permanently excluded even though I have had the pleasure of looking at this painting in the past. I think of consumption as the appropriation of objects as part of one's *personalia* – food eaten at a feast, clothes worn, houses lived in. The incorporation of consumer goods into the definition of the social self arises out of a framework of social obligations and also perpetuates this framework. Consumption is part

of a process that includes production and exchange, all three being distinct only as phases of the cyclical process of social reproduction, in which consumption is never terminal. Consumption is the phase of the cycle in which goods become attached to personal referents, when they cease to be neutral "goods," which could be owned by anybody and identified with anybody, and become attributes of some individual personality, badges of identity, and signifiers of specific interpersonal relationships and obligations.

Seen in this light, true misers of the Volpone-Scrooge variety are consumers too, consumers of money as a supremely valued attribute of personality, in defiance of transactional norms. But it is noticeable that we call misers greedy, the same word we employ to describe out-and-out consumers such as Falstaff, suggesting that we recognize the resemblance of all forms of excessive incorporation of value, whether they be a distended purse like Volpone's or a distended belly like Falstaff's. In the cases to be discussed below, we also encounter what appears to resemble classic miserly behavior, but which in reality is something else. It is not love of money (self-love disguised as pseudorational accumulation) that motivates the consumption patterns I will describe, but the impossibility of converting purchasing power into a socially coherent definition of the self, in accord with the "habitus" handed down by tradition and inculcated during the socialization process (Bourdieu 1977). Not the love of money but the unloveliness of goods lies at the roots of the consumption dilemmas of rich Muria, since outside a narrow range of socially legitimized consumption possibilities, the goods commercially available in Bastar markets either have no meaning for Muria or are fraught with magical dangers.

I was led to reflect on this subject by the extraordinary contrast that can exist between different groups experiencing improved economic conditions. Some societies take to consumerism without hesitation, and experience no difficulties elaborating a previously given set of status symbols and personality-marking possessions with goods previously unavailable or unknown. Others, including the Muria, are highly conservative in this respect.

The particular example that aroused my curiosity was provided by Jock Stirratt, who in the course of a seminar on the anthropology of money at the London School of Economics and Political Science (Stirratt n.d.) graphically outlined the uses to which certain Sri Lankan fishermen who have prospered in recent times put their new-found wealth. These fishermen's incomes, having been very low, have much increased since the local availability of ice has made it possible for

their fish to reach inland markets, where they fetch high prices, in good condition. The fishermen's villages are still very remote, however, and at the time of the study, boasted no electricity, roads, or piped water supply. Despite these apparent disincentives, the richer fishermen were spending their excess earnings to purchase unusable television sets, to build "garages" onto houses to which no automobiles had access, and to install rooftop cisterns into which water never flows. All this, according to Stirratt, comes about in enthusiastic imitation of urban Sri Lanka's upper-middle class.

It is easy to laugh at such crass conspicuous expenditure, which by its apparent lack of utilitarian purpose makes at least some of our own consumption seem comparatively rational. Because the objects these fishermen acquire seem functionless in their environment, we cannot see why they should want them. On the other hand, if they collected pieces of antique Chinese porcelain and buried them in the earth as the Iban do (Freeman 1970), they would be considered sane but enchanted, like normal anthropological subjects. I would not wish to deny the obvious explanations for this kind of behavior – that is, status-seeking, keeping up with the Joneses, and so on. But I think one should also recognize the presence of a certain cultural vitality in these bold forays into new and untried fields of consumption: the ability to transcend the merely utilitarian aspect of consumption goods, so that they become something more like works of art, charged with personal expression.

Take these television sets, for instance. In purchasing such an item, to form the centerpiece of a personal collection of wealth-signifiers, the fisherman is *totalizing* his biography, his labor, his social milieu, in the form of an object whose technological associations dialectically negate the conditions under which the fisherman's wealth was actually obtained. By totalizing I mean, following Sartre (1968), bringing together disparate elements and reconciling their contradictions. In this instance, totalization applies to the elements of a biographical and social experience that are projected onto a collection of personal possessions that signify those experiences. The fisherman, to acquire wealth, has spent his days in a creaking, battered old boat, pursuing an all-too-familiar routine, and facing the all-too-familiar uncertainties of weather, movements of shoals of fish, and price fluctuations at the market. But he can turn all this labor, all this familiar messiness and uncertainty, into a smooth, dark cabinet of unidentifiable grainless wood, geometrically pure lines, an inscrutable gray glass face, and within, just visible through the rows of little holes and slots at the back, an intricate jungle of wire, plastic, and shining metal. He pre-

sumably knows that given the necessary electricity and transmissions, the set can be made to give forth more or less exciting pictures and voices. But that is not the point; what matters is the leap of imagination required for such a man to acquire and identify with such an object, adopting it as the emblem not of his middle-class aspirations, but of his actual achievements as a fisherman.

The television set, in this context, serves to objectify the fisherman's productive career, but it also transforms that career by invoking a technical and aesthetic universe (straight lines, smooth textures, plastic, aluminum, glass), that dialectically negate the objective conditions, technical processes, and sensory qualities of the labor process that, through the market, produced this same television set. In other words, the television set is a work of art, functioning like all genuine works of art to negate/transcend the real world. It is, in Jaspers's sense, a "cypher of the transcendent" (Jaspers 1971). One can call this commodity fetishism if one wishes, and consider it vulgar, but I believe that there is a valid distinction between dull, unimaginative consumerism, which only reiterates the class habitus, and adventurous consumerism like this, which struggles against the limits of the known world. I prefer to see here a creative process, one not at all deserving of the contempt that most of the participants at the aforementioned seminar seemed to think appropriate.

And I was struck by the stark contrast between the daring purchases made by erstwhile poverty-stricken Catholic fishermen in Sri Lanka, and the obsessive conservatism displayed by the newly rich in my own field area. I have no explanation to offer for the Sri Lankan fishermen, though I suspect that it has something to do with the relatively atomistic nature of their social and religious organization, compared to the Muria's, and the presence of some degree of class awareness (as opposed to traditional hierarchy, which is all the Muria recognize). But I hope I can fare a little better in explaining the Muria response to economic betterment, which is the topic I must now take up in earnest.

The traditional consumption ethos of the Muria

Bastar district, still the richest in forests of all the districts of peninsular India, has been one of the last land frontiers of the subcontinent. Not much more than a century ago, the earliest travelers described its inhabitants as lacking even cloth (they wore leaves), and the market system, which has expanded rapidly in the last fifty years, was then not even vestigially present. Only isolated enclaves of Hindu settlement existed, especially in south Bastar, near the royal capital or

Jagdalpur and along the valley of the Indrawati, and also along the north-south communication axis linking Jagdalpur to Raipur and Kanker to the north, and Warangal and Hyderabad to the south. Only in these areas were permanent fields in use; the bulk of the tribal population relied on slash-and-burn techniques. The tribal population consists of the Muria, the Maria, and the Bison-horn Maria, speakers of Gondi dialects and members of the congeries of "Gond" peoples found in a broad belt stretching between northern Andhra and southern Bihar.

Today only pockets of Maria subsist by means of techniques that appear to have been in general use when the country was first opened up to outside infiltration, following the imposition of political control by the British in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Large areas have been acquired by Hindu cultivating castes (though landlords are few and small in the area I know). But much greater areas still remain in the hands of the Muria, who now cultivate their extensive lands using techniques they have borrowed from their Hindu neighbors. Except where the forest is preserved for commercial exploitation, the land has been cleared, and has been divided into leveled fields with water-retaining dikes wherever the topography permits. Only in the mountainous northwest of Bastar, where the Maria live, is shifting agriculture still practiced. In other words, in the past one hundred years, Bastar district has joined India, has acquired an Indian appearance, and (to some extent) enjoys an Indian economy.

The inhabitants of the north-central plains of Bastar most affected by these changes are the Muria. The Muria are, by degrees, becoming a straightforward "dominant caste" of land-owning peasant cultivators. But this has not quite happened yet: the Muria still eat beef, marry late, and maintain their traditional institutions such as the mixed-sex *ghotul* dormitory (Elwin 1947) and the cult of village and clan deities outside the Hindu pantheon. Around the old centers of power to the south, however, one finds "Raj" Gonds among whom the process of transformation from tribe to caste is more or less complete. The Raj Gonds have become Hinduized, and have been settled cultivators for many generations. In other areas, as land came under Hindu occupation, the local Gond inhabitants typically sought new land elsewhere, which was easily done since land was plentiful in north Bastar and labor in short supply.

The Muria can perhaps best be understood not as a tribe with an immemorial culture and way of life, but as a phase in the historical process that has been converting people with a culture roughly like that of the Maria into people like the Raj Gonds — and thence into

straightforward cultivator castes, possibly even claimants to Rajput descent, like the Bhumia (Sinha 1962). In their locality the Muria have been the agents responsible for turning forest into India; and in so doing they are gradually turning themselves from a tribe into a caste. As I understand it, during the period of Hindu expansion in north Bastar during the last century, Muria moved into the forest, pushing out from the Hindu enclaves, felling trees and clearing fields, which then proved attractive to the incoming Hindus. The Hindus took over the land, expanding their enclaves, and the displaced Muria moved on, to repeat the process elsewhere. The Muria did not simply give way to *force majeure*; the land was ceded amicably against payment in animals, grain, liquor, and small quantities of gold and silver that would quickly be reconverted into food or, more likely, drink. Hindus we spoke to claimed that in the good old days it was possible to obtain large areas of land from Muria in exchange for a single gold earring or some other token payment. These Hindus attributed the Muria's fecklessness about land to their uncontrollable desire for intoxicating liquor.

I do not think such stories merely reflect ethnic stereotyping because they are consistent with the present-day distribution of land in north Bastar, and also with the current amicable relationships between Hindu and Muria cultivators in the countryside. The Muria are acknowledged to be the true owners of the land, and Hindus participate in the Muria ritual system because it is the Muria gods who ensure its fertility. This suggests that during the formative period, Muria-Hindu relationships assumed a stable configuration whereby Muria opened up new areas, cultivated them until they were exhausted, and when it was necessary for them to move on for eco-technological reasons of their own, turned them over to incoming Hindus for what seemed to the latter trifling sums and to the Muria pure profit. The Hindus could subsequently exploit the land using plows and animal fertilizers, techniques the Muria had not at that time adopted.

If this supposition is correct, as the virtual nonexistence of a landless category of Muria in the localities affected by Hindu immigration suggests it may be, then it may help explain the distinctive consumption ethos found in present-day Muria society. The stereotype of tribal innocence and hedonism, the eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die attitude, has a basis in fact. The Muria really do eat, drink, and enjoy themselves to a far greater degree than Indian peasants are commonly described as doing. This is particularly noticeable among poorer Muria, who think nothing of drinking away their last rupee in the world, and treating you in the bargain. There is a basic as-

sumption that there is more where that came from. This reflects the essentially unlimited resource base on which traditional Muria society rested (the forest), and the fact that prior to the transformation of Muria agricultural techniques in this century, wealth was not accumulated for lack of suitable stores of value (currency or cattle).

Muria hedonism is associated with collective (village and clan) institutions, all of which can be shown to be in some way associated with the Hindu/Muria interaction. The most famous of these institutions is the ghotul, the mixed-sex village dormitory described in detail by Elwin (though not entirely accurately; see S. Gell 1984). It is notable that the Muria ghotul, the very academy of hedonistic attitudes, assumes its most elaborated form only in the parts of north Bastar where Hindus are present; outside the range of Hindu influence, in Maria country, the ghotul exists in the very much duller form of a males-only dormitory, with none of the cultural elaboration the Muria ghotul has received. Similarly, betrothals and marriages are celebrated with much greater ceremony and expense among the Muria than among the Maria, as are collective feasts for clan and village deities. One only has to compare Elwin's splendid photographs of Muria and Maria taken in the 1930's and 1940's (Elwin 1947, 1943; Grigson 1937) to perceive that the material wealth of the Muria, as measured by such indicators as the amount of cloth, beads, jewelry, and metal tools evidently in circulation at that time, far exceeded that of the Maria. If we can assume that only a small proportion of this wealth came from the sale of cash crops – regional markets being little developed at that time – the only logical explanation for the relative wealth of the Muria is their relationship with the Hindus. Elwin does not describe the Muria of his time as rich in any except a cultural sense, and it is clear that their wealth consisted mainly of finery worn on festive occasions, and stores of food and liquor, also for public consumption at village rituals, or semi-public hospitality at other times. I would argue, though I am aware that the point is far from proven, that the Muria have elaborated "feckless" consumption into a cultural theme because they have been accustomed to having a high-consumption lifestyle subsidized by periodic injections of Hindu wealth.

The Muria associate liquidity with the selling off of capital assets (now held as livestock, since the Muria, for reasons to be discussed, nowadays rarely deal in land) in order to finance immediate consumption on a grandiose scale, usually in public contexts of some kind. These losses, traditionally, could always be recouped by pioneering new land, and although that is no longer possible, the labor market is such that the disappearance of land as a source of income

is more than offset by the easy availability of relatively remunerative forms of employment.

The social and religious life of the Muria is conducted as a series of large-scale eating and drinking occasions (festivals of the gods, marriages, settlements of disputes, etc.), in which the village as a whole must participate. There are also obligations to extend hospitality to visiting affines and other kin, to religious specialists, shamans, local officials, and the like. Outside these formal occasions, it is customary for men and middle-aged women to drink deeply in one another's company as frequently as possible, and the ghotul boys and girls also conduct feasts and drinking parties. The important point to note, however, is that this social feasting and drinking is not undertaken in a competitive spirit, in order to demonstrate superiority along the lines of Melanesian ceremonial exchange, but is intended to demonstrate commitment to the village and to Muria values. The Muria do not reveal any paranoia about getting the worst of an exchange, as do members of societies in which the *mentalité échangiste* holds sway; their fears always lie in the direction of suffering social ostracism, of which the most extreme form is outright expulsion from the village. In village feasts, contributions are standardized, and accounts are kept to ensure that each household has given an identical amount, regardless of wealth. When marriages are celebrated, the groom's family has to feast not only the bride's kin (who reciprocate), but the whole of their own village; the villagers are responsible, however, for amassing plenty of liquor, so that a good time is had by all. When disputes are settled, the pattern is the same: the party found guilty is fined a cow, a goat, or a quantity of rice, and a feast is arranged. The most onerous financial obligations are incurred in connection with consumption rituals that bring the whole village together as a single commonsensical unit. Day-to-day expenditure is also largely devoted to acquiring the means, mainly in the form of liquor, to extend casual hospitality as freely as possible.

The need to finance public consumption establishes the major economic goals of a Muria household, and sets the standards whereby the Muria evaluate the world of goods. Objects are desirable if they have meaning within the context of public feasting; otherwise, they have no value. The main items the Muria buy at market are cloth, decorative trinkets, and jewelry. The Muria are addicted to finery, particularly the ghotul boys and girls, whose display and dancing during village ritual is a matter of deep concern to them and to the village as a whole. Each young dancer is responsible for purchasing his or her own finery, but it is always worn in the context of collective display

and is selected with this in mind. In 1977, for instance, the ghotul girls of Manjapur all obtained new saris with identical border for the annual "Play of the Gods" (*pen karsana*), the highlight of the ritual calendar. The ghotul boys had uniform black singlets, voluminous white skirts, white turbans, and feather headdresses, for wear at all-night dances. The Muria propensity for contriving uniforms is not restricted to the young. The senior men of Manjapur all wear the same kind of blue shirt on public occasions, a village uniform that distinguishes them from men of other villages. This code of dress and adornment is not enforced by sanctions; the Muria themselves are not even particularly conscious of it. The stated criterion for making purchases of this kind is that such-and-such items are beautiful (*sobta*), not that they have overt symbolic meanings.

In fact, Muria dress is anachronistic rather than traditional, since in truly traditional times cloth and jewelry were unavailable. We can see this by studying Elwin's photographs of the Muria of forty-fifty years ago. These pictures show the grandparents of the present-day ghotul boys and girls to have been just as dressy as their descendants, but wearing fashions that have been abandoned long since in the areas in which they originated. One plate (Elwin 1947, p. 420) shows a group of boys wearing remarkable short-sleeved, collarless buttoned shirts and strange flattened turbans of a style now never seen, but which appear to be distant echoes of courtly styles of the nineteenth century, or even earlier, filtered to the Muria via the Hindus. The present-day Muria male hairstyle, the hair on the forehead shaved to the crown of the head, with the hair in back left long and tied into a bun, is the classical Hindu *bodi*, a style seen only in attenuated forms now among Hindus themselves but jealously preserved by the beef-eating, hard-drinking Muria. The "tribal" sari is a shorter, narrower version of the standard sari worn by neighboring Hindu women, tied the same way but worn without a bodice, which until very recently most Muria women considered an immodest item of clothing, liable to attract attention to the breasts rather than divert it. Tribal saris are now almost all manufactured in Bombay of flimsy cotton cloth, dyed in bright colors, especially for sale in the tribal areas: the much more durable local *ganda* cloth is now worn only by old ladies and conservative village elders. The Bombay saris, regarded by outsiders as signs of authentic tribal identity, mainly because they are scanty and reveal the legs and upper body, are considered by the Muria themselves not only exotic (because they come from outside Bastar) but also respectable and modest; wearing the 4.5-meter standard sari is regarded as ostentatious.

In fact, none of the vestimentary signs that betoken tribal identity to outsiders are produced by the Muria themselves or originated indigenously. Tribal finery, turbans, loincloths, short saris, and "tribal" jewelry (heavy silver torques, gold, silver, and brass earrings, gold necklaces, massive silver and brass bracelets,) – all these arrived in the area with the Hindus, and were adopted by the Muria in imitation of their betters. These items are obtained from Hindu traders in the markets, never from other Muria, and are associated with superior status.

A case in point is silver jewelry, which is made in Rajasthan and has been traded in Bastar by Marwari merchants during this century. The design of the jewelry is traditional to Rajasthan, though I do not know if it is worn there any more. The silver ornaments for sale in Bastar markets are mostly old, but are cleaned and repaired by the Marwari silversmiths so that to all appearances they are brand new. This is a source of perplexity to Western visitors in search of old and authentic-looking tribal jewelry (see Spooner's remarks in Chapter 7, on the authenticity of Turkmen carpets.) It is old, it is authentic, but it is none of it tribal. According to a Marwari informant, silver jewelry circulates among both Hindus and Muria, but is little worn by the Hindus, who keep it as a store of value and as a component of dowry payments. The Muria do not have dowries, and the silver with which Muria girls adorn themselves has been purchased by them, using their own money, obtained by selling produce at market and by wage labor. Among the Hindus jewelry is essentially family property, significant as a store of capital; among the Muria it is personal property, primarily significant as personal adornment.

One can summarize the traditional Muria attitude toward prestige consumption goods available in the markets as follows: the items sought – cloth, finery, jewelry – are all associated with non-Muria groups considered by the Muria to be higher on the social scale. The definition of prestige goods has been imposed on the Muria by outsiders, and is perpetuated by a marketing system that is in entirely non-Muria hands. But in taking over elements of a set of non-Muria prestige goods for internal consumption, the Muria have imposed their own set of social evaluations on them, which are quite distinct from the ones operative among the groups with whom these goods originated. Prestige consumption items are sought not because of an intravillage competition to be the most fashionably dressed, most bejeweled individual around, but because all villagers alike are attempting to live up to a particular collective image. The ghotul boys and girls are obliged to spend heavily on clothes and finery so as not to let the side

down at festivals with dancers from other ghotuls. The older men are obliged to obtain the standard blue shirt so as to make a good show at market, sitting with their fellow villagers at their accustomed place (Gell 1982). Jewelry is worn so as to look respectable, rather than to dazzle. In other words, it is in order to express conformity, not originality or individuality, that such purchases are made. This has in turn had an effect on the selection of goods offered by traders to Muria at rural markets. One can now distinguish between a range of goods aimed specifically at tribal consumers, particularly saris, turbans, loin-cloths, decorations, and heavy silver jewelry, and a range of modern items that are not usually offered at the more rural markets, namely, shoes, trousers, jackets, woolens, 4.5-meter saris, printed cloth (Muria prefer plain colors and woven borders), intricate as opposed to massive jewelry, sunglasses, umbrellas, stationery, crockery, furniture, medicines, etc. These items are available from shops in the towns, which are very accessible to the Muria by local bus, but are not attractive to them.

Besides clothes and finery, the Muria also spend money on food and drink. In normal times, subsistence grains and pulses (dāl, chick-peas, lentils) are not obtained at market; most families are self-sufficient in food. But rice and vegetables such as radishes, eggplant, chilis, tomatoes, beans, and various greens are bought for important occasions, such as marriages. The luxury foods preferred by the Muria are all traditional – parched rice, dried fish, *pakhoras* (a deep-fried snack), leaf-tobacco – rather than modern delicacies such as sweets, cookies, tea, sugar, manufactured cigarettes, etc., which are popular with Hindus. The largest expenditure in this category goes for drink, which is sold on the fringes of the market and in the villages. Even this item is not really indigenous; distilling was traditionally a monopoly of the Kallar (distiller) caste, of higher ritual status than the Muria. Nowadays the Kallar are legally prohibited from plying their trade so the Muria have to make their own, which they claim to be inferior to the Kallar product. Liquor is an essential element in all aspects of social and ritual life; for the Muria, the very notion of sociability, of belonging to a social group and maintaining social relationships, is unthinkable without alcoholic accompaniments. The Muria passion for liquor, much remarked by outsiders, is by no means a symptom of anomie or despair, as alcoholism may well be in some tribal societies, but the outcome of the conformism, the paranoia about belonging, which marks all phases of Muria life.

In short, Muria consumption is bound up with the expression of collective identity and the need to assert commitment to the village

as a political unit and to its institutions. Particular items are singled out from the range of Hindu prestige symbols and incorporated into a collective style, which all Muria try to approximate as best they can. Consumption is not associated with competition, but with the demonstration of adequacy, the ability to come up to the collective mark. The emphasis on the collective style, rather than on individual differences, explains the anachronistic nature of Muria tastes and their conservative approach to consumption. The Muria are dedicated followers of fashion, followers being the operative word. Their fashions are anachronistic because no one wants to defy the restraints of the collective style. Even now, when some young men are cutting their hair and dressing more like the local Hindus, their motive is not to look smarter than before, but to look less conspicuous in a world that is perceived as increasingly Hindu-dominated.

Recent economic changes

This collectivist consumption ethos has its roots in a phase of the tribecaste conversion process in which interhousehold economic differences was minimal and inequalities in wealth between households would be at most temporary, owing to the absence of media of capital accumulation. Since this pattern was set, however, there have been crucial changes in the economic basis of Muria society. Around the turn of the century, the government imposed controls on access to forest land, controls that have been applied more and more stringently, so that the Bastar land frontier is now effectively closed. The government ban on the free exploitation of the forest was believed to have precipitated an uprising in the countryside in 1910, and between the two world wars Muria lands were subjected to survey and land titles were registered. Owing to the fear of renewed outbreaks of anti-government feeling, the amount of land ceded to the Muria was rather generous in relation to their numbers. At the time of the settlement the Muria must have appeared both poor and dependent on access to large areas of uncleared forest.

Today almost all the forest ceded to the Muria has been cleared and more has been encroached on, with the result that official census figures give the average land-holding per cultivating Muria family at more than ten acres. By now, thanks to the cumulative labor of generations, this land has been converted into leveled paddy fields, with water-retaining dikes, of considerable agricultural potential even without irrigation. It is common to find families holding 20, 30, or even more acres of paddy field, enormous acreages by Indian standards.

These fields can only be cultivated with animal-drawn plows, and many families cannot cultivate all the land they possess for lack of cattle or buffalo. But here again time is on their side: buffalo were rare in the area before the war, but now herds are gradually building up, as are cattle herds, enabling this initial shortage of agricultural capital to be overcome. New trade routes have opened up, bringing plow animals into the area. Land registered to adivasis cannot be sold to non-adivasis by government decree, so Muria land is no longer passing into the hands of Hindus. Moreover, the old easy come, easy go, attitude to land has vanished with the introduction of permanent fields whose construction and upkeep represent years and years of accumulated labor. The population has also increased, so that labor shortage, once the most important constraint on production, is becoming less of a problem and land can be fully and more intensively cultivated (two crops, one of rice and one a dry-season crop such as millet or oil-seeds, are the norm).

Muria family farms are much more productive now than they were in the past. Moreover, the Muria have access to wage labor at high rates of pay (eight rupees a day in 1982) in relation to their actual living costs. The government Public Works Department and the Forest Department are chronically short of labor, so that work is readily available during the agricultural slack season. Besides wage employment, Muria also employ one another as farm laborers for the standard rate of three kilos of unhusked rice per laborer per day.

In short, the local economy is in a flourishing condition, prosperous in good years and well able to withstand the rigors of bad ones. Despite being a notoriously "backward" area, supposedly occupied by miserable, poverty-stricken tribals, Bastar district exports rice year after year, and that, in India, is the bottom line.

Rich Muria families

It is against this background that I want to examine consumption in two "rich" Muria families, that is, families who in the general economic upsurge have done better than most. Rich men among the Muria are identified as *saukar* ("hundred-rupee men"), and they may be (and usually are) village elders (*siyan*, "wise men"). Wealth and influence in village politics usually go together, but the relationship between the two is ambiguous: wealth gives political standing because it is a tangible sign of intelligence and industry, not because the loyalty of the village can be bought. A rich man can finance the feast that a poor man gives the village when his son is married; but it is still the

poor man's feast. The ethos of each family head's being equally and individually responsible for his duties and feast contributions vis-à-vis the village as a whole means that rich men cannot come to prominence by acts of outstanding public generosity. Everyone is required to make the standard contribution; the only difference is that it is easier to do this if one is rich. If a family loses its wealth, for whatever reason, it does not lose its prestige in the village arena, at least not immediately. And merely acquiring wealth, in the absence of a continuous demonstration of adherence to the traditional status quo in village politics does not confer *siyan* status. The first case I will discuss is of a man who has become wealthy in rather special circumstances. Usually wealth is associated with land, and land with membership in the dominant clan. This man is not particularly well off in land (with his parents and his brother he farms 13 acres), and he belongs to neither of the two important clans in his village. He is a recognized *siyan*, respected for his formidable intelligence, drive, and finesse in public speaking, but at the same time he is an outsider. But before discussing this man (Tiri) and his consumption problems, let me briefly indicate two ways in which rich Muria can develop two kinds of *saukar* identity, neither of which is appropriate in Tiri's case.

The archetypal *saukar* in the neighborhood of the village (Manjapur) where I mostly worked was called Dhol Saukar. Dhol had an enormous house and a great deal of land, as well as the cattle and labor to work it. He was always more or less drunk and was the fattest Muria I have encountered. He clearly ate a vast amount, even by the generous standards of the Muria. In public, he was invariably excessively affable, greeting everyone with prolonged embraces and slurred words of humble greetings. He knelt on our porch for about five minutes on one occasion, intoning again and again, "Great gods! Please don't be angry, don't be angry!" (*Mahaprabhu! hongaima, hongaima.*) He was locally well-known and well-respected, but his public demeanor was always ultra-disarming, so that his drunkenness seemed to be more a matter of self-defense than anything else. By becoming a living embodiment of the high value placed by Muria on copious eating and drinking, Dhol Saukar managed to be notoriously rich and at the same time completely inoffensive. Moreover, like most of the other rich Muria I will be discussing, he preserved an external appearance of relative poverty. His turbans were small and shabby, his loincloth was of the briefest and most traditional kind; only his gold necklace and earrings marked him out as having any wealth at all. Dhol Saukar, a relatively older man, is a rich Muria of the old school — a hard drinker, a lover of feasting and company; that is to say, he

is like any other Muria, but more so. This persona, however, is unsuitable for ambitious men. Specializing in eating, drinking, and conviviality is implicitly a retreat from engagement in the struggle of recognition in the village arena. Old men behave this way once they have relinquished control to their sons, but the ambitious up-and-coming siyan cannot simply concentrate on drinking, even though this is an activity that the Muria regard as respectable in itself. The Muria also admire sobriety, intelligence, the power to exercise control over domestic and village affairs – all of which are inconsistent with permanent inebriation. It was said that affairs in Dhol's house were a shambles, despite his universal popularity outside it. This perhaps is the consequence of Dhol's attempt to combine richness and Muria-ness by simply stepping up traditional consumption.

Next, and in sharp contrast to Dhol, whose strategy was successful enough in its own terms, I want briefly to discuss a youth who has attempted to go to the opposite extreme, with notably little success so far. This youth, who was about 18 years old when I met him, had 40 acres of paddy land, and so was a saukar, but he was not a siyan and by the look of things never would be. He was drunk at our meeting (tending to truculence) and was surrounded by disreputable non-Muria hangers-on. Whereas Dhol's dress was modest, this youthful saukar wore a weird mixture of Muria and "modern" clothes. On his feet he wore army boots, many sizes too large, without socks; above these, baggy bottle-green shorts, a nylon string vest, dark glasses, and a towering but rather lopsided tussar silk turban. From the pocket of his vest protruded a leaking fountain pen, which had deposited irregular blue stains over his chest. (I was informed by disapproving Muria companions that he could neither read nor write.) I gathered that he was ill-regarded in his own village and spent his time away from it, in the society of low-grade officials, forest guards, and other marginal fellows. He had no prestige and was considered "mad" (*bai-hal*). Had he not suffered from the handicap of excessive wealth, this young man presumably would have been as well-adjusted and as well-liked as his poorer contemporaries. He can be considered an Awful Example, the opposite of Dhol Saugar, a man whose consumption behavior establishes an incoherent personality, leading to social rejection.

My two main examples are less extreme cases than these, and involve men I know better. By repute at least, Tiri is the richest man in Manjapur, and because we lived across his courtyard for a year we were in a good position to monitor his consumption. Tiri is rich not because he has a lot of land, but because he is a hard-working and

exceptionally efficient farmer, a brilliant organizer, and a wheeler-dealer who works hand-in-glove with the Forest Department, local contractors, and the Public Works Department. He must have inherited his acumen from his equally redoubtable mother, another organizational genius. Together this pair have carried all before them, despite the fact that Tiri's mother and father arrived as penniless runaways from a distant village, and that Tiri's childhood was spent as a farm servant in the house of a rich man in the locality. Tiri's is the only household of his clan in the village; he is a classic *nouveau riche*, an upstart, but he is also a siyan, an excellent public speaker, negotiator, and village politician.

Both Tiri and his mother were extraordinarily conservative in consumption matters. He wore only the traditional short loincloth, turban, and the blue shirt worn by all the men of his generation. He used *ganda* (handloomed) cloth rather than machine-made – more durable and therefore cheaper in the long run, but less sparkingly white. He told us that it was wrong for Muria to wear shoes, trousers, loincloths, and the like. He had neither a bicycle, a wristwatch, nor a wireless (his younger brother had acquired all three). It was not that he was trying to look poor; his actual riches, accumulating in the form of cattle and buffalo and various publicly known debts, could not be effectively concealed. It was rather that he was determined not to enter into kinds of consumption that would make him out to be a different kind of person than he regarded as morally appropriate, in the evaluations of both his society and himself. Unlike Dhol Saugar, he did not drink or eat more than the average Muria. When drinking was obligatory he drank, but between times he often became a conscientious abstainer for months at a time, believing that when he was drunk he was not fully in control. Tiri attempted, in other words, to consume exactly as if he were no richer than the average man. In his production activities and acquisition of money he assiduously sought mastery, but this same mastery when translated into consumption behavior became a consistent series of denials; if he were to spend as he gained, his behavior would cancel out the very achievement by which he set such store. It was only if he consumed as if he were not wealthy that he would remain so. In fact, despite the village consensus confirming his affluence, he often complained to us of financial insecurities, enormous losses impending, and the like. In a poetic moment, he made a comparison between riches and the moving shadow of a shade tree, now here but soon gone; on another occasion he described riches as being like the sand bars in a riverbed, seemingly solid but washed away in the wake of a rainstorm (S. Gell 1984).

Tiri's mother is equally puritanical, but as an old woman she can take nonconsumption to extreme lengths. Her saris are outrageously shabby. She buys the cheapest kind of machine cloth, the kind that falls to pieces in a fortnight, and wears it as long as decency permits. She has hardly any personal possessions besides a tobacco pouch and a silver neck torque (*suta*) of the kind worn by many Muria women. She had no blanket (she said, though I don't know whether to believe this) until we gave her one – a light shawl. She will spend money in the market only on food, vegetables, chilis, spices, dried fish, and an occasional fried delicacy. Like her son, she seems determined to protect her wealth by denying its consumption consequences.

Meanwhile there are certain objects in the Tiri household that receive special attention. Most conspicuous of these is the brass water-pot, which stands on a post facing Tiri's verandah and from which the members of the household take drinking and hand-washing water. All households have such a water-pot, but usually only an earthenware one. Tiri's mother is unusual in possessing such a fine specimen, which she keeps in spectacularly gleaming condition and prominently displayed. Inside the kitchen, hidden from view, she has a stack of four or five more brass pots. The family also possesses more than the usual number of smaller brass water pots and a beautiful set of heavy brass plates, which are used for company and for ritual meals.

Brassware of this kind is manufactured in Raipur and is normally unavailable in local markets. However, it had been traded in Bastar for a long time at the big annual fairs (*mardhai*), particularly the ones attended by Muria at Narayanpur and Kondagaon. Brassware is an important category of prestige goods, and like all such goods is associated with high-status Hindu manners. The local Hindus eat off brass plates all the time, whereas even rich Muria households like Tiri's eat off plates only exceptionally; usually they make do with plates and cups made from leaves, which are more efficient in that they involve no washing up and can be fed to domestic animals immediately after the meal. Tiri's set of plates is engraved with the family name (though none of the family can read), together with swastika emblems and other Hindu symbols. Brassware, like jewelry, has penetrated the Muria consumption system because it is associated with public consumption rather than private luxury. All the richer households of the village possess some brass plates and perhaps a water pot or two, but there is no outright competition. They are brought out to do honor to guests, or to do honor to the village and its gods on ritual occasions.

But it seems that Tiri's mother, in amassing such a large collection

of water pots, and in displaying her best one so prominently, has gone further than other women in her village, none of whom have collected nearly as many pots. It would appear that she is unusually susceptible to brass water pots, since one pot costs about as much as four blankets, and she thinks she cannot afford a blanket. I believe that there is an element of fetishism here, but the object of Tiri's mother's fetishistic attitude is not one that takes her out of her quotidian world (like the fishermen and their television sets), but one that stands as a powerful symbol of traditional Muria feminine activities.

Tiri's mother told Simeran Gell that she was glad there was no well in the village, and that the part of the day she enjoyed most was the late afternoon, when she went off to the river (more than a mile away), together with her faithful pot, driving a herd of cows before her. There she would water the cows and vigorously scrub the pot with sand to make it shiny, before filling it and another pot of lesser value with water, bringing them back balanced on her head, so as to arrive, dripping but unbowed, surrounded by cows, in time to start organizing everyone for the evening meal.

The energy and skill that Tiri's mother puts into the performance of her domestic tasks is breathtaking to behold, and she herself is thoroughly conscious of it. I think her fierce pride in her performance of her role as Muria matriarch is projected onto her collection of brass pots, particularly the one that is displayed. Psychoanalytically, and also in certain systems of Indian symbolism, pots are female symbols; so there may be depth-psychological grounds for thinking that she identifies herself with the pot she cherishes so much. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the local Hindu castes use pots as symbolic bridegrooms: girls who reach puberty without finding a husband are married to pots (Dubey 1953). So it could also be that the pot is a male symbol. In any case it is likely that the symbolism involved is multivocal and overdetermined.

Depth psychology aside, it is notable that the brassware-collecting propensity of the Tiri household is one of the few ways their affluent status is overtly demonstrated. Because brassware was one of the first items of Hindu wealth to be traded in Bastar, it can be amassed without seeming to reject basic Muria identity. Probably, in years to come, Muria and tourists will be the only purchasers of traditional brassware, just as Muria and tourists are the main purchasers of traditional silver – most of the traders are moving with the times and going over to stainless steel, which is much more popular with modern-minded Hindus.

Curiously the Muria, a traditional people with no home-grown tra-

dition of craft and prestige-good production, are actually much more similar to Westerners, seeking authenticity in the exotic, than they are to traditional craft-producer societies, the category to which they are erroneously believed to belong. Traditional craft producers, like the Turkmen whom Spooner discusses in Chapter 7, do not seem to care about authenticity, and, to the dismay of collectors, seem happy to prostitute stylistic purity to please the degraded taste of modernity. But the reasons for Muria conservatism are different from the reasons underlying Western purism in matters of craft. The Muria are conservative because they do not want to depart from the communally sanctioned consumption ethos, because they do not want to appear individualistic; Westerners on the other hand seek purity in order to demonstrate superior taste, to enhance, rather than conceal, their individuality.

Consumption in the Tiri household is centripetal, designed to bring everything within bounds that can be rigidly controlled. It is a cause of great satisfaction for Tiri's family that they eat only their own rice, and that the food introduced from outside is exclusively the produce of traditional suppliers, notably, Maraars, the local market-garden caste. This conservatism arises not from a variant of the Protestant ethic, but from the determination on the part of a house that is rich but (rationally or not) insecure, not to transgress, not to presume, not to behave as if circumstances had changed and more adventurous consumption were really possible, lest the whole fragile edifice crumble overnight. Meanwhile, they become richer and richer. Because their land is limited (thirteen acres), it would indeed be rational for them to accumulate wealth with which to buy more fields; but it is unlikely that fields will become available, and if they do, a powerful coalition of clan interests would be ranged against the isolated Tiri household. In any case, one does not get to buy fields by skimping on blankets. Tiri's puritanism, which is not really un-Muria since it is an attempt to preserve a Muria lifestyle in defiance of the economic facts, is still arguably rational and sensible in some long-term sense, and Tiri's son will no doubt benefit from the parsimony practiced by his father and grandmother. Tiri is clearly in control of his destiny and is pursuing a strategy that makes sense to him and to his village associates.

My last example is of an even richer household, in which consumption is tending toward a much more radical degree of incoherence.

During my most recent trip to Bastar, in 1983, I chose to work close to the burgeoning local administrative and commercial center, Narayanpur. I lodged in a house in Duganar village belonging to a Muria

in his sixties, Ram. Ram Saukar has five excellent houses but he chooses to sleep – year in, year out, winter and summer – on an open threshing floor in the midst of his fields. He is, to all appearances, a man of the most abject poverty. He wears a cotton g-string and an old woolen pullover, filthy and full of holes. He is tall and skinny, with close-cropped silver hair and a bristling growth of beard (the one way I could do something for him that he seemed really to appreciate was to shave him for free).

At the outset I assumed that Ram was a typical Muria old man, that is, a nonentity in his own house. In traditional Muria villages (among which Duganar can no longer be counted), it is typical for men with adult sons to be forced to relinquish control of domestic and productive organization and devote their time to drinking with cronies of their own age. Tiri's father, for instance, whom I did not even bother to mention when I was describing his house, is such a bibulous old man, charming if occasionally tiresome, but treated with undisguised contempt by his wife and son. With Ram Saukar things were very different, as I soon discovered. He did no physical work, but he controlled and directed everything, the execution being in the hands of his two adult sons, their wives, his unmarried daughter, and two permanent farm servants. Ram Saukar was the senior member of the dominant clan in Duganar, the *sarpanch* of the village, literate in Hindi and fluent also in Halbi and Gondi. He owned 35 acres of land, absolutely prime paddyfields with a government irrigation channel running straight through them. He had so many buffalo that he had stopped counting them, merely remarking, when I asked, that he thought he had "enough." He even had a Tata lorry and a driver at his disposal, though I am sorry to report that he had achieved this by allowing his daughter to become the mistress of the Sikh lorry driver who actually owned the vehicle and who had become his permanent client. This arrangement suited Ram Saukar perfectly; his daughter remained at home, where her labor could be exploited, he had the use of the lorry whenever he wanted and none of the expense of maintaining it, and he made money by providing board and lodging for the lorry driver and his assistants.

The product of the 35 acres was considerably more than required to feed even Ram's large and motley household. However, I was puzzled to learn that nothing was ever taken to Narayanpur market, only a couple of miles distant, except pure cash crops (such as mustard seed). This unwillingness to sell rice, which I had encountered in the more "traditional" Muria village, I initially ascribed to respect for the rice itself (which is how Tiri had explained his own abstention from

the sale of rice, which is too sacred to be commercialized). I discovered later, however, that the Ram household was in the rice-selling business, but that instead of selling rice to the cooperative in the local market at government rates, they waited until supplies became short and prices high, whereupon they sold rice privately in the village. They also collected and sold large quantities of mahua pods (the raw material for *darrango*, the local liquor), always waiting for the best moment to unload their supplies – just before the Narayanpur *mela* or the marriage season. Ram's house was stacked to the rafters with mahua pods, but never a drink was to be had there, unless one of the brothers or the lorry driver obtained a bottle in Narayanpur. Ram himself neither smoked nor drank. I once offered him a cookie. He accepted, ate half of it in tiny nibbles, and then put the uneaten half aside "for the children."

Given that Ram Saukar had a large income by peasant standards, and never spent, or had anyone spend on his behalf, a single *paisa*, what on earth did he do with his profits, apart from putting them in the bank?

The only way in which the Ram Saukar family conspicuously spent more money than other, poorer households in Duganar was in the construction of new houses. The old main house comprised three houses built around a courtyard, with the fourth side of the square being occupied by stalls for livestock. In one house lived his wife, in one his elder son, in the other his younger son. He himself, as I said, lived out in the fields. On the main road leading into Narayanpur, he had built a kind of condominium consisting of three attached two-story houses of elaborate construction. This *burha lon* (great house) was intended for letting to migrant families working in Narayanpur. It had been standing two years and was beginning to show signs of decrepitude. Only one house was occupied, and that by the assistant of the Sikh lorry driver, who was not paying much rent. The whole thing looked like a dead loss commercially, but everyone in the family was extremely proud of having created such an imposing edifice, and they spent a lot of time there, chatting to the wife of the lorry driver's assistant. Next to the much-admired *burha lon* was a building that was not admired at all, one that was frankly admitted to be the old man's folly. Ram had decided to construct a house of stone, eliminating at a stroke the maintenance problem that besets mud-walled houses. He had hired stonemasons to chip the local granite into quadrangular blocks, but at this point his architectural inspiration had run out, or his nerve, and the house had been built as a single small room, no more than about twelve feet square, without windows. It was in

fact a stone replica of a little hut that a very poor man might put up for himself. It was plain that this stone hovel was useless for any purpose, and it had never been roofed. The stones and cement were expensive and well joined, but this house, like the *burha lon*, was pointless as an investment of time and money. Nonetheless, despite their already having two surplus houses, at the time of my stay Ram Saukar's family were constructing no fewer than three more houses for themselves. These houses were to be for Ram's two sons and, following some shady deal, for the lorry driver. This latest round of construction had been stimulated by the government's offer of 5,000 rupees for building materials, plus title to house lots along the Narayanpur road, to "homeless" tribals. Without this incentive perhaps these houses would have been built elsewhere and not in such quick succession, but both brothers were enthusiastic at the prospect of having houses of their own, even though they were away from their own land and the family's main house, and would be squeezed in between the *ganda* (weaver) settlement and the main road, surrounded by strangers from other castes.

The Ram Saukar family could put money into buildings they did not need because building a house was sufficiently like a traditional, "practical" use of resources, so as not to be obviously, even to them, a way of playing with money. But playthings, or objects of aesthetic enjoyment, are what the excess houses, particularly the *burha lon*, had become. The old man's stone hut was obviously some kind of personal statement, expressive of his stony nature, of his desire for permanence, perhaps also of his antagonism toward his sons since he had insisted on building it despite their protests. This object may also represent a tomb; the only stone structures ordinarily built by Muria are funerary monuments. But it is characteristic that the symbolic statements incorporated in the family's excess houses viewed as objects of consumption are disguised by the fact that the houses are not represented as objects of consumption at all, but as investments, albeit with some kind of ulterior purpose.

The old man, as has been described, consumed only the bare minimum needed for physical survival. Yet in many ways he was no skinflint. His sons were allotted fields from which they derived good incomes of their own, and both undertook contracts from the government from which they could derive more money. Both had long since acquired the trinity of status symbols beyond which Muria peasants, even educated ones like these, do not aspire (radio, bicycle, wrist-watch). In their dress they were modest in the extreme. Neither wore long trousers, only shorts, when they went to town. Normally they

wore cheap, knee-length cloths and tattered t-shirts, though each had a few better shirts for wear on formal occasions. Neither wore shoes or sandals, except to town. They had cut their hair and did not wear turbans. In fact, they appeared to have spent less on clothes than a young man in a traditional village would spend on clothes and adornment, quite irrespective of whether he came from a rich family or a poor one. They drank far less and ate no better than the average "poor" Muria in a traditional village. They wore no jewelry. To be sure, the women of the house were quite well-dressed when they wanted to be. The younger brother's wife said that her husband gave her saris when he could, but he was inhibited by the attitude of his elder brother's wife, who objected to the squandering of family money on her sister-in-law, whom she considered an interloper. This led to quarrels between the brothers, episodes the younger woman greatly feared.

The Ram family was inhibited about spending money because any consumption initiative was seen as a threat to power. The old man, I think, avoided spending money in order to keep his iron grip on the organization of the household as a productive unit. If he had started drinking and enjoying life like an ordinary old man, he would have lost his power, like ordinary old men do. The brothers did not spend money because each was determined not to give the other an excuse to level accusations of spendthrift behavior, accusations that would have threatened the other's position as claimant to the eventual inheritance. But behind these intrafamilial conflicts there remains the general fact that neither brother really fantasized about consumption beyond a very basic level. I held lengthy discussions with the Sikh lorry driver concerning the price of tape recorders in Delhi as opposed to Raipur, Jagdalpur, Narayanpur, and so on (he wanted one for the cab of his lorry). Both brothers participated eagerly in these conversations, but it was quite clear that neither of them regarded a cheap tape recorder as an object they could conceivably buy. The stores in Narayanpur and Kondagaon, with which they were very familiar, were stuffed with modern goods, usually sold to salaried employees of the government and other aspiring urbanites, which they never expressed the slightest wish to buy.

But the most striking instance of the brothers' attitude toward consumption concerns not modern goods but supposedly traditional ones, to whose consumption possibilities the Ram family, imprisoned in its wealth, was entirely blind until those possibilities were pointed out by me.

Among the items of tribal art for which Bastar is famous, the most

prominent are the gunmetal figurines made by the lost-wax process. Like all Muria material culture with "tribal" associations, these sculptures are not actually made by tribals at all, but by the local bronze-working caste (*Ghassiya*). These objects are placed in temples, and they are also avidly collected by tourists. They can be bought in quantity at any large fair in Bastar, or directly from the manufacturers, who are settled in villages throughout the district. While I was in Bastar researching markets, I visited a center of metal-casting at Kondagaon and acquired, for my own touristic purposes, a little collection of the smaller bell-metal figurines to decorate a mantelpiece at home. I bought a horse, a cow, a deer, a tiger, a scorpion, and so on, making as nearly as possible a matched set of all the animals offered. When I got back to the Ram household (where I was staying) after my trip to Kondagaon, I produced my set of little animals and arranged them on the floor, thinking they might amuse the children for a while. The effect was electric. Not only were the children absolutely entranced, but a large and enthusiastic group of adults, including both brothers, gathered around as well. The animals were picked up, minutely examined, placed in various arrangements, and admired from every angle. I was complimented on my ingenuity in finding these objects and acquiring them, and when the session was over they were lovingly packed up for me and placed in my suitcase. Yet the entire set did not cost more than 100 rupees (eleven dollars) in all (tourist prices), and all of them were available to my admiring audience at any local fair for much less than I had paid for them. But it was apparent that it had never occurred to any member of the household to buy such objects, even though they are supposedly redolent of Muria culture. Of the culture, perhaps; of the consumption system, not at all. Only by being a tourist – by buying these animals as a set and displaying them in a particular context – did I make it apparent to Muria themselves that they had something there to consume. Clearly, it will be a long time before the Muria embark on consumerism in its modern forms with the panache of even the most diffident tourist. But perhaps I made a start with the Ram family on that occasion.

Conclusion

The foregoing account of the Muria consumption system and its ambiguous future in the context of current economic changes has been fragmentary in many respects. But I hope it suffices to indicate the complex interaction between aspects of peasant societies that are not usually considered conjointly: the economic transformation brought

about by technological change on the one hand, and on the other the symbolic order that conventional economics assigns to the category of tastes. The study of taste has recently become an important preoccupation of Marxist sociology (Bourdieu 1979), and quite rightly, because nothing so acutely expresses social class, and the educational system that reinforces and perpetuates classes in modern society, as consumer preferences in the cultural domain – music, films, furnishings, pictures, and so on. In the study of aesthetic production, attention has shifted from the creative activity of the lone artist or craftsman to the social conditions that are reproduced in art and craft production, and that foster this kind of productive activity. Here too, I think, there is a lesson to be drawn for the study of “primitive” art, where the “lone genius/enlightened public” schema of conventional art theory is even less applicable than it is in its original bourgeois context.

The Muria, as I have suggested, have created nothing in the material sense, except a landscape and a market, a market supplied by other groups – cloth weavers and dealers, Marwari silversmiths in far-off Rajasthan, Ghassiya workers in bronze, potters and smiths, and so on. These material elements have been selected and integrated into an immaterial cultural matrix, a collective style tightly integrated with the processes of Muria social reproduction (village political institutions, the ghotul system, the cult of the clan gods and earth goddess, the marriage alliance system, and so on). It is this collective style, this productive consumption, which is the creation of the Muria in the sphere of art and which has given rise to the illusion that the Muria are (like other tribals in India) innately artistic. Their artistry, insofar as it exists at all, is confined to the nonmaterial sphere of singing, dancing, and story-telling. But if one studies the ethnographies describing the Muria during their period of efflorescence (notably Elwin's work of the 1940's), it is impossible not to concur with the view that the Muria contrived, in their collective consumption practice, to create an astonishing synthesis, one that lingers even as the Muria are being absorbed into the mainstream of Indian rural society. This display of market-bought finery transcends the limits of mere borrowing and becomes a form of art in itself.

But this collective style depends on specific sociological conditions, ones that are increasingly unfulfilled as Muria society becomes more internally differentiated. In this paper I have outlined both the traditional consumption ethos and the pressures to which it is now subject, particularly where rich Muria are concerned. As time goes by, the Muria will eventually cease to dress as Muria, but will *dress up* as Muria when making explicit their ethnicity, heretofore implicit. Al-

ready, to a limited extent, they have become producers of “traditional” artifacts. The Kondagaon lost-wax sculpture establishment, where I obtained my set of animals, produces mainly for tourists. Significantly, the leading craftsman is an educated adivasi, not a member of the low-ranking (Hindu) Ghassiya caste traditionally occupied with this work. He has traveled to Delhi and even London, exhibiting his “tribal” craft. Just as the items traditionally imported by the Muria, through fairs and markets, underwent a sea change while being incorporated into the Muria consumption system, so now they are undergoing a further revaluation as they are reflected back into the great world, hungry for authenticity and for this reason the worst possible judge of it. We enter a hall of mirrors, with images endlessly reflected and re-reflected, much as Lévi-Strauss says of myths. And we can conclude with a suitably modified Lévi-Straussian aphorism: The World of Goods is round.

Notes

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