

## Religion of Chenchus

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**ABSTRACT** This paper looks at the three groups of the Chenchus in the basin of the Krishna River. The researchers studied the Chenchus' Religion through their Myths and Sacred Stories. We tried to collect all the stories and explanations regarding the Chenchus' beliefs, and the most of them have been gathered in the field. We have obtained the information about Chenchus' pantheon. We will study in this article the Chenchus' ritual behavior, such as their festivals, life-cycle ceremonies and other religious ceremonies and rituals. We will depict all ceremonies and compare them in the different groups. We will cast a glance on the magic practices and common beliefs. In the inference, discuss such changes, which have been taken place already because of the Government facilities as well as the cultural influence.

### INTRODUCTION

The important source of study about religion is the oral tradition, namely myths and sacred stories. In this paper, we try to collect some of them, and hope that this material would help us to understand the complex of Chenchus' religion and beliefs, rituals and magic.

Evans-Pritchard classified the various theories of primitive religion into two major groups: psychological and sociological (Evans-Pritchard 1956). In this paper, we use mostly the latter approach – of course, we take into account the feelings of awe, wonder, fear etc., but firstly we are interested in sociological effect of people's beliefs. Religion is something eminently social, religious symbols are representations of realities, but any religion, no matter how complex is it, has a base.

Spencer's theory of "manism" or ancestor worship (Spencer 1876) and Tylor's theory of animism (Tylor 1920) "might be regarded as two versions of the dream theory of the origin of religion" (Evans-Pritchard 1956). According to Tylor's theory, primitive man regarded other things to be like himself, by analogy he posited the existence of a soul (in Spencer's idea the origin of religion is to be found in the belief in ghost rather than in soul). Moreover, not only living creatures possess the soul, but also inanimate objects and natural phenomena could be explained through such beliefs. If something has a soul, it can interact with something else, that also possesses a soul, and this interplay should have a result. A natural phenomenon, death, for

instance, is the result – and it has to be explained. It leads us to our topic – the Myths and Sacred Stories.

This part seems to be very important in any traditional society. It determines the way of thinking. "If the human mind appears determined even in the realm of mythology, a *fortiori* it must be also determined in all spheres of activity"<sup>1</sup> (Levi-Strauss 1969). The economic activities, as well as their political and social structure should be proved by the mythology.

**Myths are Differing Across the Globe:** Their picturesque depends on the concrete culture, for example, Greek's myths are vivid and explain everything, from the movement of planets to the origin of the spider; most of mythologies are not so universal, but all of them have some common features. The famous philosophers and sociologists studied about myths: E.Tylor and C.Levi-Strauss, E.Durkheim and A.Losev, J. Frazer and B. Malinowski (to mention a few) and it has been found that myth is a system of symbols, which lives in human mind and could be comprehended through proper analyses. "Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution" (Levi-Strauss 1976). Myth explains what needs an explanation, and, when it has been done, this explanation is accepted by men and used by them. Such explanations are meant in collective sense and shared by everyone, who belongs to society. C.Levi-Strauss (1965) says that myth is a logical model. C.Geertz (1966) defines religion as which acts to establish power, full pervasive and long lasting moods and

motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic. This definition might be used for myths also.

**Mythology Related With Rituals:** B.Malinowski (1998) says that myth is primitive psychology and he argues that it enhances and codifies beliefs vouchers efficacy of ritual. V.Turner (1972) says that ritual is a form of religious behavior. This behavior is collective and closely relates with beliefs and their explanations. E. Durkheim (1915) stressed the view that rituals are the most important aspect of religion, beliefs being secondary. He adopted the working hypothesis that the existence and continuance of an orderly social life depended on the presence of collective sentiments in the mind of the members of society. These sentiments “regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another” (Radcliffe-Brown 1959).

In India, where innumerable tribal societies live, European travelers and missionaries collected the first dates. But the first full-length study has been written by Indian scholar. S.C.Roy's *Oraon Religion and Customs* (1928) may be considered as the first study of a particular tribal religion (Troisi 2000). There were a lot of studies about phenomena of tribal religions, and a lot of terms were applied (“Spiritism” by V.Elwin 1955; “Bongaism” by Majumdar 1950 etc.), but here we would stress two publications: the first is “The Remembered Village” by M.N.Shrinivas (1988), where he explained the mix of beliefs by the process of “Sanskritisation”, and the next is McKim Marriott's “Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization” (1965), where the American anthropologist told us about the mutual process of cultural influence between the “Great Tradition” and “Little Tradition”, and called them, respectively, “Universalization” and “Parochialization”. These definitions would help us to understand the processes, which is going on in Chenchus society and significantly impact their religion.

#### **METHODS, TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES**

The main information, which has been used has been gathered in the fieldwork. It was organized during December 1<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 by the

Anthropological Department of the Central University of Hyderabad. The main part of the fieldwork was led in the two villages: Chenchugudem and Tirumpalli, Mahabubnagar District of Andhra Pradesh.

The observation method is one of the important methods in anthropological research. There were two kinds of observations used for the study – participant observation and non-participant observation. Purely non-participant observations were extremely difficult, but the advantage of this method is that the researcher may keep away from emotions and quarrels among the groups. One cannot imagine a kind of relationship in which a person always but never participates. The observer actively engages himself in some activities such as rituals, deity worship, while remains only distant observer in others. There were many advantages of participant observation: the group could be observed in its natural setup. The researchers participated in people's daily lives, recorded what he saw and heard; however, active participation may reduce objectivity.

Interviews and key informants were also used. The key informant technique was based on obtaining information, over time, from a community's resident who is in a position to know the community well. The person or persons selected to be key informants must, therefore, have a broad knowledge of the community, its services, and its people. It is an excellent way to recover information about past events or ways of life that are no longer observable. The key informant method requires sufficient time to build a good relationship between investigator and informant. The value of the technique is the type of data that can be elicited because of the communication and trust that develops between the two.

Verification and checking the validity of data collected at Chenchugudem and Tirumpalli was done through different informants.

#### **FIELD AREA AND PEOPLE**

##### **Introduction to Chenchus**

The Chenchus are a scheduled tribe of Andhra Pradesh. The Chenchus are spread all over the districts of Andhra Pradesh but mostly they are found in Prakasham (10,413), Guntur (9,791), Kurnool (7,282), Mahaboobnagar (8,272).

**Table 1: Chenchus in Andhra Pradesh**

	<i>Persons</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Literacy rate</i>
<i>Rural</i>	44,218	22,378	21,840	32.00
<i>Urban</i>	5,018	2,584	2,438	40.00
<i>Total</i>	49,232	24,962	24,270	33.00

Source: Scheduled Tribes of India: The Statistical Report 2009

Chenchus turned to agriculture because of the Indian Government's efforts. In earlier times, even before the British rule in India, they were a hunting –fishing –gathering society spread across Andhra Pradesh to Madhya Pradesh. The Chenchus have been inhabiting areas of Kurnool caves since the Upper Paleolithic. The Chenchus together with Dabba Yerukulas and Boyas (Murty 1985) - the *Malids*, as C. von Furer-Haimendorf (Furer-Haimendorf 1943) called them, may be declared as an indigenous population in the basin of the Krishna river (Table 1).

### Occupation

The Chenchus collect minor forest products like honey, gum, soap nuts (*Kunkudkaya*), *amla* (*usirikaya*), *shikakai*, tamarind (*chinthapan-du*), broomsticks and they sell them to Girijan Co-operative Council (GCC). The Chenchus changed their traditional livelihoods due to restrictions imposed on them by the forest department and due to governmental efforts to change their livelihood options. Due to this, there is a decline of dependence on traditional livelihood like honey collection and food gathering. Now they depend on agricultural activities. They cultivate *buddalu* (groundnuts), rice, red gram, *jowar* and *mongo*. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) provide 120 days work per head for a year in order to bring up their livelihood status.

The main research about the Chenchus was undertaken by Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, an Austrian anthropologist-diffusionist, from January to June, 1940. He visited several Chenchu villages several times, stayed in some of them for a while. He shared his ideas about the social organization, and called it “democratic”. He depicted their material culture, which was much more varied than now, and mentioned about Chenchus' traditions and patterns of behavior. In the book “The Chenchus. Jungle book

of Deccan” (1943 Chapter XXII: 179-230), he describes beliefs and their traditional stories from various places.

In addition, S.T.Das explains the life style of the Chenchus in his book “Life Style – Indian Tribes: Location and Practice” (1989). He explains about their origin and lifestyle pattern in the Chapter IV (Das 1989: 40-81).

### The Villages

The region is on the fringes of the Erramala range (a chain of the Eastern Ghats) and it is characterized by karst landforms. With an average annual rainfall of about 700 mm, it presents a landscape typical of the semi-arid tropics, and degraded vegetation (due to human interference) of Alibizzia-Acacia series. This region during the present times supports populations geared to dry farming cum pastoralism, sheep/goat pastoralism, and the traditional groups like the Yerukulas and Boyas who are acculturated into the village economy leading a symbiotic life, but some groups of Chenchus still depend on hunting and foraging for their subsistence and exchange.

There were detected the three separate groups of the Chenchus: the “Village” Chenchus; the “River” Chenchus; the “Forest” Chenchus.

The main part of material in this paper has been obtained in the villages Chenchugudem and Tirnumpalli from the “Village” Chenchus. These villages are located on the periphery of the dense Nalamalla forest. Chenchugudem is nearly 194 kilometers from Hyderabad and 12 kilometers from the Mandel headquarters Kollapur. It is at an altitude of 1000 (global position system elevation) feet above the sea level, located at 78°2' 91" north and longitude of 16°1' .261" east. The boundaries are east side Peddavagu, west side Lakshminayak Thanda and Tirnumpalli, north side *Bayyana gattu* and Mare-didenne village and at the south side Narlapoor *panchayat*. Chenchugudem is a settlement rehabilitated for Chenchus, who were brought down here on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1995. The Chenchugudem consist of 45 households (178 people), which have been provided by 21 acres of mango garden.

Tirnumpalli is at an attitude of 1102 (global position system elevation) feet above the sea level, located at 78 °28.1644" north and longitude of 16°10.416" east. This village is bounded

on the east side by Lakshminayak Thanda and Chenchugudem, on the west side by Kudikilla, on the north is Maredidenne and on the south side is the forest. This is a hamlet of Maredidenne *panchayat*, Peddakottapally Mandel. This is a mixed village composed of Boya caste and Muslims. There are a total of 90 households in which 50 households belong to Boya community, 33 households to Chenchus and remaining 7 households to Muslims.

Both the villages are very close to the Nalamalla forest so these have a rather warm to hot climate throughout the year. Average rainfall is about 900 mm and is concentrated in the months of the southwest monsoon (June-September). Winters are mostly cool and dry with an average temperature around 30<sup>o</sup> Celsius.

## RESULTS

### Chenchus' Origin

There are different and varied explanations about the origin and derivation of the name Chenchu. Manusmriti (Chapter 48) makes a mention of tribe Chenchus and treats the same on par with Andhras. Presumably, they are the same as Chenchus today. An ecological meaning is sought to be attributed to the word "Chenchus" by interpreting that a person who lives under *chettu* (tree) is Chenchu (Aiyappan 1948).

This legend is connected with Lord *Mallikarjuna* of the Srisailam temple. Once there lived a man and his wife in a small hut in the forest near to the Srisailam temple. They were living happily except the sorrow that they had no children. They worshipped all deities and made sacrifices in the hope of begetting children but in vain. One day both husband and wife went for a hunt in the forest. While returning they met the Lord *Mallikarjuna* in the forest and prayed for his blessings to get children. Lord *Mallikarjuna* granted their wish on the condition that they should dedicate their child to him. After nine months the woman gave birth to a female child and both the couple felt happy to dedicate her to the Lord *Mallikarjuna* as desired by him. When the girl attained the age of three, she left her parents and started living in the forest, under a tree, eating wild fruits and leaves. Because she was living under a *chettu* (tree), she was called as *Chenchita*. After some years one day when she was roaming in the forest, she

came across Lord *Mallikarjuna* and fell in love with him. Lord *Mallikarjuna* was also very much attracted by her and married her. The descendants of this girl are called as Chenchus, like the children of the girl who lived under a tree (*chettu*). This is a common story circulated among the Chenchus in Kurnool and Guntur. According to another version, these people were in habit of eating a kind of rat, which is locally known as "Chenchu" and the same term was applied to designate the people.

### Myths

In this part, an attempt is made to understand the Chenchus' myths. Unlike other tribes, the Chenchus have no mythology that explains the creation of the world or the origin of the human beings. Chenchus adopted Hindu deities and they remember the stories concerning with Hindu gods and kings witches and miraculous transforms. However, the myths of *Bayyanna*, *Narasimhaswamy*, and *Mallikarjunaswamy* explain some of the Chenchus' traditions and patterns of behavior.

### *Mallikarjunaswamy*

This story has been already mentioned in a relation with the origin of Chenchus. A man and his wife lived in a forest near to the Srisailam temple, but they had no children. One day they met the Lord *Mallikarjunaswamy* in the forest and prayed for his blessings to get children. The Lord granted their wish on the condition that they should dedicate their child to him. The woman gave birth to a female child. When the girl attained the age of three she left her parents and started living in the forest, under a tree, eating wild fruits and leaves. She was called as *Chenchita* because she lived under a *chettu* (tree). One day she came across Lord *Mallikarjunaswamy* and fell in love with him. The descendants of this girl are called as Chenchus.

The story from Tirunpalli adds the details. When *Chenchita* attained maturity she became fair and beautiful. Once there was a black cow who used to disappear in the forest and did not give milk at home. After much observation, *Chenchita* found that one young boy was milking that cow, and *Chenchita* caught him. The young man fell in love with her and married her as a second wife. The *Chenchita*'s parents

gave her to *Mallikarjunaswamy* as they considered her as incarnate of *Bramarambadevi*.

These stories have a mythological structure – they explain the origin of the group by the relation among humans and god. *Mallikarjunaswamy* acts as a god and as a father – he grants childless couple with offspring, he takes the girl born back from the parents and then grants her offspring. Here is some kind of cyclic process, having the result in appearance of the group, which could be called as Chenchus – the descendants of the girl who lived under a tree and who was married to the God.

In addition, it can show the old tradition of milking the others' cows secretly. The god did it virtuously and only the goddess could catch him. The girl became *Bramarabadevi*. Thus, Chenchus believe that Lord *Mallikarjuna* and *Bramarabadevi* have fulfilled their desires. In the famous pilgrim center at Srisailam, Chenchus were appointed as helpers to the priest in the temple. Another important religious place for Chenchus is called as Saileswaram or Charleswaram. It is said that since the Chenchus had found the temple, Chenchus are given importance. Here a Chenchu functions as priest in the temple. Chenchus are given preference over others for *darshna* and other rituals. In addition, there is no ticket for the Chenchus and others have to pay for the ticket, which enables them to have *darshana* of the Lord.

This myth combines two religions together and in its example it is easy to see how the local deity, as *Chinchita*, became Hindu goddess, as *Bramarabadevi*. We would meet other examples further.

### **Bayyanna**

*Bayyanna* was born from the milk of divine cow while Lord *Mallikarjuna* (*Mallikarjunaswamy*) was milking the divine cow. Once upon a time, *Bayyanna* and his brother *Ontiveerudu* lived near Appaladevi kaluva in deep Nalamalla forest along with five sisters. When once *Bayyanna* and his brother went for hunting, thieves came from Kalvakolu side (village that is in the west side from Chenchugudem and Tirunpalli) and looted ornaments of the sisters and cut them noses and ears. *Bayyanna* ran in search of the thieves. He caught them, fought with them, and recovered the things stolen by them. Then he started returning to his place.

Then *Bayyanna* found that the lake near by the village was in danger, a big boulder was rolling down from hill towards the lake and the bund was ready to break. He told his brother *Ontiveerudu* to stop the boulder otherwise the lake would be breached and the village would be washed away. *Ontiveerudu* stopped the big boulder with his shoulder.

However, while both brothers were busy in rescuing the lake, a huge snake came, swallowed their pet dog, and ran into a tunnel, which was nearby. The sisters of *Bayyanna* saw the snake and told him about it. Then *Bayyanna* asked his brother to observe the smoke from where it was coming, and then he started using the smoke technique, which is called *gaikottudu*. Now it is a method of catching monitors (*udumu*) and other tunnel animals. *Ontiveerudu* found that the snake was coming from Basram forest area, which is in 10-15 kilometers away from Chenchugudem. Then *Bayyanna* ran there, held the snake, and cut it into small pieces. The Chenchus say that such a stone is still there. If anybody sits on this stone, his back would suffer from inflammation. Having killed the snake, *Bayyanna* and *Ontiveerudu* along with their sisters lived happily at the bottom of the hill, which is called as *Bayyanagattu* and the lake called as *Bayyanna cheruvu*.

This story could be considered as a myth, and examining it as syntagmatic chain, we will find out that any *Bayyanna's* action is important for Chenchus.

Firstly, *Bayyanna* was a hunter. He was real Chenchu.

Secondary the robbery and abuse required a revenge. In earlier times, the Chenchus were appointed as protectors from thieves for travelers in Nalamalla forest and pilgrims to Srisailam.

Third is the stone, which had been stopped by *Ontiveerudu*. To realize how dangerous it is, one should visit these places. Because of the geological activity, the huge stones stand high from the ground and, are slowly being destroyed by the wind and water, they can at any moment roll down from the hills. If it happens, the friend must stop this rolling stone by his shoulder.

The last are the dog, the snake and the smoke technique. The dog is a helpmate and the snake – definitely a symbol of an enemy. One doesn't have to be an Indian to realize how dangerous a snake (rather snakebite) is. Having killed the

snake, *Bayyanna* helped his dog (friend) and obliterated his enemy. The Chenchus even now practice *gaikottudu* – the technique to catch the monitors, and appearance of this method is explained in a myth.

Not only Chenchus but also other caste people who have lands near the lake worship *Bayyanna* and offer coconuts and sacrifices. Every year they organize a festival in June–July, before the beginning of monsoon. The Chenchus believe that *Bayyanna* will grant good rain for crops if they worship. Some people told that every year on the day of *Bayyanna* festival there is rainfall. There is no priest in *Bayyanna* temple, but some elders from the Chenchus act as priest. While worshipping the god there are no hymns. The shrine of *Bayyanna* is decorated with *gandam* (turmeric powder and rice flour) and silver ornaments during festival only. Other times the Chenchus visit the *Bayyanna* shrine on Tuesdays. After bathing they clean the shrine and decorate it with *gandam* and light incense sticks and break coconut. According to their wish some people sacrifice chicken and goats or sheep. Some people conduct tonsure ceremony at this shrine.

### *Narasimhaswamy*

The story tells us that once Lord *Narasimhaswamy* (man-lion god) from Ahobilam came to the forest for hunting and met a girl (her name was *Chenchulaxmi*) from the Chenchu tribe. He fell in love with her and married her by elopement. Then the couple went to his kingdom but *Narasimhaswamy*'s first wife *Adhilaxmi* was unhappy by this. After some years *Chenchulaxmi* was let down by the lord. *Chenchulaxmi* was sent to desert. Having been thrown by the Lord, heartbroken *Chenchulaxmi* cursed all Chenchu to be with running noses, black faces, dark and ugly in figure. Chenchus feel they are ugly, and so they avoid such elopements. The Chenchus from Chenchugudem and Tirunpalli consider themselves as *Deva Chenchus* because the goddess (*devatha*) *Chenchulaxmi* was born in their tribe.

*Adhilaxmi* settled herself in Singapatnam. Thus, Lord *Narasimhaswamy* settled down in Singapatnam, and this place is also called Singotam.

Another belief is that the Chenchus consider *Narasimhaswamy* as their brother-in-law and

during *Narasimhaswamy* festival, the Chenchus practice mock robbery of lord *Narasimhaswamy*. Chenchus believe that it was for compensation for elopement of their girl *Chenchulaxmi* (Mutry 1985).

### Religion

Chenchus worship and believe in many deities, both malevolent and benevolent, and follow all Hindu festivals. The major deities of Chenchus are Lord Shiva (*Lingamaiah*), *Lakshmi Narasimhaswami*, *Bayyanna*, *Ontiveerudu*, *Maisammaellama*, *Edamma*, *Peddama*, *Pochamma*, *Balamma* etc. They adopt worshipping of Muslim saints in the name of different *dargahs*. They celebrate *peerilapandugu* (Moharram) with their participation in playing *alai* with singing folk songs. They offer prayers to Lord Shiva (*Lingamaiah*) and celebrate *Sivaratri* with great devotion and they celebrate the rituals for *Bayyanna* with great devotion before honey collecting and cultivation season. Their festivals include *Sankranthi*, *Shivaratri*, *Ugadhi*, *Holi*, *Dasera*, *Dipavali*, *Vinayakachavithi* and local festivals like *Lakshmi Narasimhaswami Singapatnam jatara*, *Kollapur Edamma jatara*. It reflects the clear influence of neighboring villagers.

### *Chenchus' Gods and Spirits*

Here we will attempt to understand the concept of god, goddess and spirits. The Chenchus believe in the existence of various deities that are invisible powers. Their powers influence human life. They get satisfied with offerings when given in gratitude to them. The response of Chenchus to the deities is to wonder about their power, to think that they are real and experience mysticism and be fearful of them. It is very difficult to find out what was the nature of earlier Chenchus' belief in the beginning. The Chenchus have replaced their beliefs with belief patterns of neighboring communities. They have adopted various deities. This has led to the Chenchus following a great pantheon of cults and worshipping various deities of rural folks. Their contact with population of the plains has been increasing.

Chenchus call God as *Devudu* or *Bagavanthudu* who lives in the sky and observes everyone. He has a consort who is called *Devi*.

The Chenchus believe that the prayers from them must be heard by God and protect them from dangers. They believe that God is supreme and possesses benevolent powers and control the forces of nature and human life. The Chenchus worship the God in the forms of *Lingamayya*, *Narasimhaswamy*, *Mallikarjunaswamy* (*Mallana*), *Bayyanna* etc.

Again the conceptualizing the God is in generic and specific sense. Nevertheless, the difference here is that the gods are not brothers. They in fact cannot specify the relationship among the male gods expect that they are all powerful. Chenchus have no hymns and altars and they pray to the God saying to oneself: “*devuda! mamulanu kapudu... andaru manchiga undetatlu chudu*” which means “Oh God! protect us. And see that everything is well”.

The deities worshipped by Chenchus of Chenchugudem and Tirnumpalli can be identified based on sex as follows. The female deities include *Maisamma* (different names), *Bramarambadevi* (*Chenchulaxmi*), *Pochamma*, *Ellamma*, *Edamma*, *Balamma*, *Ganamma*. The male deities include *Lingamaiah* (Shiva, Lingam) *Narasimhaswamy*, *Mallana* (*Mallikarjunaswamy*), *Bayyanna* and Hindu gods like Krishna, Hanuman etc. Chenchus believe that *Maisamma* is the supreme female deity. She resides nearby in the forests, hills, rivers, and always within reach of man. That is why while starting fishing, hunting, or honey collection or other gatherings, they first pray to *Maisamma*. Chenchus believe that she helps to get a good gain and protects from dangers. After the deal, they offer her a bit of the product by throwing away one small roasted part into jungle or water.

The Chenchus of Chenchugudem and Tirnumpalli conceptualize *Maisamma* in a generic sense, but also in specific forms. She has different names, which conceptualize the relation between these various forms of hers as sisters. Some of the forms of *Maisamma* identified by the Chenchus are the following: *Erradibba Maisamma*, *Karubandala Maisamma*, *Katarubandala Maisamma*, *Minumutti Maisamma*, *Salvandula Maisamma*, *Katta Maisamma*, *Peddavagu Maisamma*, *Madyaruti Maisamma*, *Konda Maisamma*, *Ontijadala Maisamma*, *Nainonipalle Maisamma* etc. Probably these names were given to her according to the various areas of the Nalamalla forest like hills, river banks and some villages.

The Chenchus believe in spirits and soul. When a person dies without fulfillment of desires, he/she would become ghost, which is called *deyyam*. Ghosts are always malevolent. The Chenchus believe that if a woman dies during pregnancy or while having children, she would fearsome *deyyam* and trouble her children and close relatives. To satisfy the ghost, the Chenchus offers sacrifices and liquor.

From the above description, it is clear that the world of Chenchus includes gods and ghosts. The gods are both female and male. All of them are benevolent. All the spiritual beings are feared and Chenchus offer sacrifices to satisfy these beings. The polytheistic belief is reflected in the number of gods and goddesses. Many gods were adopted from Hinduism.

#### *Adopted Gods*

The first would be *Shiva*, the auspicious one, who is the major Hindu deity and one aspect of Hindu “trinity”. *Brahma* is the creator, *Vishnu* is the maintainer or preserver, and *Shiva* is the destroyer or transformer. The followers of Hinduism who focus their worship upon *Shiva* are called *Shaivites* or *Shaivas*, as well as those, who focuses upon *Vishnu* are called *Vaishnavites*. Along with the followers of *sakthi* traditions there are three of the most influential denominations in Hinduism.

#### *Shiva*

The Chenchus worships god *Shiva* as *Lingamaiah* as well as *Mallikarjunaswamy* or *Mallana* (we remember that the last is “father” of Chenchus, because he married a damsel called *Chenchitha* – their children became the first Chenchus).

Chenchus might have adopted worshipping god *Shiva* as *Lingamaiah* by the influence of Srisailam pilgrims. Srisailam is one among the various 12 *Jyothirlingam* of India and very famous in south India. Srisailam is a holy town, 232 km of southern Hyderabad on the banks of the Krishna River.

Another important religious place is Saileswaram (or Chaleswaram) that is at a distance of 90 kilometers from Srisailam is the deep forests of Nalamalla hills. Here and in Srisailam temple, Chenchus help the priests and Lord *Mallikarjunaswamy* is worshipped in Srisailam.

Chenchus from Tirunpalli and Chenchugudem worship *Bayyanna* who is another form of Shiva as their own god. Chenchus are priests at Bayyanna temple, which is located at north side of Chenchugudem on the bank of the irrigation tank. The Chenchus believe that *Bayyanna* is a benevolent god and he protects from dangers and helps for good hunt.

#### *Vishnu*

*Narasimhaswamy* (man-lion god) is one of the incarnates of Lord Vishnu. *Narasimhaswamy* is known as the God of Ahobilam. There is the famous temple of the man-lion god, *Narasimha* (popular as *Ahobila Narasimha*), who is now an important Vishnaite god. According to tradition, *Narasimha* in his wanderings in the Nalamalla forests (the habitat of Chenchus) fell in love with a Chenchu belle. The girl expresses to her father, the Chenchu chieftain, that she wants to marry *Narasimha*. Since *Narasimha* is a stranger, he is put to test by the chieftain, to prove his efficiency in climbing precipices and tall trees and collecting honey, digging termite mounds and collecting the queen (called *puttajunnu*, an item of food for the Chenchus), and in hunting. After having satisfied himself that *Narasimha* could perform these tasks, the chieftain gave his consent for their marriage. The Chenchu girl, as the consort of *Narasimha* who became an incarnation of Vishnu, later became *Chenchulakshmi*. There are excellent sculptural representations at the Ahobilam temple showing the Chenchu girl, wearing a leaf skirt and aiming her bow and arrow as a huntress (Murty 1985).

#### *Hanuman*

Hanuman is the monkey god, who helped Rama to save Seeta. It was observed that the Chenchus, especially children, wear a locket of god Hanuman in their neck. This locket is called *mala*. At that time of the annual festivals (*jatara*), a lot of Chenchus wear *Shiva mala* and *Hanuman mala* and *Aiyayapan mala* also, by the influence of neighboring villagers. *Mala* is a string of beads used to count mantras (Sanskrit prayers) in sets of 108 repetitions. The wearing of a *mala* is called *deeksha*. The *deeksha* lasts for 41 days or 21 days or sometimes 11 days. Those who wear *mala* or *deeksha* have to follow strict

rules. From the time of wearing the *mala*, they should stop eating non-vegetarian food, smoking, drinking alcohol, should not engage in verbal or physical abuse, and should abstain from sexual relations. Then, they should cook separately. Most of them fast and eat only once a day. Wife cannot cook for her husband if she has periods. The *deeksha* followers should not shave or cut hair until the *deeksha* is completed. They dress in different colors specific to each *mala*, for example *Ayyppan mala* followers wear black dress, *Shiva mala* followers wear yellow dress and *Hanuman mala* followers wear saffron color dresses.

#### *Muslim Saints*

The Chenchus worship *dargah*, that is mausoleum a tombs of Muslim saints, by the influence of villagers. In Chenchugudem, four people get possessed of Muslim saints. This possession is called as *devudachudu* and *savarinethadam* and occurs especially during Moharram days, which they celebrate as *Peerilu Panduga* as other caste people. One key informant said that he worships *Panagal dargah* in gratitude. While they are in migration, he used to worship it by the influence of his co-workers. And another informant told us that he developed interest in the worship of Muslim saint due to the influence of a school teacher, a Muslim priest (mullah, locally called *moul-ali*). The Chenchus who get possessed practice some rituals of the Muslims who do not eat chicken and mutton that is not killed by a Muslim. The sacrifice is called *halaal* – it is a sacred food from animals that are slaughtered in the name of god so food is considered to be sacred. Even the sacrifices at *Bayyanna* or *Maisamma* temple are also *halal*. The Chenchus practice *halaal* in their life cycle rituals as well as at festivals.

*Halaal* means *lawful* or *legal*. It is a term designating any object or an action that is permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic law. It is the opposite of *haram*. The term is used to designate food seen as permissible according to Islamic law. The *halal* practice shows the interethnic relation between Chenchus and local Muslims.

#### *Goddesses*

Chenchus worship various gods and goddess of their neighbours and offer sacrifices. Whom-



ever they worship, they follow a very rustic and primitive manner. The Chenchus have adopted various deities like *Ankanamma*, *Pochamma*, *Elamma*, *Edamma*, *Gangamma* etc. They consider these deities are sisters and they are daughters of Lord Shiva.

*Ankamma* called sometimes as *Ankamma Devi* and worshipped mostly by the "River" Chenchus. Naroshima Urtanuri, a 60 year old fisherman from Gunla Penta (small and isolated village on Krishna River) went on a pilgrimage to Shershell and that took about 15 days, and he brought the icon from there. In this icon, *Ankamma Devi* or *Ankamma* stands under the tree in a company of different animals, such as the cow, the tiger, the dog and the rabbit with all its friends and relations. She is the object of the common worship. Several men come to pray *Ankamma* and sing the songs in her glory.

*Pochamma* is known as goddess of small fox which is known as *ammavaru*. Usually she is worshipped at the time of marriage at *boddurai* for granting good health.

*Elamma* is considered as the goddess of snakes and she is prayed for protecting them from dangers of snakebites. This deity is worshipped by some Chenchus only.

*Edamma* goddess is known for the annual festival called *jatara*, celebrated at Kollapoor Mandal. This *jatara* is celebrated in the months of February –March every year.

*Gangamma* is another goddess worshipped by Chenchus. She is known as water goddess and the second wife of Lord Shiva. The "river" chenchus worship her while launching a new boat. The ceremony is simple – they just place a piece of stone, colored in red, white and yellow lines, do *pudja* by breaking a coconut. From this time onwards, the goddess has to help the owners of this boat to be lucky anglers.

Actually, we could not say definitely that all these goddesses were adopted; at least the rituals of worship stem from belief in soul, as we saw in the examples of *Gangamma* and *Ankanamma*, which are similar with the worship of *Maisamma*.

### **Festivals and Jataras**

All festivals can be divided into two: indigenous and adopted. Thus, the Chenchus celebrate majority of Hindu festivals. They have

adopted these festivals under the influence of the plains people. Their ancestors used to celebrate the *Shiva ratri* due to the influence of Srisailam temple. They celebrate the *Sankrathi* due to the influence of Singapatnam temple. The Chenchus participate in Moharram celebrations and call it *Peerla panduga*.

The annual festivals are called the *jataras*. The first day in *jatara* is called *uduku panduga* and the next days – *saddi panduga*. On the *uduku panduga* the Chenchus worship in the pattern similar to other caste people - they clean the pictures of gods and goddesses and offer them coconuts etc. The Chenchus called it as *kayashekkeri*. They cook *prasada* and offer it to god, light incense and pray. On the next day, they sacrifice chicken to *Bayyanna* or goddess *Maisamma*. The Chenchus celebrate *Ekadasi*, *Rakhi pournami*, *Vinayachavithy*, *Dessera*, *Diwali*, *Sankranti*, *Shiva ratri*, *Holi* and *Ugadi*.

### **Ekadashi**

The Chenchus celebrate this festival in the honour of Lord Shiva. Some people fast on this day. They do rituals as other caste people do. They make *prasada* with *ravva* and sugar, visit the Lingmaiah shrine in the village (*gudem*), and offer *prasada* to him. After worshipping, the *prasada* is distributed to all.

### **Rakhee Pournami**

On this day, the sisters came to their brothers home and tie *rakhee* to their brothers and their children. The brother offers money or sari to his sister as gift.

### **Vinayak Chavithi**

This festival is celebrated in Chenchugudem since five years only by the influence of the villagers. This festival is celebrated for nine days. From the first day to last day, they conduct *poojas*, *bhajans*, and dances at the *Lingamaiah* shrine. On the last day, the lord Ganesh idol is taken in procession in the streets of the village (*gudem*) and taken to lake for immersion, what is called *Ganesh Nimarjanam*. After *Nimarjanam*, the *Ganesh prasada* and clothes are auctioned. This practice is also an influence of the villagers.

### ***Peddala Amavasya***

This day is the first day of the *Boddemma* festival. On this day the Chenchus worship their ancestors and offer sweets and other items. In the evenings, they play *Boddemma* by singing various folk songs.

### ***Dassara***

The Chenchus celebrate this festival for two days. On *Uduku pandaga*, they visit *Bayyanna* and *Lingamaiah* temples in new clothes. They share *jambi* (sacred leaves) and greeting each other. On second day, they sacrifice chicken to the deities like *Maisamma* and *Bayyanna*.

### ***Diwali***

The Chenchus celebrate this festival with the caste people, especially with Boyas and Vodderas. On this festival, the Chenchus usually visit *Kurumurthy Jatara* (Kottakota seasonal festival).

### ***Sankranthi***

Chenchus celebrate *Sankranti* as *Uduku pandaga* and *Saddi pandaga* – for two days. On *Uduku pandaga*, they visit *Bayyanna*, *Lingamaiah* shrines and offer coconut with devotion. Next day they celebrate *Saddi pandaga* by sacrificing chickens. The Chenchus call *Sankranthi Keedu pandaga* (harm festival).

### ***Ugadi***

This is also celebrated as *Uduku pandaga* and *Saddi pandaga*. According to their capacity, they make sweet items, prepare *Ugadi pachadi* (pickle), and offer it to the god and goddesses by breaking coconuts. On *Saddi pandaga*, they sacrifice chicken to the *Maisamma*.

### ***Shiva Ratri***

This festival is very important for the Chenchus. During this festival they visit Srisailam temple. The Chenchus, who do not visit the Srisailam temple, celebrate *Shivaratri* for three days in the village itself. In these days, they take bath regularly and worship *Lingamaiah* at his shrine with devotion by singing songs and playing the

Kolattam. They offer *prasada*, coconut and they break the fast by taking sacrificed meat.

### ***Holi***

The Chenchus celebrate *Holi* by singing songs and dancing. Some group of people gather and collect rice from each house and then play with colors. After this, they cook the collected rice at the *Lingamaiah* shrine and eat collectively.

### ***Mohrram***

Chenchugudem people celebrate *Moharram*. They celebrate it as *Peerla pandaga*. They are involved more in this festival because there are several people who get possessed by Muslim saints on this festival. The festival is celebrated for nine days. During this day in the nights the Chenchus visits Mosque and play *aalai* (they play around a burning pit). In this play, they sing songs related to *peerilu* and other folk songs. Thus they celebrates festivals by the influence of neighboring villages

The Chenchus' village *jatara* could be weekly or yearly *jatara*. The yearly *jatara* are known as *Singotam jatara*, *Eedamma jatara*, *Chalameswaram jatara*, *Veerula jatara*, *Rangapuram jatara* and *Gampa jatara*. All this names derived from the name of the places, where the annual festival is going on.

### ***Nainopally Maisamma Jatara***

According to their wishes, the Chenchus visit the weekly *jatara* in Nainopally village in Peddakottapally Mandel in Mahabubnagar district. It is nearly 20 kms. of Chenchugudem. At least two Chenchues families from Chenchugudem and Tirumpalli visit this *jatara* and worship *Maisamma* with great devotion. They spend all day time there only and return before 6 pm.

### ***Chaleswaram Jatara***

These *jatara* is held yearly once, after 15 days from *Ugadi* on a full moon. *Chaleswaram jatara* is organized at a Shiva temple located in Nalamalla forest. This place is one of the places visited for Srisailam pilgrims, variously known as Saleswaram and Saileswaram. This place is one

of the sacred spots in Nalamalla forest located at about 90 kms from Srisailam. Located in the beautiful forest environment, it is at an altitude of 395 feet above the sea level. This place is popular not only in folk tradition but also in the Puranic lore. This *jatara* is celebrated for 3 days. Yearly five families from Chenchugudem visits Chaleswaram. They bring two pairs of dress and food, *roti* and *curry*. Thirugudu Sannaiah gave information that they travel by a tractor till Er-rapenta and then go on foot. If people start at 8 o'clock, they reach Chaleswaram by 2 am on the next day. Some people shave their head at Chaleswaram according to their vows and take bath in the pool; after that they go for *darshana*. In Chaleswaram prices are comparatively high: a single coconut costs Rs.50, to get one head shaved one has to pay Rs. 20. In addition, people have to buy tickets for *darshana*. However, the Chenchus here are the priests, so there is no ticket for Chenchus.

#### **Singotam Jatara**

Singotam or Singapatnam is a beautiful village near to Kollapur, famous for god Narashimhaswami and Laxmi temple. It is located on hill-top near Srivani cheruvu. Narasimhaswamy temple in Singotam attracts huge number of crowds not only from Mahabubnagar but also from neighboring Kurnool district. Here the Chenchus practice mock robbery to lord *Narasimhaswamy*. Chenchus believe that it was for compensation for elopement of their girl *Chenchulaxmi*.

In the beginning the Chenchus offer coconuts and sweets, then start to offer sacrifices of chickens, goats, sheep. A weekly market on every Wednesday is organized here for agricultural needs and cattle.

#### **Edamma Jatara**

This *jatara* is celebrated at Kollapur a month after *Sankranti*. This *jatara* is celebrated for 4 weeks on every Tuesday. The weeks are called as *modativaram*, *suddavaram*, *sudivaram*, *nelapuja*. Usually Narlapurgudem Chenchus (the village not far from Chenchugudem) visit the *Edamma jatara* on *suddavaram*. Here they offer *bonam* (sacred rice cooked in a new pot) along with chicken.

#### **Gampa Jatara**

The Chenchus from Chenchugudem organize a picnic near the river (*peddavagu*). Its name is *gampa jatara*. It happens yearly once usually in August – September months. Every family participates in it. During *gampa jatara*, they decorate a *gampa* (basket) with white, red, yellow colors. They prepare everything for *gampa jatara*, take *rotis*, chicken and ingredients for curry in these baskets. Then choose a place where water is available and spread out on the bank in groups according families and gotra. They elect a stone as *Poleramma*, decorate it with turmeric powder and flowers. Then they sacrifice the chicken to *Poleramma*. During the *gampa jatara*, they pray to deities to keep them healthy and remove all sins. According to the tradition, they start to throw out the old things like the baskets, winnowing fans and domestic things.

In addition, Chenchus visit *kurumurthy jatara* (in Chinthakunta, 70kms from Chenchugudem), *ranagapuramurshu jatara* and *veerula jatara* in Mulachinthpally, but we could not get any particular information regarding these holy days.

#### **Life Cycle Rituals**

The Chenchues conduct rituals from birth to death, beginning with birth rituals, tonsuring, puberty for women, marriage and death rituals (Ivanov 2011). Here we just list all Chenchus' *rites de passage* briefly.

#### **Birth**

When the child is born, the woman rests for 9 days and during this time her mother helps her. Chenchus call the birth ritual *purudu*. It is organized on the third day of delivery. The next ritual, called *idoddulla* is organized on the fifth day after the birth. The Chenchus keep three pots as hearthstones and fourth pot is put on three pots. Then they boil water in the four pots. These four pots of water are used for bathing the woman. On the ninth day, a ritual called *nillakeeladiyadam* is organized. The woman takes a bath near the well. Nowadays, a bath is taken at a hand pump. The Chenchus decorate the pump or well with *pasupu kunkuma*

(lights the incense sticks) and pray for well-being in the future.

### **Name Giving Ceremony**

The name-giving ceremony is called totela and takes place when the baby is between one to three months old. For this day father has to make a cradle from bamboo. In the morning, the child is first cleaned in the ritual water, then called by its new name and put in the new bed, which is hung in the house. This part of the ceremony called is thotli panduga. On that day, a name is given to the child which may be the name of the god or goddess or the name of the ancestors. Nowadays, the names include names of Muslim saints also. After giving the name, the child wears new clothes and a hip thread is tied to the child. These days the Chenchus worship goddess Baladevra and Pochamma for the well-being of the child.

### **Tonsure**

The Chenchus celebrate tonsure as *puttentukalu*. Within one year or within three years, usually maternal uncle cuts the first three locks of the child. Then a barber removes the remaining hair. The tonsure ceremony is conducted at the *Bayyanna* temple. The family offers feast to their *gotra* members, close relatives, and some other people. The feast includes meat and liquor. In this ceremony the people who are invited to feast offer gifts, clothes and money to the child's parent. These offerings are called *chadivimpulu*.

### **Puberty**

Usually around 12–14 years a girl attains puberty. This is called *peddamashi kavadam* or *ediginadi* or paduchu *samurthainadi*, which means the girl, has attained maturity. The girl should sit in a corner of the house. An old Chenchu woman, usually girl's grandmother, assists her. It will be conducted on the 9th or 11th day. Until the ceremony, she is restricted to remain within the four walls of the house. She has food restrictions also. She should eat tamarind soup and raw chili powder. After attaining puberty, the parents consult the person of *gaddechepadam* and choose an auspicious day for celebration. The parents inform all their relatives

and *gotra* people and friends about the same and invite them for the celebrations.

On that evening, the girl is given bath by the elderly women. She is dressed up as a woman in a sari and blouse and ornaments. This is called *chire kattinchadam*. Relatives of the girl's mother side bring sweets and other food items and offer the same to her by putting them in her lap. Each woman blesses her. That night the girl's parents give a feast to all. In the feast meat is served with liquor and toddy. The significance of this ritual is to return to sacredness from pollution and to teach the girl how to behave as a woman and by giving feast to all the girls parents inform all that their daughter is ready for marriage within 2–3 years.

### **Marriage**

Monogamy is the common form of marriage among the Chenchus. Polygamy is also practiced but it is rare. Marriage by negotiations, that is, with the consent of both the families and the bride and bridegroom is common. Cross cousin marriages are the most preferred. However, marriages by elopement are also found when a girl or boy's parents do not agree for marriage. Love marriages are also observed in Chenchugudem and Tirumpalli.

Among the Chenchus, marriage is usually arranged by negotiations by both the sides. We call it "compulsion to marry". The elders call the son and tell him that it is time for him to marry. On an average, the man marries just after he turns 20. Whether he wishes to get married or not, he has to offer the name of some girl or marry one of his parents' candidates. He as well as the girl are thus compelled to marry. It does not mean that he should marry the girl whom he doesn't like, but it means that he should marry in the interests of his kin group. We suppose that this "compulsion to marry" is a consequence of the blood relations.

The marriage ceremony is elaborate and includes many ceremonies, giving presents etc. The ceremony has some indigenous traces and many features which have been adopted from Hinduism.

### **Death Rituals**

Chenchus bury a dead body. When a person dies, the relatives try to bury the dead body on

that day itself since the weather is usually hot. They dig a pit 5 feet in length 2 feet wide and 5 feet deep. The corpse is then put in it, head in the south and legs in the north direction. Then the pit is filled with earth and is marked with stones. The next ceremony is conducted on the 5th, 9th, or 11th day. This ceremony is called as *dinalu*. On this day, the chief mourner and close relatives visit the grave and take bath in the lake and a barber removes hair of the chief mourner and close relatives. The four people who carried bier stand keeping the chief mourner in the middle. The elder takes a powdering post (*rokalli*), smeared with turmeric paste and red powder touches each person's feet three times. These five members again take bath with hot water.

Then a feast is given to all relatives. Until the day of *dinalu*, the chief mourner and same *gotra* people are restricted not to go outside or to the neighbors homes. On these days they are considered to be polluted. After *dinalu* they visit a temple and sleep there. After this they are allowed to go anywhere, but the chief mourner is restricted not to attend any marriage for 7 months.

### Beliefs and Magic Practices

In Chenchugudem and Tirnumpalli, the Chenchus have several beliefs about auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. If they happen to hear the sneezing of someone while they are about to start work or if a dog shakes its tail and ears in the morning, or if they come a buffalo, cat or widow, they feel it is inauspicious for them. If such an incident occurs, it is believed that the work started or the purpose of their activity will not be accomplished. On the other hand, a cow or a dog walking without shaking their bodies but shaking their tails is considered a good omen and it is auspicious. The cry of an owl (*gudla guba edupu*) and fox barking in the night are considered undesirable (bad thing) which may bring undesired happenings.

They have a belief that if a porcupine's spine is kept in the house, it will lead to a quarrel between two persons or families. Therefore, they burn the thorns in the forest itself. They believe that if *udugu aku* (leaves) are kept in the basket, they give good business at that time. In addition, the *nalla suranji* with stems and leaves,

if kept in the home will ensure that spirits and ghosts will not enter into their homes.

### Practice of Magic and Sorcery

Chenchus believe in sorcery and magic, and some of them practice magic and witchcraft. There are two kinds of magic among the Chenchus. The first one is to destroy or harm a person. The second one is to counter the first one. Usually the witchcraft is practiced because of jealousy or competition. One who plans to do witchcraft collects the soil from footprint of the person, the would-be victim of his magic. He places the soil in a new white cloth, adds turmeric powder and marking seeds *jeediginjalu*, and prays to *Maisamma* to harm the victim. Then he places the cloth under the stone of *Maisamma*. They believe that *Maisamma* will attack him soon, and because of this, the person becomes weak without any kind of illness. Once the person is recognized of being effected by black magic with the above symptoms, he has to organize a counter magic. The counter magician will conduct ritual and sacrifices to deities to free the person from the actions of *Maisamma*. *Maisamma* is a malevolent spirit here.

The Chenchus believe in truth-sayers or fortune-tellers to reveal the cases of sickness also. The Chenchus call it as *gaddechepadam*. In the *gaddechepadam*, the person goes in trance of a deity and reveals how someone is affected by sorcery. He will also reveal what rituals have to be conducted to counter the black magic to become normal. Usually the *gaddechepadam* is performed by the Yerukulas in neighboring village. We have also observed a person possessed by Muslim saints who reveal about black magic.

There is another method of performing sorcery. In this case, mud paste of spit and burnt *beedi* and hair of the person on which sorcery has to be performed is collected. By adding turmeric and *zeediginjalu* to the above and putting them in a cloth and keeping it under the stone of *Maisamma*, and by offering a chicken, one can harm the person. The Chenchus' magical practices may be understood from Frazer's classification of magic. The Chenchus magic is homeopathic magic (law of similarity).

The Chenchus perform magic to deprive off the hunting capacity of active person who

is a good hunter. If person wants to do magic on him, he collects footprint soil of the person and add to it meat of the hunted animal in cloth and placed it under the stone of hearth. Until the cloth removed under the stone of hearth, he fails in hunting. Thus, Chenchus practices magic to manipulate others.

From these, we can understand that the Chenchus belief system includes worshipping those powers, which help and show respect to them by offering worship. Their response to the harmful beings is to avoid them and in case they are affected, they should satisfy them by offering sacrifices. However, they believe in man's capacity to manipulate the powers of spirits for their advantage.

## CONCLUSION

### Sanskritisation

The Chenchus are very much influenced by rural Hinduism. By the influence of villagers, they started worshipping various deities as other rural people. They start worshipping Hanuman and Rama, Krishna, and other Hindu gods, along with *Maisamma* and *Bayyanna*. The worshipping pattern is also influenced by the villagers like breaking coconuts and lighting the incense, practicing festival fasting. They celebrate some festivals in two days as *uduku panduga* (by cooking sweet items and offering coconuts and sugar to god or goddess) and *saddi panduga* (offering sacrifices to god or goddess). The Chenchus practice offering to the natural spirits by throwing one small roasted piece of meat into water or jungle.

### Islamisation

The Chenchus have inter-ethnic relations with other castes including the Muslims. This relation leads to the Chenchus adopting the worship systems of the Muslims. Chenchugudem and Tirumpalli Chenchus are very much influenced by the Muslims and they also worship at *dargas*. Many Chenchus go into trance in the names of these saints and actively participate during Moharram festival locally known as *Perilapanduga*. Some of families from Chenchus have adopted the practice of *halaal* ritual. Even at temples, some of the Muslims are appointed to conduct *halaal* on chickens and goats.

### Syncretic Religious Practices among the Chenchus

Religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. This can occur for many reasons, the latter scenario happens quite commonly in areas where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture, or when a culture is conquered, and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs or, especially, practices.

The ethnographic details attempted the understanding of the nature of the Chenchus beliefs, which include native perception of gods and goddesses, worship of ancestors. These ceremonies and rituals serve as binding forces to hold the villagers together. Rituals like *Bayyanna* or *Pocahmma* festivals are celebrated annually, by attending seasonal festivals (*jatarara*), the Chenchus refresh their intimate relationship with neighbours and keep united, and they maintain the social structure.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> "If Law is anywhere, it is everywhere" – the epigraph to *Elementary Structure of Kinship*

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