

Michaël Bruckert – “The aromas of banned meat in contemporary India: poaching small animals and eating game meat in Tamil Nadu”
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Abstract :

In ancient Ayurvedic treatises, the meat of wild animals is described as particularly beneficial for the body. Yet, in present India, an Act passed in the name of nature conservation practically bans hunting all over the territory. This paper, based on recent fieldwork, will show how, despite these regulations, marginal tribes and traditional hunters, such as Nari Kuravars and Irulars in Tamil Nadu, keep on poaching small animals such as squirrels, rats, hares, lizards, weasels, wild cats, bats or egrets. These practices are often associated both with the worship of gods and goddess dwelling on the fringes of the human settlements and with the yearly performance of domestic animal sacrifices. Hunted meat is mainly intended for self-consumption, but hunters communities also often indulge in small-scale clandestine retailing. If the majority of the Hindu population considers these meats as deeply impure and blames tribal people for threatening the wildlife, a substantial section of lower and middle caste members relishes them for their taste, for their alleged medicinal and energetic values and for their proximity with a “natural” world. This paper will argue that such entanglements between humans and wild animals set off heavily segmented discourses about edibility, palatability and dietetics, while they tend to reactivate and rephrase the dichotomy, well-anchored in the Hindu thought, between the “domestic” and the “wild”. Beyond, this paper will address the conflicts that underpin poaching practices, as the politics of wildlife conservation seem to encroach on the right of marginalised people to secure their nutritional intake and their revenues.

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