Articles

Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala

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Abstract: This paper uses ethnographic material on the Christian middle class in the South Indian state of Kerala, to explore the significance of skin colour as symbolic capital for marriage and dowry negotiations. Within the social contours of caste, community and marriage circles, fair-skin colour and other female embellishments operate as "boundary markers" to accentuate marital, caste and class positions and feminine gender identity. South Indian and South Asian perceptions of "fair skin colour" as a defining feature of female beauty ideals and feminine gender identity incorporate other related qualities such as health and moral conduct. Skin colour, along with dowry negotiations, serves to disempower women both symbolically and materially in the matter of their own marriages.

Keywords: skin colour, group identity, femininity, symbolic capital, marriage, dowry.

Résumé : Ce travail utilise les données ethnographiques sur les Chrétiens appartenant à la classe moyenne provenant de l'état Kerala au sud de l'Inde, afin d'explorer la signification de la couleur de la peau en tant que capital symbolique dans les négoces sur le mariage et la dot. A l'intérieur des contours sociaux d'une caste, les cercles communautaires et familiaux, la peau claire et d'autres embellissements féminins jouent le rôle des «marqueurs de frontière» pour accentuer les positions de classe, de caste, de mariage et l'identité féminine. Les perceptions sud-indiennes et sud-asiatiques de «la peau claire» en tant que le trait le plus significatif des idéaux de la beauté et de l'identité féminines, incluent d'autres qualités voisines, comme la santé et les attitudes morales. La couleur de la peau avec les négoces sur la dot servent à subjuguer les femmes autant symboliquement que matériellement en ce qui concerne leur propre mariage.

Mots-clés : la couleur de la peau, identité de groupe, féminité, capital symbolique, mariage, dot

As every South Asian woman knows, the words "fair" and "beautiful" are often used synonymously in female beauty descriptions and feminine gender identity constructions. Writing about her childhood experiences of colour in "The Politics of Brown Skin," Karumanchery-Luik (1997), a Kerala Christian sociologist, recalls her mother warning her to avoid the hot sun as it would make her skin dark. One of my East Indian students wrote in her undergraduate dissertation that her mother often referred to her endearingly as the "black cat" and chastised her for spending a great deal of time outdoors in the hot sun. Hellman-Rajanayagam (1997: 109), in "Is there a Tamil 'Race'?," recalls the negative reaction of her South Indian Tamil friends whenever she described her Tamil *ayah* as "one of the most beautiful women I have ever met": "No she is not pretty, she is dark," her friends would demur. In South Asian cultures, "dark skin" is considered an undesirable physical feature for a woman, and, being a South Asian myself, I can personally relate to the claim that fair skin and beauty are inseparable as defining elements of feminine gender descriptions. This association is made almost at the birth of a female child, and in India, where the dowry has reached frightful proportions as a compulsory requirement in most arranged marriages, it is not uncommon for relatives to make remarks about the female child's complexion along with subtle reminders to the newborn's parents of the dowry they must put by for her future marriage: the darker the complexion, the higher the dowry. Matrimonial columns in South Asian newspapers at home and in the diaspora attest to the high premium placed on a prospective bride's light-skin colour.

The concept of skin colour in India, and more generally in South Asia, embraces much more than chromatic qualities, for the semantics of colour include cultural perceptions and judgments about associated moral and behavioural qualities, health and appearance, and individual and collective identities. Ideal womanhood, feminine

beauty ideals and communal and national identities are mutually constructed with women bearing the burden of carrying the symbols associated with all three (for example, see Bannerji, 1994; De Alwis, 1996). A recent example from India illustrates the symbolic associations between women and national identity in the controversies surrounding a beauty pageant. India hosted the 2001 Miss World Pageant to "showcase India to the world" as a liberal and modern nation (Oza, 2001: 1067). Although beauty contests were already popular in India's schools and communities (Kishwar, 1995), and Indian beauty queens frequently represent the country in international beauty competitions, hosting the 2001 pageant in India was opposed by women's groups and Hindu nationalists. Their contention was that encouraging the "exhibition of beautiful bodies" (Oza, 2001: 1081) was contrary to Indian values and would lead to the commodification of Indian women (via tourism, sex trade, the influence of Western values). The role expectations of South Asian women "as the symbolic space of the nation" (Jayawardena and De Alwis, 1996: xv), as carriers of national, communal and caste identities, as the repositories of authentic traditions and the transmitters of moral values to their children are well documented. What is less discussed is the role of skin colour in identity assertions and their embodiment through women, as well as their implications for marriage arrangements.

Beauty and health are no doubt universally valued categories and are desirable attributes in a marriage partner. But as culturally defined categories, beauty and health also encode values and ideas about position and privilege in their myriad manifestations in specific cultural contexts. Beteille (1968: 175) has noted that "while there is clearly a preference for light-skin colour in almost all sections of Indian society, it is difficult to say how far this preference influences social action," and that "the most concrete expression of it is to be found in the choice of marriage partners." As Mandelbaum (1970: 101-105) in his survey of Indian society notes, apart from the "explicit" rules of marriage such as endogamy or exogamy, "fairness of skin" and a woman's general appearance are among the "implicit rules of the game for maneuvering for family advantage." Among the Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, "the ideal Sinhala-Buddhist bride is described as a 'pancha kalyani,'" or the bride with the five desired merits, namely, "fair skin, long black hair, attractive body, youthful appearance and beautiful teeth" (Jayawardena and De Alwis, 1996: xi). According to a Japanese proverb, "white skin makes up for seven defects" in a woman (Wagatsuma, 1968: 129), and, in the Japanese notions of beauty, "white skin" for a woman signifies ideal womanhood, "purity and moral virtue" (ibid., 139). In China, the now extinct practice of foot binding for women was intended to achieve a crippled shape that men found attractive in women (Papanek, 1990: 176). In Sudan, female genital circumcision (or mutilation) is believed to make a women's genitals "pure, white and smooth," and is linked to other cultural practices such as pre-wedding cosmetic preparations which involve skin lightening techniques (Boddy, 1982: 690-691). In general, as Davis (1997: 376) points out "social stratification, whatever its causes, hinges upon certain objective bases or marks—e.g., sex, age, birth, race, residence, achievement and appearance—tangible pegs whereon are hung the more intangible realities of invidious discrimination. These same objective bases also serve as axes for marital selection."

In this paper, I draw largely from my data and study of over 100 Syrian Christian and Latin Catholic households among middle-class Christians in Trivandrum, the Capital City of Kerala in southern India,[1] to reflect on the importance of skin colour in three related areas: in the construction of caste and sub-communal identities; in defining beauty norms and feminine gender identity; and in influencing marriage and dowry negotiations. In dowry transactions "skin colour" as an index of "beauty" is symbolically associated with health and moral qualities and acts as one set of symbolic markers articulating social location, female gender identity and the marriageability of women. In making these associations, I do not ascribe a privileged place to skin colour while minimizing the importance of other social variables. Skin colour is one variable among other interlinked and interdependent variables such as class and caste status and kinship connections that enter into marriage and dowry transactions within the Christian middle class.

For the general reader, as well as for anthropologists, the discussion about skin colour cannot be easily isolated from discussions about "race." Recent writings on race and caste in South Asia attempt to trace "pre-colonial" conceptualizations of identity and difference, and to "discover the interplay between Western and Indian ideologies" (Robb, 1997: 45). These writings have raised a number of leading questions: To what extent was colour used in indigenous conceptions of "difference" apart from and independent of colonial influences (Brockington, 1997)? Is colour awareness a "primordial quality," as Shils (1968) argues, or one that is "ingrained in human beings" (Wheale, 1910: 229 in Cox, 1970: 83), or a "continuation of age-old Indian attitudes which happened to coincide with race theories"—i.e., theories based on notions of taxonomy and evolution, environment and physiognomy (Robb, 1997: 7-8)? Did attitudes about colour as learned behaviour,

emanate from externally imposed, arbitrary labels that came to be grafted onto other diacritics of social differentiation such as language, caste and community (Robb, 1997)? These questions need to be dealt with at the outset.

Colonial Theorizing on Colour, Caste and Race and the Indian Context

The general anthropological consensus on the colour-race-caste conundrum is that phenotypical variations within the human species have no meaning except the social constructions that humans put on them (Harrison, 1999; Smedley, 1999). The colour views of the ethnologists, colonialists and orientalists in British India were undoubtedly influenced by the intellectual climate of the time and the environmental and racial theories of the 18th and 19th centuries that sought to explain both the unity of humankind and the diversity of human populations. In India, the task was to explain the dilemma of superior Indian civilization and the physical and moral endowment of particular communities, especially those that boasted fair skin and demonstrated valued martial qualities like their dominant British rulers (Caplan, 1997). Environmental and racial theories coalesced to mark off those with presumed superior physical and moral qualities and who were capable of civilizational progress from those who were incapable of similar advances. Thus, Susan Bayly (1999b: 72), argues that European race theory was much more than a "crudely self-glorifying tool of colonial rule," and one that emphasized the possibilities of civilization and advancement of peoples who were blessed with superior endowments and environmental conditions.

However, as Issacs (1968: 76) has rightly noted, "racial mythologies built around differences in skin colour and physical features were among the prime tools of power used in the era of the western empire." Racial prejudice against peoples of colour had a strong economic basis (Keesing and Strathern, 1998) even as enslavement required the attribution of particular essentializing qualities to those enslaved as justifications for slavery.[2] The ethnological classifications and statistical compilations of Indian castes and communities during the height of colonialism in 19th-century India were part of the colonial project of knowledge making which Asian scholars, following Edward Said, have characterized as "orientalism" (see Breckenridge and van der Veer, 1993). The "Aryan theory of race" was the most significant of Indologists' (European scholars writing on India) contributions to orientalist knowledge (Thapar, 1977). It not only seemed to provide indigenous evidence for a racial theory of "caste" but, in asserting a linguistic and racial affinity between the

dominant Europeans and fair-skinned Aryans who conquered the indigenous and supposedly "dark skinned" *dasas*, it also provided a justification for the dominance of the "lighter-skinned races" over the "darker races."

Thus, the British in India used colour, dress and conduct to distance themselves "physically, socially and culturally" (Cohn, 1996: 111; Tarlo, 1996) from the Indian population even as they used skin colour, attire and conduct to mark out the "Aryan North" from the "Dravidian South," the high from the low castes, and the martial and ruling castes from those among whom such traditions were absent (Elliot, 1869 and Forbes, 1813, cited from Bayly, 1997, 1999a and 1999b). The British commentators also attributed different moral qualities to Indians of different castes, communities and regions. For instance, Herbert Risley (1915: 14), the ethnologist, offers a dramatic description of the extreme divergence in skin colour across India:

> ...the dead black of the Andamanese, the colour of a black-leaded stove before it has been polished, and the somewhat brighter black of the Dravidians of southern India, which has been aptly compared to the colour of the strong coffee unmixed with milk...the flushed ivory skin of the typical Kashmiri beauty and the very transparent brown-wheat coloured is the common vernacular description...of the higher castes of upper India....

For Risley, this served as proof of the racial distinction between the "pale-skinned Aryans" of the North and the "dark-skinned Dravidians" of the South (also see Forbes, 1813: 72 and Huxley, 1868-69, cited from Bayly, 1997). Forbes (1813: 384, cited from Bayly, 1997: 175), describes the South Indians in general (*i.e.*, Tamils of Tamil Nadu the Malayalis of Kerala, the Telugus of Andhra Pradesh) as indolent, mediocre and passive, with "civilization among them having long attained its height." At the same time, he elevates the martial castes among them, such as the Nairs of Kerala, to the superior position of "a well-made handsome race, of fairer complexion than the lesser castes." There are also references in Risley's work (1915: 16) to the Syrian Christians of Kerala, who, having a martial tradition like the Nairs, are praised for their skill and described as "having red moustaches" and their babies "red carroty hair." Lionel Caplan (1997: 261) relates British views on the superiority of these martial castes and communities in India to biological race theories that placed a high premium on martial qualities and their transmission through blood lines and hereditary inheritance. These ideas would no doubt have influenced their treatment of the Syrian Christians, and Christians generally, who were

accorded privileges not given to other castes, such as the wearing of footwear "wherever Europeans would normally wear their shoes" (Cohn, 1996: 134).

What is pertinent to my discussion is that most colonial descriptions of Indians centred on the Indian women and their appearance, skin colour, gait, walk and attire as markers of identity and separation between different castes and communities (Risley, 1915; Rothfeld, 1928). These descriptions would have provided European readers with enough grist on the "mysterious east," and the exotic and sensual orient of European imaginings (e.g., Balfour, 1885, cited from Cohn, 1996). In European descriptions, Dravidian women on the whole, with the exception of the Hindu Brahmin and Nair castes and the Syrian Christians of Kerala, are "dark, stunted, hardly attractive" (Rothfeld, 1928: 80). In contrast, a high caste Brahmin woman is portrayed as one who "...with steady untroubled eye, straight nose and sensitive nostril, fair skin, pride in their port and self restraint in every gesture, they move through the mass of common men, as if conscious of a higher mission ..." (ibid., 92). Thus, colonial theorizing on race and caste went further to attribute essentializing physical and moral qualities to women of different castes and communities, although such renderings about race, caste and gender are now justifiably dismissed as orientalist and essentialist imaginings (Dirks, 1989 and 2001).

The origins of colour attitudes and their association with caste and racial groupings will continue to be a matter of debate and contention, since it is difficult to determine what is essential and what is extraneous to these concepts. Historical and literary evidence from India suggests that colour and physical characteristics were among several factors that defined indigenous social and moral categorizations. Susan Bayly (1999a: 103-104) argues that the "pronouncement of sweeping generalities about other people's 'essences' was not an invention of white men, or of the colonial state," and that long before British rule in India the Mughal rulers and commentators had begun to distinguish the Indians on the basis of their "moral and physical essences" and use skin colour as a system of classification, identification and evaluation. What is certain, however, from the reading of South Asian writings on the subject is that the colour-race-caste connections are not definitive, unambiguous or inflexible (see Robb, 1997 and Trautmann, 1997 for a discussion of this point). Colour values, as Peter Robb (1997: 8) notes, were "not unambiguously related to merit or status;" nor did they enjoy a more important status than behaviour or social conduct for making moral judgements or for defining social placement. The varna (colour) scheme, which formed the basis

for the "Aryan theory of race," has been described as a marker of linguistic differences, an expression of social conduct (Brockington, 1997) or social order (Gupta, 2001), and the caste organization of society based on occupational differences (Thapar, 1977). Colonial perceptions of racial and caste distinctions have now been acknowledged to have been influenced by an erroneous reading of the Brahminic creation myth in the Rig Veda and spurred on by the works of orientalists who propagated the Aryan theory of race in the process of establishing a theory of the linguistic affinity between Indo-European languages.[3] While physical differences between the dominant *Arya* and the subjugated *Dasa* may have existed, the evidence is not unambiguous (Gupta, 2001) and cannot be taken as the basis of caste distinctions (Trautmann, 1997). Furthermore, Dipanka Gupta (2001: 3) observes that in early Vedic texts "fair skin" probably referred to "light," meaning "knowledge" which the Aryans claimed for themselves. The functional integration of caste society within Aryan culture hardened into more racialist attitudes over time (Brockington, 1997) as "material and intellectual changes" may have provided the conditions for the emergence of racial attitudes (Robb, 1997: 9). In Sri Lanka, according to John Rogers (1997: 163) "ideas of difference with quasi-biological character were already prevalent long before British rule...." However, Rogers also makes the important point that modern racial theories and ideologies selectively appropriated "existing labels and symbols" in ways that transformed their indigenous meanings (ibid., 163-164).

The origins of colour values notwithstanding, colour, like caste or ethnicity, as a legacy of the colonial and precolonial pasts continues to shape and influence cultural perceptions of identity and difference. Gupta (2001: 2) refers to the sociological cliche that the aesthetic standards of the "superior" community are often adopted by others. The colonial privileging of fair-skinned communities would have given certain economic and political advantages to these groups at the expense of other communities. This was undoubtedly the experience of the Syrian Christians whose privileged treatment by the British and indigenous traditional leaders underlined their claim to "high caste status."

Caste and Sub-Communal Identities among the Kerala Christians

Christianity arrived in Kerala long before the advent of the Europeans in India. Trade links with West Asia in the early Christian era had brought communities of Jews and other seafaring immigrants to the Malabar coast (present day Kerala) in Southwest India. The Kerala Christians are

divided into "Syrians" and "non-Syrians," who are both further divided into Catholic and Protestant sects and denominations. The Syrian Christians comprise the two main sub-communities of Northists (*vadakkumbhagar*), or "St Thomas Christians" as they are also called, and Southists (*Thekkumbhagar*), or *Knanaya* Christians as they are more popularly known. The two communities are subdivided into Catholic (Romo Syrians, Syro-Malankara Catholics, *Knanaya* Catholics) and Protestant sects (Jacobite, Orthodox, Marthomite, Anglican, Church of South India, Evangelical, etc.,). The Northists claim to be the descendants of Brahmin and Nayar converts of St. Thomas, the Apostle, who is believed to have come to Kerala in circa 52 AD, and consider themselves the "old division" (*pazhayakuttukkar*), in contrast to the Protestant sections of the community that transferred their allegiance to the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch. The latter are known as the new division (*puttankuttukkar*). The Southists, or *Knanayites,* claim descent from Syrian migrants who came to Kerala in AD 345, under the leadership of a merchant named Thomas of Cana (*Cnai Thomen*). Some Southist families also claim to have Jewish origins. The descendants of these early Jewish immigrants were themselves divided into white and black Jews and have different conceptions of their origins and identities (Mandelbaum, 1970). The Southists I interviewed seldom referred to the colour distinction among the Jewish immigrants, but some of them are proud of their Jewish descent and continue to nurture their Jewish cultural origins. The Southists are endogamous to the point that marriage outside the community results in excommunication from their respective Catholic and Protestant Churches. The Northist-Southist divisions are not caste divisions as Dumont (1970: 203) seems to suggest because of the endogamous preferences and prescriptions among the two sub-communities. Endogamy is not a sufficient condition for defining caste divisions and neither the Northists nor Southists explain the difference between them in caste terms.

Anantakrishna Aiyar (1926: 50), whose documentation of Kerala Christian culture is well known, writes: "The Southists are fairer in complexion and have finer features than the Northists and boast of their descent from the parent church with genuine Syrian blood in their veins." My Southist informants made similar claims and used fair skin as proof of their extra-Indian origins. To the outsider, however, the distinction of colour is less evident, with a good mix of "fair" Northists and "dark" Southists, but informants from each community were consistent in using colour as one defining mark of their superior identity *vis-a-vis* each other. The Northists and Southists also use genealogical (pedigree, clan, biogenic), spatial (area of origin), temporal (time of conversion/origin), and cultural (food habits, degree of communal solidarity, differences in dowry, occupation, educational achievement and mental health status) distinctions as markers of identity and separation.

The Syrian Christians on the whole, according to Kurian (1961:36) have "intense pride of race and tradition." Although the term "Syrian" "has little relationship to the 'inhabitants of Syria'" but refers rather to their use of the Syriac language in their liturgical services (Maclean, 1924: 1670), the term has come to denote a caste-like community with claims to Brahmin, Nair, or "pure" Syrian origins. The Northists and Southists have traditionally been assigned a privileged position vis-a-vis caste Hindus (Fuller, 1976; Lewandowski, 1980), and are treated as Brahmins and Nairs whom they are said to resemble in physical appearance i.e., fair complexion. To quote Anantakrishna Aiyar again (1926: 242),"The Syrian Christians are a fine race of people, and are mostly like Nairs in their physical characteristics. They are seen in all shades of complexion. The women are short in stature, and are as handsome as their sisters in the higher Hindu castes." Early writings also place the Syrian Christians on par with the matrilineal Hindu Nairs, but below the patrilineal high-caste Nambudiri Brahmins (Buchanan, 1819: 146). Several writers also allude to their role as "pollution neutralizers," i.e., the handling of an object by a Syrian Christian that was previously touched by a member of a lower caste would neutralize its pollution effects and allow its use by members of the Hindu high castes (Forrester, 1980; Fuller, 1976 and 1977). Syrian Christian men were also allowed to carry a sword as an emblem of their superior status (Kurian, 1961: 36), while there are Syrian Christian families that still carry titles such as *Pannikkar* (warrior), *Vaidyan* (physician) and *Tharakkan* (tax collector). These titles were given to their ancestors by Malabar Kings as rewards for services to the king or to honour them for their good deeds in society. These symbols of prestige serve as markers of family pedigree and social position and are used to define status-based marriage circles within the Christian middle class. Distance pollution, menstrual restrictions, the rules and taboos underlying cross-caste commensal relations, dietary practices, as well as marriage rites and other life-cycle traditions that they share with high-caste Hindu groups have placed the Syrian Christians at the apex of the Christian caste system (see also Visvanathan, 1993: 3).

For Syrian Christian women, their high-caste status endows them with both privileges and restrictions. As Vom Bruk (1997: 180) has poignantly observed, women's

bodies, including skin colour, dress and other feminine embellishments may be regarded as "symbolic artifacts" that mark the boundaries of castes, sub-communities and classes (also see Douglas, 1966; Ramaswamy, 1998). For instance, the traditional dress of the Syrian Christian woman is the *Chatta Mundu*, a seamless white "garment, with or without a coloured border seven yards long and one or one and a quarter yard broad, worn folded with a number of fringes behind" (Aiyar, 1926: 244). Seamless cloth in Indian symbolic constructions represents purity and auspiciousness (see Altekar, 1938; Bayly, 1986; Cohn, 1996) and was worn by the higher castes, since unstitched clothing was believed to attract and hold less pollutants than stitched clothing. According to Kurian (1967: 27), traditionally Syrian Christian women wore "completely white garments." White garments are still worn on auspicious occasions such as weddings, given as gifts to near relatives at the *Katcha koddukkal* (gifting of cloth) ceremony during a marriage, and are worn by elderly widows to indicate their high-caste status. Syrian Christian women, unlike the women of the lower castes such as the Shanars, Izhavas and Nadars (toddy tappers), were granted the privilege of wearing the *kuppayam* (jacket), which was adopted by the higher- caste Hindus during the colonial period, and were allowed to carry a *muthukudda* (umbrella) to shield themselves from the sun and from the eyes of men. The carrying of *mutukudda* forms part of Syrian Christian marriage rituals even today.

According to Anantakrishna Aiyar (1926: 242), the Syrian Christian women's "dress and deportment correspond very much with their character;" and further, "notwithstanding the heat of the climate and their freedom of intercourse with their neighbors, they are seldom or never known to violate the law of chastity." The privileges of modest dress and other embellishments were denied to women of the lower castes who could only wear a cloth of coarse texture, not lower than the knee or higher than the waist (Cohn, 1996; Hardgrave, 1968). When the lower caste women, with the help of the missionaries attempted to cover their breasts for the first time, there were riots on the streets of Kerala, with the upper-caste men pulling the breast-cloth off the women of the lower castes (Hardgrave, 1968). However, wearing the breast cloth (or the blouse) is no longer a caste privilege, or the monopoly of Syrian Christian, or high caste, women; all women can now wear blouses.

The non-Syrian Christians are the descendants of Hindus who were converted during the later (post-16th century) Portuguese, Dutch and British periods, and are known as *Latinkar* (Latin Catholics) and *putiya Christiani* (new Christians). Each of these groups comprises several lower castes whose ancestors might have become Christians to escape the debilitating effects of the Hindu caste system. The Latin Catholics are the descendants of converts of Portuguese missionaries from the 16th century onwards. They are so identified because of their liturgical rites. They belong to three traditionally endogamous castes, *viz.*, the *Ezhunutukar* (Seven-hundred), the *Munnutukar* (Three-hundred) and the *Anjutukar* (Five-hundred, and are also known as the fisher castes, or Mukkuwars). In the past, the Seven-hundred and Three-hundred castes could be identified by their attire, hats, turbans, trousers and the Western-style dress worn by the women. The Seven-hundred caste members were also called *mundukkar* (wearers of white cloth), while the Three-hundred caste people were referred to as *topasses* (wearers of hats) and are even now called *sattakar* (those who wear dress) because of the Western attire of their women.

These hybrid and western outfits were ridiculed by other Indians in colonial times, particularly when they were worn by the lower castes, although the Western attire was adopted by the Indian elite men to gain the respect of their British rulers (Tarlo, 1996). The Syrian Catholics regard even the relatively well-to-do Latin Catholic families as "culturally different;" the symbolic indicators of this difference are dark complexion, food habits, dress, a Westernized life style and, more importantly, the relative freedom enjoyed by Latin Catholic women. The Latin Catholics are not generally preferred by the Syrian Catholics as marriage partners for their sons and daughters but there are instances of cross-caste marriages. The "New-Christians" are the Protestant converts from the British period and are generally from the more depressed castes and classes whom the Syrian Christians still refer to by their caste names, *viz.* Pulaya Christian, Paraya Christian, Nadar Christian, etc. They are generally described by the Syrian Protestants as dark skinned, backward and culturally different. For example, Kurian (1961: 26-27), a Syrian Christian, remarks "it is not far from the truth if one says that the higher castes are noted for their comparatively light complexion, while the lower castes are mostly black."

When Syrian and non-Syrian marriages do occur, they are between families of similar class status, or they are hypergamous arrangements involving upwardly mobile Latin families using their acquired wealth and status to marry into "traditional" (*parambariya*), "well known," "good" (*nalla*), or old (*pazhaya*) Syrian-Catholic families (*kudumpams*). These adjectives describe the prevalent status groups and marriage circles within the Christian community. Alternatively, Syrian families of

modest resources but belonging to traditional or good families may secure hypogamous marriages for their daughters to avoid giving large dowries or to secure an educated groom.

The mobile, middle-class families among the Latin Catholics are dismissive of Syrian superiority and offer counter stereotypes of their own to demonstrate Latin/ Syrian differences. Syrian Christians are described as materialistic and money minded people, who demand large dowries for their sons and hold rigidly conservative attitudes towards the behaviour and expectations of women. At the same time, the Latin Catholics use the symbols of dress, fair-skin colour and genealogical links to Nairs and Brahmins to stake their own claims to higher status. In making these claims, they are not dismissing the hierarchy of caste or the caste status of the Syrian Christians. On the contrary, the Latin Catholics who make these claims, draw on the physical and symbolic markers of superior caste status to assert their own rank. Like the Syrian Christians, they too claim descent from the Nair sub-castes and cite as evidence their shared clan names. The Latin Catholic families who assert their high caste status also avoid marriages with other Latin castes, although, in general, caste endogamy among the Latins is less restrictive than among the Syrians. Among the Latin Catholics, those of the Seven-hundred caste claim the highest caste status and dismiss the fisher caste, or the Five-hundred caste, as "shore people" and "backward Christians," while describing themselves as "original Christians." Latin families also invest in property and jewelry for their women, and seek marriage arrangements outside their community.

According to Visvanathan (1993: 118-119), the Syrian Christians' obsession with fair skin and the prenatal practices that Syrian women observe to ensure that their children are fair in complexion, stem from the Syrian Christians' desire to prove their Brahmin ancestry, since Brahmins are considered to be fair skinned. Syrian Christians also desire to distinguish themselves from other Christians such as the Latin Catholics and the New Christians, who are generally seen as dark in complexion. The Syrian Christians consider the usurpation of the traditional Syrian dress and genealogical connections by the Latins as presumptuous attempts to claim Syrian or upper caste status. During my fieldwork I experienced the caste curiosity of a Syrian Christian woman whose family had recently rented their apartment to a young couple. The woman was curious about the caste of her tenants who she thought were Latins even though they were fair complexioned. The young woman's mother was also attired in the traditional Syrian dress. The Syrian woman urged me

to find out the caste of her tenants. As it turned out, the tenants belonged to the Mukkuwars (fisher) caste, but when I asked the mother whether the *chatta mundu* she was wearing was a Syrian dress, she vigorously asserted that the garment was not the monopoly of the Syrians but the traditional dress of all Malayalis (i.e., speakers of Malayalam, the language of Kerala).

Ayurveda, Skin Colour and Feminine Beauty Ideals

Skin colour, as an element of female beauty also plays an important part in feminine identity constructions and finds articulation in the ayurvedic health-care practices of the Syrian Christians. The use of ayurvedic medicine (*ayur*—knowledge, *vedic*—of the *vedas*) to secure well-being, positive health and longevity has been widely known and practised in Kerala and is an essential part of household medical practices (Osella and Osella, 1996a; Visvanathan, 1993). Generally, good-health and a long life (the purpose of ayurveda) could be achieved by active effort and are not predetermined by karma (Basham, 1976; Obeyesekere, 1976).[4] A balanced body (between hot and cool, see Beck, 1969) is believed to manifest itself in culturally valued physical features such as fair (not pale), smooth and oily skin, loose and flexible limbs, plump body (not fat), and black, straight or wavy hair (Osella and Osella, 1996a). A fair skin, plump body and black hair are generally regarded as attractive traits for women among most South Indian communities including Kerala Christians. Young girls are chastised if they are too "thin," as it will reduce their chances of a good marriage. Christians also believe that a thin body would make conception difficult (see also Egnor, 1980: 23; Zacharias, 1994: 43). Thinness and dark skin are also the most "tangible physical expression of suffering and rejection" (Egnor, 1980: 7) and are often associated with the impoverished lower classes who have poor diets and toil long in the hot sun (see also Basham, 1976; Wadley, 1984). I have often been informed by Syrian Christian and Nair men and women that one can always identify a Harijan (untouchable), a Nadar or Parayan (toddy tapping untouchable castes) by their colour and/or frail appearance.

In physical terms, *white*[5] corresponds to coolness, and in the case of a widow or a virgin, coolness signifies the state of sexual inactivity. Writing about the hot/cool opposition in South Indian world view, Daniel (1984: 186) has suggested that a "protracted unmarried state" for a girl may be associated with a cool body, an imbalance that might lead to illness. Hence pale skin as a sign of *coolness* is disliked for this reason. However, as Daniel (1984) has noted, hot and cold are both caste and person specific

and have much to do with diet, character, body type, time and stages of life. Hot (*choodu*) and cold *(thanu)* by themselves produce negative physical states unless controlled, combined and balanced to provide an ideal physical state. Too much heat is dangerous and powerful (sexual energy, *sakti*—female power, strength) and physically translates into *dosham* (affliction) reflected in specific bodily characteristics such as "thinness," "tightness," "dark and coarse skin," "facial blemishes" (pimples—*muha-kuru*, skin boils—*kuru*) and "curly, brown hair" (Osella and Osella, 1996a). Certain physical stages are believed to bring about an increase in heat or cold: thus, menstruation and pregnancy increase body heat (sexual energy), while childbirth brings about coolness; old age, on the other hand, is a time of tightness and coolness (reduced sexual energy).[6]

The health, well-being and the beauty of a woman are interconnected and, in terms of ayurvedic philosophy, the physical and moral health of a woman are also linked. Feminine beauty ideals encompass many of these same ideas, as beauty is seen as the most tangible and objective manifestation of physical and moral health contributing to ideal womanhood (see Kishwar, 1995 on India in general). Syrian Christian women, especially the older women, assume the role of "keepers of ayurvedic knowledge," or kitchen ayurveda, that is used to prepare traditional medicines for domestic use, for curative and preventive purposes and to enhance the beauty, well-being and health of younger women (Visvanathan, 1993: 117). As Visvanathan also states, Syrian Christian women take several ayurvedic oil preparations (*pinnathailam, kashyam, arishtam, lehiyam* and *nei*) for loosening the uterus, increasing respiration, for skin rashes, boils, lactation, and for strength and fitness. Since black hair is a preferred beauty trait, Kerala Christian women apply different kinds of oils and herbal remedies to their hair to obtain healthy, black hair. Chemical hair dyes are seldom used by older women whose black and healthy hair is attributed to careful nurturing and frequent oil applications.

Ayurvedic principles also reinforce the intimate association between the mother and the unborn child who is believed to be influenced by the thoughts, deeds, emotions and the diet of the pregnant mother (see also Das, 1988). This association is stronger in the case of mothers and daughters since South Indian understandings of conception emphasize the mixing of gendered substances (Busby, 1995: 36-37; Daniel, 1984), with daughters inheriting a greater proportion of their mother's female substance. Pregnant women take elaborate care to ensure the fair skin colour of their new born. Syrian Christian women

informed me of a concoction they make, adding the gold dust scraped from the wedding ring of the mother to the mother's milk to make the baby fair (see also Visvanathan, 1993: 119). Pregnant women also apply turmeric (as a purifying substance) to their body, massage the body with ayurvedic oils, and consume the juice of bitter gourd to dissolve poison and to purify, loosen and soften the skin pores and to enhance the complexion. Oil massages are administered to pregnant women with the expectation that the oils would filter through and strengthen the fetus (Visvanathan, 1993). After childbirth, strict dietary taboos are followed along with purificatory herbal baths to purify the mother and the newborn. Overall, Syrian Christian women's preoccupation with ayurvedic practices is inspired by the need to have "healthy, strong and slim bodies" (Visvanathan, 1993: 120) and to ensure the beauty and health of their children.

Among Christians, as in other Indian communities, the ideal woman—fair skinned, black haired with a voluptuous and healthy body—is at once sexualized, feminized and moralized, and the depiction of women in these ways serves to define Christian ideas of marriageability. Sexual differences are culturally accentuated by magnifying and exaggerating sex-specific natural traits (Agacinski, 1998: 18) through artificial means such as whitening creams and body embellishments such as female jewelry. Traditional skin-care remedies are commercialized in Kerala today, and brand-name skin care products, boasting ayurvedic sources and true and tested powers to make a woman's skin fairer, softer and spotless, flood the urban market. These products cater to the younger, middle-class Christian women, who are unfamiliar with "kitchen ayurveda," but who, like their female counterparts in other communities in Kerala and all over India, are caught in a web of what has been called India's "beauty craze" (see Chopra and Baria, 1996), and the "commodification and objectification of women" (Ramachandran, 1995: 123; Shirali, 1997) created by media advertisements and the infectiously popular Indian cinema. Market consumerism further augments a woman's cultural preoccupation with fair skin and appearance as essential traits of femininity and marriageability. The *Fair and Lovely* beauty cream and the advertisement bearing its name selling fairness and beauty to enhance women's chances of both employment and marriage is a case in point. It was taken off the market after women's groups protested against its racial connotations and for equating beauty with fair skin, but it has since found its way back and is a much advertised beauty product not only in India but also in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

Female Gender Constructions and Marriage Requirements

A woman's body as Das (1988) has noted, is both a sexual body—beautiful, erotic, desired and admired—and a maternal body—revered and sanctified. The twin concepts of erotic sexuality embodied in Indian cultural concepts such as *sakti* (dangerous, inauspicious/auspicious energy) and fertility (auspicious motherhood) are essentialized in Kerala Christian perceptions of "womanhood." Ramachandran's (1995: 121) analysis of female sexuality in Kerala refers to this "fascination/repugnance dyad," which is reflected in the portrayals of women's sexuality in the folk tales, songs and dances (e.g., the *Kathakali* dance) of Kerala. As Das (1988:201) notes, a woman's sexual body is the "domain of marriage" and her sexuality must be contained and channelled for reproduction through her submission to the male in marriage (also see Kapadia, 1995). Images of women's erotic sexual potential contribute to Christian women's own self-image and affect the way in which women experience their own bodies and their pre-occupation with being modestly attractive. While Christian women admire and envy beautiful women within their communities, beautiful women are also the targets of gossip, judgement and moral evaluations, particularly if they are single or young widows.

Christian women's, and men's conception of marriage separates the genders in terms of their conjugal and gender related functions. Men need marriage to make them more responsible, while women view marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of their destiny, closely tied to the birth of children, and dependent on husbands and sons for economic security and well-being. The importance of marriage for women cannot be exaggerated in a culture that does not countenance the status of a single woman. The unmarried state is negatively viewed since marriage, as Daniel (1980: 67) has observed, "provides the structured setting" for the elimination of "rumors of promiscuity," and protects women from "the watchful eyes of men." Young and attractive single women and widows are particularly vulnerable to public scrutiny and suspicions of sexual misconduct. Christian women describe an unmarried woman as *"pothuppen"* (common or shared woman), her unattached and unbounded body signalling her use as public property by men who wish to take advantage of her.

A 48-year-old Syrian Christian woman who was widowed at the young age of 27 married seven years later to avoid the ignominy and ostracism of widowhood. In explaining her decision to remarry, she insisted that a woman without a husband is "nothing," since a woman's social identity comes from having a husband. Her concerns are not unfounded as other Christian women who knew her described her as a "beautiful, independent, socialite" to whom her present husband (a widower) had been attracted long before the death of his sick wife. Another young widow of 42, described herself as "attractive" and painted a gloomy picture of her life as a recluse, watched and "gossiped" about by her community and neigbours, and blamed for her involuntary independence which widowhood had thrust upon her. She believed that young, attractive widows are expected to present a docile demeanour, to dress plainly and to restrict themselves as much as possible to the private space of their home. While she is employed as a teacher and is the sole supporter of her three school-going children, she is convinced that even her educated colleagues at the school expected her to dress down and be inconspicuous on special public occasions. In contrast to the widow, the ideal married woman among Christians, as among Indians in general, must display "beauty of face, clarity of eyes, luminescence of skin, dress, jewelry and comportment which are markers of the auspicious married state" (Hancock, 1995: 918).

Beauty, or skin colour as its surrogate, is also a threat to male freedom and the social hierarchies of caste and class through boundary-crossing, cross-caste/class sexual encounters or marriages. Thus, individually contracted marriages, as opposed to marriages arranged by parents, are called "love marriages" and are viewed as "immoral" since they are assumed to be based purely on physical appearances rather than on the explicit individual and collective attributes that are believed to make a marriage firm, creating strong and lasting affinity (*bendam* among affines—*bendakkarar*). More importantly, "love marriages" are also popularly associated with cross-caste or inter-communal marriages. Through the institution of the "arranged marriage," women are allowed to transcend the "dissolutionary pull" of erotic sexuality (see Zacharias, 1994: 40) and realize the ideals of transcendent "wifehood" and "motherhood." Christian Women themselves, view the arranged marriage as a life saver, since it would help even dark and unattractive women to get married. Besides, there is always the dowry to compensate for any physical shortcomings in a girl. They believe that left to her own devices, an unattractive female would be forced to live a life of inauspicious solitude as an unmarried woman. Anantakrishna Aiyer (1926: 77) had noted that among the Christians belonging to the Jacobite denomination, "a girl is never left unmarried. Even a deaf, dumb and blind girl must get married, because girls receive no share of the parent's property except marriage dowry."

Arranged marriages among Syrian Christians follow specific marriage rules and selection criteria in regard to prospective partners. Unlike other Dravidian communities such as the Latin Catholics of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, Syrian Christians do not practise bilateral cross-cousin marriage and other kinds of close-kin marriages. Explaining cross-cousin marriage in South India, Cecilia Busby (1995: 22) questions Dumont's insistence on alliance and affinity as the defining principles of preferential cross-cousin marriages. Busby offers an explanation of cross-cousin marriages based on South Indian notions of shared substances that are contingent on gendered links (e.g., transmission from mother to daughter). Her argument is that marriage rules are based on prior considerations of marriageability. Thus cross cousins are non-sharers of bodily substances and are ideal marriage partners, while parallel cousins are sharers and are prohibited as marriage partners. However, while Syrian Christians do entertain the notion of gendered links based on shared substances as in the mother/daughter relationship, these ideas are not the basis of their marital preferences. Syrian Christians prohibit both types of marriages, and their marital norms are analogous to the North Indian pattern of *sapinda* exogamy, which prohibits the marriage of all "near relatives by birth" (Trautmann, 1981: 246). The ideal prohibited degree of marriageability among the Syrian Christians is five degrees on the mother's side and seven degrees on the father's side. This rule is sometimes breached by the *Knanaya* Christians, given their group endogamy within a numerically smaller marriage pool. Syrian Christians also practise clan (house or *veedus*) exogamy which means that individuals who share the same house names (*veedu peyer*) are prohibited from marrying.

Latin Catholics follow the Dravidian pattern of preferential bilateral cross-cousin marriages which are directed by practical concerns as much as categorical preferences. For instance, the restrictive connubial rules of the Syrian Catholics against marriage with Latin Catholics as well as the higher dowries transacted by Syrian Christians encourage cross-cousin marriage among the Latins. While Catholics and Protestants seldom marry, and there is a preference for intra-denominational marriages within each of the Catholic and Protestant sects, this preference may be overlooked to accept inter-denominational marriages within the same caste. Women who marry outside their denominations join the denominations of their husbands and must pay the required compensation to their natal churches.

Marriage arrangements also take into account the collective attributes and achievements of families (i.e.,

lineage or pedigree as reflected in "house names" or *veedu payer*, family reputation, kinship connections, caste, wealth, class status and titles) and the individual attributes and achievements of the prospective partners (e.g., professional and educational qualifications, reputation, appearance, mental and physical health). Daniel, a 19-year-old described his expectation of his future wife thus: "she must be educated, city-bred, smart and able to accompany me to social events and must know what I want." He insisted, however, that she must not be a working woman. Most Christian families emphasize and invest in the education of daughters (Kerala has a high rate of literacy for India, over 70% for females and 80% for males) not so much to increase her economic autonomy or independence within marriage as to maximize her chances of securing a good match for her (see Chacko, 2003). Few young men today are interested in a girl with little education, unless she can compensate materially with a good dowry or good looks. In many instances, however, educated Christian women, particularly in the professions, pay high dowries since they have to compete for equally or better qualified grooms in the right age and status group. The "marriage squeeze" (Billig, 1992) in Kerala is the result of the short supply of grooms in the right age and marriageable category and not the result of a shortage of grooms overall. Educated women are at a disadvantage when competing against women with attractive dowries but little education, or women with "good looks," but the marital success of all these women depend on the criteria emphasized by the grooms and their families during marriage negotiations. For instance, when Peter, a Knanayite Protestant was arranging the marriage of his second daughter, who is a dentist, to an engineer, his future son-in-law was getting "many offers of high dowries," much higher than the Indian Rupees of 100 000 that Peter was able to offer for his daughter. Eventually, the groom's family chose Peter's daughter over the others, as more consideration was given to his daughter's professional status and earning potential besides the dowry.

Women entering marriage have also to meet the gender specific expectations of ideal "wifehood" and "motherhood." The ideal wife and mother is expected to be chaste, pious, devoted and respectful to her husband, while the ideal mother is the self-sacrificing woman who keeps a good house and looks after the moral upbringing of her children. As Mathew, a 60-year-old Syrian Catholic lawyer described it: "Obedience is a wifely virtue, which reflects culture and upbringing. Obedience is a reflection of wifely love and devotion." Traditional families are harsh in judging, as negative types, women who are quarrelsome, who are in careers that are deemed inappropriate

for women (e.g., beautician, nursing), and who are locked in natal family disputes.

Christians believe that a prospective bride's appearance and moral character can be deduced from her mother's looks and character, for as Das (1988:205) has noted, "resemblance and non-resemblance are means of positing connectedness, continuation and contiguity" (Busby, 1995). Mothers and daughters are related in specifically gendered ways (Fruzzeti and Ostor, 1976 on Bengali kinship) and this connection extends to the sharing of physical and moral characteristics which define the female self or personhood and influences the marriage prospects of daughters. For instance, since prospective marital partners among Syrian Christians rarely meet until dowry negotiations have been completed, the "mother's looks" serve as an indicator of the prospective bride's "looks." Phillippose confirmed this point when he said that during the marriage proposal for his son, the latter made discrete inquiries about the prospective mother-in-law's "looks" because he wanted "a fair, slim girl whose mother was also fair and slim." Marrying a "fair" woman would ensure the fair complexion of the future female generations. Women are also believed to be the repositories of good or bad moral behaviour, and the producers and transmitters of positive/negative moral traits to their children, particularly to daughters. Cruz, a Latin-Catholic retired teacher, cited a pithy adage to sum up the marital implications of mother-daughter extension: "It is easy to marry a bad girl of a good mother, but it is difficult to marry a good girl of a bad mother." Chako, a Syrian Catholic man informed me that the "girl's character, her mother's character and the character of all the women in the family" are considered when a marriage proposal is discussed. When he was seeking a bride for his son, who was an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) Officer (the highest echelon in Civil Service), one of the marriage proposals was rejected on the grounds that the mother was rumoured to have been a "flirt" as a college student, and another marriage proposal was unsuccessful because the girl's mother had delivered a baby prematurely. Thus, the perceived shortcomings of women as wives and mothers are visited on the marital prospects of their children, particularly daughters, as more of the same is expected of the daughter. For the sake of their daughter's future women would steer clear of conjugal conflicts and disputes over property shares in their natal families even when inheritance or dowry practices are disadvantageous to them.

The marriage prospects of a woman also depend on the marital status of her sisters. Chako noted that the presence of an unmarried older sister in the family does not bode well for the marital prospects of the younger sister as questions are raised about family reputation, stability and the likelihood of genetic flaws. Similarly, the type of marriage of one sister can affect the marriage prospects of her female siblings. When Peter's (previous example) elder daughter married a Hindu Nair she was excommunicated by the *Knanaya* Protestant Church, Peter and his wife worried that their second daughter's chances of contracting a good marriage were ruined by their older daughter's mismatched, interreligious and intercaste marriage. The professional qualifications of their second daughter, however, proved to be more important to the groom's family than their older daughter's love marriage to a Hindu Nair.

Appearance and skin colour are desirable attributes more for a bride than for her groom and are taken into consideration during marriage and dowry negotiations (see Visvanathan, 1989: 134), although some women do look for appearance and personality in a prospective groom, in addition to his job and qualifications. Lizzy Simon, a Syrian Catholic woman in her mid-thirties, pointed out that she had always wanted to marry a "fair, good looking man." She considered herself to be "pretty" and believed that "if the girl marries a boy who is dark and not good-looking, people will laugh at the couple." In the end, she did not marry a "fair, good-looking man" because her preferences were dismissed in the light of other more favourable qualities that her parents found in their future son-in-law. Lizzy's experience is typical of women's situation in general, for as Beteille (1968: 175) has noted, "the matching of looks," or even the preference for "physical features of a particular kind," is only "marginally important…other things being equal;" and the "dark skin may be more of a liability for a daughter than for a son." Also, as Bourdieu (1977: 68) has suggested in the case of Middle Eastern marriages, here too, the urgency of marriage for Christian women places limits on the bargaining strategies of parents and on the personal preferences of their daughters.

Pennu Kaanal (Viewing the Bride)

The ritual of *pennu kaanal* provides an interesting instance of the differential operation of colour values between men and women. Many of the elderly couples whom I met during my fieldwork, had not seen their partners until the wedding day. The arrangement of marriage was left to the parents and paternal and maternal uncles and aunts who decided the marriages of their children based on considerations of caste, family wealth and reputation (see Aiyar, 1926: 70). As couples were usually very young, even as young as 10 or 15, they were not considered

mature enough to express their preferences. Early marriages were also favoured for preventing "sexual irregularities" (Aiyar, 1926: 74) and mismatched marriages resulting from caste and communal exogamy. Skin colour and appearance would have been marginally important in the older marriages. In current marriage arrangements, prospective partners see each other in the *pennu kaanal* (bride viewing) ceremony at the bride's home, or the parish church, after the dowry negotiations have been completed. This ritual would have acquired greater currency as the practice of child marriages became illegal in the early 20th century. The marriage of cross-cousins and other close relatives would hardly warrant a formal meeting as in the case of Latin Catholics, although here too, depending on familiarity and closeness, certain formalities are to be followed. Young men now expect a personable and sociable wife and companion whose good looks can be an additional boon; thus, viewing the bride has become a necessary part of marriage arrangements.

The *pennu kaanal* ritual takes on particular meanings when considered in relation to Indian theories of vision (Babb, 1981; Osella and Osella, 1996b). The demure deportment of a prospective bride when presenting herself to "be seen" by the suitor has been described in many studies on Indian marriages. Karve (1968: 86) notes that, in the case of the North Indian ritual of *seeing*, "when the affinal kin take their first look at her face, she must keep her glance demurely lowered or her eyes entirely shut." Glancing and eye contact in Indian theories of vision, according to Osella and Osella (1996b: 195) who studied flirting encounters among young women and men in Kerala, are to be seen as "direct aggression," or "confrontation," as "an actual exchange and offer of something" (affection, hope). In the context of *pennu kaanal* what is being offered is the girl, who faces the dim prospect of being snubbed or refused by her suitor and his family. *Pennu kaanal* is thus a serious encounter, even a sombre event in which the normal rules of gender and social hierarchy are meticulously observed, unlike in the case of flirting behavior among Kerala youth, where the normal rules are subverted or transcended (Osella and Osella, 1996b on Kerala). The correct etiquette to be followed during *pennu kaanal* is for the girl to enter the room looking demure and modest in a saree; she may take a quick glance at the prospective groom if she serves him sweet meats, while he may have glanced her way when she entered the room. Few words are spoken, although in many of the cases I studied, the couples had spoken, since young men are anxious to find socially compatible wives. A male parent informed me that when his son met his future wife at the *pennu kaanal*, he "talked and talked for

hours, asking her many questions." Sushila, a Syrian Marthomite with a master's degree in sociology, observed that when she met her future husband, his only conversation with her was to inform her that his future wife should not work. Questioning the groom, would be seen as "pushy" behaviour on the part of the bride. Annamma, a social worker and sociologist, whose marriage I discuss later, recalled the reactions of some of the men who had responded to the advertisement she had placed in the newspapers for prospective grooms. Although several men had answered the advertisement, they had been put off by her questioning them when she had met with them at her work place. She was considered to be "too pushy" to be a desirable partner in marriage.

The ritual of *pennu kaanal* is viewed by some Christian women as a "direct challenge or aggression" (Osella and Osella, 1996b), where the power of the *look*, the male gaze, might indicate refusal, interest or acceptance. Christian women see this as a degrading experience, but a ritual that they must go through to be married. Thus speaking of the *pennu kaanal* ceremony, Ammukutty (age 40) noted: "The woman is supposed to show herself to the man who has come to see her. She must serve him tea and refreshments and answer his questions, and then to be told that he has refused her. Even educated women must go through this humiliation." The humiliation and the shame of refusal must also be understood in relation to the act of *seeing* or *being seen* as signifying physical connection. *Seeing* and *sight* in the Hindu ritual of seeing the deity imply connection, sharing of substance, benevolence and worship (Babb, 1981). The act of seeing coincides also with the "physiological aversion to seeing dangerous things (evil eye)," as "sight is the means of contagion in primitive science" (Aiyar, 1926: 95). Thus, eye power must be contained and carefully regulated in male-female interactions. In the context of marriage, "being seen is both mandatory and dangerous" (Shirali, 1997: 66). A woman's demure countenance is necessary because, although her body is pleasing to the male gaze, it is dangerous and disruptive in its sensual and sexual aspects. Thus it is unbecoming for a woman to boldly challenge the male gaze (Shirali, 1997). The masking (modesty) and the revealing (showing the girl) of the body and glancing and lowering of eyes in the context of the ritual of *pennu kaanal* are acts whereby the female body is "feminized and sexualized" (see Vom Bruk, 1992: 182 on this point). The implied familiarity in the act of "seeing" is often controlled and managed by a change in the site of "seeing," from the familiar surroundings of the woman's home to the more formal setting of the parish church, or the home of a friend/relative. Some prospective suitors manage to

steal a glance at the proposed woman at her workplace or, if she were a student or a lecturer, at the college before the formal *pennu kaanal* ritual, since refusing a woman after the *pennu kaanal* can be embarrassing to the woman and her family. Mary John, a college lecturer threatened to resign after her marriage proposal fell through after the *pennu kaanal* since her colleagues and friends knew about the proposal and the viewing ceremony. Her family managed to persuade her to take a leave of absence instead.

Women who are turned down after the *pennu kaanal* ritual, tend to take the refusal as an indication of their unattractiveness. On the other hand, the woman's "dark skin" or "appearance" could be used as an *excuse* for rejection, especially in cases where the groom's family is dissatisfied with the dowry offered. A threat of refusal after the "viewing" may also be used as one last attempt by the groom's family to claim a higher dowry. When Betty, a Jacobite *Knanaya* Christian, attempted to arrange a marriage between her niece and her husband's nephew, the young man refused saying the girl was "dark and plain looking." Betty was not convinced since she claimed that her niece was "quite sweet"; she believed that the real reason for his refusal was because the dowry offered was lower than the dowry received by his older brother in the same year. The intended marriage of Ammani, a Syrian Marthomite and an engineer, failed to take place because her suitor's mother made one last attempt to increase the dowry from the agreed amount of Rs. 150 000. Ammani's family saw this as an indication of "money mindedness" on the part of the suitor's family and called off the engagement after the *pennu kaanal*. When we met soon after, Ammani was confused about the young man's passive reaction to his family's demands since she had a pleasant conversation with him during the viewing. She was convinced that he had not found her attractive enough to persuade his family to reconsider their demands. A few months after "viewing" Ammani, the man married a non-working and high-school graduate who offered a much bigger dowry.

Colour and the Negotiation of Dowry

Davis (1997: 386) has remarked that marital selection is a great deal more than birth or caste considerations and "involve a trade, a reciprocity which ensures a certain kind of equality by balancing between the two mates all the qualities which enters into the calculation of marital advantage . . . achievement, beauty, intelligence, youth and wealth." In emphasizing the role of fair skin as one criterion of marriage, I would argue that "colour" becomes part of the symbolic capital, to use Bourdieu's (1977) term, in

marriage considerations. Lionel Caplan (1987: 117) takes a similar approach in his analysis of marriage and dowry among urban Christians in Madras City (now Chennai) in Tamil Nadu. Using Bourdieu's ideas on marriage as a game of cards, in which the "outcome depends on the deal, the cards held (i.e., material and symbolic capital), and the players' skill, Caplan analyses Christian marriages in the context of class, caste, dowry and family reputation as well as the personal merits and demerits of prospective spouses. However, marriage, as Caplan (1987) has also argued, does not favour the players equally. It affects men and women differently and favours some women over others, depending on their individual attributes and the collective merits of their families.

The role of colour and appearance in arranged marriages is situational, variable and discriminatory, and it does not operate in the same way in every marriage or influence the outcome or success of all marriage negotiations. A light-skin colour and "good looks" can be used to compensate for what Lenski (1954) has called "status inconsistencies" in cross-caste marriages, as well as inadequate dowry, lack of education or employment. Conversely, larger dowries may be demanded from women without education, employment, and women who are considered to be dark or unattractive. Daughters and daughters-in-law are unequally favoured in the allocation of dowry payments by their natal families while dowry differences among sisters-in-law (*nathoonmar*) within an affinal household can be the source of jealousy and conflict, especially if a woman of fair-skin colour carries a lower dowry than one who is dark skinned (see Bumiller, 1990: 54 for a similar point). The dowry may also reflect the balancing of spousal attributes in marital negotiations. Rosie, a *Knanayite* woman, received a higher dowry than her younger sister who married 14 years later. Rosie married into a "prestigious family" and had to take a dowry befitting the status of the groom's family, but her sister married at a late age and the only son in a family of four daughters and modest means. Rosie observed that her sister was "not good looking and was not educated," while her brother-in-law who being the only brother of many sisters could not have found a better match.

The dowry amounts have increased significantly from the nominal cash dowries that were paid in the past (see Anantakrishna Aiyar, 1926). Family wealth, family name and reputation were the main considerations in the past, and the dowry was matched with the inheritance of the groom. Liza, a Marthomite woman, noted, "in those days it was a case of getting the right connections more than a question of money." With the expansion of the urban Christian middle class, educational qualifications, earning

power and jobs in the urban employment sector, and ownership of urban property have become essential requirements for both men and women in the marriage market. The financial burden has now shifted exclusively to the bride's family in contrast to the past when both families shared it equally by matching the bride's dowry with the groom's inheritance. Although the practice of dowry was made illegal in 1961 by legislation for all of India the practice continues among Kerala Christians, and indeed in every part of India, as a compulsory part of marriage transactions (Philips, 2003). However, Kerala in general has been spared some of the more abhorrent practices associated with dowry, such as the frequently reported "dowry deaths," mostly in the northern parts of India.[7]

The dowry in arranged marriages is an indication of the relative status and standing of the families of the bride and groom. The offer of a dowry below expectations may be an assertion of superiority of the bride givers over the bride takers; it could equally convey the unequal treatment of a daughter by her natal family. The offer of a dowry above expectations, on the other hand, becomes a favourite subject of community gossip and insinuation that the large dowry is being used to "marry off" a girl who is either dark, unattractive, or "sickly," or has some dubious attribute. Among Syrian Christians in particular, there are strict conventions regarding the appropriate dowries to be given and received by families of particular status groups and marriage circles. While many traditional families still adhere to these conventions and reject offers of exceedingly high dowries for their sons or the high dowry demands made by prospective suitors for their daughters, there are the "new rich" (*puthu-panakkarar*), who offer large dowries to gain attractive alliances with traditional and well-known families. "Good" or "traditional families" who have seen their wealth dwindle and have only their reputation to recommend them might also attempt to get the maximum dowries for their sons, or negotiate lower dowries for their daughters.

Varghese, an 85-year-old respected scholar belonging to the Marthomite denomination, took pride in the fact that he had successfully "married off" his six daughters to Syrian Christian men of good standing. He was not a wealthy man but belonged to a lineage of educated families. He considered all of his daughters to be "very beautiful" with the additional qualification of being educated and employed. He used them as trade-offs to give modest dowries at their marriages, compared to the dowries offered by other families of the same status and the high dowries his sons received for their marriages. The one exception was his third daughter who had only a tenth grade education and was not employed. He used her "good

looks" to negotiate a dowry he could afford, but he still had to pay a higher dowry for her compared to her older sisters, and had "to settle for less" in marrying her to an army officer even though he did not meet the family's expectations for an educated groom. In the case of his sons, on the other hand, Varghese exploited their professional qualifications to secure high dowries for them. One of his sons, a doctor, married a woman with a serious heart condition. The Varghese family chose to ignore the woman's health because she was from a wealthy and prominent Syrian Christian family, not to mention the impressive dowry of a substantial cash amount and partnership for the groom in the father-in-law's medical business.

There are other instances where large dowries and/or family status have been instrumental in "marrying-off" women who are considered to be dark, unattractive or unhealthy. Cherian, a Syrian Christian college lecturer, described his sister, who had a grade 12 education, as being "neither fair nor pretty." The family had a difficult time finding a groom for her but finally arranged her marriage to a groom belonging to a Protestant denomination and holding "only a clerical job" in the Middle East, for a relatively high dowry of Rs. 80 000 in 1984. Thomas, a Syrian Catholic, related the case of his nephew (his sister's son) who first refused to marry his present wife as she was "rather dark." Thomas's sister prevailed on her son to agree to the marriage, noting "what is the harm if the girl is dark, all that will be of no account with three lakhs of rupees in the bank."

The colour and physical appearances of prospective spouses can affect marriage choices and dowry payments in other interesting ways. Achamma is a 70-year-old Syrian Catholic widow and the mother of 14 children, 13 daughters and one son. When the oldest daughter's marriage to her son-in-law was being arranged, her daughter was not "impressed with his looks because he was bald and looked old." But the groom was attracted to her daughter who "was very beautiful." Achamma managed to persuade her daughter to marry him because he was from a good family and did not insist on dowry. Achamma gave a token dowry of 40 gold sovereigns. Her second daughter, a doctor, married a Syrian Christian doctor working in the United States. He had come looking for a bride in his native Kerala and had wanted "a girl of good character" and "good looks" but was not concerned about dowry. Achamma gave this daughter a token dowry of 40 sovereigns as well. She believed that her daughters' good looks had worked to their advantage since marrying them off would have been a daunting task given her rather modest wealth. Achamma's only son married outside his caste, the

circumstances of which are described later on in this section.

Dowries are comparatively lower among the strictly endogamous *Knanayite* community because of the smaller marriage pool and the lower achievement level of this community in the professions. But communal endogamy has certain practical advantages insofar as unattractive women or women lacking competitive dowries can be married into families with previous marriage connections. Peter, a *Knanayite* college lecturer, whose daughter's marriage to a Hindu Nair was previously mentioned, described how he and his wife had managed to persuade one of his younger brothers to marry his present wife, whom his brother perceived as being "too thin and sickly." The bride's family was distantly connected to them through marriage and Peter and his wife had insisted that "a known family is better than an unknown one." The bride's mother was a widow and had little to offer as dowry. The marriage was an ideal arrangement as it did not contravene the rules of clan exogamy. On the other hand, in the case of Peter's brother's daughter Nirmala, who married her cross-cousin Arjuna (Peter's sister's son), a special dispensation was granted by the Jacobite Syrian Church, since this was a marriage that broke the rule of *sapinda* exogamy, which prohibits the marriage of near relatives by birth. This "wrong marriage" was permitted on "sympathetic grounds," for the bride had no dowry, she was well passed the age of 35 and her widowed mother had difficulty getting her daughters married. Arjuna was not educated and was also unable to find "a good match" within the community.

Latin Catholic women, unlike their Syrian Catholic and Christian counterparts, have strong inheritance rights in land and houses which are often given as dowry at their marriages. However, compared to dowries in the Syrian community, the dowry amounts are low. I attribute this to communal/caste endogamy and close-kin marriages. But here too, wealth and appearance can be used as bargaining counters in inter-status, inter-caste and inter-community marriages. Daisy Das is a Latin Catholic woman whose daughter married a rich contractor from Tamil Nadu, the region bordering Kerala. Daisy described her son-in-law as "very dark, but rich." His main requirement for a bride was that she should be "fair and good looking." Her daughter fitted this description and Daisy and her husband were overjoyed that they could get a wealthy son-in-law for their daughter since they had little wealth to offer as dowry or inheritance.

Intercaste marriages involving Syrian and Latin Catholic families illustrate the playing out of caste, dowry and colour/appearance in specific marriage arrangements.

Lilly, a Latin Catholic teacher, married Thomas, a Syrian Jacobite, who became a Catholic to marry Lilly. Lilly is from a wealthy Latin family claiming "Nair caste origins." Lilly referred to her mother as a "fair lady," who was pressured to marry a "dark man" (Lilly's father), because he was a doctor in Malaysia. Lilly described herself as "very dark and not good looking unlike my other family members." She made many references to her skin colour during our conversations, particularly since her husband, who is also a teacher, is of a light complexion. He was referred to as *"veluzha"* (fair) man by their neighbour who directed my field assistant and myself to their home. My research assistant, who is a Nair woman, was frankly surprised at the "colour- mis-matching" of Lilly and Thomas, since this was also a cross-caste marriage. Lilly made no secret of the fact that her husband, Thomas, married her for her dowry, which was 100 sovereigns in jewelry and Rs. 10 000 in cash, a substantial dowry in 1959. She went on to suggest that "Syrians are very money-minded, demand high dowries, and would marry Latins who are willing to provide high dowries."

Achamma's (the Syrian woman with 14 children) only son Joseph, is an officer in the prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS), and he married the daughter of Stephen, a wealthy Latin Catholic politician from the *Mukkuwar* (fishing) caste. Stephen, Joseph's father-in-law, is a self-made man, who rose from humble beginnings to establish lucrative businesses in the export of fish and in the hotel industry. His wife (Joseph's mother-in-law), is an attractive Syrian Catholic woman and the daughter of a young, impoverished widow, who is described in the community as a "fair, pretty widow of ill repute," who had difficulty getting her children married into respectable families within the Syrian-Catholic community. Stephen's marriage to her daughter provided him with the credentials he needed to claim Syrian connections, while his wife, an attractive woman like her mother became the respected spouse of an enterprising businessmen and prominent politician in Kerala. It was rumoured that Stephen had deliberately prevented his daughter from marrying a Latin man of her choice so that he could arrange her marriage to Joseph, Achamma's son. He dangled the carrot of a large dowry before Achamma and her family: a cash component of Rs. 100 000, shares in a restaurant, a new house, jewellery, etc. Although this marriage was a cross-caste marriage, there were exceptional circumstances that influenced their decision to cross caste boundaries. Stephen's reputation as an influential politician and the impressive dowry that was being offered were hard to resist and Achamma and her husband had been willing to overlook

caste, for as Achamma put it, "these days, class is more important than caste." They were, however, disturbed by Stephen's claim to respectability through their son's prestigious job as a civil servant. Subsequently, when a Latin IAS officer who was a friend of her son was attracted to one of Achamma's daughters and proposed marriage to her, Achamma could not refuse his request as her son's marriage had already set a precedent. No less important was the suitor's prestigious job as a civil servant. However, Achamma refused to give more than Rs. 30 000 as dowry, provoking the groom's father to remark "even a fisherman would get that much." Generally in Syrian/Latin marriages, Syrian families have an advantage over Latin families in that they can negotiate lower dowries for their daughters, using superior caste status as well as fair skin and appearance as trade-offs. In contrast, Latin women, whom the Syrians consider to be darker in complexion and of inferior caste status, must pay high dowries to marry Syrian men. Thus, while cross-caste marriages endanger the caste purity of families, there are circumstances such as these when caste rules are breached to offset disadvantages in dowry, and/or when occupation and political and class connections confer advantages to traditionally wealthy families such as Achamma's whose economic circumstances have changed.

The example of Annamma (previously cited) presents a unique instance of a cross-caste marriage. Annamma is a 30-year-old Syrian Catholic from a "good family." She is employed as a social welfare officer and insisted, as a matter of principle, on marrying without a dowry. Her parents worried that their daughter would remain single as all arranged marriages involve a dowry transaction even as a formality. Annamma is strikingly beautiful, educated, employed and independent. She placed an advertisement in the papers, calling for prospective suitors who would be willing to forego dowry. She interviewed the applicants at her workplace, most of whom described her as being "too smart," "independent," "pushy" and "frank." Her eventual husband, a Latin Catholic, had answered the advertisement while on one of his brief vacations from the Middle East where he was working as a technician. Annamma's mother-in-law informed me that her son had refused a number of marriage proposals from his own community because he found the dowries offered to be inadequate, since "Gulf returnees" as they are called, can often demand high dowries. After his meeting with Annamma, however, her son dropped the dowry issue and decided to marry Annamma because "he was attracted by her good looks and intelligence." Annamma's insistence on a dowryless marriage resulted in her marriage outside her community,

but it is a moot point whether her fair skin and good looks, or her Syrian caste status, influenced the marriage choice of her Latin Catholic husband. Perhaps it was a little of both, whereas for her other unwilling suitors, her good looks were not enough to mitigate her independent character or her insistence on a marriage without dowry.

Discussion

This paper considered skin colour, in its many manifestations as beauty, health and moral conduct, as a symbolic artefact marking the boundaries of castes and communities, defining feminine-gender identity, and influencing marriage and dowry transactions. Skin colour, as a communal and gender marker is indeed a "social myth" (Wolfe, 1962) perpetuated by society and imposed almost exclusively on women and not on men. Colour values are also differentially applied to women, depending on their relative position in caste and communal hierarchies. Whereas upper-caste women are expected to exhibit the ideal body type, i.e., fair skin, black and straight hair, and a healthy body, women of the lower castes and communities must carry the burden of being excluded from such culturally desirable physical traits. Although colour variations between and within communities exist, women are defined by qualities that are considered "essential" to different groups, and gender becomes fragmented at the boundaries of caste and sub-communal identities.

The cultivation of sexual differences as Sylviame Agacinski (1998) has noted, involves both embellishments and exaggerations of the body. For women, these embellishments are particularly important as they accentuate the health and beauty of their bodies and enhance their sexuality, marriageability and reproductive potential. Body embellishments take the form of jewellery and clothing that mark the life-cycle stages of women while also operating as significations of individual differences and collective identities. They also include brand-named beauty products that flood the Indian market, equating "fairness with beauty" and advertising beauty as the means to both employment and marriage.

The ideal woman is not only the beautiful woman (fair, moral, healthy), but one whose sexual, erotic and disruptive sides are muted, concealed and contained within the secure confines of marriage and male attachment. While beautiful women are sensual and pleasing to the male gaze and are desirable as marriage partners, beauty in its sensual and sexual meanings poses a threat to the caste and communal hierarchies of Christian society. The arranged marriage and the dowry system allow Christian women to transcend the negative associations of this dual image of themselves while also allowing them to over-

come the limitations of colour impediments and physical imperfections.

Marriage makes a woman socially visible, but her social identity through marriage must be secured through her physical visibility (desirability) and material endowment in the form of dowry or inheritance. A woman's prospects in the marriage market are thus dependent on the extent to which she embodies the desired cultural qualities of ideal womanhood, in addition to her material worth and her individual achievements. Women are thus defined by their individuality and by their gender positioning and the two are mutually constructed. Fair-skin colour, in its multiple manifestations as femininity, morality and health, is tied to marriageability and conjugality, and hence to motherhood and gender identity.

Skin colour, as symbolic capital, is one attribute among many others that is used in marriage and dowry bargaining. Dowry is the monetary measure of a woman's *value* as a person and as a representative of her caste, class, or community, and mirrors her degree of conformity to cultural ideals of beauty and other attributes of feminine gender identity. Despite the high educational achievements of Kerala Christian women, there has been no dramatic reduction in the dowry that even educated women should put up to get married (see Philips, 2003). A woman must also be pleasing to men's eyes, and since the opportunity is seldom given for prospective couples in an arranged marriage to socialize in any meaningful way, physical appearance operates as one criterion in the list of attributes underlying the selection of a bride. It is not the only measure of marriageability, however, and the cases I have described reveal the ways in which colour operates in Christian marriage arrangements.

Colour values are an intrinsic part of constructions of female sexuality and femininity; and the "ideal woman" and the "ideal physical type" are defined synonymously in Kerala Christian cultural constructions. Such constructions inevitably result in divisions among women based on the degree of conformity to such cultural ideals. Christians' preference for fair skin works to the advantage of certain categories of women by positioning them for better marital outcomes but they are not necessarily the victors in the marital game. On the other hand, social norms that compel women from supposedly "superior" communities to display the ideal beauty standards and corresponding attributes that define their superior status, tend to marginalize other women who fall short of the expected standards. They lead to the "erasure"(Jayawardena and De Alwis,1996: xi) of women from other communities who are collectively excluded from similar expectations based on cultural definitions of caste identity and social place-

ment. Thus, in Kerala and elsewhere in India, the marriage market works materially and symbolically to undermine women's status and their achievements in education and in employment.

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Notes

1 Kerala State, located in the South West coast of India, has the largest concentration of Indian Christians (20% or 6.4 million) in a total population of 32 million and is the home of the oldest Christian community in India, i.e., the Syrian Christians who number around five million.

2 Historical and ethnographic evidence, however, challenge simplified links between "fair" skin and economic or political privilege and domination. The enslavement of fair-skinned groups was common before Africa became an alternative source for black slaves for the Mediterranean and Near Eastern slave trade (Evans, 1980, cited from Trautmann, 1997: 225). Fair-skinned Slavs were more desired as slaves by German tribesman (Smedley, 1999: 693). Slavery existed among people of colour while indentured servitude existed in parts of Europe and Britain (Robbins, 2002).

3 For a discussion of the Aryan theory of race see Cox, 1970; Robb, 1997; Thapar, 1966 and 1977; Trautmann, 1997.

4 In ayurvedic theory, illness is caused by humoral imbalances, and a healthy body requires a balance between the three humours: wind, bile and phlegm. Ayurvedic medicine involves the use of three basic treatments to increase fluidity in the body and to loosen and soften the body and its passages (Raheja, 1988): a proper diet to maintain humoral balance and a balance between heat and cold states; the application of oils and other herbal substances to the body and parts of the body that are affected by ill health, or as preventive anointment; and the ingestion of ayurvedic concoctions.

5 While a virgin bride or a widow would wear white (signifying sexually inactivity), a new bride will wear a red sari after the ritual tying of the *tali* or *minnu* by the groom. The colour red symbolizes fertility and active sexuality.

6 Menstruation results in the seclusion of the young girl, with the purificatory bath and the eating of cooling foods. Among Syrian Christians, the painting of the palms and feet with henna (*mailanchi*) serves as a means of containing body heat and neutralizing the poisons in the body and the evil spirits that might attack the body (Anantakrishna Aiyar, 1926: 95; see also Kapadia, 1995 for other South Indian communities).

7 According to a more recent study (Chacko, 2003), violence against women, dowry-related deaths and suicides among women connected to the dowry problem are on the increase in Kerala.

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