



Recognition, Ritual, and Indigenous Identity: Reinterpreting Charles Taylor's Hermeneutics of Recognition Through the Philosophical Worldview of the Irula Community of Attapadi, Kerala, India

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Abstract- This paper develops an intercultural dialogue between Charles Taylor's hermeneutics of recognition and the living philosophy of the Irula community of Attapadi, in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It examines how an indigenous epistemology articulates a relational understanding of being that both deepens and extends Taylor's account of the dialogical self. For Taylor, the self is not a self-enclosed, "punctual" subject but an identity constituted within what he terms a "web of interlocution": one cannot be a self on one's own, but only in relation to interlocutors who are essential to one's self-definition (Taylor, 1989). The argument advanced here is that Irula ritual life, oral tradition, and ecological ethics give embodied form to this dialogical ontology while pressing beyond its anthropocentric limits. Performances such as the circular Kummi dance and the community's narrative and ceremonial traditions enact a lived philosophy of interdependence in which personhood, nature, and the sacred are mutually constitutive. Against the modern ideal of an autonomous individual, Irula thought frames personhood as relational and ecological, grounded in reciprocal recognition extended to both human and other-than-human worlds. Read in this way, recognition is reconceived from an interpersonal moral gesture into a cosmological principle of balance and continuity—an orientation consonant with Gadamer's claim that genuine understanding is achieved dialogically, through the medium of a shared language (Gadamer, 1989). Situating this exchange within a decolonial framework informed by Smith (2012) and Mignolo (2011), the paper argues that Irula cultural expressions are not anthropological curiosities but philosophical acts—forms of resilience that sustain ethical meaning amid marginalisation and ecological disruption. Integrating Taylor's hermeneutics with Irula relational wisdom, the study reimagines recognition as a holistic process with ethical, ecological, and spiritual dimensions, and proposes that hermeneutic philosophy expand beyond the human toward a dialogical ethics of coexistence in which understanding the world and caring for it are inseparable.

Keywords- Hermeneutics; recognition; dialogical self; indigenous worldview; Irula community; decolonial philosophy; ecological ethics.

I. Introduction

Contemporary philosophical debate on identity and recognition has been shaped predominantly by European intellectual traditions that privilege abstract rationality and individual autonomy. Indigenous communities such as the Irula of Attapadi, however, sustain alternative epistemologies grounded in ecology, ritual practice, and relational ethics. Their worldview, dense with myth and collective symbolism, offers a living



instance of what Charles Taylor (1989) calls the dialogical constitution of the self—a mode of being realised through recognition and ongoing dialogue rather than in isolation.

For Taylor, identity is never formed alone. “There is a sense in which one cannot be a self on one’s own,” he writes; “I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors” (Taylor, 1989, p. 36). The self emerges and develops within a “web of interlocution”—the conversations, communities, and cultural frameworks through which self-understanding becomes possible at all. This account rejects the “punctual” model of selfhood associated with Descartes and Locke, in which the subject is a detached point of disengaged reason, and affirms instead that selves are permeable and interconnected, formed within shared horizons of meaning. Dialogical selfhood, for Taylor, is thus an ontological claim and not merely a social observation: who we are is constituted in and through relation.

This conception can be brought into illuminating dialogue with Irula thought. The Irula are a Dravidian-speaking community of the Nilgiri ranges of the Western Ghats, distributed across Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and they constitute the largest of the tribal communities of the Attapadi region (Sreehari & Kasi, 2025; Thurston & Rangachari, 1909). Their cultural life is organised around community participation, ritual performance, and a relational understanding of identity. In the Irula worldview, personhood and meaning are created and sustained through shared practices—ceremonial dance, communal storytelling, and cooperative ecological labour—that resonate strongly with Taylor’s thesis that the self is realised dialogically.

Crucially, Irula ritual is not an arena for individual self-expression but a space of collective recognition, mutual understanding, and the shared creation of value. Identity is negotiated continually between individual experience and the well-being of the community, and that negotiation reaches beyond the human to encompass the natural and spiritual orders. This paper argues that such a relational philosophy both exemplifies and extends Taylor’s dialogical model: it shows how selves are shaped through continual dialogue and reciprocal recognition, while widening the circle of interlocution to include the ecological and the sacred. Read through a decolonial lens, the Irula worldview is reclaimed not as ethnographic data but as philosophy in its own right.

II. Hermeneutics: Meaning, Method, and Cultural Relevance

Hermeneutics, from the Greek *hermēneuein* (“to interpret” or “to translate”), originally named the art of interpreting sacred and authoritative texts, but in the twentieth century it became a broad philosophical account of understanding as such. Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur transformed hermeneutics from a method of textual exegesis into an analysis of human existence, holding that understanding is always historically and culturally situated. Gadamer (1989) argued that interpretation is never a neutral, presuppositionless act but a “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*), in which the interpreter’s horizon meets that of what is to be understood. Meaning, on this view, is not simply uncovered but brought into being through dialogue, reflection, and openness to the other.



Charles Taylor extends this insight into the ethical and political domain through what may be called a hermeneutics of recognition. Because selfhood is dialogical—because one is a self only among other selves—understanding is not confined to texts but unfolds through our relations with others, our languages, and the moral frameworks we share (Taylor, 1989, 1994). Hermeneutics is therefore at once a philosophical method and an ethical stance: genuine understanding requires recognition of, and respect for, the other’s horizon of meaning. Misrecognition, Taylor (1994) observes, is not merely a failure of courtesy but can inflict real harm, confining people within a diminished mode of being.

Applied to indigenous traditions such as those of the Irula, hermeneutics acquires renewed vitality. Rituals, songs, and oral narratives function as living “texts”—embodied articulations of history, ecology, and identity. Interpreting these forms reveals indigenous knowledge to be interpretive and dialogical in its very constitution. Grounded in relational understanding and ecological awareness, the Irula way of life exemplifies hermeneutics as a lived practice rather than an abstract theory; like Gadamer’s account of the work of art, it invites participation and understanding through shared experience, narrowing the distance between philosophy and life.

III. Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that combines ethnographic observation, hermeneutic interpretation, and decolonial analysis. Field engagement in the Attapadi region included conversations with community elders, observation of ritual gatherings, and the documentation of oral narratives, undertaken with attention to the ethical commitments of community-based and indigenous research (Smith, 2012). Hermeneutic interpretation, drawing on Gadamer (1989) and Taylor (1989, 1994), is used to read these cultural expressions as dialogical sites of meaning. Following Gadamer’s thesis that understanding proceeds as a fusion of horizons, Irula rituals are approached as dialogical spaces in which meaning is co-constituted between participant and observer; Taylor’s hermeneutics of recognition then carries this dialogical principle into the ethical sphere, framing the encounter as one of mutual recognition rather than detached description.

Methodological note. The descriptions of Irula ritual and performance presented here rest on field observation in Attapadi, supported by secondary ethnographic and comparative scholarship on South Indian tribal traditions (Sreehari & Kasi, 2024, 2025; Thurston & Rangachari, 1909). Comparative references to neighbouring or analogous practices are offered to illustrate the broader grammar of indigenous performative wisdom, and not to conflate distinct cultural identities; each tradition is treated as a dynamic, evolving expression of lived philosophy. The interpretive aim is recognition rather than classification—to read these practices as philosophy, while respecting their particularity and the limits of an outsider’s horizon.



IV. Rituals, Recognition, and Relational Ethics

Within Irula life, ritual functions as an interpretive and performative act through which the community sustains identity, memory, and ethical relationship. Each ceremony enacts a dialogical engagement among the human, natural, and spiritual orders, constituting what may be called a lived hermeneutics of recognition. Among these forms, the Kummi dance-performed in a circle to rhythmic clapping and song-stands as a performed philosophy of collective existence. Its circular form, in which no dancer occupies a centre and each movement answers another, offers an apt image of dialogical selfhood: a space in which identity is continually formed through relation and response, and in which the unity of individual, community, and cosmos is rehearsed and renewed. Beyond dance, Irula culture is woven through with ecological and ritual symbolism that binds the spiritual and the everyday. Seasonal observances tied to the harvest and the monsoon honour deities of fertility and protection and affirm a finely tuned ecological awareness. Songs performed in the Irula tongue carry oral histories-ancestral journeys, forest lore, and ethical instruction grounded in cooperation and humility (Sreehari & Kasi, 2024). Craft traditions, especially bamboo work and herbal medicine, embody a practical wisdom that links subsistence to reverence for the living environment. In each case, knowledge is transmitted not as abstract doctrine but as participatory practice.

The Irula of Attapadi have also long stood in relation to neighbouring communities, and these relations form part of the region's ritual fabric. Oral tradition recalls ties of mutual respect and occasional ceremonial cooperation between Irula elders and longstanding local lineages, particularly around agricultural festivals-instances in which recognition is performed across social boundaries. Such moments may be read, with Gadamer, as a fusion of horizons in which distinct cultural meanings meet and interact, opening renewed possibilities for understanding. The interpretive caution noted above applies here: these encounters are sites of negotiated meaning, not evidence of a single, homogeneous tradition.

Parallels can be drawn between Irula practice and other indigenous traditions across India. The Kurichiya and Kurumba of the Western Ghats, or the Gond of central India, sustain comparable relational ethics that join ritual to ecology and kinship; among them too, dance and storytelling serve as modes of interpretation through which communal identity is preserved and transmitted. Such comparisons suggest that indigenous rituals are not archaic survivals but dynamic philosophical expressions of life itself-enactments of what Taylor (1989) describes as the moral space within which questions of meaning, value, and belonging are continually addressed.

Through these interlocking practices, ritual becomes for the Irula at once a medium of recognition and an archive of resilience. The ethical dimension of their performative life invites a rethinking of recognition not merely as interpersonal acknowledgement but as a cosmological orientation. Each observance functions as an interpretive act of remembering, renewing, and restoring relation-with one another, with the earth, and with the sacred. In this sense Irula ritual life constitutes a living hermeneutics: an ongoing dialogue between history and hope, the human and the more-than-human, articulating a philosophy of coexistence with direct bearing on contemporary ecological and ethical concerns.



V. Resilience and Decolonial Hermeneutics

In the face of marginalisation and environmental displacement, the Irula sustain resilience by reinterpreting ritual and memory rather than abandoning them. Their adaptive continuity recalls Taylor's (1989) account of an identity that persists through transformation, holding to a framework of meaning even as circumstances change. Here recognition extends beyond interpersonal acknowledgement to encompass ecological and spiritual reciprocity—a widening of the moral circle that the Irula worldview takes as fundamental.

This widening is sharpened by decolonial thought. Gadamer's hermeneutics already insists that understanding is dialogical, arising through respectful and open exchange between differing horizons rather than through the imposition of a single, ahistorical truth (Gadamer, 1989). Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012) carries this commitment into the politics of knowledge, showing how colonial structures have marginalised indigenous ways of knowing and calling for research practices rooted in genuine dialogue—practices that listen to and collaborate with indigenous communities rather than treating them as objects of study. Walter D. Mignolo's (2011) notion of “epistemic disobedience” names the corresponding shift: a refusal of the assumption that legitimate knowledge must take a single, Western form, and a reclaiming of interpretive agency by those whom colonial modernity rendered merely the objects of others' knowledge.

Taken together, Gadamer, Smith, and Mignolo point toward a decolonial hermeneutics grounded in both interpretation and ethical engagement. In relation to the Irula, this approach treats understanding as participatory and ethical-honouring listening, shared meaning-making, and mutual recognition not only as interpretive procedures but as acts of justice. Naming and articulating one's own world, as Smith (2012) emphasises, is itself a form of resistance to epistemic erasure; the Irula community's continued articulation of its worldview is, in this sense, a philosophical and political act.

Despite persistent challenges—socio-economic inequality, land pressure, and environmental degradation—the Irula continue to uphold and revitalise their cultural heritage, increasingly supported by initiatives in education, health, and sustainable development. Their resilience offers more than an instance of cultural survival; it exemplifies an enduring relationship between community and the natural world, and a way of knowing that has much to contribute to the wider ethical imagination.

VI. Conclusion

Bringing Charles Taylor's hermeneutics of recognition into dialogue with the Irula worldview of Attapadi invites a reconsideration of what it means to philosophise across cultures. The aim has not been to draw a static comparison but to initiate an epistemic exchange in which philosophy is willing to learn from indigenous systems of thought. Through ritual, ecological sensibility, and oral tradition, the Irula community embodies a living hermeneutics of recognition in which recognition is not a social transaction alone but a cosmological principle connecting the human, the natural, and the sacred in a single continuum.



The Irula understanding of personhood challenges the Cartesian ideal of an isolated, self-contained subject and affirms instead a dialogical ontology in which identity unfolds through relationship and collective participation. This resonates with Taylor's notion of the dialogical self while extending it, by rooting recognition in ecological and spiritual interdependence. Irula philosophy thus enriches hermeneutic thought with an alternative vision of belonging, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility that the modern Western tradition has tended to occlude.

Viewed through a decolonial lens, this synthesis represents a movement toward epistemic justice. For too long, indigenous knowledge has been reduced to ethnographic description rather than acknowledged as genuine philosophy. Recognising the Irula worldview as a full participant in philosophical reflection restores the dignity of indigenous epistemologies and reframes decolonial hermeneutics as both a method of interpretation and an ethical commitment-to listen, to engage, and to redress the hierarchies that have governed the production of knowledge.

The resilience of the Irula is at once cultural and philosophical. Their rituals and ecological practices articulate a way of life grounded in reciprocity, care, and coexistence rather than domination and separation. In an age of environmental crisis and cultural fragmentation, such perspectives offer a transformative ethical vision oriented toward harmony, recognition, and sustainability. Integrating Taylor's hermeneutics with the Irula worldview suggests, finally, that philosophy must be dialogical across traditions and not only within them: true interpretation demands humility, openness, and ethical responsiveness. The Irula community, through its living wisdom, reminds us that to recognise is to relate, and to interpret is to renew. The study accordingly calls for further philosophical inquiry into indigenous performative traditions as fertile sites of meaning, where hermeneutics, ecology, and ethics converge upon the shared future of humanity.

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