

# SPIRIT STONES

## of Southern India

I was driving down the highway when a crude wooden cross caught my eye. At first, I thought someone must have hit an animal on the road and buried it there. However, when I talked to Bill Noble, a geography professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, he told me it is highway patrol policy in some western states, such as Montana and Wyoming, to mark the spots where fatal accidents occur. Noble also said he has seen similar markers on mountain roads in South America. This just goes to show, something that might initially seem to be a peculiarity of a certain region might have worldwide roots. Although it may be nothing more than policy in America, some tribal people in southern India believe a person's soul remains in a certain spot after death. When a tribal woman becomes pregnant, a stone, or churinga, is selected for her unborn child's spirit, which attaches itself to this "spirit stone" and stays with it even after death.

The Arunta tribe of Australia utilize sacred caves and rock shelters to hold a churinga for each female and male member of the tribe, according to Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, 1899. A churinga is composed of stone or wood and is often incised with decorative motifs. Upon the death of any member, the related spirit of the person is believed to be conjoined with his or her churinga. Spirits eventually wander away, and pregnancy in a female occurs when a spirit enters her womb. Thus, there is a primitive and charming concept related to the transmigration of spirits.

Although there is no counterpart of this belief system in India, some of the tribals of southern India place spirit stones in the open, in dolmens (table-like tombs), in above-surface cists or in simply constructed temples. Spirit stones were once invariably water-smoothened stones from stream beds, but among tribals who have not abandoned the cult practice, there is now a tendency to deposit a sculptured stone instead. The common belief is that the spirit of a deceased person will be bound to the spirit stone for a while, but will then go to a supernatural abode and not return to earth for another existence.

So far, our research of the virtually unknown spirit stone cult has shown the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu and adjacent areas to have the strongest surviving elements of the cult. Both the Irulas and Kurumbas of the Nilgiris tend to believe in spirit stones, as do the Bettu Kurumbas and

Kasabas who inhabit the Mysore Ditch just to the north of the Nilgiris. Uralis inhabiting the Dimbhun region to the northeast of the Nilgiris still leave spirit stones in temples with thatched, hipped-roofs. The members of an extinct Urali patri-clan once brought

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**- William A. Noble**

either the dug up bones of their deceased or the deceased themselves for burial at Nungundi in the higher eastern Nilgiris. Near this burial site are the piled-up spirit stones long ago left in a temple (mostly disintegrated by now) for the deceased members of the extinct patri-clan. In researching farther from the Nilgiris, we now know that the Sholagas of the Billiginrangan Hills to the north of the Nilgiris still deposit spirit stones within a dolmen. A similar practice has long since been abandoned by the Malayalis (not to be confused with the inhabitants of Kerala) of the Shevroys to the east. However, in the nearby Kollimalais to the south, there are Malayalis who still believe that departed spirits dwell in stones deposited in dolmens. While the Posaalis of the Melagiri Hills to the northwest of the

Shevroys no longer deposit spirit stones for their dead, dolmens with ancestral spirit stones still stand in nearby jungle. The Mala Arayans, living on the lower western slopes of the High Range in Kerala, were once unique in constructing small above-surface stone cists, each for a single spirit stone.

Is it too outrageous to suggest that the ancestors of the Arunta and other Australian aborigines had, perhaps, some cultural ways in common with Australoid inhabitants of southern India? Why are such distant people associated with deposited objects believed to hold the spirits of the departed for some time? Some dolmens in southern India represent a very ancient way to provide shelter for sacred spirit stones.

We know that the Bettu Kurumbas leave a spirit stone on the ground, near a tree, during the funeral. One Irula site has spirit stones piled together on the ground. With the exception of a Kurumba temple with a pyramidal thatched roof and a rectangular thatched temple, which has long been in ruins, Kurumba spirit stones are generally kept in dolmens. Although the Irulas often live close to Kurumbas, they have only small and dolmen-like temples with piled stone walls and flat roofs, or thatched temples with hipped roofs to house their spirit stones. ©

\*Based on the research of William Jeadhas, the Rev. Philip Mulley and the writer, William A. Noble.