

## Manifestation of Liminality in Malayali Tribes

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### Abstract

Liminality, the unique state of in-betweenness is a form of social interaction that continues to shape the human society. The role of liminality is effectively explored through the performance theory that analyses human actions as parts of performance. Being the second phase of the performance, liminality offers an insight into the actions of the individuals who perform. The phase of liminality is not strangulated and is often analysed with the other two phases of separation and aggregation. Liminality that signifies transition is prominently evident in Malayali tribes, one of the largest tribal groups that occupy the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu. The rich and diversified practices and traditions of the tribe is a distinct portrayal of the Indian tribal culture.

The culture of the Malayali tribe is exhibited through their lifestyle, food, dance and music that define their uniqueness. The study is an attempt to identify the stages of performance through the lifestyle of the Malayali tribes. It aims to bring out the elements of liminality that distinguished the tribes. It explores Victor Turner's idea of communitas evident in the Malayali tribes that endorses the equality among all human beings. The research sets out to analyse the integral role of food, music and dance in binding the culture of the people. It aims to uncover the mysticity that is observed during the liminal phase. It is an exploration of the intrinsic human bond that is manifested through the Malayali tribes.

**Keywords:** Performance; Liminality; Malayali Tribe; Food; Ritual; Art

### 1. Introduction

Human actions exhibit variations based on the situations and presence of people during the execution of an action. Human actions that occur with the complete awareness of the individual engaging in that action can be considered as a performance. Performance is inclusive of everyday activities that have become routine in the life of an individual. The individuals who engage and performance do not always acknowledge the actions as performing as it has been a component of their lives. The negligence of everyday activities as performance stems from the thought that an action that takes place at frequent intervals of time becomes common place. The performance of an individual is heavily impacted by other individuals who are either spectators or co-participants who also take part in the action. Performance does not only involve individual who engage in an action but also other contributing factors.

The performances are generally interconnected, a concept explored by Erving Goffman, one of the earliest proponents of performance studies. Goffman's postulates laid the foundations of performance studies that views performance as a reflection of the inner self of an individual. Performance studies brings to the fore how an individual gets completely absorbed into a performance as well as detaches oneself from it because of his/her awareness of the distinction between the fabricated act and reality. The awareness of this distinction fosters a better understanding of the circumstances that pave way for an effective performance of an individual.

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Goffman further posits that performance is also shaped by the experiences of an individual that are the resultants of the existing norms of the society: [1] “To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it...as a ceremony—as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community” (35). Goffman identifies that performance does not only impact the individual but also serves as a powerful tool of persuasion that influences the society and alters the views of other individuals. An individual alters and modifies his/her performance to cater to the expectation of the spectators who witness it.

The seeds of performance theory laid by Erving Goffman are pruned and nursed by Richard Schechner who provided a deeper analysis of performance. Schechner’s *Performance Theory* published in 1988 serves as a fundamental framework for performance theory fostering a better understanding of it and providing room for further exploration of the theory. Behavioural scientists and theorists of psychology expanded the realm of performance by analysing it as a structure that cannot only be restricted as a form of art. The act of performing is interpreted from the perspectives of religion, politics, culture, colonialism, psychology, sociology and feminism. This multifaceted nature of performance paves way for experimentations that aim at unfolding its potentiality.

Judith Butler, a prominent philosopher elaborates on the role of performance in the creation and emphasis of gender in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* published in 1990. She highlights the relationship between gender and performance as, [2] “...the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary (187). The proponents of performance theory aim to establish the correlation of performance with other entities that enables a better understanding of it.

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## 2. Phases of performance

Richard Schechner presents the different occurrences of performance stating that it cannot be contained in one particular arena. According to Schechner, performance is observed in a wide range of fields:

[3] Performance is best construed as a “broad spectrum” or “continuum” of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles.... (7)

He categorises the broad spectrum of performance into nine categories as discussed. The division of performance includes activities of everyday life to the modern technology that has become an indispensable element of human life. Schechner’s theory derives inspiration from Victor Turner, an anthropologist who widened the arena of performance studies. Turner points out that performances include various phases that are ambiguous and transformational.

Victor Turner identifies the nature of performance as transformatory and transactional. He outlines that there are different phases that occur during a performance. According to him liminality is the most prominent phase of a performance as he considers performance as an evolving act. Turner in his *Anthropology of Performance* identifies that, [4] “A ritual performance is a flow/reflexivity dialectic” (55). He believed that liminal phase also known as the in-between phase that occurs during the transition facilitates the changes from the previous phase and serves as a ground for the preparation of the next phase. He places liminality at the centre of social interaction as this adaptive stage fosters a better comprehension of the entire process and its eventual course.

Liminality considered as a social exchange, generates cultural layers and continues to shape individuals. It is widely used to analyse the cultures of different geographical locations that undergo social modifications. India is a country that has transformed with time while retaining the roots of its rich traditions. The tribes of India greatly uphold the norms and traditions of the past. Inhabiting the interior regions of the country such as the tall mountains and deep forests, the tribal community lives in close association with nature that aids them in continuing the ancient ways of living. Their reverence towards the ancestral practices serves as an influencing factor that keeps them rooted in their culture.

The tribal population of India live closely knitted with the ancestral practices of the sub-continent: [5] “In India, indigenous populations have been described under a variety of titles: Adivasis (original inhabitants), Aborigines, Adim Jati (ancient tribes) or Vanavasi (forest dwellers)” (Coates 5). Though the tribal population accounts only 8.6 percentage of India’s total population, they play a vital role in maintaining the traditional heritage of the country. The tribal way of life in the present time undergoes vivid modifications as a result of modernisation. Education, government schemes and policies and media influences have contributed to the mutation of their lifestyle but with conscious retaining of their practices.

The Government of India aims to preserve and bring to the light rich culture of Indian tribal community through schemes and research. The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) promotes the study of tribal communities through a “Special call for Studies of the Culture, History and Geography of the Scheduled Tribes of India”. The project titled “Resuscitating the Tribal Heritage of the Malayali Tribes in the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu” sanctioned through the call, uncovered the lifestyle, history and culture of the Malayali tribes. The Malayali tribe of South India are spread across five prominent hills of the Eastern Ghats They are extensively found in Kalvarayan Hills, Kolli Hills and Javadhu Hills, Shevaroy Hills and Pachaimalai Hills. The interview conducted with the members of the tribe revealed that the education of the present generation of the tribe and the developments that take place in the hills have facilitated their free movement from the cities to these hills and vice versa. The exclusive culture of the tribe gets reflected in their festivals, religious rites, food and art. The exhibition of their performance keeps them rooted in their cultural values. A probe into the practices of the Malayali tribes bring out the essentiality that highlights their unique cultural elements.

### Objectives

Victor Turner uses liminality to point out the uniqueness of in-betweenness that can be observed during a performance. The Malayali Tribes of the Eastern Ghats exhibit liminality through their lifestyle. The objectives of the present study are,

- To identify and distinguish the three stages of performance with regard to the Malayali tribes.
- To bring out the elements of liminality evident in the tribes.
- To explore the idea of ‘communitas’ demonstrated by the tribe.
- To analyse the symbols of food, music and dance that are intrinsic components of tribal culture.
- To examine the mystical character that gets assigned to entities in liminality.
- To unveil the importance of human bond endorsed by Malayali tribe.

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### 3. Phase of Separation

Victor Turner in his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* uncovers the nature of ritual performance. He models his ideas based on his observation of the Ndembu tribe of North Western Zambia in Africa. Turner identifies that the ritual performance comprises three stages put forth by Van Gennep namely separation, margin and aggregation. The first stage of separation that Turner points out is the initiation step in the process of ritualistic performance. The individual who performs the act is isolated from the others who do not take part in it. This separation is usually considered as the preparatory stage where the performer meditates on his/her actions and prepares for the performance. This stage also breaks the usual routine of the performer and provides room for new transformation. The detachment from the habitual actions of the performance is essential to tread on the path of transformation.

The phase of separation is prominently evident in the Malayali tribes. The field visit of the research crew to the habitat of the Malayali tribes revealed a clear demarcation from their everyday activities. The members of the tribe engage in a variety of jobs ranging from agriculture and plantation workers, daily wage labourers and they are also employed through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) that offers 100 days of work to people in rural areas. The members of the tribe also go to the neighbouring towns and cities in search of employment that is appropriate for their educational qualification. The tribes engage themselves completely in their work from dawn to dusk and it is a challenge to interact with them during their hours of work.

The ritual performance serves as a pathway for them to break away from their monotonous schedule. Being an agrarian community, the Malayali tribes live in harmony with the different components of nature that includes plants, animals and the five elements of the universe. The Malayali tribes in the Yelagiri hills separate themselves from their everyday activities and begin to prepare for the festival of Pongal from the beginning of the month of January. They, including those away from home begin to fast a week before Pongal. They consider it as a ritual of purifying themselves before the festival. The separation phase can also be observed in animals like bulls that play vital role in the process of cultivation. The bulls are normally tied in their respective sheds in houses. However, during the festival of Pongal they are separated from their homes and are kept in fenced places near the temple where people gather to celebrate. The phase of separation transitions into the next stage called margin.

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### 4. Liminality in Tribal Lifestyle

Victor Turner considers the phase of margin as the most prominent of all the three phases and terms this phase as liminality where the process of transition takes place. Turner calls liminality as ambiguous as it is in a continuous

process of change that asserts its arbitrariness. He points out that liminality plays an important role in the ritual performance because the transformations that alter the performance occur in this stage. The phase of liminality is unique from the realm that an entity belongs to. When an entity enters liminality, it is faced with a complete contrast to the separation as well as the aggregation phases. Liminality is presented with a plethora of symbols that signify elements unique to this stage. The entity realises and acknowledges these symbols and perform accordingly.

The Malayali tribe who are spread across the hills of the Eastern Ghats gather at a place separating themselves from the duties of life during a ritual performance. They assume new rules as they enter into liminality during the performance. The members who live in the hills and those who have moved to the neighbouring cities come back to the place to perform rituals. The major ceremony of the Malayali tribes is the festival of Pongal that is celebrated in the month of January. Celebrated for four days, it is festival of harvest that exhibits oneness and harmony of all living beings. The human beings and the animals who take part in the process of agriculture are assigned special status in the liminal space during the festival.

They also celebrate '*Aadi Peruku*' on the 18th of the Tamil month of *Aadi* that aligns with the month of July or August. The members of Malayali tribe in the phase of in-betweenness observe a strict fasting for forty-eight days where they do not consume any non-vegetarian foods. The stage of in-betweenness is also characterised by the purity of thought and action according to the belief of the tribes. The members of the tribe gather at the *Mariamman* (local deity) temple on the festival of *Aadi Peruku* to pray to the goddess for a good cultivation and a favourable monsoon that benefits agriculture. The people offer prayers and other sacrifices to please her. The phase of liminality has various attributes that get manifested in the social structure.

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## 5. Communitas and Social Interaction

Turner presents an interim society that is created in the liminality. He terms that society as '*communitas*' and states that the social interaction that happens within the *communitas* is distinct from the common way of life. Turner's *communitas* uncovers the relationship between individuals who exhibit free will that is not confined by the social responsibilities assigned to them. It serves as a place where the segregations based on social hierarchy is neglected. He says that.

[6] The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. (96)

According to Turner, the liminality of ritual performance is not only exhibited through spirituality but also through elements like food, art, music and dance. Turner posits that in view with tribal communities, the sacred attributes of a performance stand out as it is believed to be the prime component by the members of any tribal community.

Pongal is a communal celebration in which all the members of the tribe come together near a temple where they perform a series of rituals. The rituals symbolise their way of thanking the God and the land for the previous cultivation as well as serves as a plea for fruitful harvest in the future. The place of gathering can be considered as a '*communitas*' as the people who participate in the ritual ignore their differences. They involve in it as a homogenous group exhibiting unity. Their roles in this zone of liminality becomes transient and therefore no fixed role is assigned to any particular individual. For instance, the Malayali tribes of Yelagiri gather at a place near the temple where each family is allotted a fenced space called '*patti*'. The *patti* serves as a place where the cattle of each of the family is tied up. All the members of the family irrespective of their age and gender work together to prepare the food for the cattle.

The festival of Pongal serves as a liminality in which the social order gets disrupted paving way to a relatively undifferentiated society. It was observed that the members of the tribe seclude themselves from the rest of the society, gather at liminality and work hand in hand during Pongal. The members of the tribe and other people who come to witness the ceremony are treated in the same way without any differences. The Panchayat President of the village was seated along with the people and there were no special privileges that were given to him. The interviews with the Panchayat President and other members revealed that when they gather together for Pongal, they become a unified group with a common motive. The authority of one single person is subverted emphasising their negligence of social hierarchy. The *communitas* of the Malayali tribe can be seen as the converse of the modern society where human beings live fragmented lives as isolated individuals who lack the sense of oneness.

The '*patti*' also serves as the liminality of the animals that are involved in agriculture. The bulls of each family is brought to the *patti* in a procession. The cattle also get separated from their routine during the ritual performance. They are not

involved in the process of tilling and relieved from the other work like pulling carts as they enter liminality during Pongal. The horns of the cattle are painted with vibrant colours and accessories like ribbons and balloons are tied to their horns. The members of the tribe also adorn the cattle by tying bells to their necks and garlanding them with flowers. The full-grown bulls along with calves are kept inside the fenced space. They are worshipped on the day and special offerings are prepared for the cattle. The liminality fosters these preparations that take place before they resume to their routine.

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## 6. Mystical Nature

The entities in liminality are often assigned mystical characters that are extension of the religious belief of the members of the tribe. The entities with such powers are considered as a reflection of Godly powers. These powers are bestowed upon the entities during the festivals that are celebrated to praise God and express gratitude: [7] “The mystic would serve to re-energize the bond between individual and life, and between individual and society, and would do so on the basis of a positive joy that comes from the affirmation of participation in the wider creative process that is nature” (Stenner 56). The powers are assigned by the representatives of the community who choose the entities. The entities that received the special status in liminality get completely removed from their previous roles and acquire specific roles.

Apart from the cattle used for agriculture, the Malayali tribe assign certain animals as Temple bulls (*Kovil Kaalai*) that are considered sacred. The cattle that are pledged to the temple are also tied to poles in a specific place in front of the temple. These cattle are kept there during the festival of Pongal and are later taken to the Ranganathaswamy temple also known as the Srirangam Temple located in the district of the Tiruchirapalli. The initiation rites of the temple bulls take place at the Srirangam temple where the animals get a religious symbol branded on their backs. This process takes place every year during the festival of Mattu Pongal. The animals go back to their routine after this liminality of initiation process.

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## 7. Food in Liminal Space

The experience of an entity in liminality is characteristic by a series of powerful symbols. Food, the basic necessity of life required for survival becomes a symbol with a plethora of meaning attached to it. It does not become invisible in the backdrop instead becomes an indicator of the cultural heritage of a region. It assumes new identity in liminality that redefines its meaning: [8] “Food becomes a site on which the characters find (or fail to find) a moment of epiphanic change” (Birkenstein 198). Food in liminality sheds its usual meaning and acquires a different function. The transition of food during a ritual performance impacts the human subjects who are involved in it. The ingredients, proportion and methods of cooking become distinct in the phase of liminality. The food in liminality results in an altered and newfangled experience of the individuals that provides an in-depth understanding of the phase.

The Malayali tribes of Javadhu hills celebrate the festival of *Aadi Peruku* that can be considered as a ritual performance. The members of the tribe give various offerings to the deity Mariamman, one of the widely worshipped Gods. The people assemble in front of the temple and offer rice, coconut and fruits like banana. The food is cooked in huge pots near the temple and the members of the tribe volunteer to look after it. The piping hot rice is carried in huge containers by the young men of the tribe. The rice is placed on banana leaves and later banana and coconut are also placed on the same leaves. It is covered by a shed made from leaves and bark of a tree. The ordinary ingredients like rice, coconut and banana acquire a sacred position in liminality. The members of the tribe acknowledge the sanctity of these food and wait till the completion of all the rituals to get the sacred food. They believe that the blessed offering is a way of receiving the blessings of God.

The regional foods of the tribal community become symbols of the divine in the liminality. The Malayali tribes consume regional dishes like *Ragi Koozh* (Finger millet Porridge) regularly. This commonly consumed dish assumes new identity in liminality. It is usually offered to the Goddess Mariamman in the month of *Aadi*. *Koozh* is usually offered to the Goddess after the offering of Pongal. It is prepared in the usual method by grinding the finger millet into fine powder and cooking it with water and rice in the required consistency. Once it cools down, buttermilk is added to it along with onions, green chillies, curry leaves and salt. During the festival, it is placed in huge containers decorated with neem leaves. The people bring containers and the porridge is distributed to them in it.

The tribes also sacrifice cock to Goddess Mariamman as offering. The fowls chosen for the sacrifice need to be healthy and young as a failure in such a sacrifice could incur the wrath of the Goddess. The young men of the tribe bring the cocks alive and place in front of the temple. The temple priest prays to the goddess and sacrifices the cocks using billhook machete (*Arival* in Tamil). The members of the tribe cook the chicken with chilli powder, turmeric powder and

salt within the temple premises. The curry is also considered as a sacred offering that carries the blessings of the goddess. The everyday staple of the tribe acquires new meanings during liminality as it becomes a sacred symbol.

Food is no longer seen only as a component that satisfies hunger in liminality. The ambiguity of the phase provides room for new forms of the existing variety of food. During the festival of Mattu Pongal, the Malayali tribes of Yelagiri prepare a unique variation of the dish of Pongal. It is prepared exclusively for the cattle that are tied in the *patti*. While in traditional Pongal the ingredients like rice, moong dal, jaggery, milk and ghee are cooked together, in this Pongal the ingredients are cooked separately and mixed together later. The ingredients of this Pongal cooked in liminality include rice, jaggery, ghee, curd, moong dal, fruits and vegetables. It is prepared by mixing cooked raw rice, powdered jaggery and mashed fruits like banana and guava that are locally available. The vegetables like pumpkin are cooked together with moong dal and added into the mixture. The dish becomes complete when fresh curd and ghee are blended together with hands.

The Pongal prepared exclusively for the cattle is placed on a banana leaf and kept in front of the *patti*. A small structure made of cow dung is built at the entrance of the *patti* and it is filled with water making it look like a small pool. The *patti* and the offerings are blessed by an elder of the village who is addressed as a *Komali*. He wears long beard-bristles made out of dried sticks coated with lime. After the blessing the youngest calf of each enclosure needs to drink the water from the small pool and has to emerge out of the pool by breaking it to eat the offerings that are placed further beyond. The Pongal is served to the other bulls only after its consumption by the youngest calf. Thus, the food turns performative in liminality and exhibit various functions.

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## 8. Liminality In Art

Cultural performances like music, dance and drama also exhibit liminality. The participants of these performances extract themselves from their actual reality and enter into liminality. The performance itself could be considered as liminality as it is an ambiguous state in which the individuals acquire transient identities. The inevitability of cultural performance is elaborated as, [9] "The model of cultural performance thus was founded on the idea that one performance is not an isolated event but part of a system of interlocked enactments that together constitute the model of operation of a whole society" (Shepherd 43). The individuals represent the equality of people in liminality through their performances. The performers reveal the oneness of human society and natural world that is essential for sustainable living. Apart from being advocates of cultural richness in liminality, the performers stress on the conduct of individuals while entertaining the people who witness it.

The Malayali tribe exhibits their mastery over music through their *Kummi* songs. *Kummi* is mostly performed by women who sing songs accompanied by the clapping of hands and they dance in circles as they sing. The members who perform *Kummi* also prepare themselves by keeping aside their own identity and absorbing their liminal identity as performers. In certain places like Pudukkottai of Javadi hills, the men of the Malayali tribe also perform the *Kummi*. The songs of *Kummi* praise the Gods and their mighty deeds. It also revolves around the beauty of the nature in certain occasions. The singers keep creating the lyrics of the *Kummi* songs thus making them arbitrary in nature. The performers who perform move out of their monotonicity and enter liminality where they exhibit their sense of community.

The communal heritage of the Malayali tribes is brought out through the most popular dance form - *Servai* that is performed during religious festivals and Pongal. The dancers enter liminality where their appearance becomes altered because of the colourful costumes that they wear. They perform in circles and sing their own songs. The dance troop has a jester who is called as '*Komali*' and he performs the *Komali* dance separately. The *Komali* and members of the troupe separate themselves from the other dancers and enter an inner liminality in which the *Komali* grasps the attention of the audience. The costume of the *Komali* is distinct from the other dancers and he wears a hat with money and bangles attached to it. He also wears bright and heavy make-up that makes him stand out of the troupe. He increases the intensity of the performance and entertains when he is in the liminality. The *Servai* dance can also be seen as a ritual performance because when it is performed, the temple bull is worshipped by the women of the tribe.

The *Therukoothu* known popularly as street theatre is also practiced by the Malayali tribe and is prominent in the Javadi hills. The art form can be considered as a liminality where the individuals take up roles and perform them. It is similar to the drama of ancient times. The plot for street theatre is usually taken from the Indian epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The actors of *therukoothu* completely detach themselves from their daily life during the liminality of performance and they become entirely new characters through their vibrant and colourful costumes and make-up. The men of the tribe play the roles of both male and female characters. The actors represent restored behaviour in liminality in an attempt to maintain the cultural continuity. The roles are pre-meditated and teach the people about the morals and values that build a stable society

## 9. Conclusion

Victor Turner points out that the state of liminality instils a sense of comradeship in the entities within it. An entity's separation from its routine and the coordination and uniformity it acquires in liminality is carried on to the last phase of performance called as aggregation. The new transient identity that is acquired by an entity in liminality is modified according to the phase it enters. Liminality can therefore be considered as an ambiguous state that fosters the bond between human beings. It brings out the inevitability of human interaction and relationship that promotes an equal society without partitions. The phase of liminality is transitory yet it is considered as a condensed edict that needs to be followed for a secular society without divisions.

The study of Malayali tribes has brought to the fore the elements of performance that can be observed in their culture and lifestyle. It establishes the need for the phase of separation that reinforces the importance of a unified society. It also brings to limelight the phase of liminality that can be associated with ritual performance of the Malayali tribes like festivals. The study has highlighted how food as a symbol of liminality assumes distinct functions. It elaborates how liminality is not just limited to human beings but also the non-human entities like animals involved in agriculture.

The study explains how mystic powers are assigned to animals in liminality and the association of these powers with religion and God. It emphasises on the role of art and its transformations in the phase of liminality. The study underscores the phase of liminality in which the members of the tribe value the bond between human beings and with nature. It bears testimony to the lifestyle of the tribes that rejects hierarchy and enforces equality. Liminality of the Malayali tribes highlights how the unity and communion of people create a pathway to resolve the disputes that try to dissect the society. The tribe's pledge to the natural environment that is revived in liminality awakens the conscience of the present generation to protect and preserve natural resources. The liminality of the Malayali tribe serves as the ground for a renewed way of life that prods the citizens of the world to live a life of harmony complementing each other. A probe into their liminality has unfolded how the strategies adopted by the members of the tribe preach and practice the well-concerted symphony of all entities of earth where the human beings coexist with other living beings. – A lesson indeed for all to learn!

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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