

Tamil Nadu: More on Kurumba paintings

By sharonstjoan

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Three young Kurumba men

In the previous blog entry, "[India: Tamil Nadu: Paintings that save tigers](#)" Mr. Kumaravelu, Forest Officer of CPREEC, and myself are meeting with three young men from the Kurumba tribe and an elder from the Toda tribe, in the Nilgiri Hills in western Tamil Nadu, India, this past January. The meeting continues.

They are showing us what is depicted in their paintings.

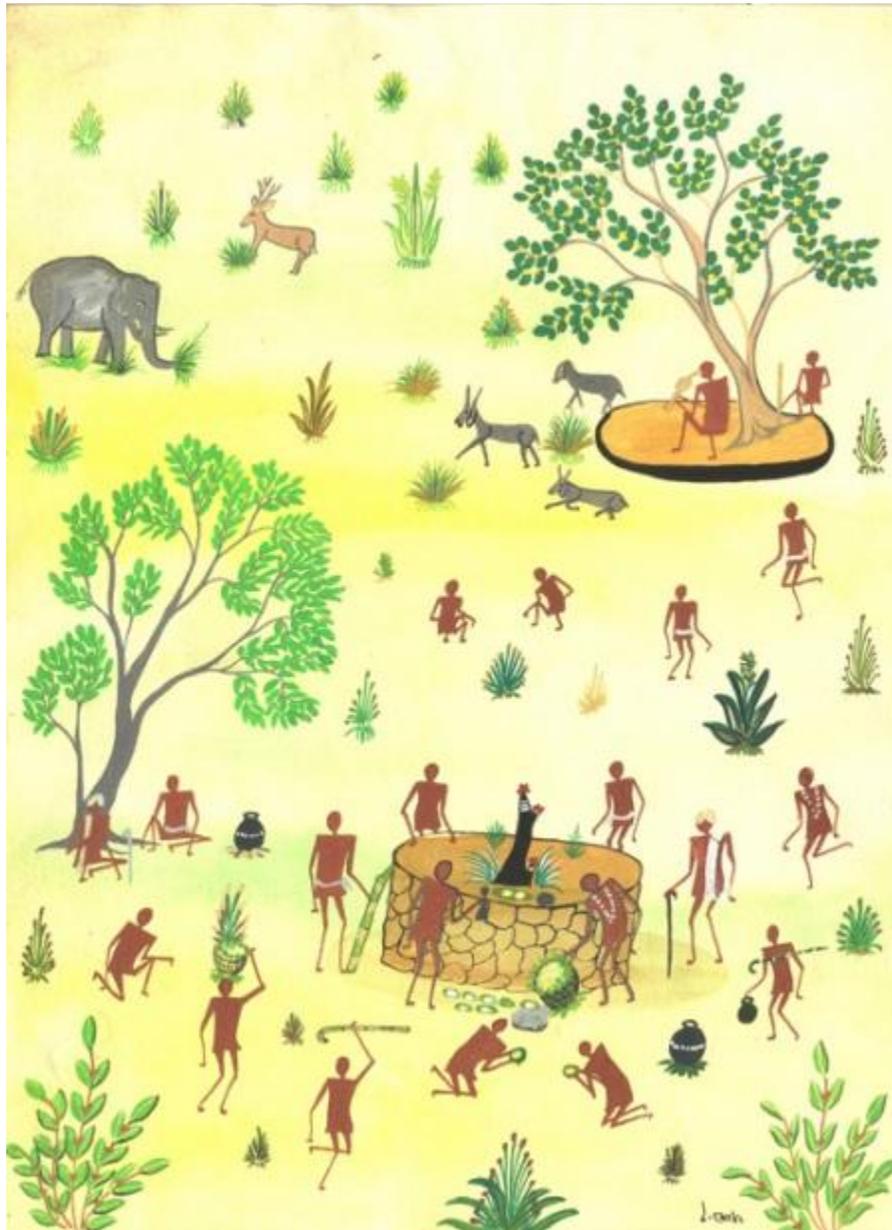
Traditionally, the Kurumbas are known to be medicine men, and they paint what are essentially magic rituals. However, the three men I am speaking with are young, and they do not know a vast amount about the ways of their ancestors.

I am told that the older men, and especially the older women, would have a more extensive knowledge of the rituals and the ways of their people.

Still they can explain what is in the paintings and something about the ceremonies that they themselves have taken part in.

They, along with two other artists, have been making a living by painting for the past ten years, and the income from the sales of their paintings is shared with all the people of their villages.

The C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation made it possible for them to carry on the tradition of painting, which had been on the verge of dying out.



The first Kurumba painting

In the first painting, there is a musical instrument made of bamboo resembling a flute, played by a fellow under a tree. Other people are gathering around a shrine.

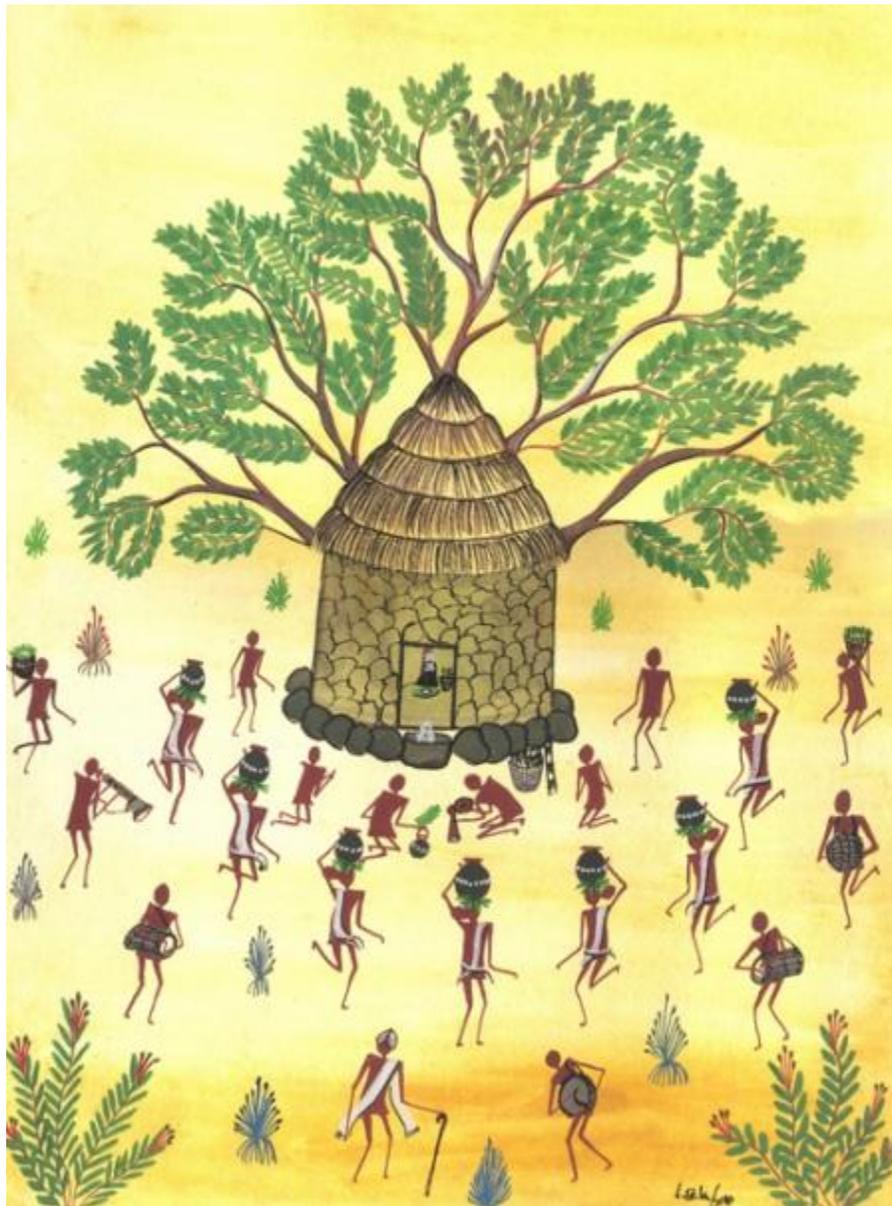
When they plant pulses (beans and peas), for the success of the crop, they offer seeds at the shrine of the deity. The name of the god is Thuppa Kata Devar. To perform the puja (or offering), they use round leaves, a particular kind of leaf from the jungle trees, with boiled rice. This is exactly the kind of tree whose branches are waving above the head of the fluteplayer in

the painting. He has a friend nearby, who is perhaps the goatherd, along with three goats, one lying down in the shade.

In front of the shrine, people have marked out a place to plant a few seeds, and these seeds are being offered to the god. The plants that grow in this spot will now belong to the god, and they will be used only for pujas.

Two gray-haired elders in the painting wear scarves and carry canes. One sits under a tree.

The second painting relates to a festival that takes place in the forest.



The second Kurumba painting

They explain to me that on occasion (I believe it is once a year), seven young men will go into the forest to make preparations for a big festival for all the people to worship the god Kumba Devar. For this, they remain in the forest for seven days. During this time they do not wear clothes, but only leaves, so that the animals will not perceive them as humans. They make no sounds while they are in the forest. The god lives very deep inside the forest. While in the forest, the young men collect and prepare all the food items that will be offered to the deity. On the seventh day, they will be joined for the festival by all the people living nearby.

The god who is worshiped is a small mud pot. (It's not clear to me whether he also exists separately from the pot as a spirit who lives in the forest.) He is a male deity. Grains are put into the pot with a 25 paisa coin. Every year the pot is changed, and a new one is made to replace the other. However the old pot is kept carefully in a cave, along with those used in the past. For at least seventy years all the old pots have been collected and stored in the cave. Prior to that there were other pots, one for each year, that were kept elsewhere.

Five generations ago, the Pala Kurumba started this tradition, around the time that they took up farming. Before that time, the Kurumbas had been hunter/gatherers. The purpose of the ritual offering is to ensure that the crops will be protected from animals and birds. They tell me that no animal or bird will come near the crops.

Another of the crops grown is corn, which is planted in April and harvested after three months. Their ancestors used to hunt, but the law banning hunting is very strict. Now they farm and herd goats; a goatherd always carries a stick.

In this second painting, seven women, each wearing a scarf or a sash, are carrying pots, Key Deva/Malinga Deva are names associated with the pots though I'm a little unclear as to exactly how— perhaps they are the names of the pots, which, again, I am told, are male.

Stones encircle the shrine, which has a thatched roof, and a stone is placed within the circle. The women will pour their seven pots of water over the stone. If the water runs out over the edge of the circle, then there will be a good rain for the crops.

Nearby a number of drummers play various drums, and an elder, with white hair, stands looking on in the foreground, wearing a sash and carrying a cane.

The three men talk, more generally, about their customs. Clearly music is a major aspect of life. When they are farming, while one group is doing weeding, another group plays music to keep the workers from getting tired. The musicians also play bells, which used to be made of bamboo, but now they are made of metal.



Mr. Kumaravelu, CPREEC Field Officer

In mid-April and in May, the rains come.

Later on, there is a harvest ritual, and following the harvest ritual, another ritual for the healing of people who are sick; music and boiled rice are essential in this ritual.

Also around the harvest time, marriages take place.

When a person dies, they take a river stone, and place it inside a large circle of stones, among the stones already inside the circle for all the others who have passed on. The soul of the person lives inside the stone.

They have also worshipped statues, but they themselves did not make the statues, others made them. When they see an elephant, they worship it—and also a tiger—out of both fear and reverence.

Later, Mr. Kumaravelu, the CPREEC Forest Officer, tells me that in many parts of India, when someone dies, “After a few days a stone is taken to represent the dead person, and pujas are performed for it.” These are ancient rituals performed by people in the countryside. He tells me that there are stone circles that he has come across himself. Some are around 30 feet across, and they delineate the outside ring around the graves.

In this reverence for stones, there seems to be something very universal and archetypal. One is reminded of Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids.

This association of stones with the sacred is not unique to India.

Mr. Kumaravelu reminds me that even today, we in the west put a headstone on a grave.

Countless megalithic circles, pyramids, dolmens, menhirs, underground chambers—ancient and mysterious—abound all over the world and have an integral connection with the sacred. One comes across them in every corner of the earth—from the cold, windswept islands off the Scottish coast to deep in the South American rainforests.

The perception of stones as gods—or as divine entities related to the gods—travels down through time—seeming never very far away.

To read about how CPREEC has enabled the Kurumbas to maintain and develop their traditional art of painting and how this has benefited the tigers of India, please see the previous entry or visit their website listed in the Blogroll.

To see a larger view of the Kurumba paintings or to buy a print, please go to the link to Fine Art America in the Blogroll. Proceeds will go to benefit the Kurumbas.