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# A Reappraisal of Rock-art at Vellarikombi and its Kurumba Association and Continuity

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**Abstract:** Rock-art in the form pictographs and modern painting tradition vogue amongst the Kurumba tribe was reported from Vellarikombi located in Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu in the year 1984. Since then, some writings on the rock art as well modern painting tradition have emerged. However, a comprehensive study on the rock-art was lacking. Hence, Vellarikombi was visited to understand the pristine rock-art and modern painting tradition. This article is a reappraisal of the rock-art and the modern painting tradition from Vellarikombi.

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**Keywords:** Kurumba, Pictograph, Rock-art, Megalithic, Kurumbar-koil, Magico-religious, Anthropomorphic

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## Introduction

Vellarikombi (11° 23'41.18"N; 76° 51'43.36"E) is located in Kotagiri taluk of Nilgiri district, Tamil Nadu. It is roughly 21 km from Mettupalayam on the State Highway No.15 to Kotagiri. The closest bus stop is Mamaram. From Mamaram, after a trek of nearly 4 km through tea plantations one arrives at a habitation of the Kurumbas. From here, another trek of nearly 8km through the reserved forest of Jakanare slopes leads to the rock art site (Sridhar 2005: 37). The site is situated at an elevation of 1268 MSL and locally called *eluthu paarai* and was first brought to light by Mr. Allen Zackerel, a Professor in Anthropology from USA in 1984 (Kumaravelu 2000: 14). The local Kurumbas hold reverence to the rock-art pictographs and believe that it was executed by their ancestors. It was observed by CPR Foundation Chennai, that Sri. Mathan, a local Kurumba, was still practicing paintings on dwellings and temples during festival seasons. To assure that the art sustained after his times, his grandson Shri. R. Krishnan (Kitna), and kin were imparted training in the art by the foundation and encouraged to create paintings on paper using natural colours. Today, Krishna and his kin continue

the Kurumba painting tradition on paper and have gained recognitions for it (Krishna 2000: 20).

This paper tries to appraise the rock-art pictographs at Vellarikombi with a view to understand its style, significance, date and connotation by field visit and interacting with R. Krishnan and the local Kurumbas who still practice the paintings tradition though in a different medium. In our interactions, Krishnan was the main spokesman of the community and thus opinions regarding the paintings, material used, believes, practices etc., cited in this article are attributed to him.

## Kurumbas

Possibly the earliest recorded reference to the Kurumbas of Nilgiri is in the work *An Account of the Primitive Tribes and Monuments of the Nilgiris* by James Wikinson Breeks published in 1873. He says they are divided into various *bigas* or families like Botta Kurumba, Kampale Kurumba, Mulu Kurumba, Pal Kurumba etc., (Breeks 1873: 48). The next important work referring to them was *Caste and Tribes of Southern India* by Thurston published in 1909. Thurston says that, Kurumbas are very old inhabitants and the stocks in Nilgiri-Wayanad region are the descendants of the Pallavas. There are different groups amongst them like Betta or Vetta Kurumba who live in the hills and sustain by foraging activities, Jenu Kurumba or honey collectors, Mullu Kurumbas who are herdsman and Ur-ali Kurumbas who are agriculturist. These clans are sometimes represented by totemic animals like elephant, dog or hill etc. The Kurumbas at Vellarikombi speak Kannada and are called Mysore Kurumbas or Kadu Kurumbas by Thurston (Thurston 1909 Vol. IV: 156-161). They are divided into two clans namely Bettada and Jenu and the ones at Vellarikombi appear to be of the Jenu clan or the clan of honey collectors (Krishna and Balaji 2016 119).

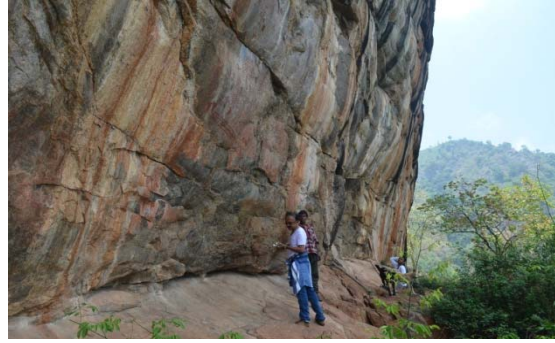
## Rock-art Site with Pictographs at Vellarikombi

From the Kurumba habitation at Vellarikombi, to reach the rock-art site one has to descend into a forested valley and then climb up a steep hill (Figure 1). The rock surface of the granitic hill is of dark pinkish hue and directly on its surface are the pictographs, facing east to the habitation and the valley. The pictographs are mostly of red-ochre and white colours. The motifs done in red-ochre and white are primarily clustered at two different locations along the rock surface. The pictographs in red-ochre colour are located around 3-4m high on the rock surface (Figure 2) and those in white are observed to the lower reaches around 2m high (Figure 3). The paintings at great heights were possibly done standing on a scaffolding or bamboo poles. They still depend on bamboo shafts/poles to reach beehives in high locations for extracting honey and some were noticed at the site itself (Figure 4). It is not only the colour difference and location that is striking but, there is also a dichotomy observed in the motifs and style. The common motifs in red are liner, stylised and highly decorated anthropomorphic figures. The white depiction apart from anthropomorphic figures also contains animal depictions and they are in the flat-wash style. This variation in

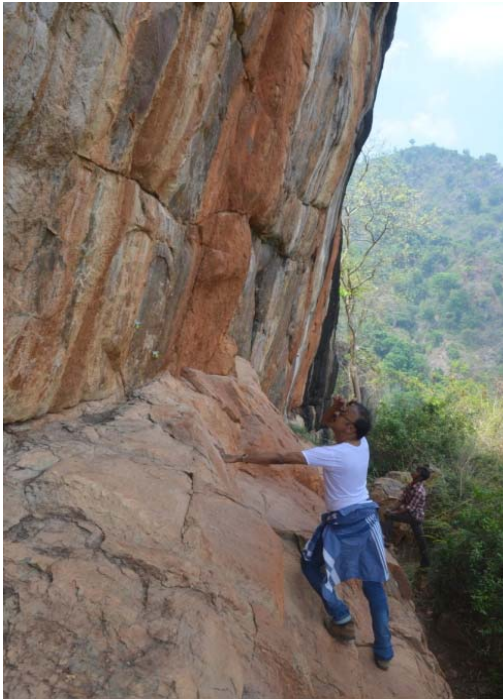
style and character possibly indicate varied beliefs, affiliation and time period behind their creation.



**Figure 1: Across the Valley the Arrow Denotes the Site**



**Figure 2: Cliff Bearing the Pictographs in Red Colour**



**Figure 3: Location of White Pictographs**



**Figure 4: Bamboo Ladder for Honey Collection**

At almost at the centre in red color is a Sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*) with its antlers clearly visible which is visible only in the D-stretched photograph (Figure 8). This pictograph is apparently the earliest at the site as many layers of overlap are noticed over it. The most common motifs depicted in red-ochre colour are anthropomorphic figures (Figures 5-14). The anthropomorphic figures are depicted standing or walking. They generally tend to have a tubular torso and the shoulder and hands are done in a single continuous stroke of line. The hands are lowered and held to either side. The torso is sometimes further decorated with vertically aligned red dots or at times with a series of vertical and lateral lines or criss-crosses (Figures 6-14). The hip at times is



demarcated by a horizontal line. The legs are drawn in single or double lines and occasionally are shown slightly bend at the knee as though to denote movement (Figure 5-9, 12-13). The face is sometime depicted as a blotch or circle. The facial features are seldom depicted clearly and the emphasis is on the coiffure, possibly denoting matted hair or a headgear made of vegetation, generally done in a pyramidal form created by a series of raising curved lines. At times the whole series of lines creating the pyramidal formation are enclosed within an outer line (Figure 6-14).

There are a series of overlaps noticed in the red-ochre pictographs which indicates that these figures were painted at the same spot over varied periods of time. Even today, Kurumbas priests annually paint their temple walls with anthropomorphic figures superimposing or overlapping older ones (Raju 2012). Krishnan identifies the anthropomorphic forms at Vellarikombi as their deity *Doddadaivam* (great deity), *Neer Daivam* (water deity) etc.

The headgear and the general treatment of the anthropomorphic forms in the pictographs at Vellarikombi draw similarity with the petroglyphs at Edakkal shelter which is assigned to the ancestors of the Kurumbas by Fawcett (Fawcett 1901: 421). The headgears at Vellarikombi (Figure 6-7) and Edakkal (Figure 15) have elaborate treatment and recalls headgears used in Theyyam/Bhoot kola forms vogue in Kerala and Tulu respectively (Figure 16) (Kumar 2015: 472) or present day costumes of Yakshagana (Figure 17) or Angami tribesman from Nagaland (Figure 18).

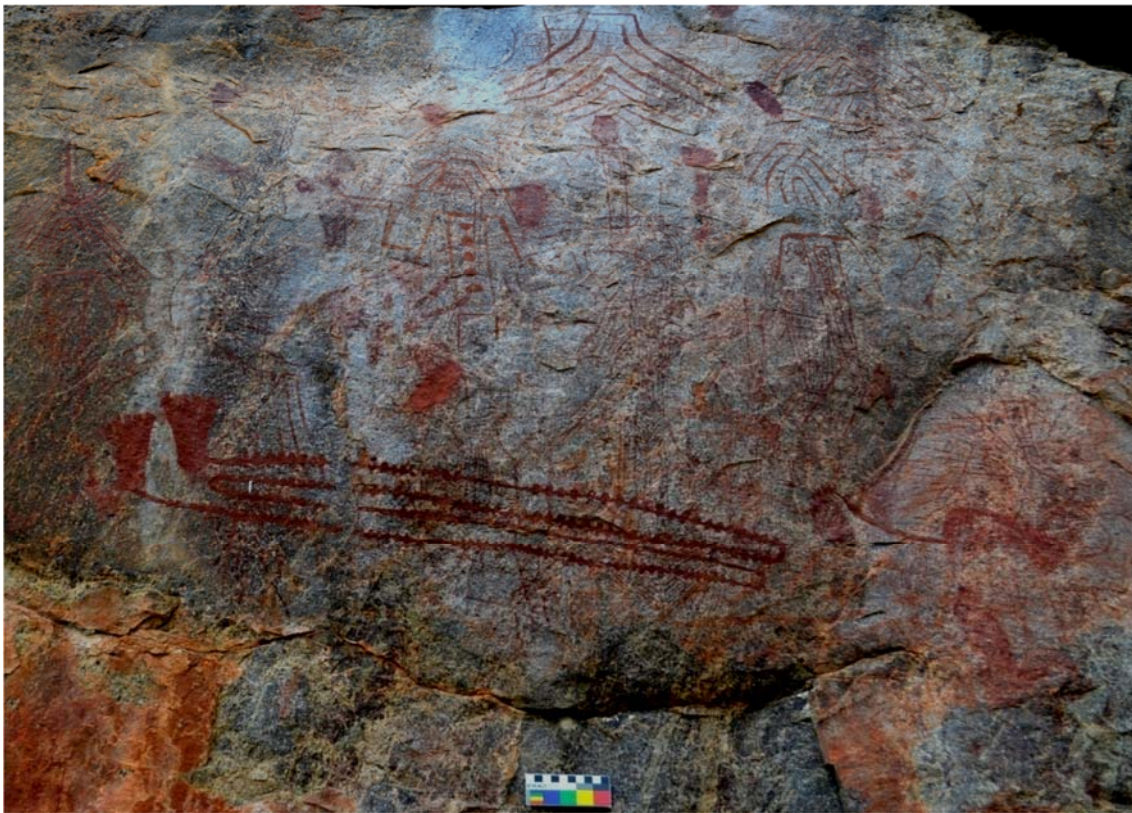


Figure 5: Picotgraphs in Red- Ochre Colour





**Figure 6: Close-up of Some Pictographs**



**Figure 7: Close-up of Some Pictographs**

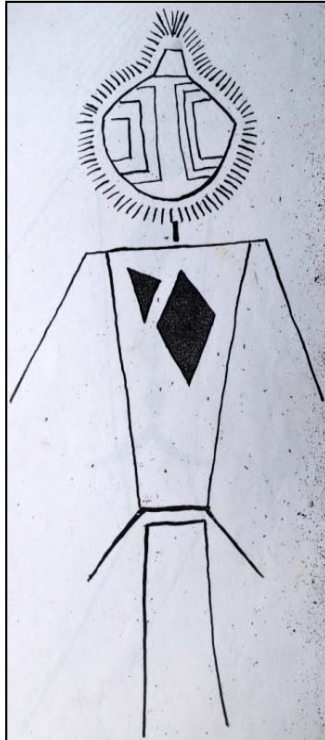


**Figure 8: Close-up of Some Anthropomorphic Pictographs**

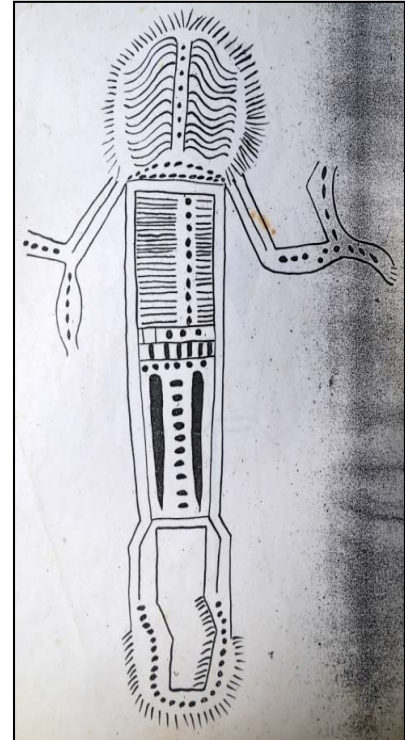




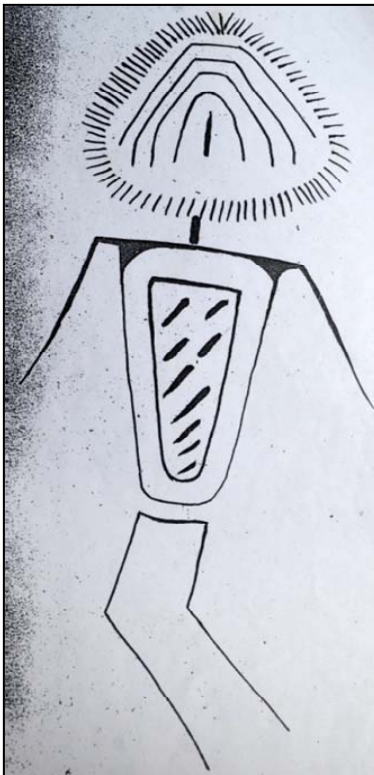
**Figure 9**  
(Courtesy Krishnan)



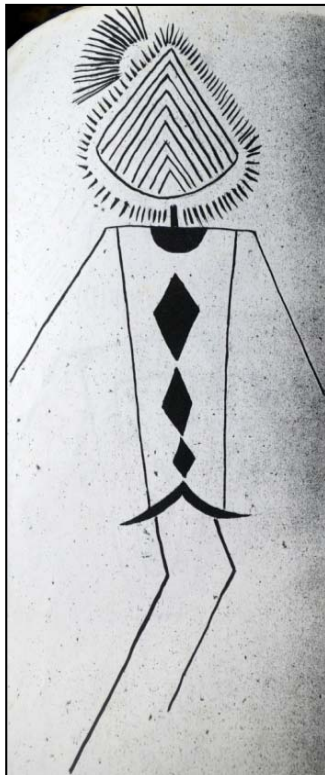
**Figure 10**  
(Courtesy Krishnan)



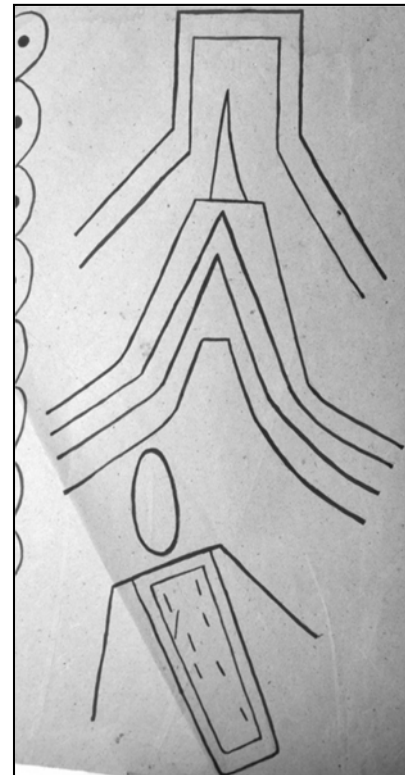
**Figure 11**  
(Courtesy Krishnan)



**Figure 12**  
(Courtesy Krishnan)



**Figure 13**  
(Courtesy Krishnan)



**Figure 14**  
(Courtesy Krishnan)





**Figure 15: Edakkal  
Petroglyphs**



**Figure 16: A Theyyam  
Headgear**



**Figure 17: Yakshagana  
Headgear**



**Figure 18: Angami Tribesman  
from Nagaland**



**Figure 19: Chain Tree , Lakkidi,  
Wayanad**



**Figure 20: Figures in White Colour**





**Figure 21: Figures in White Colour**

Among the red-ochre paintings, apart from the anthropomorphic figures there are also some other motifs like feet and plus or cross marks etc. A right and left foot depicted are connected by a meandering line with nodes (Figure 13). Krishna feels that the feet represent a ghost or spirit and the line with nodes denotes an iron chain to which the spirit has been exorcised and bound. A similar belief of exorcising spirits using iron chain exists in Wayanad. There a huge iron chain hanging from a tree located west of the NH 766 or Wayanad road, 1km north of the view point at Lakkidi. The story goes that Karinthandan, a man belonging to the Paniya tribe was unjustly murdered by the British, and his aggrieved spirit started to cause accidents on the Thamarassery Ghat road, for which he was instrumental. As remedy, his spirit was exorcised and bound into an iron chain that was left hanging from a Ficus tree, popular now as the chain tree (Figure 19).

There is an equal armed cross design enclosed by a line also in red-ochre colour (Figure 14). Cross design in a variety of fashion have been observed in Edakkal petroglyphs, which Fawcett calls them as sun and fire signs (Fawcett 1901: 413). Krishnan feels that the cross symbol at Vellarikombi denotes four directions. However, this symbol has also been reported from a host of sepulchral sites elsewhere and hence in certain contexts appears to have a connotation with death/related rituals (Tiwary: 2013). The Kurumbas still practices ancestor worship and a muffled form of megalithic tradition.



The white pictographs are done in the flat-wash style and clustered towards the north-eastern side of the cliff (Figure 20 & 21). The motifs in white (done possibly Kaolin) include bovine animals like bull, the Indian Bison, some anthropomorphic figures etc. Krishnan feels that these figures are of lesser importance than the red ones and hence done in white. That seems possible since they are kept at lower levels and intentionally kept away from the anthropomorphic figures in red-ochre that are assigned divine status. Bovine animals and vegetation is conspicuous by their absence in the red-ochre pictographs. There are some anthropomorphic figures in white with splayed out hands, sometimes holding a stick or weapon in their right hand and possibly denote shamanistic figures and in certain area like Marayoor similar figures in white are called 'Payee' or ghost and are probably related to exorcism (Benny 2015: 506). Krishnan however feels that the white figures are cattle headers.

The white paintings also show overlaps and hence, it is not a single phase of activity. Among the white pictographs, some of the animal figures now fading is depicted with a slightly orange hue and they seem to be the earliest (Figure 20). Stylistically similar white paintings have been reported from a host of sites in the Palani hill ranges and Anjunad valley, Marayoor (Mathew 2015: 535, Figure 9-14).

### **Apparent Significance of the Pictographs**

These pictographs in rock-art at Vellarikombi seem to have a magico-religious connotation. Thurston records that, among the Kurumbas, in case of illness no medical treatment is sought and as an alternative resort to exorcisms, charms, incantations and animal sacrifice (Thurston 1909: 16). This is also attested from the beliefs prevalent among the Kurumbas at Vellarikombai. They believe that these pictographs have divine powers and ward off evil and bestow protection to the local populace habiting the hill. Interestingly it is also reported that, the rock-paintings are secret messages of/to their ancestors. The magical and healing property of these pictographs can also be garnered from the fact that figures similar to that in pictographs are drawn on patients with diseases to heal them and such pictographs also drawn on patients with incurable diseases (Krishna and Balaji: 2016 118). This practice, again reiterates the magico-religious affiliation of the painted forms and its continuity to the present times. Most of the native tribal/ethnic groups still believe that diseases on illness are caused due to evil spirits and to remove they seek help of ancestors and gods through the medium of shamans. The anthropomorphic figures at Vellarikombi in red-ochre are considered as representations of divinities like *Doddadaivam*, *Neerdaivam* etc. by the Kurumba men like Krishnan.

Among the white paintings, cattle are a prominent in depiction. Thurston records that Jenu Kurumbas do not keep live-stock of their own (Thurston: 161). Hence, should it be presumed that the cattle were taken by Kurumbas for grazing and rearing during lean months for remunerations? Or are they creations of Mullu Kurumbas who are considered as herdsman? Kurumbas practice sorcery and they were summoned or to remove the curse or evil that caused illness in cattle (Raju: 2012). Hence, a possible

connotation behind the depiction of cattle and the shamanistic figures together may be an expression of some such remedial activity or healing process.

A Kurumba shaman stated that the pictographs were sacred messages dedicated to their ancestors (Raju 2012). Kurumbas have a strong belief in ancestor worship. They are considered authors of dolmens and megalithic edifices seen in many places in Nilgiri hill ranges (Kapp: 1985). They believe that good men after death become benevolent *Devas* and bad men become destructive *Devas* (Thurston Vol.IV:164).

Kurumba priest are said to have a practice of drawing anthropomorphic figures on temple wall annually over earlier paintings during festival days. It is believed that the spirit from the paintings on the temple wall flies to the figures painted on the cliff and rejuvenates them (Raju: 2012). The most interesting revelation is that even today as part of their annual festivities the priest/shaman of the clan under severe austerity live in the forest and prepare food as offering to these painted forms in the hill to rejuvenate their power so that the community living there is benefited by their protection. This ritual is called *manal* has its root in animism and it is a worship also dedicated to the 'forest gods', as forest is their place and habitation and subsistence.

### **Chronology of the Pictographs in Rock-art**

Chronologically and stylistically the anthropomorphic figures in red-ochre colour at Vellarikombi seems to be the earliest. The white pictographs are stylistically and thematically different and are later white paintings possibly of historic period. Some scholars on the basis of the cattle depicted in white have attributed the pictographs to Neolithic period and Sridhar to Megalithic (Kumaravelu 2000: 14; Sridhar 37). The Neolithic affiliation possibly needs reconsideration as there are no Neolithic sites or artefacts reported from the immediate vicinity of Vellarikombi. Kurumbas possibly took to cattle grazing at a late period considering Thurston's observation, as cited above (Thurston: 166). Stylistically, motifs almost similar to that noticed in the rock-art at Vellarikombi were vogue among the Kurumbas of Nilgiri hills till 19<sup>th</sup> century as recorded in the photograph cited above and recorded by Brecks. Brecks reports that some of the better houses of wattle and mud are white washed and painted using charcoal and red earth with rude images of animal and men (Brecks 1873 50 and plate XXIII; Pl.18a and b). Hence, the Neolithic association of the white paintings seems doubtful.

The red-ochre paintings are apparently earlier and seem to have some parallels with the petroglyphs at Edakkal also attributed to the Kurumbas. The association with megalithic period appears more feasible. Kurumbas at Vellarikombi worship their ancestors in the form of water worn out pebbles which they house in a temple. Even today, they worship worn water worn pebbles, representing their ancestors enshrined in a hut referred to as *savu-mana* or death house. It has a hoary tradition, it is also reported by Brecks and by Thurston as Kurumbar kovil (Thurston: 169) (Figure 24-25). They even today continue to erect a cairn or a single stone over places of dead



(Figure 26). They also erect structural dolmens using boulders which are later plastered (Figure 24). Kurumbas are considered authors of dolmens and megalithic edifices seen in many places in Nilgiri hill ranges.



**Figures 22 and 23: Old photo of Kurumba family and their painted hut (after Brecks)**



**Figure 24: Structural dolmens and *savu-mana***



**Figure 25: Worn stones in *savu-mana***



**Figure 26: Cairns and single stones**

The red-ochre pictographs in rock-art at Vellarikombi are apparently coeval to some of the petroglyphs at Edakkal and seems belong at the earliest to the late-Megalithic or early historic period around 300-400 BCE. The white pictographs are apparently very late and may even go to the medieval times, if we were to consider stylistic similarity with those from the regions like Marayoor (Kumar 2014: 118).

## Conservation and Preservation

Visit to the site needs permission from forest authorities as it is located in the reserved forest area. The rather inaccessible hostile terrain and it's rather late discovery are factors that have in a way sheltered it from human vandalism and visitor's graffiti. However, the pictographs are on the open surface of the rock and subjected to climate and nature's varieties. The morning sun directly falls over the pictographs and probably has resulted in the decolouring of the pictographs. Sheltering the painting by erecting artificial edifices is also not feasible in the terrain. Due to the reverence attached to the rock paintings by Kurumbas residing in area and its location in the reserved forest the paintings may remain safe from immediate destruction and vandalism. In the best interest of the environment, wild life, rock paintings, ethnic

tradition and culture of the area it ideal to keep the rock-art at Vellarikombi oblivious to tourist.



**Figure 28: Kino tree with its sap**



**Figure 29: Sap of the Kino tree**



**Figure 30: Sap mixed with water**



**Figure 31: Leaf of 'kattaigida' plant**



**Figure 32: Red Soil**



**Figure 33: Brushes**





Figure 34

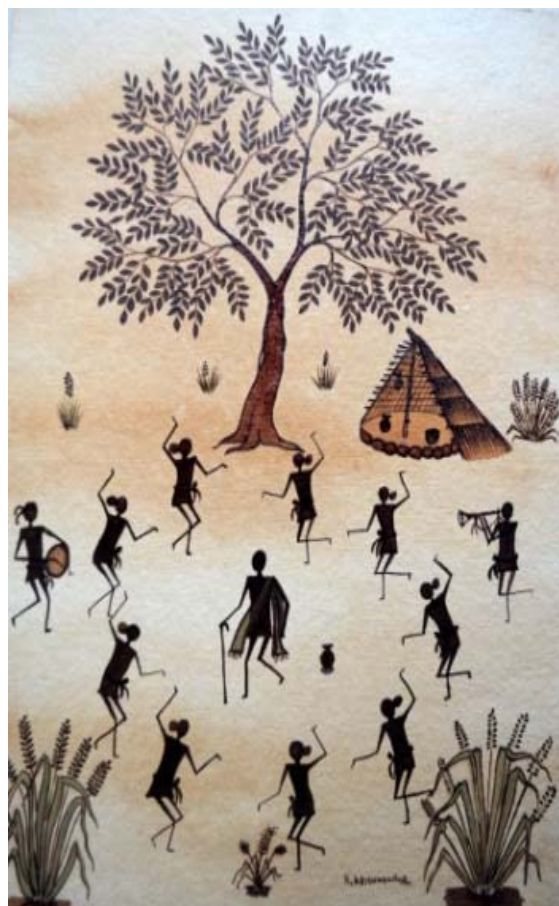


Figure 35



Figure 36

Figures 34-36: Printed copies of the paintings done by Krishna and his kinsmen





**Figure 37: Interactions with Shri. Krishnan to understand the possible connotation of the pictographs in rock-art and the current painting tradition**



**Figure 38: The team members at the rock-art site**



## Continuity of Kurumba Paintings

The earliest report regarding the continuity of Kurumba paintings on a hut from Nilgiri dates to 1871-72 as cited above was by Brecks (Brecks 1873), (Figure 27). These painting depicting animals and humans were done over whitewashed surface using charcoal and red earth (Thurston: 166).

The continuity of the painting tradition by the Kurumba ethnic group at Vellarikombi till recently was in a report by CPR Institute of Indological Research. Due to interventions of this institute the dying painting tradition was carried forward from its last surviving practitioner Mathan. (Kumaravelu 2000: 19; Krishna 2000: 20-21; Krishnan and Balaji 2016 119).

The Krishnan and his Kurumba kinsmen now continue the painting tradition on paper using natural colours. The natural colours yellow/brown/maroon colour is derived from the gum or sap of the Kino tree (*Pterocarpus mosrsupium*) (Figure 28-30) green from extracts from the leaf of 'Kattaikeerai' or 'kattaigida' plant (Figure 31). Reddish-brown (*semm-manna*) and white colours (*budhi-manna*) are derived from various types of soils collected from the surrounding hills and valley (Figure 32). The colours are mixed with water and then using brushes of various sizes (Figure 33) and the paintings are done on handmade paper boards. The boards are usually given a background or base colour of brownish-red derived from the Kino tree.

The current themes on paper, focuses more on domestic or social activities, like planting or harvesting of crops, honey harvesting, religious rituals/celebrations like annual festival, worship of Mariamman, Kurumbadeva, Malingasami, forest deity, festivities centred on their temple/ Savu-mana / Kurumbar kovil etc (Figure 34-36). These are themes are blended with other motifs like bael trees, plants and nature and it generally does not include magico-religious anthropomorphic divinities, like those painted in rock-art. Except for goat no other animal was observed in the modern paintings. Kurumba art on paper has now gone beyond the boundaries of the Vellarikombai (<http://www.kurumba.in/kurumba-art.html>).

Thematically and stylistically the paintings done on paper at Vellarikombi and those noticed in rock-art as pictographs, appear entirely different and carries different connotations. The figures in rock-art pictographs appear to have shamanistic connotation integrating ancestral worship /exorcism. They are assigned divine status and names and worshipped and ritually propitiated or appeased soliciting protection and blessings for the clan and its activities. The paintings on paper the other hand seem to have a preference for depicting domestic activities, or rituals and functions, not intended at conceptualizing or appeasing divine powers.

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