

WAY OF ANCESTORS: MORTUARY PRACTICES OF KURUMBAR OF ATTAPPADY, KERALA

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Abstract : This article is written principally on the basis of interviews with the *Kurumbar of Attappadi* and the *Kurumbar* are remarkable for the degree to which they adhere to old ways of living. The hamlets of most of this tribal people are situated in inaccessible forest regions which helped them to resist external contacts and to lead an isolated life according to ‘the way of ancestors.

Key words: Tribe; Pālu Kurumbar; Ethno-archaeology; Kinship; Secondary burial; Cheeru

Introduction

Attappady Valley is an ethno-archaeologically and culturally fertile region in the extensive vested forest area in Palakkad district of Kerala State. This Valley is inhabited by three tribal communities- *Irular*, *Mudugar* and *Kurumbar*. Among these tribes the *Kurumbar* are remarkable for the degree to which they adhere to old ways of living. The hamlets of most of this tribal people are situated in inaccessible forest regions which helped them to resist external contacts and to lead an isolated life according to ‘the way of ancestors. The valley has an opening from the Coimbatore side. *Kurumbar* live in the dense forests adjoining the Silent Valley. Among them there are two subdivisions – *pālu Kurumbar* and *ālu Kurumbar*. The *Kurumbar* of *Attappadi* are *Pālu* (milk in Malayalam) *Kurumbar* and of *Nilgiri* are *ālu* (milk in Kannada) *Kurumbar*. They are separated by the geographical setting. The *ālu Kurumbar* live in the upper elevations of the Nilgiris and the *pālu Kurumbar* live in the lower elevation on both banks of the river Bhavani.

Kurumbar and their Social, Political and Economic Organizations:- There are 14 *Kurumbar* hamlets and their total population is 1796 (Census of India, 2001, pp.73-75). Among them 9 are in Reserve Forests and 5 are in Vested Forests. The 9 hamlets or *Ooru* are *Melai Thodukki, Thazhai Thodukki,*

Murugala, Anavayi, Kadukumanna, Galsi, Gottiarkandi, Thadikundu, and Kurukkathikkallu. The other 5 hamlets are *Boothayur, Yedavani, Pazhayur, Soottara* and *Moolakomb.* Among these hamlets *Thodukki* and *Anavayi* hamlets occupy prominent positions because *Thodukki mooppan* or headman is the officiator of the last rites of all the *Kurumbar* settlements and *Anavayi* is their original settlement. *Kurumbar* speak a language which is a mixture of Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam.

Each *Kurumbar* hamlet has a tribal council with a headman or *Muppan, Vaṇdari, Kurutalai, Mannukkarān* and *Talaivar.* The office of the *Muppan* is hereditary. He is the functionary of all the ceremonies like birth, marriage and death ceremonies. He also acted as a judge and settled the disputes among the tribesmen. *Vandari* deals with economic matters. *Mannukkarān*, the ‘Knower of the Soil’, supervises agricultural activities and funeral functions. *Kurutalai* is the messenger of the headman and *Talaivar* is the general servant of all others. The presence of this council is compulsory at the time of every funeral and the *Mannukkarān* is in charge of fixing the spot of the grave. At the time of sowing and reaping, the *Muppan* and *Mannukkarān* invoke the ancestors and make offerings to them for a better yield.

The *Kurumbar's* social organization is patrilocal and patrilineal. The clans are known as *kulam.* They have several exogamous clans like *Vellegae, Arar, Chempage, Uppili, Kurunagae, Devanar, Peradara* and *Kartegae.* Every *Kurumba* belongs to one of these clans. The *Kurumbar* family is generally monogamous and a family consists of father, mother and children. Each family in a hamlet has a separate house. Generally aged parents live with their sons. All domestic duties are shared among family members. The eldest male member is the head of the family and he is obeyed and respected by all others in the family. The main duties of womenfolk are collection of fuel, cooking and bringing water from rivers, streams etc. The status of women compared to men is inferior. But they occupy prominent positions in rituals and ceremonies, participate in agricultural activities, work as wage laborers and took decisions whenever necessary.

Traditionally *Kurumbar* are shifting cultivators and foragers. They are also experts in collecting forest produces, hunting and fishing, animal husbandry, basketry etc. The cultivable lands among the *Kurumbar* are popularly known *askothukadu.* Before cultivation *Mannukkarān* after consulting *Moopan* choose the plots to be cultivated by each hamlet dwellers. *Mannukkarān* who is the custodian of soil performs certain rites and makes offerings to *Karai Daivam,* god of the hamlet in a locality. The crops

are *rai/kora* or Finger millet (*Eleusine corocana*), *tuvarai* or Red gram (*Cajanus Cajan*), *chama* or Little Millet (*Panicum vulgare*), *kundu cholam* or Maize (*Zea sp.*), *thinai* or Foxtail Millet (*Setaria italica*), *kirai* or Amaranth (*Amaranthus hypochondriacs*), *kaduku* or Mustard (*Brassica campestris*), *ulathum parippu* or Blackgram (*Vignamungo*), *mulaku* or Chilies (*Capsicum Sapp*) and *nila kadalai* or Groundnuts (*Archis hypogaea*). Main agricultural tools are the *kunthali* or axe which is used for cutting trees and other vegetations and the sickle for clearing forests, grass and reaping. After using the *kothukadu* for two or three years they shifted to another *kothukadu*. In this way they used the allotted *kothukadus* (maximum allotted *kothukadus* are 6 in numbers) and returns to the same *kothukadu* after 18 years. During the harvest season all family members actively take part in it.

They are also expert collectors of minor forest products (MFP) because most of the *Kurumbar* hamlets are situated in the dense forest. They collected tubers and roots of different variety like *Noorakilangu* (*Dioscorapentaphylla*), *Kavalu* (*Dioscora sp.yam*) and *Perikkukilangu* (*Dioscora sp.yam*). All these minor products are collected seasonally (from January to April). They used digging sticks for this purpose. The *Kurumbar* organized small bands of same clan or family during these occasions for collection. Men, women and children participate in this event. Other important items are honey, wax, turmeric, ginger, soap nut and wild cardamoms. They are expert basket makers by using different types of vines, cane and bamboo from forest. Most important shapes of these baskets are square, cylindrical, triangular, with or without lids, and tightly knitted or loosely plaited. Their baskets are known as *kottai*, *kurukkai* and *valla* and are used for agricultural activities, domestic purposes like storing articles and for sale. They hunted animals like small birds, deer, rabbits, boar, rat, mice with the help of snares and traps. They also trained their dogs to catch these wild animals. The time for fishing is at the end of summer and beginning of Monsoon seasons i.e. in June. There is abundance of fish wealth in Bhavani and Siruvani rivers. At the time of Monsoon these two rivers overflow and fish enters into small streams and tributaries of these rivers. So they can easily fill their baskets and reduce scarcity for food. They also domesticated bulls and cows for dairy products, sales and manures. They also kept poultry farm and goat farm. These two animals are mainly used for sacrifice during the occasions of ancestor-worship and secondary burial ceremonies.

Kurumbar and Burial Rites :- *Kurumbar* have special kind of burial and burial rites, post burial rites and ancestor-worshipping ceremonies, conducted under the direction of *Moopan* or headman. The Tribal Council and *Kurumbarfolk* took part en masse in the ceremonies and extended help in the form of service, kind and cash. The *Kurumbar* believe that “death occurs when the soul leaves the body in the form of air” (Nair, 1985, p.66). *Chavu* or *Savu* is the term used by the *Kurumbar* for the corpse. The tribes of *Attappadi* make particular type of decorated biers like those of the *Todas*, *Badagas* and *Kottas* of the *Nilgiris* which anthropologists call funeral cars. “The use of a funeral car is a custom which has a somewhat wider distribution. The term ‘car’ is actually a misnomer, since the funeral car is in no sense a vehicle of transportation. Instead, it is merely an elaborate structure in which the corpse lies in state before it is cremated or buried. The corpse is transported to the funeral car on a cot or litter, and is laid at the bottom of the car. The car is decorated with ribbons and sometimes with belongings of the deceased and is dismembered by the assembled crowd before the disposal of the body” (Meighan, 1951, p.149). At first they collect three bamboos from the forest and cut it into pieces of equal size. They believe that after preparing the funeral bier, no piece of bamboo should be left unused; if any piece remains, another death would follow. They keep the poles upright using brick pieces, stones or cement hollow-bricks (the practice of using bricks is of course a recent development). A thin bamboo stick is attached to the upper end of each upright post and the free ends of the thin sticks are tied together into a pyramid top. Then the three sides of the stretcher and the pyramid top is neatly covered by colorful saris. The stretcher is then decorated with gilt papers and by fixing stems of plantain trees on the four posts. The stretcher is now removed from the earth taking utmost care to see that the whole thing remains intact. For the *Kurumbar* the stretcher is called *Kudakaram*.

The *Kurumbar* today follow both methods of disposal – inhumation and cremation – and the same tribe follows both practices, though in different contexts. Among the *Kurumbar*, the *Mannukkaran* finds the spot of the grave; he, after a moment’s prayer, fixes a stump on the site of his choice shown by his inner eye. The grave is six feet deep and has a side cavity called *Allekkuzhi*. For the *Kurumbar*, the sons-in-law of the dead should make the grave. The *Kurumbar* deposit grains like *Cora* and *Ragi* inside the grave. They place cooked *Millet* and *Ragi-ada* for boys/girls, which have to be prepared by their aunts. For men they deposit knife, *koth* or a small spade, an axe, money and a sickle and for women *koth* alone.

They also place a cane basket known as *thekku* on the grave which contains grains like *Millet, Cora* and a small spade.

There is a strange custom among the Kurumbar of Attappadi known as *nikal nir kuthu* associated with funeral. While returning from the graveyard, the son of the deceased person should collect a few pieces of dry and green high-growing grass called *tharuvappullu (Demostachya bipinnata)*. The womenfolk, after bathing, bring water in a *Padi or* litre-jar (measuring jar), and it is placed at the spot where the funeral car was placed earlier. Then the headman makes arrangements for the ritual. This rite has to be performed by all the close relatives of the deceased. The green grass piece stood for the newly deceased person's soul whereas the dry ones, the ancestors' souls. At first the green piece of grass is dropped into the water in the liter-jar followed by the dry pieces invoking the names of the ancestor souls of the deceased like, say, father, mother, maternal and paternal uncles, brothers, sisters etc. If the two grass pieces immediately join together, it is believed that the particular ancestor-soul, whose name has been invoked, has adopted the newly deceased soul. It means that the dead is the beloved relative of that ancestor. If the two pieces remain separate, the process is continued till the two grass pieces merge together. This is a simple method to identify which one of the ancestral souls has accepted the guardianship of the newly departed soul. But the ceremony presupposes that it is just a guardianship of the soul by his/her kin-souls and that they continue to roam about among the kin-people; his/her soul gets salvation and reaches the land of the dead only with the completion of the *Cheeru* or the second and final funeral ceremony. Afterwards the water in the litter-jar is poured out and it is put upside down till it is used again for another *nikal nir kuthu*. The two tribes also use oil (gingili oil in the past and coconut oil today) at times when *tharuvapullu (Demostachya bipinnata)* is not available. While using oil, the two drops, one indicating the dead and the other an ancestor should merge together just like the grass pieces.

Kurumbar and Secondary Burial:—The last post-burial funeral ceremony of the *Kurumbar* is the *Cheeru*, which is conducted after the death of 101 members of a settlement, hence it takes 10 or 20 years or more between two *Cheerus*. The lag between two *Cheerus* is also due to the huge expenditure incurred in celebrating it. The *Cheeru* of a settlement is decided by the tribal council in consultation with the *Muppan* and the tribal council of the *ThodukkiKurumbar* settlement who are the chief ritual functionaries for a *Cheeru* in any *Kurumbar* settlement. Custom insists that it is the chief functionaries of the *Thodikki* hamlet who decide the date of the *Cheeru* after receiving a nominal *dakshina* and offerings to

Karudaivam (the *Kurumbar* deity) are made. It is particularly important that the *Cheeru* is fixed to be conducted on a date before which sowing activities in all settlements should be finished.

Just after fixing the date of *Cheeru*, messengers are sent to invite members from all the *Kurumbar* settlements and also from the *Muduga* settlements where they have kin-relatives now (as the two tribes now intermarry) and the nearby *Irula* settlements. The premises of the whole settlement are cleaned and a temporary mess hall is built. Each household in the settlement should contribute one sack of rice and a money payment of 500 to 1000 rupees. A week before the commencement of the *Cheeru* the *Muppans* and *Mannukkarans* of 14 settlements (8 settlements in former days) in association with all the functionaries and elders of the host settlement join together to perform a special rite called *Kallukku Rayi Attu*. They pound ragi on a big grinding stone to prepare a pastry with to be offered to *Karudaivam* of the settlement at the house of the *Mannukkaran*. This rite is known as *Math Vekkal*. On the seventh day after this the *Cheeru* should invariably begin. On all these seven days the *Mannukkaran* go fasting and on the three days of the *Cheeru* he should abstain from bathing or changing of clothes.

A specially decorated funeral car called *Gudikkettu* is prepared for *Cheeru*. For its preparation six experts from the *Thodukki* settlement arrive a day in advance of the *Cheeru*. They go to the nearby forest for collecting wooden poles for the construction of the *Gudikkettu*, the first piece of which should be cut by the *Mannukkaran* of the settlement. The upper portion of the *Gudikkettu*, which resembles a pyramid, is finished by the early morning of the first day. It will have three steps and will be decorated with gilt papers. The pyramid top will be adorned with a colorful umbrella. Music and dance starts just after its preparation. A chamber, called *Gubbe* in which the bones are kept, is prepared after sunrise by fixing four wooden poles upright on the soil and by covering its three sides with colorful saris. After the completion of the *Gudikkettu* and the chamber, *Nikalnirkuthu* is performed. It is done for those who had faced uncommon deaths and for whom *Pachachavu* has not been performed.

To collect the clavicle a group of tribesmen under the leadership of the headman visit the graveyard. The clavicle of the person who had died first after the last *Cheeru* is collected first. The clavicles of women who had been married into other settlements and who had died and been buried there are collected next. The bones of the deceased persons of the settlement where *Cheeru* is organized is collected only on the first day and after the completion of the preparation of *Gudikkettu*. If a clavicle is not traced out, a ring made of silver or *Tharuva* grass is substituted and is dropped into the grave

invoking the deceased and taken back. The bones collected are smeared with turmeric paste, are washed and covered in a new cloth, and carried to the settlement by the *Muppan* accompanied by the *Mannukkaran*. The bundle of bones are handed over to the *ThodukkiMannukkaran* who would stand in front of the *Gudikkettu*. The *Muppan* retires to his house, takes a long stick and hands it over to his *Mannukkaran*. On receiving the stick in his hand the *Mannukkaran* enters into frenzy and points out the faults committed by the inhabitants. At this juncture his wife unties her hair and joins her husband in his frenzy. Meanwhile, the *Thodukki Mannukkaran* puts the bones inside the *Gubbe*. The womenfolk approach the *Gubbe* and start group-wailing. All the assembled people disperse and a feast is served to all.

There will be Music and dance throughout the three days of the *Cheeru*, for entertaining the spirits, except on occasions where there will be some special kind of ceremonies. There will be no rituals on the second day of the *Cheeru* except the continuous play of dance and music. On the third day a peculiar function called the collection of *Pariyapanam* is held at the office of the *Muppan* of the settlement and in the presence of other headmen and other prominent functionaries. While all the functionaries sit together on mats in an open area, relatives of the dead married males approach them to clear off their marital liabilities and to close their accounts dues to the dead in this world. If any deceased male had failed to clear the full payment of the bride-price, his relatives should pay it off to his wife's father or to any of her relatives if father is not alive. It is customary to pay a nominal amount as *Pariyapanam* even if it had already been completely paid off. All the invitees come and bow before the *Muppan* and are rewarded with a sum of money. At the end of the ceremony the *Muppan* gives rupees ten each to the headmen of other settlements to buy betel leaves and areca nuts. The longer the interval between two *Cheerus*, the longer will be the duration of the ceremony of *Pariyapanam* collection.

On the third day afternoon ritual sacrifice takes place. Seven men go to the nearby river carrying seven small earthen pots, bathe in the river, collect water in the pots, return and place them around the *Gudikkettu*. Seven male goats are bathed in the river and are made to circle the *Gudikkettu* before being sacrificed. (The number of the goats may vary according to capacity). It is imperative that two of the seven goats should be brought by the two seniormost sons-in-law of the hamlet known as *Thalai-mappila* and *Chinna-mappila*. Both the goats should be white colored ones and that of the *Thalai-mappila* should be the biggest of the lot. Both *Thalai-mappila* and *Chinna-mappila* wear white dresses and white head

gears and hold black umbrellas. They also carry bundles containing 30kgs of rice with them which is kept in the house of the *Muppan*. They circle the *Gudikkettu* three times along with the goats. The goats are sacrificed one by one by the *Thalaimappilai* by hitting on their heads with the back of an iron-axe. After sacrifice the goats are drawn into the *Gubbe* and meanwhile the women gather to wail. When the wailing ends, men and women with broomsticks, winnowing baskets and wooden pestle start dancing around the *Gudikkettu*. The carcass of the goats are taken for the ritual feast, served at night to all the people gathered there.

On the fourth day, before sunrise, the *Gudikkettu* is dismantled and the parts are thrown away on the way to the graveyard after cutting every part into pieces or sometimes burning it. Later the bones are taken to the ossuary where the remains of the ancestors are kept. This place is situated away in the forest and is known as *Nikalumalai* or shadow-land. The bones or rings are kept either in a stone structure which is known as *Malikai* or *Mathinati*. This sepulchral monuments looks like small *Menhirs*. A portion of the feast prepared on the previous night is taken along with the bones and are offered to the ancestors at the *Malikai*. To ward off ritual pollution, on his return, the *Mannukkaran* takes a ceremonial bath and throws away the dress that he had been wearing for the last three days. The premises of the settlement are cleaned and a ceremonial meal is prepared and is eaten by all from the same plate. This is an assertion of tribal solidarity at the auspices of the ancestors.

Kurumbar and their Ancestors

The spirit of the dead played an important role in everyday life of *Kurumbar* in various ways.

Kurumbar makes necessary arrangements for the comfortable journey of a dead person's spirit to the next world to join his/her ancestors residing there. They conduct the last rites of a deceased person only five or ten years after his/her death (in the form of secondary burial). Any delay in the sending off the spirits to the other world through the last rites, according to the tribal belief, causes the spirits of the dead to wander about. Similarly, the spirits of the persons who have had to face unnatural deaths also are doomed to wander about. These refugee-spirits, during the interval between their death and the last rites, dwell on trees like the *Pala*(*Alstonia Scholaris*), the *Banyan* (*Ficus Indica*) or the *Kanjiram* (*Nux Vomica* or *Stryehnos*).

The *Kurumbar* believe that spirits live on a hill, which lay a little away from their settlement known as *Nikalumalai* and the spirit lived in the form of *Nikal* (*Nizhalin* Malayalam) or shadow. They believe

that human essence has a dual aspect. After death one aspect of the essence – the physical body – perishes and the other aspect – the shadow of the person – is transformed into spirit. This shadow travels to the world of the dead. Sometimes the shadows of evil-doers enter into animal or human bodies and cause trouble to their kinsfolk.

Spirits of the dead are identified as belonging to two categories on the basis of the nature of death of a person and on the basis of the services/harms rendered by them to the tribe while they were alive. The spirit of those who die of natural causes and render valuable services to their kinsfolk are known as benevolent spirits. The spirits of those who face unnatural deaths and cause trouble to their kinsfolk in various ways are treated as malevolent. The benevolent spirits are worshipped by their kinsfolk through offerings and prayers while malevolent spirits are exorcised with the help of benevolent spirits. Each tribal family has its own benevolent or malevolent spirits and good/evil deeds of these spirits affect them alone. The attack of a malevolent spirit of one family upon another family or of one tribe on another tribe is a rare case and it happens only if the spirit is misused by an evil sorcerer.

Benevolent spirits are revered as house-spirits or domestic deities. Susan Elizabeth Ramirez makes the following remark on the services done by the ancestors to the living and vice versa. “The living periodically visited the complexes to request health and fertility from the ancestors and conduct propitiating rituals, often burning food offerings, singing and dancing. People believe that they depend on the dead for life, fertility and prosperity”. (Ramirez,2004, p.394) The *Kurumbar* sought the services of the benevolent spirits in various occasions.

While going for hunting, they invoke their ancestors by making offerings to them like cooked food, coconut, bananas, betel leaves and areca nuts and on return, they offer a portion of the cooked meat to their ancestors and only after that they take their share. Kurumbas who engage in fishing pray to the dead for a good yield before starting their venture with the fishing net or fishing hook in their hands. When *Kurumbar* go out for collecting wild honey, they pray to their ancestors help for spotting a rich beehive. As roots and tubers are the main items of food of the *Kurumbar*, before starting to go out to collect them, with digging sticks in their hands, they make offerings to the dead to bless them with plenty of rare tubers and roots. While engaged in agricultural activities *Kurumbar* seek the blessings of their ancestors and make offerings to them for the fertility of the soil and a good yield.

Ancestors render their valuable services to the living, by advice or prophesy, through dreams. “The spirits of the dead reveal themselves in dreams”. (Crook, 1926, p.184) *Kurumbar*, like the other tribes around the world, are believers in dream images and believe that ancestors visit their beloved survivors in dreams. The spirit of a father/mother appears in the dreams of his/her most beloved offspring alone. They give advice on important matters, warn against dreadful enemies, inform about names and other details of medicinal herbs, remind about offerings he/she has to make and, of course, reveal solutions for their troubles.

It is a practice for tribes all over the world to specially remember the spirits and to make special offerings to them. The spirits are worshipped daily, in festive seasons, auspicious and ceremonial occasions and on annual days. Tribes believe that unless the spirits are worshipped through offerings, they always cause trouble to their kinsfolk, appear in their dreams and warn them. The *Kurumbar* offer food to their ancestors on auspicious occasions like marriage, birth of an infant or the naming or ear-boring ceremony of a child. On these occasions, the headman of the settlement takes a leading role in the celebrations.

It is believed that the spirits of those who die of unnatural causes, like those who are murdered, those who commit suicide, and those who are victims of epidemics like small pox, become malevolent. Besides these, the spirits of women who die unmarried or in pregnancy or in childbirth become malevolent. Likewise the spirits of evil sorcerers also become malevolent when they die. Benevolent spirits are sometimes transformed into malevolent in two ways: first, if they are left unattended or are not propitiated regularly by their survivors and, second, if they are misused by evil sorcerers. “The spirits of all who have died a violent death are classed among the dangerous ghosts. Their span of life has been cut prematurely short; they feel that they have been wronged, and seek to avenge themselves on the authors of their death if can discover them. And since, in their wrath, they do not always discriminate nicely between the innocent and the guilty; they may become a danger, not only to individuals but to a whole community” (Frazer, 1936, p.103).

The malevolent spirits molest the living in various fearful ways by causing many forms of sickness, epidemics, mental disorder, female barrenness, and calamities like draught, famine, storm or flood. Financial loss, crop failure and the deaths of babies or pregnant women or cows may also result from the ghost’s displeasure. Moreover, the malevolent spirits enter into the body of his/ her relatives and frighten

the kinsfolk. All these evil characteristics of malevolent spirits have a universal nature. Domestic animals like dogs, cows, cocks, etc. can recognize the arrival of invisible malevolent spirits and from their unusual behavior tribesmen come to know of their presence. They can also experience the presence of the spirits from unusual alarming sounds or from the tempting fragrance of certain flowers of trees like the *Pala*. They enter into the body of any one of their relatives or into the body of any domestic animal of their old hamlet. Following are some of the symptoms or behavioral changes pointed out in the spirit-affected persons/animals: first, domestic animals suddenly fall down and die without any cause; second, giddiness, high temperature etc are found in the affected persons; third, the victim is plunged into a state of blabbering, frequent fainting, wailing, laughing or tormenting others; and finally, scratch marks appear on the face and body of the prey.

The *Palu-Kurumbar* attributes sickness to the malevolent activity of spirits. To ward off such spirits and to cure the disease, they consult the headman who tries to deal with it by tying magical threads around the wrist of the affected person. If this fails they consult their medicine man who tries to cure it by applying some medicinal herbs after paying homage to the ancestors and clan deities (if the tribe has any). If this too fails, they finally consult efficient sorcerers who try to exorcise the spirit through blood sacrifices. *Kurumbar* believe that malevolent spirits have the power to prevent rainfall and thereby cause draught leading to the failure of crops and to famine. According to the tribal belief, the malevolent spirit enters *Adi-Loka* or *Naraka*, which is situated beneath the earth, after death. When they try to come out from the underground, calamities occur.

Conclusion

Thus *Kurumbar* is a group of kinsmen and kinswomen united by a common ancestry. We cannot define them on an ethnic/racial basis. Their world is constituted by kinship based social organization. Among them there is theoretically no caste or class distinction, no ruling class versus commoners on the basis of property rights. The history of this tribe goes back to the Neolithic stage of prehistory, and their culture is linked with Neolithic agricultural techniques of production. Agriculture is a labor-intensive activity and for agricultural activities a settled way of life and cooperation between families are necessary. Returns on labor are delayed. This led to the formation of kinship-based societies and such societies fall under the category of 'tribe'. *Kurumbar* inherits property from their ancestors or ancestor-gods and thus has no

right to dispose of such property. The social, political, economic and cultural organizations of the *Kurumbar* would prove that they perfectly conform to the above-mentioned definition of a tribe.

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