



DECODING THE MEANING AND BELIEFS ASSOCIATED WITH PETROGLYPHS IN EDAKKAL ROCK SHELTER, KERALA, INDIA

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ABSTRACT - Kerala is a tiny stretch of land situated on the southwestern tip of peninsular India. Diverse yet distinct environmental and cultural factors make this land unique. Rock art of the region is represented by pictographs and petroglyphs, and the latter form predominates compared with other regions. The Edakkal rock-shelter probably has the richest variety of petroglyphs in the world. These petroglyphs are mute cultural vestiges of a bygone society, now perceived and assessed as art. Behind the art lie unfathomable seminal religious beliefs of its practitioners and creators. The belief and meaning envisaged by its creators will never be truly explicit to us. There are some primitive religious practices and beliefs still lingering in ethnic society, the meaning of which is never pondered but continued merely as traditions. An attempt is made in this paper to analyse these religious ideas and practices, and to decode the history, meaning and beliefs associated with petroglyphs in the Edakkal rock-shelter.

RIASSUNTO - Il Kerala è una sottile striscia di territorio situata nell'estremità sud-occidentale della Penisola Indiana. Diversi e allo stesso tempo specifici fattori ambientali e culturali rendono questa terra unica. L'arte rupestre nella regione è rappresentata da pittogrammi e petroglifi, questi ultimi predominanti se confrontati con le altre regioni. La grotta di Edakkal può vantare una ricca varietà di petroglifi. Tali petroglifi sono vestigia culturali mute di una società del passato, oggi percepite e valutate come 'arte'. Dietro l'arte si celano le misteriose credenze religiose fondamentali dei suoi praticanti e creatori. Il bagaglio di credenze e di significati immaginati da coloro che li hanno realizzati non saranno mai del tutto chiari. Esistono ancora nelle società etniche alcune pratiche e credenze, il cui senso non è mai ponderato ma semplicemente trasmesso in quanto si tratta di tradizioni. Attraverso l'analisi delle idee e prassi religiose ancora sussistenti, tale intervento si propone il tentativo di decifrare la storia, il significato e le credenze associate ai petroglifi della grotta di Edakkal.

Kerala is a tiny stretch of land situated on the south-western tip of the Indian peninsula. Diverse yet distinct environmental and cultural factors make this land unique. The rock art of the region is represented by pictographs and petroglyphs and the latter predominate compared with other regions. The Edakkal rock shelter probably has the richest variety of petroglyphs in the world (Fig.1). These petroglyphs are mute cultural vestiges of a bygone society, now perceived and assessed as art. Behind the art lie the unfathomable seminal religious beliefs of its practitioners and creators. Taking clues from some primitive religious practices and beliefs lingering in the ethnic tribal society in the region, an attempt is made in this paper to decode the meaning and beliefs associated with the petroglyphs in the Edakkal rock shelter.

THE EDAKKAL ROCK SHELTER

The Edakkal rock shelter (11°37' N, 76° 15' E) is a unique petroglyph site in Kerala and also happens to be the earliest rock art site discovered. The shelter was discovered in 1894 by F. Fawcett just 15 years after the historic discovery of the Altamira paintings. The report on the cave by Fawcett is of an exemplary nature and there is hardly any facet he left unrecorded or without an interpretation (Fawcett 1901). Yet it happens to be the most discussed rock shelter in academic circles in India and has been subject to various studies and interpretations.

The shelter is located on a hill known as the Ambukuthimala at an elevation of about 4,600 ft MSL. The shelter has lower and upper storeys. The lower storey has no engravings and flowing through it is a perennial water stream. A steep climb opens on to a landing and to the right side of it is a passage leading into the upper shelter. This shelter is between two rock formations with a large boulder canopied at the top. The further end of the shelter is however open to the sky (Fig.1). The rock surface on either side of the entrance

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is engraved or etched with strange-looking stylized anthropomorphic figures and other images (Fig.2). These anthropomorphic figures, though linear in delineation, are quite articulate in execution. To attain coordination, symmetry and best results it appears that the outline of the figure was first drawn and subsequently etched or grooved out deeper. These figures are generally represented in single grooved lines and rarely figures with grooved double lines also occur. There are also a few inscriptions in the cave.

The left wall almost in the centre has a very prominent anthropomorphic figure with a strange face, head-gear and arms (Fig.3). Adjoining it is another equally large figure with a queer circular design at the chest. There are a few more anthropomorphic figures adjoining these, some small and some large. There are also some figures above the larger images in shallow depths compared with the larger figures. Animals like the dog, elephant, deer, blackbuck and peacock, plants and flowers, and a human figure with a hand shaped like a jar are among the depictions (Fig.7). A wheeled cart (?) with a figure above on the extreme left (Fig.5) and a lady with a square head-dress on the right end are interesting representations (Fig.6). Spoke wheels and some geometric motifs are also noticed at many places along both the walls. There are also three inscriptions on this wall towards the upper empty space at the far end, which opens to the sky. On paleographic grounds the earliest inscription is datable to the early historic period (Fig.8). The inscriptions are away from the etching and at an elevated portion where sufficient natural light is available. On the right wall too there is a large anthropomorphic figure adjoining some smaller ones. Towards the far end opening to natural light is a ladder (?) with an anthropomorphic figure above it. There are a few other female figures elegantly carved, apart from animals like blackbuck, a queer bird with a long neck (peacock?) and some inscriptions with early paleographic characters.

DISCUSSION ON THE EDAKKAL ENGRAVINGS

Much has been speculated about the Edakkal engravings, the methodology, meaning and date, from the time it was first reported. The people who created the engravings did not execute it as a work of art as we perceive it today. It was a reflection of their beliefs and practices. Its true meaning will never be known other than the interpretations we make. Conjecturing and infusing meaning into these enigmatic creations is always a challenging and satisfying pursuit for research.

The location of the Edakkal shelter is awe-inspiring and bestows a mystic feel even today. Nearly 4 ft of debris from the cave was cleared from the rock shelter soon after its initial discovery by Fawcett. He does not report any stone artifact of prehistoric nature from it. The debris of nearly 2 ft was also removed from this shelter in 2010–11 and during the process no prehistoric stone artifact was found either. This clearly shows that the rock shelter was never inhabited in the true sense but possibly was a place of worship and veneration, like a temple, of the aboriginals who once inhabited the region (Fawcett1901:104).

Fawcett over a century ago had observed that Kurumbas had a reverence for the Edakkal engravings, but no one visited it. He notes its association with the Chettis and a deity they worshipped before conducting a tiger hunt and with minor goddesses called Mudiampilli and an imp called Kuttichattan (Fawcett 1901:104–06). All this in a way speaks of the reverence the locals had towards the figures carved in the shelter, though none claimed authorship.

It is quite possible that the authors of the engravings at Edakkal were the ancestors of the Kurumba tribe, who were quite creative in their religious beliefs. They had an affinity for erecting religious edifices on hills. E. Thurston mentions the Kurumba tribe worshipping rough stones set in caves called *kurumbar koil*. During illness and when instructed by their ancestral spirits, tribal Kurumba made offerings to Bettadachiamma or the 'mother of the hill'. Apart from this, they also believed in evil and good spirits and practised exorcism and animal sacrifices (Thurston1909, Vol.4: 164). Kurumbas practised ancestor worship and erected megalithic monuments (Ray 2008: 162). It is quite apparent that some of the megalithic monuments scattered around Edakkal owe their origin to this ethnic group.

The main representations on both wall surfaces are anthropomorphic figures. On the left wall as we enter, two large figures occupy the central portion of the rock surface and surrounding it are smaller ones and animal figures. On the right wall too, the main figure is anthropomorphic followed by smaller figures of animals. There are both male and female forms represented. The female forms have angular representations with slender waists, and queer head-dresses like the male figures, possibly to designate a divine character. The faces of all these anthropomorphic images are not explicit in physiognomic detail and seem to be adorned with some mask-like element to impart a mystic iconic feel and character. Both the arms of the anthropomorphic figures are generally shown raised up and fingers are not clearly demarcated and have leafy appendages. The feet of many of the images are not clearly demarcated. Was this depiction in tune with the underlying belief that spirits have no feet? Nearly all the anthropomorphic figures are individualistic and no two are exactly similar. They are more variably executed possibly to denote different personas. Some commonality, however, is observed in

the coiffure and costumes of these figures and also at times in the delineation or positioning of the hands. Some female figures with the queer headgear apparently have some divine standing and may represent the hill divinities or goddesses Bettadachiamma which Thurston says were worshipped by Kurumbas to ward off ill-health, evil or Masiti (also a female divinity worshipped by Ten Kurumbar)(Thurston 1909, Vol.4: 164; Figs.4a and 4b).

It is of great significance to decode and understand the meaning and belief associated with anthropomorphic figures. Anthropomorphic figures carved in stone have been reported in megalithic contexts from a host of sites like Mottur in Tamilnadu and Padugonigudem, Dongatogu, Tottigulta, etc. and the Khammam District of Andhra Pradesh (Narasimhaiah 1980:127–203; Rao 1988:25–6, Pls.15-16). These figures, like at Edakkal, do not have their physiognomic features clearly demarcated, though in rare instances their gender is shown. In Kerala some votive terracotta male and female anthropomorphic figurines have been reported from megalithic urn burials at Malampuzha in Palaghat District, reiterating the fact that votive figurines were crafted and vogue among megalith builders and practitioners of Kerala (Kumar 2004:170–5).

Some ethnic tribes in Kerala, like Kadars, Kanis, Kurumbas, Cholanaikans and Patinaikans, still have indistinct forms of megalithic practices and ancestor worship. Among these tribal groups, Cholanayakans and Patinaikans worship images of ancestors' images made in bell metal which they keep in caskets, wrapped in red silk cloth and sprinkled with vermilion and coins as offerings. The custodian of these images is the *moopan* or chieftain (Kumar 2007:95). These images, both male and female, are generally shown holding a staff in one of their hands. Some images hold a staff in one hand and in the other a bill-hook or smaller staff, and the iconographic character is similar to the Muthappan Teyyam figures of today. It is acknowledged that many rituals in the Teyyam performance have their roots in hunting and tribal practices of ancestor worship and shamanism (Gabriel 2010:40–1).

It was indicated by Fawcett that the coiffure and costumes seen in Edakkal figures show similarity with that of the devil dance of the Tuluvas or the Teyyam forms enacted today (Fawcett 1901:416; Mathpal 1998:39; Fig.5). The bow and arrow held by one of the main figures in the Edakkal representations also happens to be chief weapon of Muthappan. The philosophical and iconographic similarity that the Edakkal anthropomorphic images share with the bronze images of ancestors worshipped by the Patinaikans and the Muthappan Teyyam necessitates placing them in the same league. Teyyam rituals have a similarity with tribal ritual and practices. In tribal practices the *moopans* becomes the medium (shaman) and in Teyyam the person who wears the dress becomes the shaman, who through ritualistic practices and performances attains a state of trance or an altered state of consciousness to gain access to the world of spirits and gods and command divination and healing and make theophany. In tribal society these *moopans* (sometimes called *chenmakkaran*) or shamans are vested with the responsibilities of death rituals, wherein they invoke ancestral spirits and assign them the duty of ferrying the dead soul or spirit into the realm of the god.

Apart from the anthropomorphic figures there are some representations like a spoke wheel symbol, a cart or ladder-like object with a human representation at the further end and animal motifs. Cartwheels with four spokes are not functional and hardly known and possibly are not cartwheels as thought. A recent study indicates that the symbol of the cross within a circle is associated with death (Tiwari 2013). Similarly the ladder and the figure at the distant end may represent the soul's ascent into heaven. It will be interesting to note that the figure at the further end of the ladder is not clearly demarcated, as though presenting the soul's mystery (Fig.6). The identification of the ladder or stretcher gains credence as there is more than one representation of this motif at Edakkal and in many of them the so-called wheels are absent. To draw an analogy, in Buddhist art, Buddha's descent from heaven is also represented by a series of steps (Cunningham 1879:Pl.XVII). Hence the association of ladder engravings with death and after death the ascent of the spirit into heaven seems obvious.

Recently a researcher has photo-documented the use of bamboo stretchers or ladder-like objects by the Kadar tribe group in Kerala to transport dead bodies to the burial ground. This was abandoned over the grave along with other utilitarian objects and over the head portion of the deceased was planted a stone (Kurian 2013). It is interesting to note that most of these emblems are found adjoining and directed towards the large anthropomorphic figures as though in reverence to it.

The assumption that the representation stands for a cart does not seem to hold good as no draught animal is observed in the engravings. It is interesting to note that none of the indigenous tribes of Kerala ventured into cattle keeping or rearing of their own and hence the absence of cattle in the engravings is quite palpable. The four-spoked wheel seems a non-functional entity in a large draught cart. The circle with a cross in the centre interpreted as a wheel should possibly read as a death symbol (Tiwari 2013).

Engraved and oriented towards the anthropomorphic representations are animals like elephants, dogs, deer, blackbuck and others (Fig.7). These animals were apparently totems of the different Kurumba families who contributed to engraving these figures as votive offerings over different periods of time (a fact also obvious



from different styles and depths) (Thurston 1909:158). The most common animal representation is the deer or blackbuck and probably the clan represented by this animal had a predominant contribution in creating these engravings. Recently a blackbuck engraving was observed on a boulder in the forest of Waynad District by Krishna Raj, quite like the one in Edakkal, and possibly was a territorial demarcation of the ethnic group representing the animal (*The Hindu*, 11 January 2013).

The Kurumba tribe had a practice of abandoning their place of stay and shifting to new ones after a mishap or calamity had struck. It is quite possible in such an eventuality that the ancestors of the Kurumba tribe migrated and subsequent generations when they returned had lost intimate association with the Edakkal engravings and their true meaning was lost. This possibly would explain why the local Kurumba tribesmen have no explicit attachment to or reverence for these engravings. However, they still associate themselves with ancestor worship conducted by their *moopan* (chieftain or headman of the clan who also acts as the shaman).

Though the Kurumba disassociated themselves from the petroglyphs in the shelter, its existence and knowledge were not totally lost from public memory, as evidenced from the inscriptions in the shelter dating from the second and third centuries to the fifth and sixth centuries AD and the fact that the cave was visited by the socially elite (Mahadevan 1998:Fig.8). Engravings may have been done also during this period, but it is difficult to sort them out.

DATE OF THE ENGRAVINGS

It has been usually considered that the Edakkal engravings belong to the Neolithic period, taking clues from a Neolithic celt reported by Fawcett some 15 km away from the site. If these petroglyphs were engraved using Neolithic celts, then debitage of the celts made and used in the work should have been found in sizeable amounts from the cave and its vicinity, but they are not forthcoming. The Neolithic period in south India is associated with sedentary life, pottery, celts, microliths and animal husbandry. None of these features is observed at Edakkal or anywhere in its vicinity. Bulls in terracotta and painted forms associable with the Neolithic period are found at many places in south India. In the petroglyphs of Edakkal not a single domesticated bovine animal finds representation. These factors seem to assert the fact that these engravings have no Neolithic association.

We have already observed that a large number of megalithic monuments have been reported from Edakkal and its surroundings. It has already been reported that the authorship of some of these definitely belongs to the Kurumba tribal group. The megalithic tradition in Kerala today dates back close to 1000BC and it is also a well-known fact that the megalithic tradition continued well into the historical period and even now continues in an indistinct form among some of the indigenous tribes of Kerala. The finish and depth achieved in the engravings at Edakkal seem to imply that iron implements and technology mastered during the megalithic period were put to use in crafting these petroglyphs.

At Edakkal, the earliest dateable records are found engraved on the wall surface of the left and right walls, away from the petroglyphs. The earliest inscription on paleographic grounds is datable to the second and third centuries AD (Mahadevan 1998). The location of the early inscription seems to indicate that the engravings were already in existence when they were inscribed around second century AD. Even if we were to presume that the engravings predate the earliest epigraph by 700–800 years, it would still date only to the fifth or sixth century BC, in other words to the megalithic or early historic period. Hence the Neolithic association of the Edakkal petroglyphs possibly needs to be abandoned.

Summing up, it is felt that the main anthropomorphic figures at Edakkal are not carved with the pure or traditional beliefs and iconography of the gods worshipped in the temples. They are in fact reflective of a synthesis of ritual and beliefs like death and life after death and beneficial ancestral spirits, who could be approached and appeased to protect from evil, diseases and calamities. The petroglyphs in all possibility represent ancestral spirits and deities of the Kurumba tribe and are votive symbolic honour offerings. Many of the symbols carved adjoining the main figure have a votive value and some of them, like the stretcher and spokes circle, possibly denote death and the transmigration of the soul into the realm of the dead or heaven and related concepts. The animals represented are depicted oriented towards the main icon in reverence and possibly are totemic representations of different families or clans of the Kurumba who were involved in the creating these votive petroglyphs. The petroglyphs of Edakkal do not seem to have Neolithic associations but apparently date to the megalithic period.

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Fig. 1 Edakkal rock shelter general view from inside



Fig. 2 Petroglyphs on the left rock surface of the shelter



Fig. 3 Close-up of the anthropomorphic figures on the left rock surface



Figs. 4a and 4b Female forms in the shelter



Fig. 5 Lady with box-like headgear



Fig. 6 Ladder design with an anthropomorphic figure above and two circles with cross in it



Fig. 7 Animals in a move towards the anthropomorphic figures and wheel symbols



Fig. 8 Inscriptions in the Edakkal shelter: No.4 is in Tamil-Brahmi characters and the earliest