



THE CONTEMPORARY TRIBAL ART OF THE SATPURA RANGES

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Abstract - The contemporary tribal art of the Satpura Ranges

The tribal society of Satpura ranges, the Korku honour their deceased members with carved and decorated teak wood memorial boards, which are placed under a sacred tree in their memories during the highly religious ceremony. This may last for seven to eight hours during the ceremony the tribe females dance in a circle around the sacred mango tree. In between they hold the memorial board in their hands and dance. The memorial board is known as Gatha among them, Gatha means narration of story about their ancestors

Following the carved board is venerated and wept over. Later, a goat or jungle fowl is sacrificed and eaten, while the local liquor made from the flowers of the Mahua tree (*Bassia latifolia*) is consumed. One such sacred tree is situated in the "Gond Baba Udhayan" (lit. - Garden of the Gond deity) located in the Pachmarhi town itself. Tribal who come from the surrounding villages of Pachmarhi use this site for their religious rituals followed by feasts. Memorial boards are placed at the base of the sacred tree within ten years of a death. The subjects carved into the board are selected from a limited list of elements. These are usually horse riders; group of geometrical human figures holding hands, representations of sun or moon and the name of the deceased.

In carvings of the horse and its rider the Korku do not depict their own ancestors, as they did not have horses. The figures mounted on horse represent their conquerors. This element of the carving is totally unrelated to the lives of the deceased, but its stylistic form and that of other human figures is similar to the more recent rock paintings situated in rock shelters only a few kilometers away. Many of the present day tribal communities decorate the walls of their house with paintings. The selected subjects relate to their natural and cultural environments, depicting birds, floral patterns, whilst other appears to be of symbolic or ritual importance. These wall paintings also seem to have their roots in the rock art tradition. At present the Korku tribal live in wattle huts whose walls are coated by clay colored white. The tradition of paintings continues as the korku women decorated their house walls with paintings and sketches. They use local colour such as the dark or Indian red, yellow ochre, blue and white. The paintings are executed during the slack rainy season or occasionally, during festival events. The women folks in the Korku society carry out all domestic work and look after the children.

Riassunto - L'arte tribale contemporanea di Satpura Ranges

I Korku, società tribali del Satpura Ranges, onorano i loro defunti intagliando e decorando tavolette votive in legno di tek che vengono deposte sotto l'albero sacro durante una particolare cerimonia religiosa che può durare 7-8 ore. Durante la cerimonia le donne danzano in cerchio attorno all'albero sacro di mango. Dopo la deposizione della tavola il defunto è venerato e pianto. Il cerimoniale è noto come Gatha che significa "narrazione della storia degli antenati". Dopo la deposizione vengono sacrificati e mangiati un pollo o una capra e si consuma un liquore locale fatto coi fiori dell'albero Mahua (*Bassia Latifolia*). Uno degli alberi sacri si trova nel "Gond Udhayan Baba" (letteralmente giardino delle divinità Gond) nella città di Pachmarhi, i fedeli delle tribù vengono dai villaggi vicini per celebrarvi i riti religiosi e le feste. Le tavolette in legno sono deposte ai piedi dell'albero sacro dieci anni dopo la morte dell'antenato.

I soggetti intagliati sulle tavole hanno un repertorio molto limitato: raffigurazioni di cavalieri (che non rappresentano il defunto ma i conquistatori, perché i Korku non allevano i cavalli), figure geometriche, figure umane che si tengono per mano, rappresentazioni del sole e della luna e il nome del defunto. Questi soggetti non hanno relazioni stringenti con la vita del defunto ma derivano stilisticamente dai soggetti delle pitture rupestri recentemente individuate in ripari sottoroccia a pochi chilometri di distanza. Anche le tradizionali decorazioni murarie dei villaggi Korku sembrano avere radici nella tradizione d'arte rupestre: ancora oggi, in molte comunità tribali è diffusa l'abitudine di decorare i muri delle abitazioni con soggetti che rimandano al mondo naturale (uccelli, motivi floreali) e ad un universo simbolico e rituale. Queste decorazioni (pitture e disegni) sono realizzate dalle donne sull'argilla bianca usata per intonacare le semplici pareti di canniccio delle capanne usando i colori reperibili in loco come il rosso scuro o indiano, il giallo ocra, il blu e il bianco. Questi dipinti sono realizzati durante la stagione delle piogge o, più raramente, per celebrare feste o eventi. Il ruolo delle donne nelle comunità Korku è relegato alle attività domestiche e alla cura dei bambini.

Résumé - L'art tribal contemporain de la chaîne de Satpura

La société tribale de la chaîne de Satpura, les Korkus, honore ses défunts avec des planches commémoratives en teck. Les Korkus les gravent, les décorent et les placent en dessous d'un arbre sacré à leur mémoire lors des cérémonies religieuses,

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qui peuvent durer sept à huit heures. Durant les cérémonies, les femmes dansent en cercle autour du manguier sacré. Entretemps, elles tiennent la planche commémorative dans leurs mains et dansent. La planche commémorative est connue sous le nom de Gatha. Pour les Korkus, Gatha signifie « narration de l'histoire de leurs ancêtres ».

Ensuite, la planche gravée est vénérée et pleurée. Plus tard, une chèvre ou une poule de jungle est sacrifiée et mangée, accompagnée de liqueurs locales à base des fleurs de l'arbre Mahua (*Bassia Latifolia*). Un de ces arbres sacrés se trouve dans le « Gond Baba Udhayan » (littéralement « Le jardin du dieu Gond »), situé dans la ville de Pachmarhi. Les tribus des villages environnants utilisent ce site pour leurs rituels religieux, qui sont suivis par des festins. Les planches commémoratives sont placées au pied de l'arbre sacré dans les dix ans après la mort. Les sujets qui y sont gravés sont sélectionnés parmi une liste limitée d'éléments. Ce sont habituellement des cavaliers, des groupes de figures humaines géométriques qui se tiennent la main, des représentations du soleil ou de la lune et le nom du défunt.

En gravant des chevaux et des cavaliers, les Korkus ne représentent par leurs ancêtres, puisqu'ils n'avaient pas de chevaux. Les figures qui montent les chevaux représentent leurs conquérants. Cet élément de la gravure n'a aucun rapport avec les passions du défunt, mais ses formes stylistiques et celles des autres figures humaines ressemblent aux peintures rupestres plus récentes situées dans des abris sous roche à seulement quelques kilomètres de là. De nombreuses communautés tribales actuelles décorent les murs de leur maison avec des peintures. Les sujets qu'ils choisissent sont soit liés à leurs environnements naturels et culturels (peintures d'oiseaux et de motifs floraux) ou bien ils revêtent une importance symbolique ou rituelle. Ces peintures murales semblent également provenir de la tradition de l'art rupestre. À l'heure actuelle, les tribus korkus vivent dans des « baraques-gourbis » dont les murs sont enduits d'argile blanche. La tradition des peintures se perpétue car les femmes korkus décorent les murs de leur maison de peintures et d'esquisses. Elles utilisent les couleurs locales, telles que le noir ou le rouge indien, l'ocre jaune, le bleu ou le blanc. Les peintures sont réalisées durant les saisons des pluies faibles et parfois durant des festivités. Dans la société korku, les femmes effectuent toutes les tâches domestiques et s'occupent des enfants.

In the remote mountains, deep dense forests, swamps and deserts the lives of hunters and gatherers remained almost undisturbed, long after more advanced cultures settled in the valleys and lowlands. The tribal people living in the rock shelters observed the colonising groups and recorded their activities in paintings on the walls of their rock shelters. Later, they were to adopt from the newcomers only a few basic cultural items, such as the way of life, fears and beliefs of hunter-gatherers in their shelters and the changing cultures of the newcomers living in the valleys, in detailed narrative scenes. This is the most complete record, supported by the evidence of archeological remains, of the tribal culture as it existed in the past. By popular belief the name Pachmarhi is a derivation of 'Pach-marhi' or a complex of five caves of the Pandava brothers, who are supposed to have spent a considerable portion of their lifetime of exile incognito in this area.

The hills are thickly vegetated with rich floristic and faunal biota but quite widespread and difficult to access. The natural species represented in the rock art were of great economic importance, having food value for the shelter-dwellers, and they often form the subjects of their paintings. Rock paintings found within shelters here are the major sources of our understanding of how their creators related to their physical and biological environment. The present area of study is the Satpura ranges, which are very rich in rock art and tribal culture and cultural environments. These people, as do their descendants at the present time, held beliefs and practices which expressed a direct or indirect relationship between their environment and themselves. Within this body of expression, the evolution of art together with the development of mankind over centuries and art as such play an important and multifaceted role. In time the valley culture exerted greater influence on the tribal groups. They left the rock shelters and the painted record ceased. Although this occurred only a few hundred years ago, there exist only a few, more recent paintings, which may be linked to the earlier examples of rock art.

Each tribe has its own set of beliefs and aspiration which are manifested in multiple and varied forms of nature worship, the cult of mother goddess, ancestral worship, the cult of the evil spirit and so on. A ritual method of worship and folk practices developed around various deities and natural powers, and a tradition of mantra or chants also developed. The various tribal creation myths are always related to one or other of the power deities of their pantheon. Many of these deities reside in a tree, apart from the human world, and can be both good and evil spirits. Most of the gods are embodiments of the idea of power of godliness, they have no forms and hence no iconography or idol, so that any place or a tree can accommodate this idea of a god. However, there are certain gods with a definite iconography moulded in clay, stone, wood or metal and assigned a certain sacred place, where at least once a year on an auspicious day people gather for ritual worship. Each tribal community has its own shaman or priest whom they follow in matters of religion and the rituals. Animal



sacrifice and offering of liquor are essential to the worshipping of many deities. The practice of fowl and animal sacrifice to appease gods is common not only in tribal customs but has also been part of their religion. Earlier it used to be a human sacrifice to the goddess Kali or Bhairav (Forsyth 1889).

Most of the tribes erect some sort of a memorial to the dead; the Gonds generally in the shape of little mounds, covered by slabs of stones; while Korkus carve elaborate pillars of teak wood with emblems of the sun and the crescent moon, and the deceased party mounted on a horse, which they erected under a tree appropriated for the purpose near one of their villages.

A very popular cemetery of this sort may be seen close to Pachmarhi town.

The Korku honour their deceased members with carved and decorated teakwood memorial boards, which are placed under a sacred tree in their memory during a religious ceremony. This may last for seven or eight hours; during the ceremony the tribe's females dance in a circle around the sacred mango tree. In between they hold the memorial board in their hands and dance (Gatha ceremony, Figure 1; Worshipping Gatha (board), Figure 2; Types of Gatha, Figure 3).

Following this the carved boards are venerated and wept over. Later, a goat or jungle fowl is sacrificed and eaten, while the local liquor made from the flowers of the mahua tree (*Bassia latifolia*) is consumed. One such sacred tree is situated in the 'Gond Baba Udhayan' (literally garden of the Gond deity), located in Pachmarhi town itself. Tribal people who come from the surrounding villages of Pachmarhi use this site for their religious rituals followed by feasts.

Memorial boards are placed at the base of the sacred tree within ten years of a death. The subjects carved into the board are selected from a limited list of elements. These are usually horse riders; groups of geometrical human figures holding hands, representing the sun or the moon and the name of the deceased.

In carvings of the horse and rider the Korku do not depict their own ancestors, as they did not have horses. The figures mounted on horseback represent their conquerors. This element of the carving is totally unrelated to the lives of the deceased, but its stylistic form and that of other human figures is similar to the more recent rock paintings situated in rock shelters only a few kilometres away (Wakankar and Brooks 1976).

The present-day tribal communities decorate the walls of their houses with paintings using natural colour like lime and *geru*. The subjects selected relate to their natural and cultural environments, depicting birds and floral patterns, and others appear to be of symbolic or ritual importance. These wall paintings also seem to have their roots in the rock art tradition. At present the Korku tribe lives in wattle huts whose walls are coated with clay coloured white.) The tradition of painting continues as the Korku women decorate their house walls with paintings and sketches. They use local colour such as dark or Indian red, yellow ochre, blue and white. The paintings are executed during the slack rainy season or occasionally during festivals. The women in Korku society carry out all domestic work and look after the children (Korku women busy with domestic chores, Figure 4).

The depiction of a peacock on the wall of a hut in Kajjri village in the national park area is very similar to rock paintings found recently in the Langi Hill shelter. A symbol painted on the same repaired wall closely resembles a rock painting of the Swem Aam shelter that has only been recently explored. That the two traditions share the same roots can be seen in the common subject matter and the continuing stylistic conventions displayed by contemporary tribal artists (Similar depiction, contemporary art, Figure 5; Rock art, Figures 6-7-8).

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

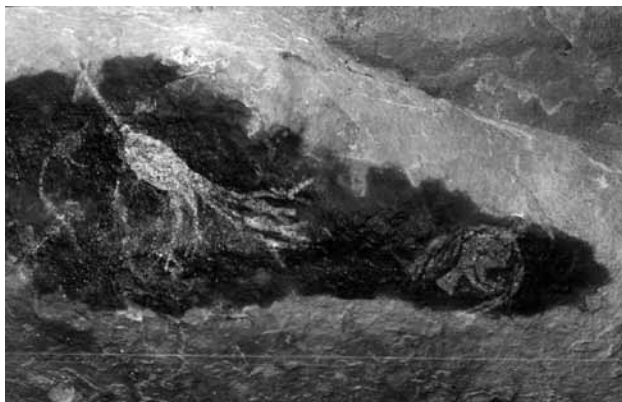


Fig. 7

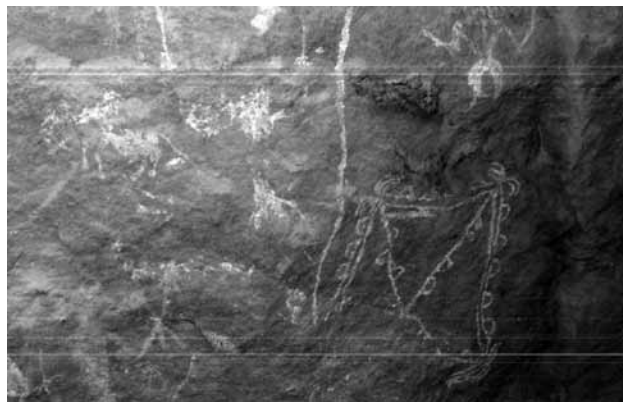


Fig. 8