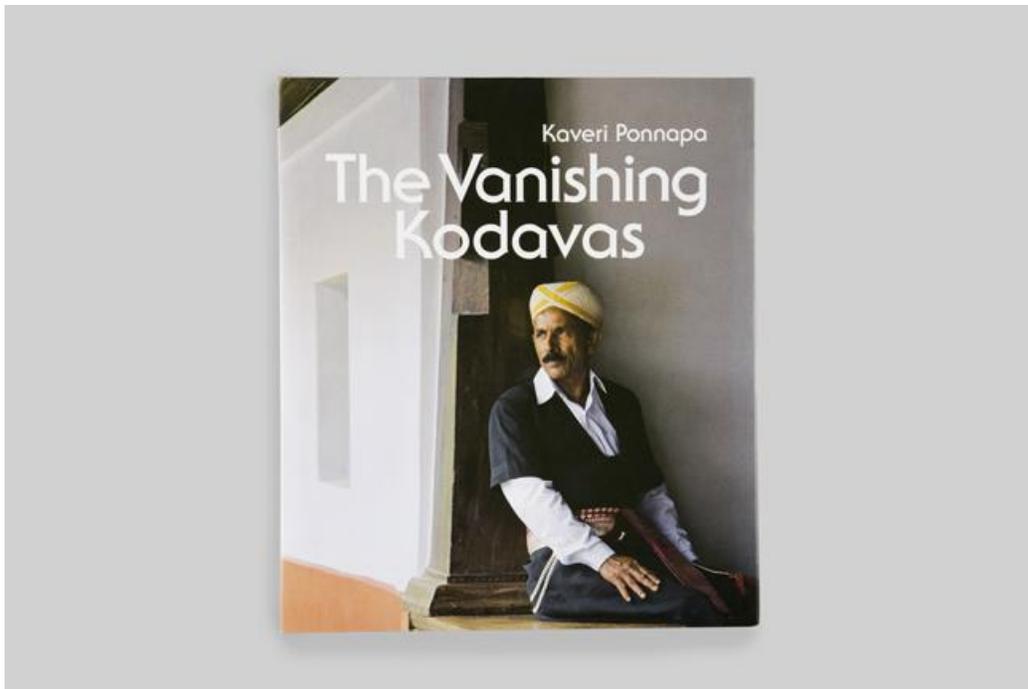


AUTHOR: KAVERI PONNAPA; PHOTOGRAPHER: SUDEEP GURTU

## like a string of cakkota flowers\*: Book review of *The Vanishing Kodavas*

Added on Aug 28, 2014

The land of Coorg or Kodagu, has in the twentieth century become a tourist hotspot, famed for its lush scenery, coffee plantations and cuisine, yet surprisingly little is known of its indigenous people and their ways. Filling this lacuna in our collective knowledge, Kaveri Ponnapa's *The Vanishing Kodavas* offers a rich account of Kodava history, rituals, customs and values – of the abstract Kodavammé or “the spirit of the Kodava way of life”.

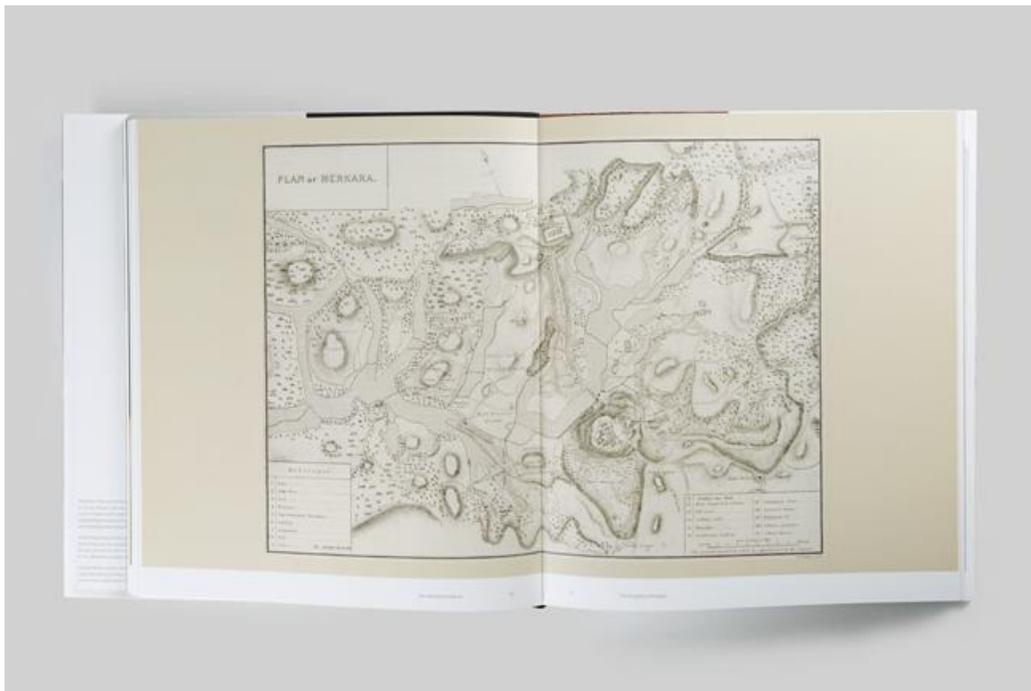


Cover, *The Vanishing Kodavas*

A student of social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, Kaveri Ponnapa spent fifteen years traversing the length and breadth of Kodagu, attending ceremonies, participating in festivals and engaging with people. Her painstaking efforts are evident in the amount of detail that can be gleaned from *The Vanishing Kodavas*, the product of this thorough research. Shedding light on their unique culture, that as she notes is fast disappearing in an age of globalisation – she writes not only of their eroding identities, but also the ways in which these have been shaped and transformed. It is significant, that she never presents the Kodavas and their customs as static cultures, unchanged in time, but as transmuted identities that affected by historical events and external influences, still strove to retain older traditions.



Pariyakali at Mandalpatti, *The Vanishing Kodavas*, pg. 234



Double spread featuring an early map of Madikeri by J & C Walker, *The Vanishing Kodavas*, pg. 92-93

Ponnappa uses a wide range of reference material in the form of gazetteer documents, colonial accounts, correspondence, official records, the *Hukumnama* (or the recorded history of the Rajas of Kodagu), folk-lore, songs, and the oral accounts of the Kodava people themselves to create an engrossing and elaborately weaved chronicle of the Kodavas. The text is creditably balanced by 300 photographs taken by Sudeep Gurtu that are spread out over the

book; visually emphasising the haunting beauty of the land that Ponnappa evokes through her writing, and demonstrating the many intricacies of Kodava clothes, jewellery, homes, shrines and customs that she expounds upon.

Supplemented with vintage photographs of Kodavas at the turn of the nineteenth century, archival maps, drawings and etchings of Kodava warriors and the landscape of Kodagu, sketches of the royal family in exile made by the Prince Alexis Soltykoff and other portraits – this book extends its multi-layered and nuanced approach to the manner in which the Kodavas and Kodagu are visually imaged.



Vintage photographs and portraits from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, *The Vanishing Kodavas*, pg. 100-101

The layout of the book further bolsters its comprehensive nature. The first chapter details the history of the Royal Family – the Lingyat Rajahs and their contributions to both the land and its people. It explores the ways in which the advent of the British Empire and the manner in which their political agendas, transferred through their writings, produced a distorted picture of the royals and their administration. Contesting the official East India Company narrative that paints the last Raja as a tyrannical despot, Ponnappa offers a moving story of his life and the naivety that led to his exile and downfall, as it were. Her account of the young princess Victoria Gowramma's tragic life is fascinating, and much of the book's impact comes from these personal stories woven into the text that leave long lasting impressions.

The personal is also significant in *The Vanishing Kodavas* in other ways. As a Kodavathi, belonging to the community who form the subject of her work, Kaveri Ponnappa moves beyond a question of access, and her writing is not merely informed and well-researched, but also empathetic and passionate. She foregrounds her subjectivity by introducing the first person, now and then, in the text; and seeks repeatedly to rectify existing assumptions and assert certain other narratives. The question of gender, one so heavily loaded in contemporary contexts for instance, is one that she repeatedly returns to, underlining how societal laws and customs in traditional Kodava society reflect an egalitarian approach in general, and in specific were vested in respecting women and their choices.



Kudi aat at the Bhadrakali temple, Makkandur, *The Vanishing Kodavas*, pg. 216

In other chapters, Ponna describes the songs, dances, religious and secular festivals and the manner of their celebrations, the myths and folk histories that shape the Kodavas, exploring the Kodava worldview and its expression. She recounts the cycles of life in Kodava society and the rituals that govern social existence – marriages, childbirths and funerals. Moving into the modern era, she looks at the history of coffee plantations in the region and its affects, following it up with a brief note on the existing state of cultural disintegration, a collection of photographic portraits and a couple of engaging stories – some referenced in earlier parts – to produce this extensive universe which mirrors her deep engagement with it.



The spirit of Kaliyatanda Ajjappa, a legendary sorcerer of great fame, being led by two Kodavas, The Vanishing Kodavas, pg. 205



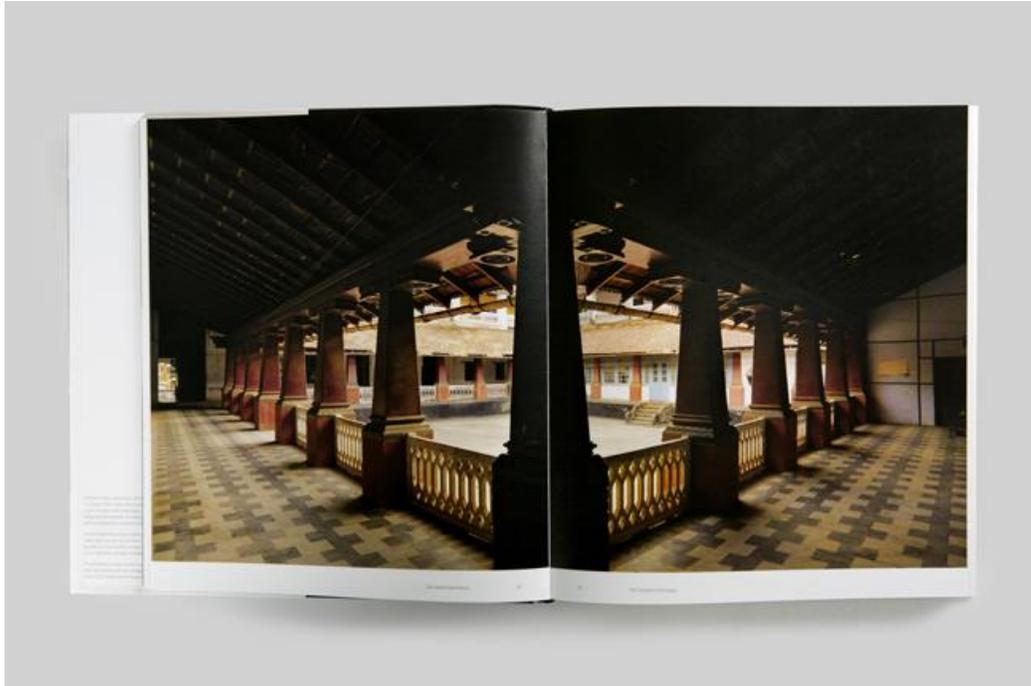
Drawings and sketches illustrating significant details of the dress worn by Kodava men, and images of the Brocade kupa belonging to historical personage Bippanda Bopu, now at the Madikeri Fort Museum, The Vanishing Kodavas, pg. 65



Left: Palandira Poovaih Devaiah & Right: Biddanda Kunjiappa Ponnanna from the Portraits section of The Vanishing Kodavas, pg. 338-339

Ponnappa also engages with the centrality of the ain manés or grand houses in the Kodava way of existence; building on which she discusses the nature of social laws and expands upon the primacy of 'the land' in Kodava thought, life,

religion and all else. The predominance of the land and its intrinsic ties to Kodava identity is a running thread in the narrative, illustrated with magnificent panoramic views of the country, photographs of dying bamboo clusters, endangered wild flowers, native wild mushrooms and ferns, gushing streams and thundering waterfalls.



Double spread featuring the upper storey of the Madikeri Fort that follows the line of a traditional ainmane, The Vanishing Kodavas, pg. 58-58



Panoramic landscape shot of the Kodagu landscape, one of two complete spreads that open out – positioned at the beginning and end of The Vanishing Kodavas

An index at the end of the book, and accompanying footnotes, provide translations of the many *takk* words used – the Kodava language, recognised now by UNESCO to be a disappearing language. And the remarkable manner in which nomenclature and linguistics are interlinked to human socio-cultural expressions forms a riveting subtext, for an interested reader. Ponappa points out how Madikeri (from the original Muddurajendrakeri) references *keri* – a term used to describe the clusters of *okkas* (the patriarchal joint family unit sometimes referred to as a clan). As the book explains, these units of family and clan structures were central to Kodava society both as exemplars of communal living and symbiotic transactions, as also the cause of bloody feuds and internal conflict that were a part and parcel of its reality. The ties of nomenclature that binds inhabitants to their natural environment, accentuates the ways in which these interlinkages function – and one of the books triumphs, is its ability to constantly expose the varied links that arise when studying a community from different vantage points.

As a meticulously compiled history of a community, gradually losing touch with its heritage, *The Vanishing Kodavas* is equally relevant to both scholars and lay readers. Ponnappa's easy and lucid writing style steers clear of dense academic theory and jargon of any kind, widening her readership. But perhaps its biggest contribution to contemporary writing on the Kodavas, aside from the wealth of information it contains, is the manner in which it blends the voice of the neutral, observing academic with that of the sensitive, ardent insider in its endeavour to encourage recognition for a community; their culture, history and identities, that are unfortunately, even if inevitably, slipping away.



Photograph featuring the dudipatkaras or Kodava bards; from left to right Bollanda Devaiah, Kaliyanda Aiyanna, Cheyakapovanda Devaiah and Chokira Subramani, *The Vanishing Kodavas*, pg. 130

\*The title of this essay is taken from a line, part of a longer lyric recorded in Nadikerianda Chinappa's *Pattlolé Palamé* (translated as *Silken Lore*), a 1924 book that is a compilation of Kodava songs from the repertoires of Kodava bards, referenced in *The Vanishing Kodavas*.

- Shilpa Vijayakrishnan

*The Vanishing Kodavas*, by Kaveri Ponnappa is priced at Rs. 7500; proceeds of its sales go to the Coorg Education Fund and it can be ordered online [here](#).

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Photography: Sudeep Gurtu.