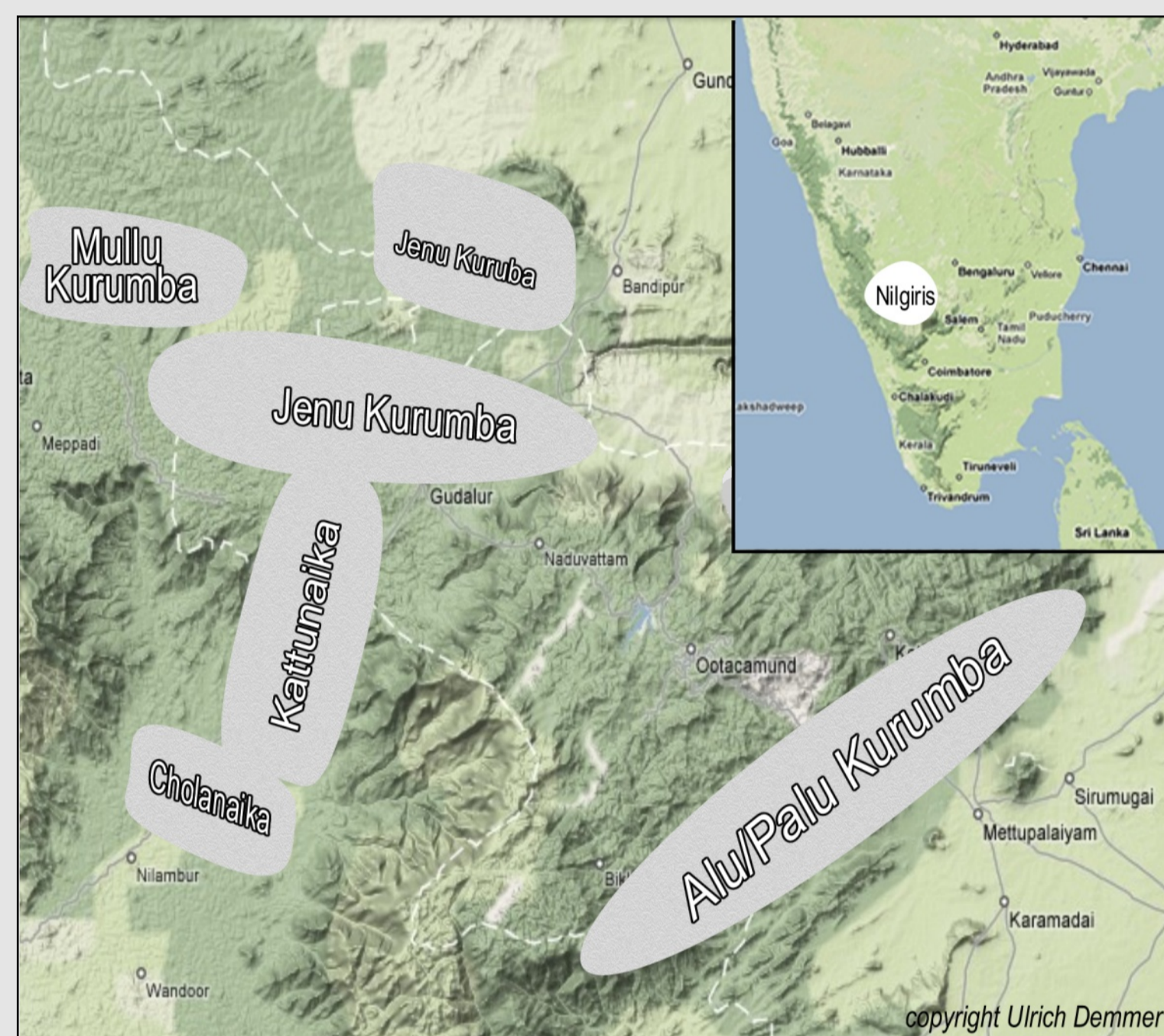# Kurumba

Documenting endangered languages of the Nilgiris

Kurumba in the Nilgiris (South India)

The Kurumba languages are spoken in the Nilgiris area of South India. The region spreads from the Nilgiris, a hilly plateau (2000-2600 m), towards the Western Ghats, into a vast stretch of tropical forest (500-1500m) partly included in the Unesco Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. For centuries, this inhospitable region was sparsely inhabited by very small and mobile tribal groups, mainly Kurumbas. The forest was their home and nature provided their livelihood until the 19th century when intrusive modernisation (roads, new settlers) began to take over their space and disrupt their way of life. The region is now divided into three states, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, each of them listing several Kurumba groups under various ethnonyms : Jenu ('honey'), Mullu ('thorn'), Betta ('hill') Kur-

Kurumba languages in the Nilgiris (South India)

umbas/Kurubas, and Chola/Kadu/Kattu ('forest') Naikas ('lords' of the forest) among them. New trends include development policies (settling the people in government-built houses or 'colonies', schooling in the state language), wildlife protection (creating 'inviolate' zones where people are removed from their subsistence environment) and the development of tourism, further speeding up the disruption of the traditional social ties and ways of life of the Kurumbas.

Documentation

The project documents five groups living in separate locations and representing distinct socio-cultural situations, ranging from the most traditional way of life to an advanced integration in the modern regional set up.

The Cholanaikas (fewer than 300 people) of Nilambur, the 'Cavemen of Kerala' 'dis-

Cholanaika man with traditional basket, used for gathering, transport of goods and households when shifting between caves and temporarily huts

Mullu Kurumba couple in front their house

covered' in the 1960s, still maintain the hunter-gatherer tradition.

The Jenu Kurumbas of Masinagudi (Nilgiri lowlands) inTamil Nadu and the Jenu Kurubas of H.D. Kote in Karnataka, as well as the Kattunaikas in Tamil Nadu/Kerala, are part of the core cluster of Kurumbas (about 5000 people) and representative of the transitional situation of small tribal groups slowly shifting from swidden cultivation and forest-based livelihood to new local wage-labour opportunities (in the Forest Department, plantations, agriculture and various daily-paid
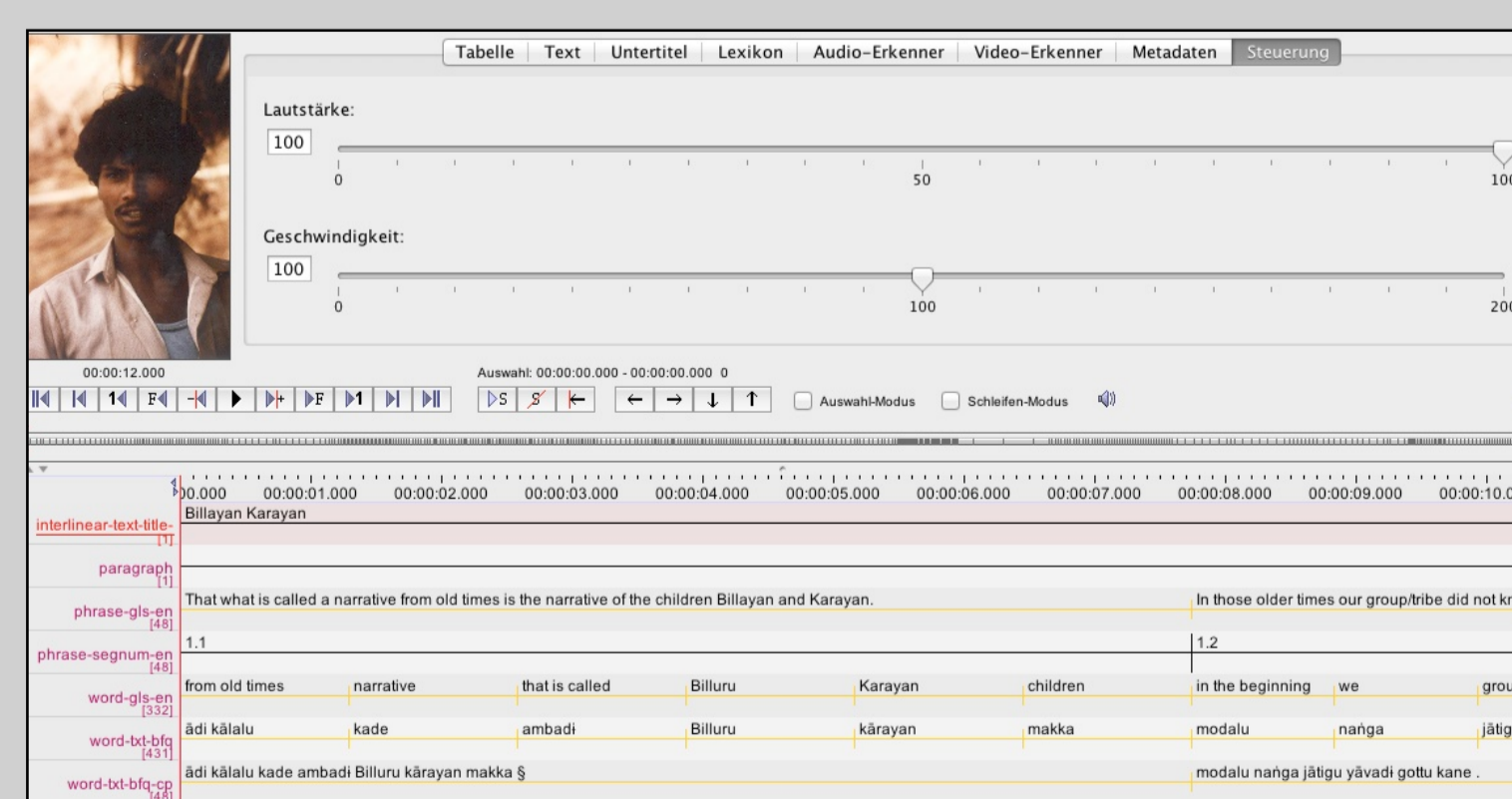

Alu Kurumba Family

occupations). The Alu Kurumbas follow the same path of socio-economic transformation, but they have closer cultural ties with the upper Nilgiri peoples.

The Mullu Kurumbas, a numerically larger community engaged in settled agriculture in the Wayanad in Kerala, are rapidly shifting to a modern way of life.

The documentation focuses on specific cultural features (hunting, fishing, honey and other forest products collection for subsistence or trade), day-to-day life (habitat, dress, food, child care and others) and more formal events (festivals, weddings, healing and death rituals).

ELAN File of a Jenu Kurumba narrative

Language

Linguistically, Kurumba, as well as the state languages of the region, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada, belong to the Southern branch (SDr.I) of the Dravidian language family found in the Indian sub-continent from Afganisthan to Sri Lanka, but spoken dominantly only in South India. Kurumba is a cover term for the varieties of language spoken by the Kurumba

groups. They show important dialectal variation, due notably to the influence of one or the other of the dominant state languages. However, they are characterized by the presence of archaisms and mixed features which prevent them from being further classified under one of the two main sub-branches of SDr.I: Tamil/Malayam-Kodagu or Kannada. Along with the upper Nilgiri languages, Toda, Kota, and Badagu, they are remnants of an earlier dialectal continuum of the region, predating the main Tamil/Kannada split.

Discourse in a Jenu Kurumba death ritual

The documentation presents audio and audiovisual recordings (including narrations, dialogues, songs, and ritual discourses) on the cultural fields mentioned above. Annotations were done with Elan. Lexicons and grammar sketches drawn from these primary data will offer matters for comparative studies.

Recording a story in Jenu Kuruba

Team

The Kurumba project, presented jointly by **Prof. Frank Heidemann**, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universtity of Munich, Germany and **Dr. Christiane Pilot-Raichoor**, Lacito-CNRS, Villejuif, France, is carried on in collaboration with team members from Europe:
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Prof. N. Rajasekharan Nair, Annamalai University, for Mullu Kurumba,
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