

SRI LANKA'S INDIGENOUS FOREST DWELLERS: A NEW PARTNERSHIP

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CULTURAL SURVIVAL OF SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka's indigenous inhabitants, the Veddas or *Wanniyalaeto* (forest-dwellers') as they call themselves, preserve a direct line of descent from the island's original neolithic community dating from at least 14,000 B.C. and probably far earlier according to current scientific opinion. Even today, the surviving *Wanniyalaeto* community retains much of its own distinctive cyclic world view, prehistoric cultural memory, and time-tested knowledge of their semi-evergreen dry monsoon forest habitat that has enabled their ancestor-revering culture to meet the diverse challenges to their collective identity and survival. With the impending extinction of *Wanniyalaeto* culture, however, Sri Lanka and the world stand to lose a rich body of indigenous lore and living ecological wisdom that is urgently needed for the sustainable future of the rest of mankind.

Historically, for the past twenty-five centuries or more Sri Lanka's indigenous community has been buffeted by successive waves of immigration and colonisation that began with the arrival of the Sinhalese from North India in the 5th century B.C. In the course of history, uncounted thousands of these original inhabitants of the *Wanni* (dry monsoon forest) have been more or less absorbed into mainstream Sinhala society or Tamil society. Today only a few remaining *Wanniyalaeto* still manage to preserve their cultural identity and traditional lifestyle despite relentless pressure from the surrounding dominant communities.

Early Sinhala immigrants from North India were of the opinion that the forest-dwelling aboriginals were not human beings at all but wild jungle spirits (*Yakas*)



who were human in outward guise only. Such negative, stereotyped attitudes towards the island's indigenous people persists up to the present day even in educated circles and has been a major stumbling block to the recognition of Wanniyalaeto self-respect, dignity, human rights, and cultural uniqueness. Hence, the Wanniyalaeto are widely *assumed* to be a backward, gullible people whose point of view may be conveniently ignored.

The vulnerable position of the Wanniyalaeto vis-à-vis mainstream society may be said to stem from two principal causes. One is that they have never received secure land tenure that recognizes their collective custodianship over traditional hunting and gathering ranges. The other reason is that they have never been consulted or represented in the decision-making process that affects their daily lives. Given the secure right to manage their traditional habitat according to their ways and given a choice to represent their collective aspirations within the framework of society at large, the Wanniyalaeto are more than capable of preserving both their endangered forest habitat and their ancestral culture for the benefit of all.

The Wanniyalaeto themselves operate within a radically different conceptual framework. For instance, the Wanniyalaeto believe that they and their ancestor-spirits belong to the forests of the Wannu which they inhabit and protect. Likewise, the concept of acreage is strange to them since they recognize only natural landmarks like hills, rivers, and villages. As a consequence of such cultural differences, the Wanniyalaeto have been repeatedly swindled out of their ancestral heritage by contrary interests anxious to seize control over Wanniyalaeto lands and forest resources. Such encroachment and economic exploitation has noticeably accelerated in the post-independence era.

Similarly, modern observers have typically been blind to the basic facts about indigenous culture. For instance, Wanniyalaeto social structure is a *matrilineal* exogamous clan organisation based on *female* descent. In simple terms, the Wanniyalaeto are a forest people who trace their ancestry through their *mother's* line back to their mother-ancestor, the yaka-princess Kuveni.

This self-identification of the Wanniyalaeto differs radically from the definition of a 'Vedda' (literally, hunter) that was imposed upon them from outside with far-reaching social consequences. Hence, to colonial census-takers and other outsiders, a 'Vedda' was a primitive human-type of wild dishevelled appearance, uncouth language and appearance, who resides in caves

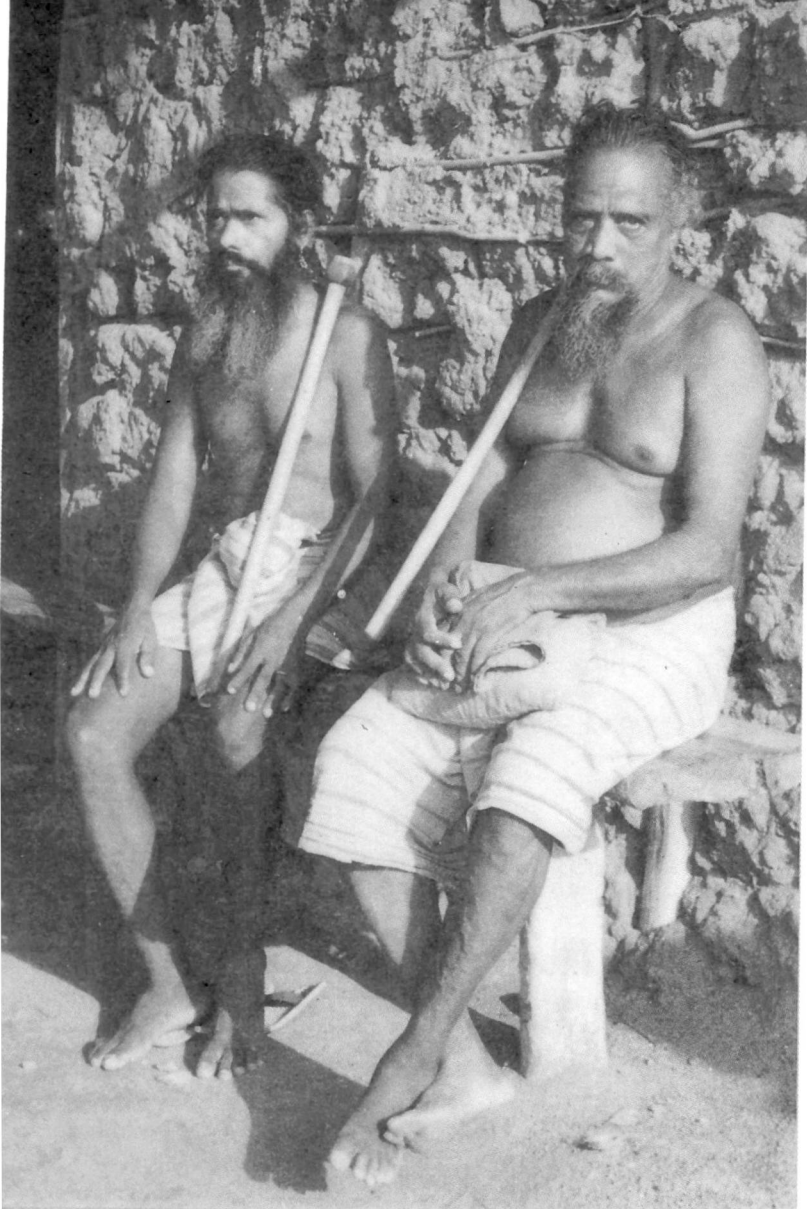
or wanders in the jungle, and who subsists by primitive means such as hunting with bow and arrows.

Thus, by these misleading criteria, the "veddas" a term never used by the Wanniyalaeto themselves were doomed to disappear in the course of time. Indeed, according to census records the 'veddah population' actually fell from 4510 in 1921 to 2361 in 1946, while since 1963 no separate count has been made, although a 1978 study identified six thousand veddas in the Anuradhapura district alone. This failure to recognize the Wanniyalaeto people's own criteria of self-identification, whether intentional or not, has effectively accelerated their disappearance as a distinct culture and denied them of fair representation in the democratic decision-making process.

As a result of pervasive social discrimination directed against the Wanniyalaeto, many of their people have adopted a survival strategy that includes taking Sinhala or Tamil names for themselves and their children, adopting the prevalent language, diet, dress, and lifestyle patterns and becoming, nominally at least, Buddhist or Hindu converts. And yet, because, their matrilineal ancestry goes unnoticed and unrecognised by the dominant patrilineal society at large, the Wanniyalaeto have been able to preserve their social cohesion and cultural self-identification even while immersed within the outward trappings of cultures very much unlike their own.

A field study was conducted in 1992 by a specialist in indigenous development policy from the International Labour Organisation.

According to the existing studies, the majority of the resettled Veddhhas are economically backward, socially isolated, and politically marginalised. The Veddas did not have the skills, means and knowledge needed to either adjust to the new situation (no knowledge of capital accumulation or saving, no familiarity with the monetary system of exchange, no long-term involvement in agriculture as a livelihood, lack of incentive for competitive tasks, etc.) or to cope with the other non-Vedda settlers. As a result, they are being exploited by the other settlers. In several cases attempts to get the Veddas used to seasonal paddy cultivation have failed, thus worsening severely their livelihood since they do not resort any longer to hunting or food gathering. It has been pointed out that tribal peoples have suffered from depression and loss of confidence as a consequence of factors such as loss of land, loss of freedom of the forest and disappearance of ritual hunts as the causes



Standing against the wattle and daub wall—Vannia and Sudu Bandia in a Mahaweli farmland

of their demoralisation. The situation has not changed substantially even after national authorities recognised the Veddas' desire to preserve their cults and customs and to be resettled in close proximity to their traditional lands.

The same study traces the wholesale disruption brought upon Wanniyalaeto culture due to 20th-century development activities:

The drastic changes in the number, distribution and social organisation of the Veddas started in the 1930s and 1940s when large irrigation and colonisation schemes in the Polonnaruwa and Mahiyangana regions were launched. These projects brought a massive influx of colonists and a reduction of the forest land which was homeland to the Veddas. In the 1950s when the Gal Oya scheme was completed, access of the Veddas to their ancestral lands and their means of livelihood were eroded even more drastically.

SOBA / September 1993

The Sri Lanka Government's concern for its indigenous people dates back to the early 1950s when a Vedda Welfare Committee was created as part of a Backward Communities Development Board. During this period, the prevalent philosophy of development regarded the disappearance of indigenous and tribal peoples as distinct societies as an irreversible and desirable process. Seen as backward and irrational, they were regarded as obstacles to national development and growth. Needless to say, such indigenous and tribal peoples as the Wanniyalaeto were not consulted for their views on the subject.

In recent years, however, the way of viewing the relationship between culture and development has undergone changes. Even during the 1960s and 70s, culture was considered to be irrelevant to the development process and much of the blame for failed development projects was attributed to resistance to modernisation from affected traditional communities. Later, culture came to be regarded as inviolable and, as such, development was to be discouraged and enforced isolation was advocated. But this strategy also is inadequate to enable endangered cultures to cope with social change.

More recently, culture has come to be regarded both as a goal and as a framework within which to promote other development goals. This means that it is up to the affected people to decide how and to what extent to retain their cultural values and ways of life, and that any development initiative should bear these values in mind. Like all societies, indigenous cultures are subject to change, too.

ACCELERATED DEVELOPMENT

In 1977 the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme was launched, under which vast tracts of traditional Wanniyalaeto hunting lands were alienated for the proposed benefit of other communities.

Under the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme, vast extents of forest land have been logged and inundated or earmarked for colonisation. One last Wanniyalaeto hunting domain remained upon 145,450 acres of forest between the western chain of reservoirs and the Maduru Oya irrigation dam. But this too was on November 9th, 1983, declared to be the Maduru Oya National Park. It was intended as a habitat for displaced wildlife and as a protected catchment area.

Paradise Lost

Consequently, the Wanniyalaeto who had been occu-



pational hunter-gatherers and custodians of the forest for uncounted millennia were transformed overnight into game poachers and trespassers. Barriers, guards, and outposts were stationed along the park's demarcated borders and the hapless Wanniyalaeto were evacuated to "rehabilitation" villages in Systems C and B of the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme where they were to become rice cultivators (see Fig. 1-3).

The old Wanniyalaeto chieftain Uru Warige Tissagami and his kinsfold of Kotabakinni, however, refused to be evicted from the land of their ancestors. Finally the government has agreed that these seven families could remain there.

Wanniyalaeto leaders allege that since 1974 they have listened to official assurances that a sanctuary of 1500-acre extent will be created for them to pursue their traditional way of life. Even this modest figure (amounting to only one percent of the park's area) was originally cited not as a sanctuary for all affected Wanniyalaeto, but only as a buffer zone to prohibit commercial logging activities around Tissagami's hamlet of Kotabakinni only. In fact, the other affected hamlets cannot possibly be included in a sanctuary of this size, which is sufficient to sustain a few families by their traditional means of livelihood.

However disadvantaged the island's indigenous forest-dwellers may appear to be in the eyes of modern-educated observers, nevertheless their sense of honour, justice, and fair play is very keen. Despite centuries of injustice and exploitation by economic predators from outside communities, even to this day the Wanniyalaeto people remain so gentle and patient towards younger cultures that, although they are proficient hunters they

have never been known to raise a weapon in anger, to commit theft or fraud out of greed, or even to raise their voice toward outsiders, let alone to speak any untruth for personal gain. Indeed, these are precisely the elements of their cultural heritage that the Wanniyalaeto are most anxious to preserve for future generations.

HUMAN RIGHTS

In the absence of any provision for direct representation of indigenous interests in official decision-making, the Wanniyalaeto have explored other potential avenues to achieve justice, including a court system that is completely alien to their own tradition of justice. Going still further, chief Tissagami and other Wanniyalaeto leaders have been granted sympathetic hearings by Presidents Jayewardena and late Premadasa respectively and by other high-ranking officials who have promised to rectify injustices.

Over the years, scientific interest in the millennia-old Wanniyalaeto culture has helped to bring their plight to international notice. In particular, one Swedish cultural anthropologist, Wiveca Stegeborn, has been closely associated with the Wanniyalaeto community of Dambana since 1977, even to the extent of learning their language and living among them as one of their people. With her professional training and close familiarity with the kinds of problems that the Wanniyalaeto have faced in recent years, Ms. Stegeborn has played an invaluable role in gaining sympathy and support for the Wanniyalaeto community.

WANNIYALAETO SANCTUARY

On June 16th, 1990, Late President Premadasa and other high-level officials met in Kandy with a delegation of Wanniyalaeto leaders including chief Tissagami to discuss longstanding grievances and measures required to address these grievances. Following the meeting, President Premadasa ordered prompt steps to reverse decades of official injustice towards the indigenous community. With Cabinet approval, it was resolved that the Government would "take specific measures to protect and nurture Vedda Wannietto culture and establish a Trust or Board for this purpose."

Subsequent to the 1990 decision, a Wannietto Trust was established consisting of officials of Government and NGOs including Cultural Survival and, since early 1993, a young university-educated Wanniyalaeto representative as well. The Trust's principal task has been

to expedite the creation of a Wanniyala cultural sanctuary upon lands alienated from the Wanniyalaeto to create the Maduru Oya national Park in 1983.

At the same time, there have been signs of increased cooperation between the Sri Lankan Government, local NGOs, indigenous communities and international development agencies including the United Nations and NORAD. The International Labour Organisation especially has assumed an important role in promoting a just and equitable settlement of issues affecting Sri Lanka's indigenous communities and efforts are being undertaken to encourage early Sri Lankan ratification of the ILO's Convention 169 "concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries".

Today, in the context of 1993 as the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, efforts in Sri Lanka have been redoubled with the appointment of a Cabinet-approved National Committee with a mandate to undertake a national programme during the International year that is intended to enhance public awareness of indigenous people and their relationship to the environment. The emphasis is upon education, but the national programme also includes such activities as a survey of indigenous communities that will provide a basis for real changes for the better for indigenous communities in years to come.

As a indication of Sri Lanka's growing international responsibility in the field of environment, Sri Lanka this year has also been elected to a seat on the United Nations

Commission on Sustainable Development which was established "to oversee, coordinate, monitor, review and report on the implementation of Agenda 21", including its provisions under Chapter 26 for "recognising and strengthening the role of indigenous people and their communities".

The task is by no means an easy one and much remains to be done. By example to other nations in her deeds, however, Sri Lanka is prepared to co-operate among nations of the world.

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A Vedda family

