



SOME CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS OF THE VEDDAHS

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Veddahs are an extinct race today. It is difficult to find a true Veddah. Instead there are only a handful of their old scions, locally called *Gam Veddahs*, who have still preserved the customs, folk-songs, legends and other traditions of their old people. The Rock Veddahs or *Gal Veddahs* have faded away.

The remaining Veddahs are found scattered in the well known Veddah settlements of Rathugala, Pollebedda (favourite outpost of Dr R.L. Spittel nestling in the Gal Oya and Maha Oya areas), Dambana (where lives the well known Chieftain Tisahamy who has refused to be re-settled in the Mahaweli new areas), Yakkure and Sorabora in Mahiyangana and Polonnaruwa regions.

The earliest foreign scholars who did scholastic research into our aboriginal life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were Sarasin Cousins (1886), and Dr Seligmann and his wife Brenda (1911). Their efforts

are contained in two books titled "An Outline of Two Years" Scientific Research of Veddahs in Ceylon" by Sarasin Cousins (now available as a reference book in the Public and University libraries of Colombo and Peradeniya) and "The Veddahs" by Dr Seligmann (this book in recent years was available as a reprint in the bookshops).

The late Dr R.L. Spittel—our foremost authority in recent years on this fast dying race—has immortalized them in his fascinating books, "Savage Sanctuary", "Wild Ceylon", "Vanished Trails", "Far Off Things". Browsing through these absorbing books, we could glean a wealth of information about the customs, habits, and legends of the Veddahs.

Since I lived and worked close to the Veddah country in the Gal Oya Valley and Maha Oya regions, for nearly 15 years, I have come into close contact with these people. It is from them that I have collected a wealth of information about their customs, folk-songs

and other rituals.

At Rathugala (off Gal Oya), there lived one of the classic types of Danigala Veddahs whose ancestors had lived in the rock caves top Danigala. Their Chieftain at the time was Maha Bandaralage Haduna with whom I was in close contact during the time I was resident in the Gal Oya Valley. For some time, in recent years, Haduna was in feeble health. I suppose he and his clan of people are still living at Rathugala, as I have had no contact with them for over 10 years after my transfer from Gal Oya. It was the ancestors of these Danigala Veddahs who came under the study of Dr Seligmann in 1910.

With the inroads of civilization such as the damming of the Gal Oya river in 1950 which culminated in the creation of the Senanayake Samudraya, the well known Veddah settlement of Hennebedda where Dr R.L. Spittel blazed the Veddah trails, was displaced. Those few Veddahs who remained there were re-settled in Pollebedda, Namal Oya and in Village Units Paragahakelle and Wavinna.

When the Mahaveli Accelerated Programme was extended into the Bintenna and Mahiyangana areas, which were the Veddah frontiers from time immemorial, some of the Veddahs were re-settled in System C, at Henanigala. About seventy such Veddah families have been re-settled in Systems, 'B' and 'C' lying in Mahiyangana and Polonnaruwa areas.

Tissahamy, the Chieftain of Dambana, and a handful of his followers refused to renounce their Veddah trappings. Instead they took to the call of the wild. These semi-wild people are actually living in the area earmarked for the present Maduru Oya National Park.

The Veddah families re-settled in System 'C' at Henanigala are now gradually and steadily taking to agriculture. I have been visiting Henanigala Veddah settlement often. There I met a few of them, like Uruarige Kiri Appu and Kalu Appu (old Tissahamy's relatives) and they have quite promisingly taken up to their new mode of life. Among them some have been appointed Home Guards and given guns as well.

They have given their children Sinhala names, like Seelawathie, Gnanawathie instead of traditional Veddah names such as Badini, Kairi. They wear modern clothing and use vessels made out of plastic. Once I met a group of these children of the forest, wearing novel frocks and carrying plastic utensils in which they had collected *palu* fruits. They still carry with them, the pellet bow (*Gal Dunna*) to shoot birds or to display it before visiting tourists.

The elders still exhibit the skill of their ancestors in the use of the bow and arrow which they display in the presence of local and foreign visitors. They then, would spatter out a few Veddah words such as 'Hudu Hura Geligamatha Gachchiuwa?' (Sir, you have come to our rock cave?).

Let us now examine some of the customs, rituals and traditions which are still in vogue among these few remaining Veddahs. These primeval type of people, believe to this day in the cult of their dead spirits whom they worship in times of distress. These are propitiated by ritual dances and incantations.

Besides these a very common ceremony to appease spirits, which is still in use by them, is the *Kiri Koraha*. In this ritual, a motor is used on which is placed a coconut which is broken into two and its water is contained in an earthen pot or an aluminium vessel. In days of yore, they used the fork of a tree to keep the coconut and the earthen pot.

Arrow heads made of wood, are placed on the vessel. Armed with these they dance round and round the *Kiri Koraha* to the accompaniment of beating of drums, followed by sonorous incantations. The Dambana Veddahs led by their Chieftain Tissahamy often performs this *Kiri Koraha* ceremony in the presence of honoured guests when they visit his home.

Veddahs eat all game flesh, except that of the porcupine (Ittawe) which is taboo, as they believe that the porcupine in the reincarnation of their maternal uncle. They call the porcupine or Ittawe as Konaru Mama (Konaru Uncle). To hunt the game, they use hunting dogs whom they adore like their own children. Their favourite flesh is the Tala goya (Iguana) and monkey which they call *gas gona*. Once at Henanigala Veddah settlement, I was surprised to see the nursing mother, nursing a baby monkey which they reared as a pet. I warned not do it as they might contract rabies, if it bit anyone, while nursing.

In the good old days, when the veddahs hunted the deer and sumbhur with the bow and arrow, there existed a strange custom, where a Veddah used to carry with him in his betel pouch a piece of dried human liver. This piece of dried human liver is said to raise man's valour and make him stronger to bear up troubles or any family bickerings. For instance, if a Vaeddah found his woman unfaithful, he might not kill his wife, but to give vent to his feelings, he might bite a piece of that dried human liver.

Dr Seligman, in his "Veddahs" says of this mystic custom thus: "This custom appears to have ceased about 3 generations ago. A man could bite off a piece of the dried liver and chew it saying to himself, 'I have killed this man: why should I not be strong and confident and kill this other who has insulted me'. As far as we could understand a Vedda might thus work himself into berserk fury, but this was only after a very serious insult, as when a man's wife had been carried off, or been unfaithful or when his bow and arrow had been stolen or an attempt made to take his land or cave".

A very few of these old descendants used to carry in their betel pouch, a piece of dried monkey liver as a substitute for the human liver. I have seen it with chieftain Haduna of Rathugala. He told me that his great grand father had in his possession a piece dried human liver concealed in his betel pouch.

Each clan or *warige* came into being after certain peculiar episodes. For instance the Morana clan was originated as a certain queen who longed for mora fruit during the off season was supplied with mora fruits preserved in honey by a veddah woman. Thereafter, the king ruled that all those who came after her, would be called the *morana warige* or clan.

Una Pane clan has its origin after a Veddah woman during a severe drought gave water from a tiny spring in a bamboo to a king who had set out hunting and was thirsty. After this event, the king bestowed on her children the title of Una Pane warige (Una means bamboo; pane means water).

As regards their artistic attainments, besides their folk-songs, invocations, ceremonial dances, they also had decorative art in which they indulged in crude drawings on the rock of their cave homes. The closest aborigines who link up anthropologically with our aborigines are said to be the Australoid-Negroid races (with a later admixture of Indian tribes) which anthropologists like Dr Seligman have expounded to be the progenitors of the present day Veddahs. In Australia and even in India, the aborigines have left behind valuable artistic impressions on the rock caves.

I have come across a few Veddah drawings on rock caves. These drawings were mostly found in very crude forms, in the form of men, bows and arrows, wild elephants and the symbols of the sun's disc, with radiating lines. These drawings were found in the rock caves of Hamangala off Bandaraduwa in Gal Oya Valley and in Illukapitiya Raja Maha Viharaya off Damana in Gal Oya.

SOBA / September 1993

In these Veddah drawings we see the figures of men crudely drawn with a circle of radiating lines, a vertical line and four protruding lines representing the arms and legs of a man. Of these drawings Dr Seligman in his 'Veddahs' has this to say: "The Veddahs has decorative art in which they indulge in crude drawings on rocks, the drawings were done mostly by women, when they awaited their husbands' return from hunting, to amuse themselves. Drawings consist of men, women, elephants. Ashes mixed with saliva in the palm applied on to the rock with forefinger of the right hand spots of leopard being put in with a charcoal paste....The radiating lines which this drawing look like the sun's disc, represent handles made of loops of creepers while the spots indicate honey".

The Australian aborigines too have decorative art on rock walls and on the barks of certain gum trees. These drawings were more impressive and of an artistic nature. Such drawings, the authorities have said, were done during the rainy season, when they had nothing else to do.

Veddah dialect even among the present day *gam veddahs* is now dead. But in the presence of visitors, tourists and strangers, they would pretend that they do not know Sinhalese and would come out with a few Veddah words. They will stare at you with their piercing eyes. They have now mostly become commercialised before the visiting tourists.

Chieftain Tissahamy of Dambana is a fine specimen, who could exhibit the prowess of his ancestors, like singing folk-songs, using the bow and arrow and dancing. When they want money they would say, 'Thaba poru ridi poru gena de' (thaba poru=copper coins: ridi poru=silver coins) all meaning to shower money. At the Mahiyangana temple, a few of these descendants would flock around tourists and let out a few Veddah phrases and songs.

Authorities like Dr Seligman and Dr R.L. Spittel have said that the Veddah dialect was a mixture of an archaic form of Sinhalese (in the form of 'Elu', Pali Sanskrit and even Tamil). For instance Gachchanawa is derived from the Pali word Veddah itself is borrowed from the Sanskrit word, 'Vydhya' meaning a hunter or one who lives by hunting.

Veddah language though it is almost dead, is still rich in folk songs. These fascinating folk songs, the present day Gam Veddahs still sing in their chenas or in their homes to while away their time. Veddah babies are lulled to sleep by Veddah lullabies.