

The earliest references to aboriginal, forest-dwelling peoples ('Pulinda') in Sri Lanka living outside or inside 'the normal social realm' of settled rural and urban centres go back to Pali chronicles and the Pali and Sinhala literature of the Middle Historic Period (5th to 13th Centuries c: see Dharmadasa 1990) Portuguese, Dutch, and early British accounts from the 17th century onwards, from a significant backdrop to the beginnings of detailed recording in the administrative reports and ethnographic accounts of the administrative reports and ethnographic accounts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

In fact, the Vedda people are probably one of the most extensively reported social groups in South Asia. The standard bibliography of writings on Sri Lanka in the European languages contains nearly 250 entries in the sections on the Veddas (Goonetilleke 1970-83; see also Goonetilleke 1960)

The best critical assessment of this ethnological literature and its problematic context is contained in the first chapter of James Brow's anthropological study of some selected village Vedda communities in the Anuradhapura District (Brow 1978:3-39). Deraniyagala in his major work on Sri Lanka's prehistory has summarized the data on Vedda material culture and lifeways (Deraniyagala 1992). drawn principally from five major sources Nevill (1886-87) Parker (1909), Seligmann and Seligmann (1991) Sarasin and Sarasin (1892-3) and Spittel (1924, 1950, 1957). The bioanthropology of the Veddas has been investigated by Kennedy (1973, 1975, 1993,) and Ellepola (1990). The authoritative work on the Vedda dialect is that of Sugathapala de Silva (1972) With the exception of these Writings, most studies on the Veddas have been largely administrative, anecdotal or narrative accounts (eg. Spittel: 1924, 1950, 1957, Wijesekera 1949, Punchihewa 1989).

As far as we can judge, virtually the only accounts based on systematic anthropological fieldwork since the early work of the Selignans and the Sarasins are the detailed field studies of 'the village Veddas' of the Anuradhapura district by Brow (1987), the more limited investigations carried out by Jon Dart on the coast Veddas of the Eastern Province (see Dharmadasa 1990). This observation, of course, does not apply to bioanthropological and linguistic research and most recently the work of Wiveca Stegeaborn (1993) and Sudarshani Fernando (1992, 1993).

'Most Famous - Least Known'

However, despite the vast body of literature available on the Veddas, it is now becoming apparent that we know very little about them from any operational point of view. What we seem to have in fact is an accumulation of fragmentary information, mostly about a handful of Vedda communities and most of it gathered from an equally small number of 'Vedda' and 'non-Vedda' informants. On the Basis of this scanty body of data, wide-ranging generalizations have been made about what is universally considered to be distinct human group. Our misinformation starts with the lack of any real definition of who the Veddas are; how and where they are distributed; and what degree of cultural and



THE VEDDA PEOPLE OF SRI LANKA: REFLECTIONS ON HOMOGENEITY AND HETEROGENEITY

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bio-ethnic affinity and homogeneity exists between the various Vedda communities that would allow us to distinguish them from their Sinhalese and Tamil neighbours. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Vedda people are 'an ethnic and historical phenomenon', but what sort of ethnic phenomenon and what history or histories they have are questions that need to be examined from their roots.

As Brow observes 'The Veddas are one of the most famous and one of the least known people in the literature of anthropology' (Brow 1978: 5)



Forest, Village and Coast

Of course we know today that there are at least three different categories, distributed widely across the north central and eastern Dry Zone plains of Sri Lanka, who come within the broad classification of 'Vedda'. These include:

(1) the notional archetype of the forest (or 'rock or 'wild') Veddhas. Since the Seligmans, this category has been presented as the only Sri Lankan group who constituted, in the not so distant past, a culturally - and bio ethnically - distinct community of hunter-gatherers. At the turn of this century, and even later, they still pursued a forest-based mode of subsistence, using traditional methods of food procurement; they sometime occupied rock shelters; they have distinct forms of social organization; but, also, their way of life has been diluted and diversified by relatively recent contact with settled agricultural Sinhalese or Tamil communities;

(2) the village Veddhas, who are thought to have been descended at some early date from the previous group and who have some cultural, linguistic and kinship-system affinities with them, but who are basically extremely impoverished peasant agriculturalists and who-like most traditional Dry Zone farming communities- supplement their agricultural economy with some marginal hunting and gathering;

(3) the coast, or fishing Veddas, of eastern seaboard, whose basic subsistence is inland and coastal fishing, with some marginally supplementary agriculture. Their cultural affiliations seem to have been with their neighbouring Tamil-speaking peasant and fishing communities, rather than with more distant Sinhala-speaking Vedda or non-Vedda groups.

It must be understood that these categories exist at a very broad level of generalization. Today, from any rigor-

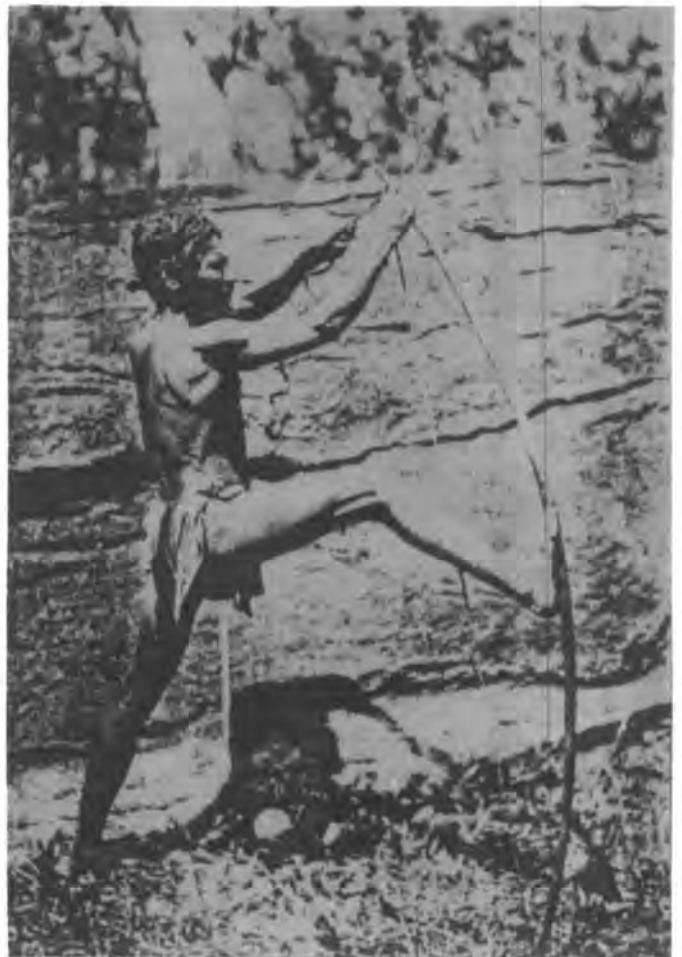
ously scientific point of view, they only form a springboard for detailed and field based research on the complex realities of the ethnicity and history of Vedda people, and on the interrelations - if any - that exist between the widely-scattered and vestigially surviving Vedda groups.

The Concept of 'the Aboriginal Vedda'

The distinction between the first and the second category, i.e. the 'wild', forest Veddhas and the 'tamer' village Veddhas goes back several centuries in the literature. From the 19th century onwards this distinction formed the main conceptual basis positing the existence of an aboriginal Vedda community and culture, and for explaining away the anomalies encountered in real life in trying to distinguish between Vedda hunter and Sinhalese peasant.

Brow's discussion of this, and his references to the work of Virchow and the Seligmans, merits reproduction at length:

It is hard to resist the inference that many Europeans were disposed to overemphasize the isolation of at least some of the Veddhas from the influence of the Sinhalese. This could be achieved by enforcing a rigid division between the two classes of Veddhas, and by permitting access to the





Sinhalese to only one class. The wild Veddahs could then be presented not simply as the descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of the island but as their living representatives, as the unalloyed representatives of a pure and primitive way of life. I am not suggesting that these 19th century authors intentionally misrepresented the facts, but it is clear that the search for racial and cultural purity became an increasingly dominant theme in their inquiries, and that their ability to discover it was greatly enhanced by the division of the Veddahs into two kinds.

Even the Seligmanns, whose ethnography ushers in the period of modern anthropology as applied to the Veddahs, were still under the spell of these concerns. The first sentence of their monograph reads: 'The Veddahs have been regarded as one of the most primitive of existing races' (1911, p. vii), and their whole account is permeated with the desire to separate the customs of the 'pure-blooded' Veddahs from those of 'half-breed' combination of Sinhalese and Veddah strain. They feel that just as the pure

Veddahs can be distinguished from the half-breeds, so the 'authentic', 'original' and 'ancestral' customs of the Veddahs can be discovered, customs that are quite distinct from those of the Sinhalese and of those village Veddahs who have mixed with the Sinhalese.....

....Beyond the simply descriptive parts of their monograph, the Seligmanns were concerned to establish two related hypotheses. They sought to show, firstly, that the pure Veddahs of the present day 'represent the aboriginal (i.e. the pre-Sinhalese) inhabitants of Ceylon' and, secondly, that the Veddahs share a common origin with hunting tribes of South India.....

The Seligmanns' relentless pursuit of pure Veddah culture among pure-blooded Veddahs leads them into a great deal of trouble. Their difficulties are suggested on the very first page of their monograph: '.... with all my efforts I was able to meet only four families, and hear of two more, who I believe had never practiced cultivation. Pure-blooded Veddahs are not quite so rare as the statement implies. The Danigala community, the best known 'wild' Veddahs of Ceylon, are still reasonably pure-blooded though they gave adopted many Sinhalese habits, including cultivation.....', (Brow 1978:16, quoting the Seligmanns).





It would seem to be that 'a new generation' of work of this nature has only barely commenced -- such as the work on the Veddas being carried out by Sudarshani Fernando at the Institute of Fundamental Studies, Yuvaraj Thangarajah at the Eastern University, and Wiveca Stegeborn at University of Maryland in the United States of America. Sudarshani Fernando's (see 1992, 1003) research is directed at examining the spatial and quantitative dimensions of the large body of currently recorded data on the Veddas, at about 150 recorded locations in the island. This program also involves the comparative listing of documented cultural traits, in an attempt to judge the extent of homogeneity that this will give us an assessment of the true nature and scope of the entire existing body of data on the Veddas. A proper survey, however, cannot be carried out by individual researcher. It requires the kind of resources, both human and financial, that are deployed in (say) archaeological field work and complex and 'multi linear' research models that are not based on simplistic and 'unilinear' preconceptions. Only then will it be possible for us to speak of up-to-date research on the Veddas.

Heterogeneity

What is completely missing from even the most recent writings on the Veddas-- with the exception perhaps of the recent book edited by Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe-- is the consideration of the possibility that what we are encountering are heterogeneous communities that have been forcibly compressed by preconceived notions of racial and cultural homogeneity into the concept of a Veddha people. To the critical observer, the Veddhas would in fact appear to be a number of fragmented, residual communities, living in varied Dry Zone environments and subsisting on a variety of methods of food procurement, extending from hunting and fishing with the bow-and-arrow (presumably until very recent times) to fully-fledged peasant farming.

We have in fact yet to discover what degree of similarity and differentiation there is between the various elements of material culture, social organisation and dialectal variation that we find between those communities who in contemporary times-- describe themselves, and are described by their neighbours, as 'Veddhas' - a useful criterion, first enunciated by Brow.

It is only by a wide-ranging survey of the existing 'Veddha' groups, including those whose identity is lost or entirely submerged in settlement and marriage among Sinhalese and Tamil neighbours, that we can begin to formulate the problems and to find the answers to the questions that arise from a critical consideration of the Veddha identity.





The same critical and programmatic observations apply to the bioanthropological research that has hitherto been carried out on the Veddhas. This is less extensive than research on Veddha society and culture, but it implicitly lays claim to a greater objectivity and exactness of observation. However, the results so far bear the same deficiencies of definition and sampling that we noted above. No one really knows who is a Veddha and who is not! Thus, the bio-anthropological readings-- apparently conclusive and using impressive analytical and statistical techniques - in fact only show us that one specific, contemporary localized social group (with a low social and geographical mobility and therefore constituting a small, interbreeding community) has certain biological characteristics that differentiate it from other neighbouring or distant groups. There has not been, as far as we can see, any attempt to examine the similarities and differences between one Veddha group or another, except in terms of very small and pre-selected samples.

The real study of human variation between those who can be described as Veddhas and non-Veddhas in Sri Lanka can only be done by a comprehensive study of genetic markers over a representative cross-section of cultural and social groups across the various geographical regions of the island.

Critical Re-examination and Field Studies

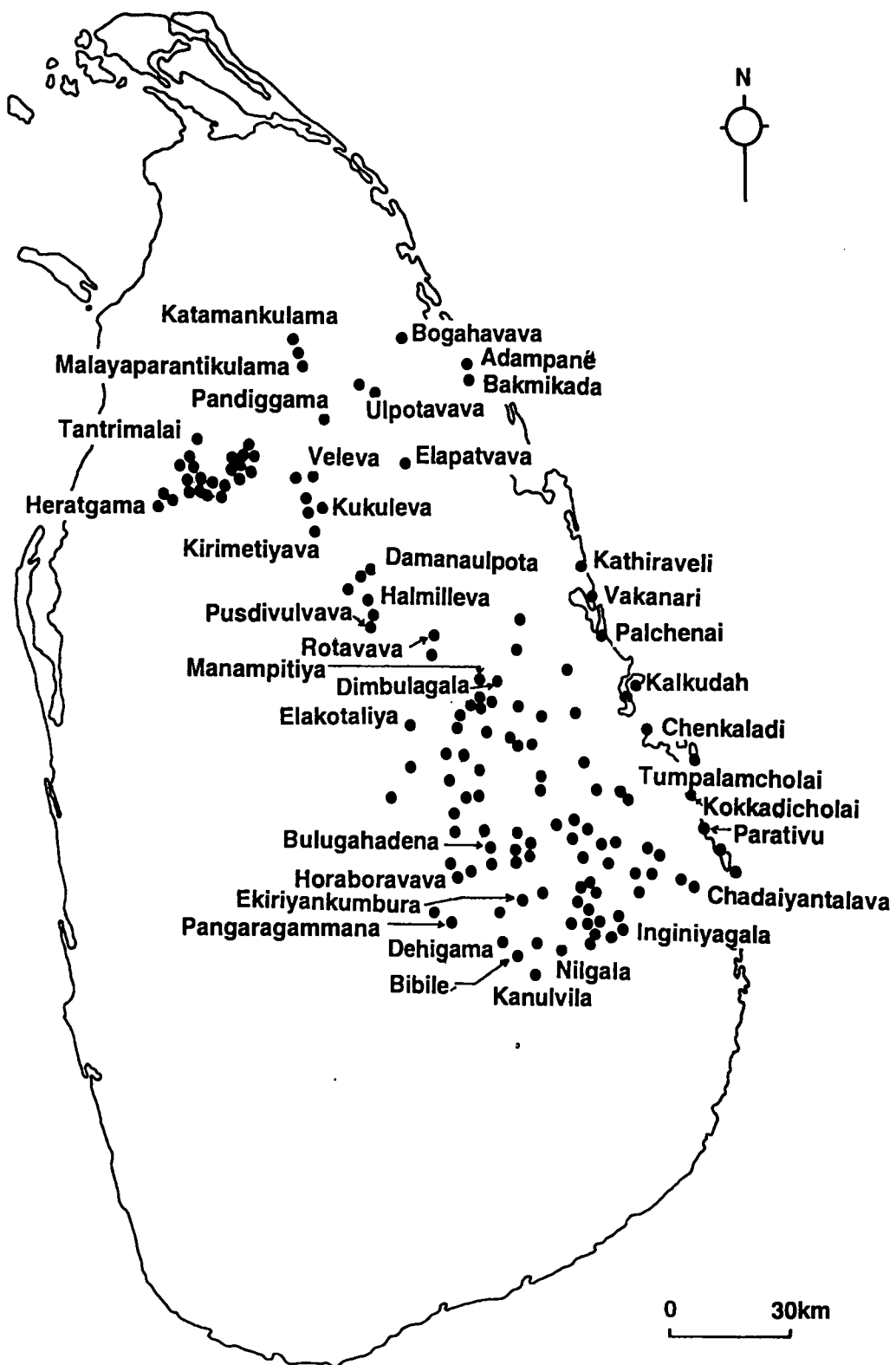
In the meantime, in the anthropological, ethnarchaeological and bio-anthropological fields, a study of existing published data and rigorous, field-based microstudies can give us some useful experimental results. Hopefully, this will enable us to produce methodologies, and models for more systematic ethnological research, of a type which does not leave us with broad and doubtful generalizations, illuminative metaphors or simple technological analogies.

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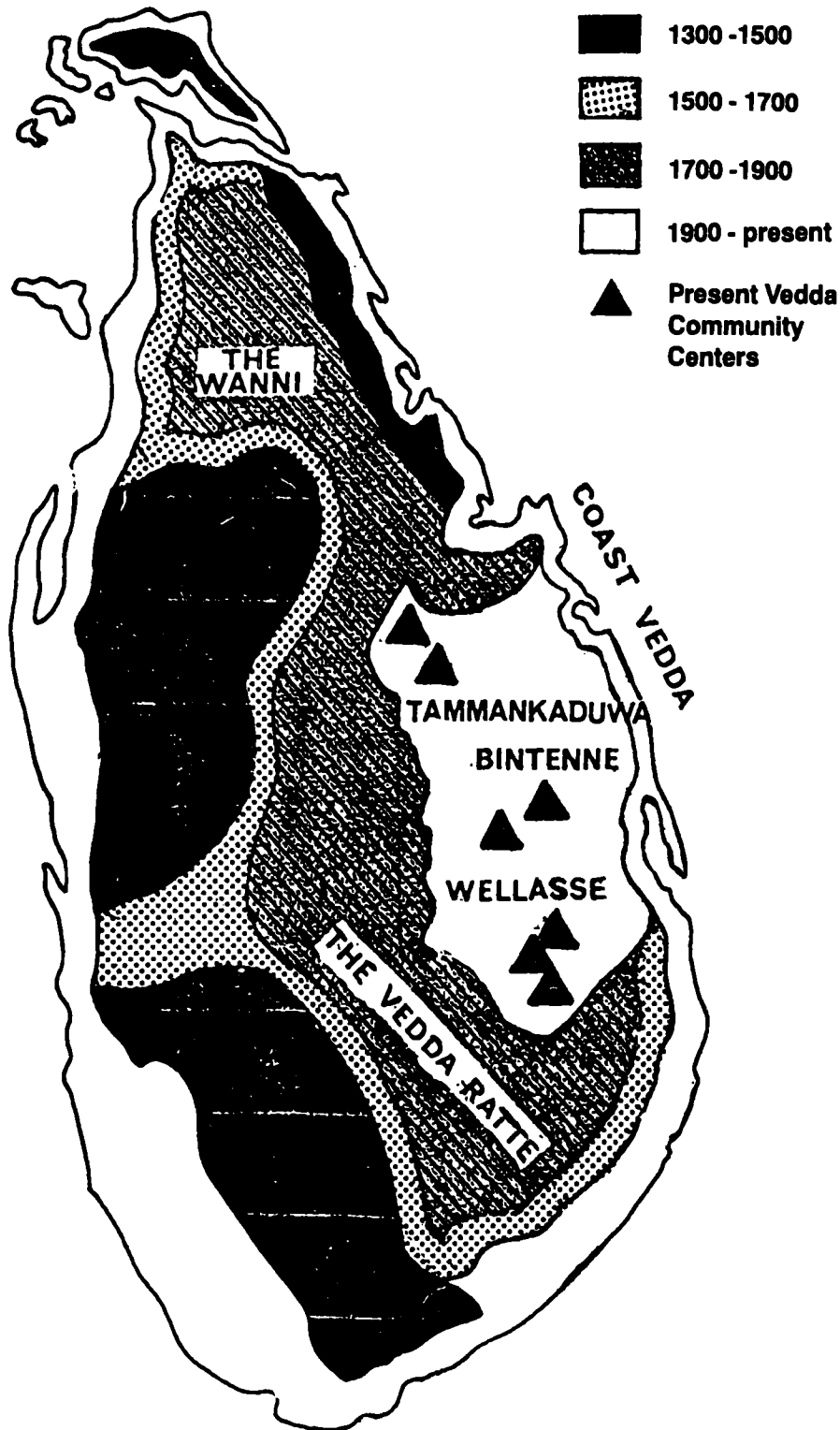
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Past and Present Veddha Settlements



Past and Present Vedda Settlements



Schematic representation of geographic distribution of reputed Veda populations in Sri Lanka during the past seven centuries. Demographic data are based upon historic written records of non - Veda peoples, the pre-historic record and osteological remains of "prevedda" and historic Veda populations. Before 1300 A.D. Aboriginal Communities were ubiquitous in Sri Lanka.

Kennedy's hypothesis regarding changing patterns of areas of Veda Settlement. Ecological Backgrounds of South Asian Prehistory.

Scale of miles

