

THE Veddas, who are a very small community, verging on extinction, are generally accepted as the first inhabitants of the Island of Sri Lanka. The name Veddha, is used by the Sinhalese to refer to these people. Etymologically it means "one whom shoots with bow and arrows". They however, refer to themselves as "Vanniyalaetto" meaning "people of the forest". At the beginning of this century, when the census of 1911 was taken, there were 5,331 Veddas scattered in several locations in the Eastern Province, North Central Province, North Western Province and Central Province. But today as the century is drawing to a close, the community numbers about two or three hundred confined to the Uva and Ampara districts.

It is well known that the majority community in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese, who form about 78 percent of the population today, and the next large community, the Tamils, about 12 percent, were later immigrants from the adjoining sub-continent of India. However, unlike in the case of many other countries, where immigrant populations, with more advanced civilizations encroached on regions populated by indigenous people, there was no protracted conflict and bloodshed leading to the extinction of the indigenous culture during a short period. In Sri Lanka there was a remarkable co-existence of the immigrant communities with the original inhabitants and this co-existence has continued for over 2,500 years. The majority community, the Sinhalese, record in their historical chronicles and in their ancient inscriptions how the Veddas sometimes helped to ward off invaders (as scouts and sometimes as parts of the defending army).

The Veddas have been supplying jungle produce as bees honey, wax, venison, elephant tusks, medicinal herbs to the other village and city dwelling communities. Sometimes the Veddas were entrusted with providing these to the royal stores. The majority Buddhist population and the other large religious group, the Hindus, as befitting the teachings of these two tolerant religions, peacefully co-existed with the Veddas. In the course of time some Veddas, drew closer to the two larger communities. Thus in later times we find both Sinhala speaking and Tamil speaking people of Vedda descent.

VEDDA CULTURE

Until about 1940s there were Veddas living in rock caves. The Seligmanns who did fieldwork among the Veddas at the beginning of the 20th century found several Vedda groups living in caves.

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Heen Vanniya of Dambana getting ready for game

Vedda : The "Adivasi" of Sri Lanka

Prof K. N. O. DHARMADASA

Each family had its own corner in the cave, others did not encroach on it. Husband, wife and children of each family thus retained its privacy and identity. All investigators have observed the strict code of family ethics and attachment among the family members. Monogamy was strictly adhered to. All observers of Vedda family life have been highly impressed by the fidelity of spouses. The children were brought up with great love and care.

Food was prepared communally. Hunting and gathering too was done communally. But each person old or young had his or her due share of the communal food. The weapons of the community were also kept in a common arsenal.

In olden times surplus meat was preserved by placing it in a specially prepared hollow of a tree filling it with bees honey, which acted as a preservative and sealing the hollow with a layer of clay. Another method of preserving meat was drying strips of meat on rocks warmed by sunshine.

Vedda women gave birth to their children in the cave itself, helped by other women folk. The umbilical cord was cut with a sharpened arrow and the wound was covered with ash to heal. Unlike among the Sinhalese birth, puberty, and menstruation were not considered impure.

A child was named after about one month of birth. The common male names were Poramola, Sulliya, Karakolaya, 'Kavva, Boda, Pubbara, Koon, Kaluwa, Gombira, Kaira, Handuna, Kanda and female names were, Suwandi, Viyani, Pinchi, Kalu, Selli, Kiri etc.

Marriages were contracted according to traditional custom. They were arranged by the parents. There was a preference for cross-cousin marriage. As customary, the would-be son-in-law would come with presents of bees-honey and dried meat to the bride's home. The parents-in-law would call the bride and make the tie a loin string made of the bark around the groom's waist and the groom would present her with a 'havariya' made of his or his sister's hair. The father-in-law would present the new couple with a bow and arrows.

When a death occurred in a cave-dwelling the practice was to cover the dead-body with leaves and for the whole community to leave the cave for a new dwelling. It will be many years later that they will return there. After the death, there will be propitiation of the "Nae Yaku", the relation deities, with offerings of food. It was the belief that the departed person would join the ranks of the relation deities presided over by the Chief deity-Kande Yaka or Kande Vanniya.

In traditional Vedda settlements, there was a small altar like construct made of sticks and leaves serving as a shrine of the "Nae Yaku". A mat, a "kaetta" knife, a pot, and a string of beads were the sacred utensils kept there. At appropriate times religious ceremonies were performed there. The head of the pantheon was Kande

Yaka. His younger brother "Bilindi Yaka" was another powerful deity. There were other powerful deities such as Kalu Bandara, Maha Kohomba Bandara, Irugal Bandara and Sandugal Bandara. Some of these Bandaras also appear in the ancient Sinhala ritual, the "Kohomba Kankariya" too. It would appear that the deification of important ancestors was a practice in ancient Sri Lanka. Possibly the Vedda custom was borrowed by the Sinhalese. There were other Vedda deities such as Mavaragala Panikka, Lepat Yaka, Rerangala Panikka etc.,

There were many rituals practiced by the Veddas in olden times. As recorded by the Seligmanns some of them were :

- (1) Nae Yaku Ceremony—after a death.
- (2) Bambura Yak Ceremony—to obtain help of Nae Yaku to obtain wild yams.
- (3) Dole Yak Ceremony—for safety in collecting bees honey.
- (4) Wanagata Yak Ceremony—to obtain the help of spirits in hunting.
- (5) Ruwala Ceremony—to cure sickness.
- (6) Kola Maduwa Ceremony—to cure epidemics.
- (7) Rahu Yak Ceremony—cure sickness and for luck in collecting bees honey.
- (8) Pata Yaku Ceremony—for the protection of pregnant women.

The most well known Vedda ceremony was the "Kirikoraha" which was both a thanksgiving for game killed and in order to obtain the blessings of the "Nae Yaku" for future ventures. "Kande Yaka" and "Bilindi Yaka" were invoked on it. After the "Nae Yaku" possessed the dancers, which signified the success of the ceremony.

It is generally believed by anthropologists that the Veddas are the descendents of the late stone age man of the island whose traces have been found in Bandarawela, Balangoda etc. This they may be considered the oldest inhabitants of the Island.

References in the oldest Sinhala historical records, particularly the earliest inscriptions of the Sinhala Prakrit period, mention the interaction between these indigenous people and the first immigrants, the Sinhalese "Milaka Tisa" and "Milaka Pusaguta" who appear in two inscriptions of the second century B.C. are identified by Prof. Paranavithana as autochthonous individuals who embraced the new civilization. The *Saddarmalankaraya* (14th Century) based on an ancient collection of stories mentions one "Nesada Thera" possibly a person of Vedda descent who later was ordained as a bhikkhu (Nesada is an ancient Sinhala word meaning "hunter").

Thus while some of the autochthonous people embraced the new civilization, others who wished to remain aloof, went on living in the jungles as their forefathers had done. The Sinhala community and later the Tamil community left them to their traditional ways.

According to the *Mahawamsa*, King Pandukabhaya, in 4th Century B.C., built several shrines for the diverse religions practised at the time and among them was the shrine of "Vyaadha Deva" obviously a deity of hunters. Also, the *Mahawamsa* mentions that when King Dutthu Gamini was building the "Maha Thupa", the Vedda provided information for obtaining building materials such as minerals found in the jungle. In the 12th century, King Parakramabahu the Great, was helped in his campaigns by the Veddas serving as scouts. In the seventeenth century, King Rajasinghe II, when fighting the Dutch was helped by a Vedda contingent.

THE VEDDA AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

As people of the forest "Vanniyalaetto", the Veddas lived in their habitat with least disruption of the environment. Animals were killed only for food — never for sport, which apparently was unknown to them. The dangerous animals, snakes, leopard, and bear were avoided. The Vedda religion was geared to this need to

Setting up dwellings close to the jungle is a Vedda practice

a great extent, i.e., to obtain the protection of the spirits while roaming in the forest.

Their deities too were part of the environment. "Kande Yaka" as his name indicates was associated with hills. Then there were other deities such as "Indigolle Yakka", "Unapane Kiri Amma" (a female deity), all connected with natural phenomena.

The environment was protected because, their life depended on it— the main source of food being yams, bees honey and meat.

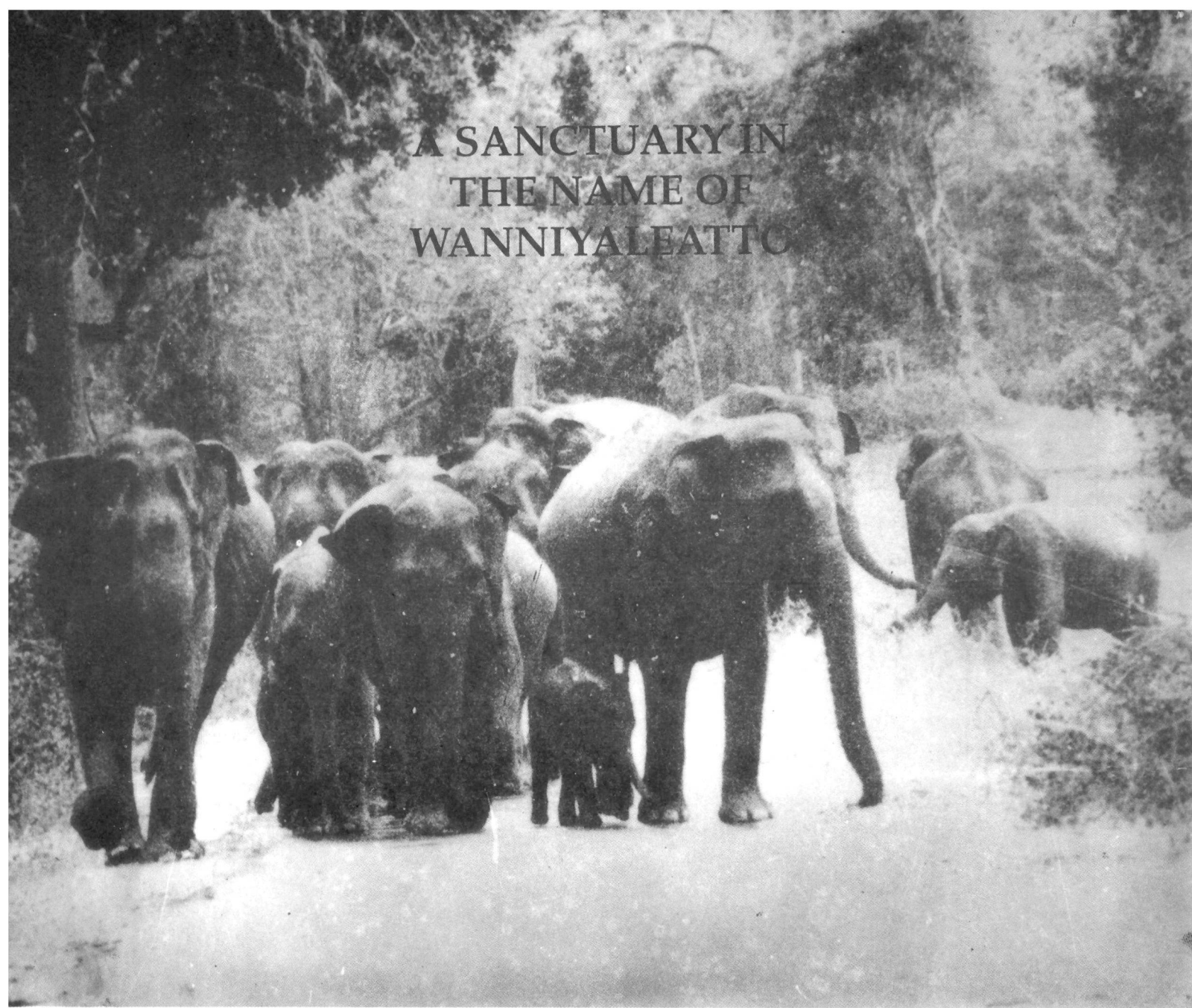
Their clan names also indicated their close identity with nature:

- Morana (Mora tree) varige
- Namudasa (Namuda tree) varige
- Unapana (water) varige
- Tala (plains) varige
- Uru (boar) varige
- Ambila (ant) varige

One lesson the "civilized" communities can learn from the "adivasi" is respect and sensitivity to nature. "Civilization" as it was worked out during the last two or three thousand years, has been at the expense of nature. But the "adivasi" such as the Veddas have been living in many parts of the globe, for a much longer period, without disrupting the natural environment.



A SANCTUARY IN THE NAME OF WANNIYALETTO



Sri Lanka has taken a positive stand on its indigenous people, the Veddas, to mark the International Year of Indigenous People proclaimed by the United Nations.

Several Vedda families who opted to settle in Mahaweli zone have been rehabilitated. They were provided land and other facilities, and brought them into the mainstream of National life.

However, in recognition of the glory of the Veddas, who are believed to have occupied the semi-green forests of Sri Lanka, for at least 16,000 years, the government has decided to make a Sanctuary consisting of several villages including Kotabakiniya, Keragoda, Bulugohadena and Kandeganwila.

Vedda Chief Tissahamy and his family continue to

live in the traditional area. The government has acknowledged the contribution the Vedda could make to protect the flora and fauna.

The government took action to establish a "Wanniyaletto Trust" to preserve and protect Wanniyaletto culture." It is significant that a member of the community is also represented in the Committee.

At present, the Game Ranger Ulhittiya, is liaising between the Veddas and authorities.

Volunteers from government and non-governmental organisations are working out a plan that would uplift and enrich Vedda culture and heritage, in their natural habitat.