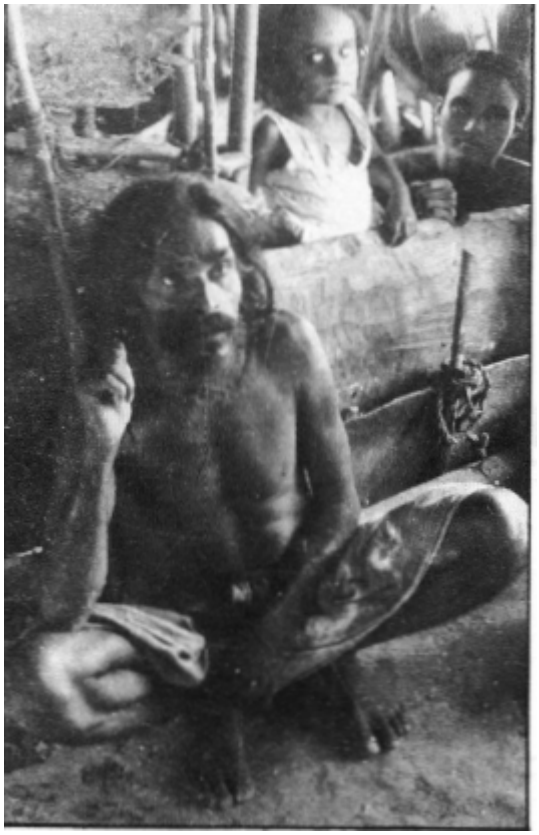
The Veddahs: Vanishing Forest People

Posted on

Gamini G. Punchihewa

The Veddahs, or hunters are the aboriginals of Sri Lanka, whose origins could be traced to the dim distance of prehistory.



Newspapers in Sri lanka recently highlighted the story of how the leader of a Veddah tribe opted to return to the familiar surroundings of the forest, rather than take up a more settled life as a villager in a government-sponsored agricultural expansion programme.

He was joined in his return to the forest by several of his tribesmen and their families. The leader was Tissahamy of Dambana, the last of a proud line of leaders of the fast dwindling forest people of Sri lanka.

The Veddahs, or hunters, are the aboriginals of Sri lanka, whose origins could be traced to the dim distance of pre-history. A people· who for several millennia have lived by the rules of the forest and nature, with their own simple way of life, rituals and dialect, until they were faced with the threat of “civilization” from the early years of this century.

Challenged by the “march of progress” these people, who lived in the forests of Sri Lanka from long before the island began to be settled by migrants from neighbouring India more than 2500 years ago, are increasingly becoming a curiosity in the land of their birth. The opening of forest lands for cultivation has led to most of them being re-settled in village lands, some given entirely to them, and in others to live with the Sinhalese villagers of the area. Increasing contact with people from. outside the forest has changed their life-styles, made them prey to diseases which were unknown to them, and lured many with the promise of the “good life” outside.

Physically short of stature with bushy, wavy hair, a sparse beard and sharp piercing eyes, the Veddahs are believed by anthropologists to be descended from the Australoid-Negroid groups with close links to the aboriginal people of the South Seas, Australia and New Zealand.
The short axe slung on the shoulder is typical of the Veddah, even the village (gam) Veddahs, who have given up the life of the hunt. Even in the forest, the axe is their principal weapon, used mainly for the breaking of hives for gathering of honey, in which the Veddah is particularly adept. A Veddah could still show you how game flesh could be well preserved in the hollow of a tree, covered with wild honey, and sealed over with clay.

The bow and arrow, which is another of the traditional weapons of the Veddah, now little in use, has largely been replaced on the hunt by the shotgun, and even the old blunderbuss, some of which are the proud possession of Veddah leaders. They display their attachment to these traditional hunting weapons in the use of bows and arrows in various ceremonies, rituals and dances which are performed even by those who have left the forest.

History and legend in Sri I.anka are liberally spiced with stories of the Veddahs. The Sinhalese and Tamil, the two main communities in Sri I.anka, have always treated

the forest people with respect, conceding to them domain in their own territory. There are many stories of Sinhalese kings appointing Veddah chiefs as their chief huntsmen, and of regular tributes being paid in the form of game flesh by Veddah chiefs to the kings of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy.

The Vedahs have in turn been a proud people. Their folk-tales often hark back to days when they were part of royalty. Sinhalese history speaks of occasions when princes fell in love with Veddah beauties being banished to live in the forest.

living so close to nature in the dense tropical jungles and forests, the Veddahs developed a Cult of the Dead as their main form of worship. Even today the ritual dances of the Veddahs, performed in time of distress, are in the nature of a worship of the dead. When death struck a Veddah living in the jungle, the others abandoned his cave or shack and went in search of a new resting place. Many village Veddahs still follow this tradition.

In worship they attach names to various spirits, derived from what they see around them. “Kande Yakka” (spirit of the mountain), “Gal Yakka” (spirit of the rock),” ae Yakka” (spirit of a relative) are among these names. These spirits do not bring harm, but are invoked to help them in the hunt, to protect their hunting dogs (which is the greatest treasure of the Veddah), and for special help in hunting the wild bear. When they go out in search of wild honey they pay obeisance to “Dola Yakka” (the spirit of the appetite or taste).

Those who have studied the Veddahs in their jungle habitat have noted the monogamous nature of their marriages, usually lasting till death. A Veddah girl marries soon after puberty. It is the custom for a young Veddah male, known as a “Randunna” or Golden Bow, of marriageable age to present himself before the father of his intended bride and propose marriage to his daughter. He would come bearing gifts of honey, yams, betel leaf, coconut, rice and game flesh. Such marriage proposals of course take place only within the confines of a particular clan or tribe, after there is general consensus within the clan that the two young people are suited for marriage.

The Veddah marriage custom is itself very simple. If the daughter agrees to the proposal the compact is sealed, and the bride ties a string made of the bark of the Niyande plant (Sansiviera zeylanica) around the waist of the groom as a nuptial knot. The string is replaced with fresh ones as time passes on. The dowry the bride brings with her as she leaves for the new dwelling with her husband is usually

comprised of things of utility -property such as a hunting dog, an axe, pots and a broad-bladed carving knife known as a “katty”, useful in the jungle.

Although the bow and arrow is not much used by the Veddahs of today, they still treasure these ancient weapons of the hunt. A Veddah living in the jungle will still be able to show you his considerable skill in archery. In the traditional method of making a bow and arrow, the bow-string is made of the bark of the Aralu Vel (Terminalia chebula) and the bow made of Kabba Vel (Allyphyllus cobbe). The strong arrow shaft is decorated and kept in balance with feathers of the eagle, owl or jungle fowl. The bow-string is coated with vegetable resin. Arrowheads are usually of wood, although the use of metal is not rare.

Visitors to Veddah communities have often been surprised by their skill in the production of utility items. For carrying water they make gourds of skin or hollow out large fruits. They make bags out of bark and turn out rough pots with clay. Veddah women are quite adept at weaving, and make leaf mats to lie upon, and bags and pouches required for travelling.

The displacement of the Veddahs from their traditional lands, which began from the early decades of this century, gathered momentum when, shortly before independence was achieved from the British in 1948, the Government opened up land in the Eastern and North Central Provinces for agricultural expansion. The Inginiyagala area, in the South East, was largely lost to the Veddahs, due to the Gal Oya development heme when new colonists from other areas of the island were settled in areas watered by the new reservoir the nanayake Samudhra.

The absorption of the Veddah into the rural community was speeded up with the more recent Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme launched in 1978, under which the island’s longest river was diverted to provide irrigation for many thousand new acres of land.

With the retreat of the jungle threatening their total displacement, steps were taken to re-settle them in lands set apart specially for them in the Mahaweli Development Zone. In this way more than 125 families were settled at Henanigala, near Girandurukotte in the North Eastern region.

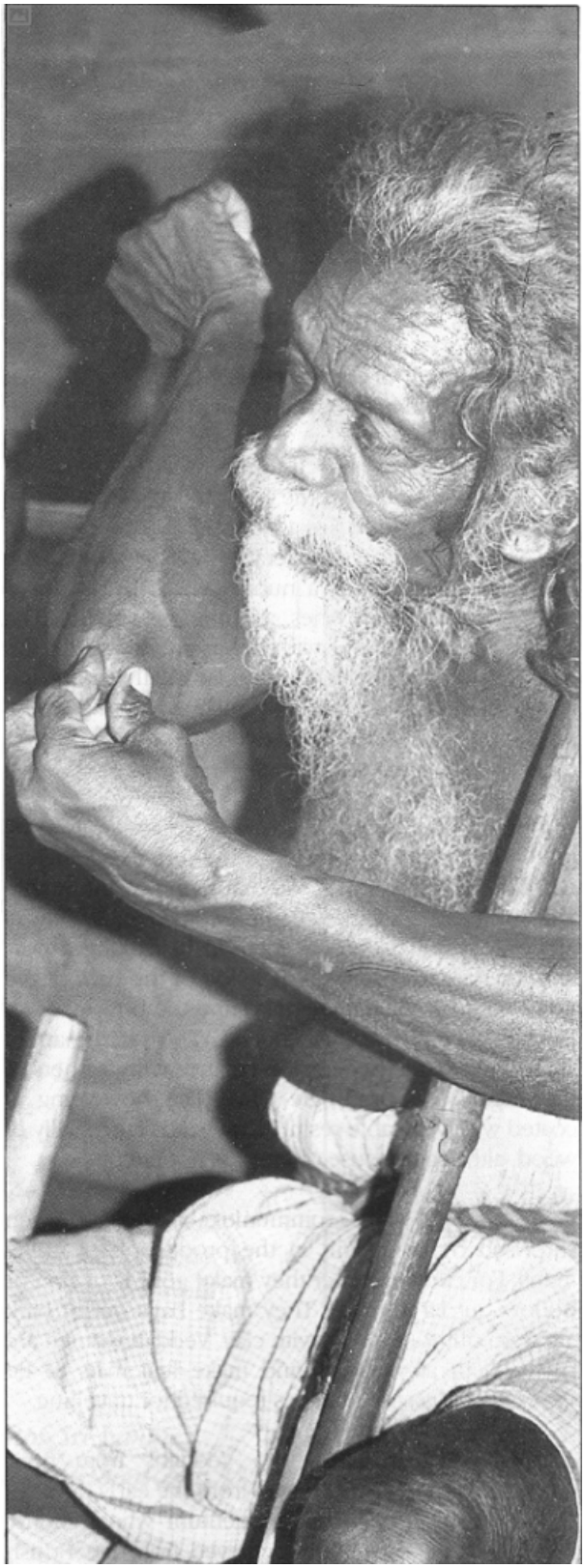
There are several other pockets of Veddah villages, situated close to the jungles, where Veddah clans are gradually being assimilated into a more settled life of agriculture, animal husbandry and even basic industry. Yet a few like Tissahamy

find the change unacceptable and insist on going back to the traditional life in the jungle.

Those who have accepted village life, and have inter-married with village still cling to many of their old rituals and customs, adding color to the rural life in these regions. They perform their dances at local Buddhist festivals, and in welcoming important visitors from the city. They invoke the blessings of the spirits of the dead at cultivation rituals, similar to what they did when on the hunt, and will perform dances of protection in times of calamity in the village.

Those who have opted to remain in the forest are now mainly living within the confines of various national parks, particularly the recently established Maduru Oya National Park, and in the jungle areas near Mahiyangana.

Veddah settlements are mainly in Rathugala in the Gal Oya region in the Eastern Province, Dambana (off Mahiyanagana) within the Madduru Oya National Park and Henanigala about 25 miles from Mahiyangane near Girandurukotte.



Patriarch Veddah chieftain Tissanamy of Dambana.



