Tropical Nomads of Bygone Days

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Gypsies – those colorfully dressed, rootless people perpetually traversing the country in small bands, accompanied by their laden donkeys, with children, dogs and chickens in procession – were a common sight less than fifty years ago in Sri Lanka. But with modernization and social welfare, this ancient tribe of people, along with their customs and traditions, have been greatly reduced, and may soon become another part of the country's heritage that remains only a memory.

The gypsies of Sri Lanka are believed to be descendants of an ancient South Indian nomadic tribe known as the Kuruver or Korovan. The Tamil name for gypsies, also Kuruver, attests to this belief. In Sinhala they are known as Ahiguritikas. Interestingly, both these names find their roots in India: Kuruver is derived from the Sanskrit word meaning palmistry, and Ahiguntika from two Sanskrit words meaning snake-charmer and snake-snarer.

The language and the speech of the gypsies, too, can be traced to India – specifically, to South India. The Sri Lankan gypsies, like their European counterparts, speak a dialect unique to them, and many of the words are of Tamil derivation. Their religious beliefs as well reveal their South Indian origins, since they worship the Hindu goddess Pathini in her deification as Valli, the consort of Skanda.

Though chiefly known as fortune-tellers and snake charmers, their occupations were many and formed the basis for the various sects that existed among the gypsies. In addition to those such as basket-weavers, there was even one known as "the eaters of jackal".

The gypsies have a code of discipline and a system of law peculiarly their own. Marriage is limited to within the clan – only cousins could marry. Men married outsiders only if there were no cousins within his own group; but in such cases, he left his own clan and entered into that of his wife's. Gypsies respected the

institution of marriage, but according to their law a woman could be “lent” to another man (if her husband went to jail, for instance) and returned. As marriages take place mainly between cousins, the succession to goods and chattel is kept within the family group.

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In spite of their foreign origins, Sinhala influence crept into their cu toms. The gypsies, though they used the cobra for commercial purposes, nevertheless, like the Sinhalese, consider it sacred. At gypsy weddings, the bride and the bridegroom tie their little fingers together, a Sinhala custom. They do not hunt on Poya day, though non-Buddhists. Even the ceremonial dances of gypsy priests are very similar to those of the Tovil, a Sinhalese ceremony of exorcism.

Probably the most important and largest gypsy festival was the annual meeting that used to be held ne.ar Kekirawa in the North Central Province during the time of the Hindu Deepavali festival. At this gathering of the clans, tribal business was attended to after three days kept for religious rituals. Everything happened here: monetary transactions were looked into, grievances heard, and even marriages arranged. Also camp plans for the year were worked out at this time, presided over by the head chief or Periya Manisen of the tribe.

Even all the chiefs were chosen at the annual meeting, by common consent. According to their law, a chief was responsible for the welfare of his tribe, and an offence brought about an immediate replacement. The chiefs had to be well versed in gypsy tradition, and the title was not hereditary.

All this was done amidst an atmosphere of merriment and good cheer, as the annual meeting was as much a celebration as a time for conducting serious business.

hough gypsies are often said to have a weakness for stealing, probably contributed to by their nomadic way of life, they also possess some outstanding human qualities, like kindness. They treat their children with great affection, and their animals with utmost care. Their donkeys, hens and dogs are given much freedom, and are immediately let loose after pitching camp. The dogs are trained hunters, and are almost as clever as their skilled masters at their jobs.

Though the gypsies look after their dogs well, their main concern is the snake, especially the cobra. The snake, trained to perform to the tune of a flute, is a gypsy’s biggest source of income, along with its byproducts of poison stones and cures for snake bites.

Subsequently, however, gypsies gave into civilization, even at the cost of their age-old traditions. Even where tribes existed, gypsy women bought their needs at grocery stores and visited dispensaries to cure illnesses. Though gypsy tradition

holds that any dispute should be settled among themselves, they began to tum to the police to settle their complaints. They no longer buried their dead in secret places, but began to seek the permission of the authorities of the village they had pitched camp in to use the local burial ground.

The gypsy population has now declined to a few extended families. Progress has undoubtedly improved their standard of life, and the few remaining present-day gypsies have come a long way from the primitive conditions their ancestors lived in. The days when they pitched camp at a clearing, setting up their talipot-leaf huts, are clearly gone. No longer do children cluster around and gaze unashamedly at these Strange, colourful people, cooking in the open amidst their children and animals, only to pack up and leave in a day or two as mysteriously as they came.

Nowadays gypsies have dwindled to the lone snake-charmer along the coastline, or the door-to door fortune-teller who is often reduced to begging – the last vestiges of an ancient tribe.

A gypsy snake – charmer sits on the wayside with his snake and mongoose show (Suresh de Silva)