

## **Aboriginal Ecology; finding missing link between prehistoric man and the modern man**

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### **Abstract**

Veddah is the last remaining group of people in Sri Lanka who believed to be the descendents of the prehistoric man. Therefore in evolutionary point of view Veddah could be the true survivals of the fittest present in Sri Lanka. A new project is launched under the auspicious of the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology of University of Kelaniya in order to obtain information from the Veddah particularly for the reconstruction of the prehistoric life style and to characterize the artifacts found in the archaeological excavations. This attempt would be successful and efficient if the life and culture of the Veddah's is known better, because Veddah it is hypothesized in this project that the Veddah would be the last remaining link to the prehistoric man in Sri Lanka. Once a month for one complete year Dambana and surrounding Veddah villages would be visited to observe how environment, ecology and human behavior changes in an annual circler. Those three dimensions would be studied by living with them

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and from formal interviews. Basically three topics have already been identified for further studies such as hunting practices, aboriginal taxonomy and fishing practices.

Key words; Archaeology, environment, human behavior, Sri Lanka, Veddah

## **Introduction**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lankan Veddah; the aborigines people of Sri Lanka were subjected for various literary work. Among many publications some of them discussed about the way that Veddah obtained goods and services from the very environment (Deraniyagala 1952, Hill 1941, Lewis 1915, Parker 1909, Seligmann & Seligmann 1911; Spittel 1924 & 1961,). Till now no one has attempted in describing the ecological role or ecological explanations for the acts of Veddah. Ecological explanations or ecological base behind the acts of veddah or their traditional knowledge has to be documented although to some extent foreign writers have done it (Hill 1941, Lewis 1915, Parker 1909, Seligmann & Seligmann 1911; Spittel 1924 & 1961). The ecological knowledge base of Veddah also can be used as an important tool in reconstructing the prehistory. Turner *et al* (2000) described that following fields can be covered by learning about the traditional knowledge of the aboriginal people 1) succession and interrelatedness of all components of the environment 2) use of ecological indicators 3) adaptive strategies for monitoring, enhancing, and sustainably harvesting resources 4) effective systems of knowledge acquisition and transfer 5) respectful and interactive attitudes and philosophies

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6) beliefs that recognize the power and spirituality of nature and 7) close identification with ancestral lands. Many groups of aboriginal peoples have lived sustainably within their local environment for many thousands of years by behaving within the total characterizes mentioned above (Turner *etal* 2000).

The hypothetical idea behind the project is as follows. In Sri Lankan context Veddah is the last remaining group of people descending from the prehistoric man. Therefore in evolutionary point of view Veddah could be the true survivors of the fittest present in Sri Lanka. Learning about traditional practices of Veddah would help us interpreting the physical evidence found from excavations. Some practices of Veddah would be descending from the prehistoric man with little or drastic changes. Depending on the environmental changes occurred since prehistoric times, relationship between man and the environment would have also affected. Some practices would have disappeared completely due to disappearance of goods and services provided by the Nature. Some practices have appeared recently after introduction of technologies to the Veddah such as hunting with guns.

Under the auspicious of the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology of University of Kelaniya a project is launched in order to obtain information from the Veddah about the relationship between them and the Nature. This project is named as Aboriginal Ecology Sri Lanka.

## **Research method**

Research methodology of the project is different to conventional methods. Research team spends about 4-5 days in the forest with Veddah and

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observe the ways he performs various day today activities, how he recognizes the sounds in the nature and how he responds to visual changes in the nature. Pictorial guides are used in order obtain the aboriginal names for fauna. As the third important part of the methodology photographs are taken of the Veddah and also the physical and the biological entities such as plants and animals as much as possible. In the future the photographs would be used again in order to gain the ethno-taxonomy of the Veddah.

## **Results**

Since February 2010 four visits were made to Veddah homeland during the last week of the month. The last week of the month was particularly selected due to the full moon condition which would enable the research team to observe the surrounding in the moon light while staying in the forest.

Based on our preliminary finding we have identified several fields for further investigations such as 1) Ethno-taxonomy 2) time and space of hunting / fishing / gathering 3) method of butchering 4) responding to sounds and 5) basics of veddah behavior such as personal hygiene and sex.

## **Ethno-taxonomy**

They have their own taxonomy for classification of animals and plants. The classification criteria of birds are not the morphological and anatomical characteristic but the behavior, niche, feeding type and singing pattern of birds etc. According to our study we found that they have names for many birds, which have not described by anybody else so far (Table 1). Some mammals are

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classified according to the morphology and anatomical features but others are based on the behavioral pattern. Also we found that they are well aware of the inter-specific and intra-specific relationship between animal species, particularly about the predator –prey relationships. Many fish species have names which have been derived from the shape, special features or behavior.

### **Time and space of hunting, fishing and gathering**

Veddah are fishermen when rivers and streams are almost close to total drying until then fishing are never attempted. Fishing in rivers and streams are only done with plant ichthyo-toxics. Many land animals such as wild boar, monkey and deer are hunted with higher frequency in some seasons, which is related to the abundance of fruits of some trees. Detail studies of this respect are underway. Gathering of mushrooms, berries, nuts and fruits are also a seasonal activity. The details of the seasonality of gathering will be obtained during the next field visits.

### **Butchering**

Veddah is a professional butcher, who does it very efficiently and effectively. Each important muscle group of any animal has a veddah terminology. The meat of the various parts of the body has different values according to their evaluation. The best meat is gifted to the healer in the community, the second best is given to the ironsmith, and the third best is given to the Veddah leader according the practice remaining in Dambana area. The carrier of the group is gifted with a special part of the meat. A complete report about Butchering method of Veddah is in preparation (Weliange et al). We are currently

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investigating the similarities of butchering between Veddah and the modern butcher.

### **Responding to sound**

Veddah is responding to many sounds produced by animals. They can identify animals by those noises or voices. His only objective while in the wild is to locate the sound; the distance and direction which helped him locating his position among other wild animals. In the night Veddah is more sensitive to sounds than during the daytime. He has the knowledge to understand the direction and the distance for any source of sound during both night and day.

### **Basic Veddah behavior**

Personal hygiene is considered only during toileting behavior. Each Veddah who was in the rock shelters in the past has a demarcated area for toileting. Therefore a particular area in the surrounding of the rock shelter was allocated for toileting behavior. Further investigations will be done about this particular behavior and land use pattern.

Controversial saying about Veddah is that they do not Bath (ref), we are seeking the ecological explanation for this issue. Up to some extent we have received some information about their sexual behavior too.

### **Conclusion**

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During four field visits which made from February to May 2010 much information were collected. Ethno-taxonomy of Veddah has never been investigated before. Taxonomy of birds is based on behavioral aspects of the birds. During next field visits in depth investigations will be done along the major lines that have been selected for further studies.

Table 1. Names used by Veddah, Sinhala name, English name and scientific name of some birds.

<b>Veddah terminology</b>	<b>Sinhala name</b>	<b>English name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>
Awukutta	Bimbassa	Common nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus asiaticus</i>
Silibilla	Demalichcha	Yellow billed babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis taprobanus</i>
Kudumahachappiya	Karawala penda	White bellied drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>
Kaera	Kaerala	Woodpecker	
Giraamboiia	Girawa	Parakeets	
Warabatti		Green Bee eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
Meechcha	Polkichcha	Oriental magpie robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
Waraliya	Kedeththa	hornbill	
Maduwayiththa	Awichchia	Indian pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>
Hapukandaya	Selalihiniya	Southern hill myna	<i>Gracula indica</i>
Gonkebaliththa	Mayna	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>

## **Acknowledgement**

I am thankful to Professor Nimal De Silva and Professor Gamini Adikari for providing logistical background for the project. A.S. Dandeniya, Prageeth Elgiriya and Duminda Alahakoon worked with me as field assistant during the

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past. The Veddah of Dambana and Rathugala are acknowledging with great respect. Mrs Sudewi Ranasinghe helped finding rare literature about Veddah. The staff of the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology helped in various ways to make this a success.

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