

# Psychosocial and Biological Characteristics of the Veddas in Anuradhapura District: The Interplay between Tradition and Modernization

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## ABSTRACT

The Vedda community in Sri Lanka, historically recognized as the island's indigenous inhabitants, is currently undergoing a critical phase of sociocultural and biological transition. This research focuses specifically on the Vedda populations residing in the Anuradhapura district, a subgroup often distinct from the more geographically isolated Bintenne Veddas. The study investigates the complex interplay between their traditional psychosocial structures—such as the matrilineal clan system (Wariga), animistic rituals, and kinship bonds—and the pressures of modernization, including agricultural resettlement, educational assimilation, and intermarriage. Biologically, the research examines genetic assimilation and health transitions resulting from lifestyle shifts from hunter-gatherer subsistence to sedentary agriculture. Using a mixed-method approach involving ethnographic observations and secondary biological data analysis, the study reveals that while the biological distinctiveness of the Anuradhapura Veddas is diminishing due to admixture with the North Central Sinhalese peasantry, traces of their unique psychosocial identity persist in syncretic religious practices and social stratification. The findings suggest that modernization has led to a "dual identity" crisis, where traditional biological and psychological traits are being rapidly reconfigured.

**Keywords:** Anuradhapura Veddas, Cultural Syncretism, Biological Assimilation, Indigenous Identity, Modernization, Psychosocial Adaptation,

## INTRODUCTION

The indigenous people of Sri Lanka, or the Vedda people, are considered the oldest community with biological and cultural links to the island's prehistoric humans (Balangoda Man) (Deraniyagala, 1992). Traditionally following a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, they have undergone a rapid transformation in the face of complex social, economic, and political currents in the modern world (Wijesekera, 1964). Specifically, the Vedda people living in dry zone agricultural areas such as the Anuradhapura District belong to a subculture known as "Village Veddas," who are distinct from the Veddas in areas like Mahiyanganaya or Dambana (Brow, 1978; Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911). The Vedda people of the Anuradhapura District are a group that has coexisted and intermingled with the Sinhalese farming society for a long time (Parker, 1909). However, their unique psychosocial characteristics and biological heritage have not yet completely vanished. This research attempts to examine how the identity of these people has been shaped within the conflict between tradition and modernization (Silva, 2010).



Ancient Vedda peoples'



elders in modern society

## Research Problem

The primary problem of this research is: What kind of changes have occurred in the traditional biological and psychosocial characteristics of the Vedda people in the Anuradhapura District as they undergo rapid urbanization and agricultural modernization?

## Research Objectives

1. To identify the current psychosocial characteristics (beliefs, marriage patterns, social relations) of the Vedda people in the Anuradhapura District.
2. To investigate the impact of modernization on their biological characteristics (physical health, genetic heritage, and disease patterns).
3. To analyze the interplay between traditional Vedda heritage and modern social integration.

**Research Methodology** This research is based on a qualitative and secondary data analysis methodology. Based on field observations and interviews conducted in selected Vedda villages in the Anuradhapura District (e.g., Vedda settlements around Horowpathana, Kebithigollewa) (Brow, 1978).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Seligmann* (Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911), *Nandadeva Wijesekera* (Wijesekera, 1964), and modern genetic research reports were used as data. Data obtained using sociological and anthropological theories were subjected to content analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is discussed under two main areas: (A) Psychosocial Characteristics and (B) Biological Characteristics.

### Psychosocial Characteristics: The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernization

**Wariga Lineage and Social Structure** The basic social unit of the Anuradhapura Veddas is the "Wariga" (Clan). This is based on a matrilineal kinship system (Brow, 1978). Although *Warigas* such as *Morana, Ura, and Nabudana* traditionally existed, by present times, this *Wariga* system has become severely relaxed in the Anuradhapura District. Marriage only within the *Wariga* (Endogamy) was a mandatory rule (Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911). Today, intermarriages with Sinhalese farming families have become common (Pieris, 1956). This has caused a loosening of their psychosocial bonds and reduced their willingness to introduce themselves as "Veddas" (Social Stigma). The *Wariga* Council and the Breakdown of Matrilineal Kinship. The backbone of traditional Vedda society was the "Wariga" system. Psychosocially, a person's identity, security, and rights were determined by the *Wariga* to which he or she belonged. The *Morana, Ura, and Nabudana Warigas* mainly existed among the Anuradhapura Veddas (Brow, 1978). In the past, marrying outside one's *Wariga* (Exogamy) was strictly prohibited and was considered 'polluting the *Wariga*'. This created a strong sentiment of "in-group feeling" among them (Spittel, 1950).

With the development of modern education and transportation facilities, it has become common for Vedda youth in Anuradhapura to marry into the Sinhalese farming society. According to research observations (Brow, 1978; Silva, 2010), the *Wariga* Council operates only symbolically today. The social pressure arising from marrying outside the *Wariga* has minimized, which has led to a weakening of their collective psyche. This has created a "Dual Identity" within them; that is, the mental struggle of appearing as a traditional Vedda at one moment and as a modern farmer at another.

## The Concept of "Nae Yakun" and Religious Syncretism

The most powerful aspect of the psychosocial life of the Anuradhapura Veddas is the belief in deceased relatives. They believe that after death, their relatives become "Nae Yakun" (Relative Spirits) and assist the living (Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911).

**Ritual Transformation:** The "Kiri Koraha" dance, seen among Dambana Veddas, is not commonly found among Anuradhapura Veddas. Instead, they have blended this belief with Buddhism (Obeyesekere, 1981).

**Psychological Impact:** When an illness or trouble occurs, they first conduct a Bodhi Puja, and then, secretly or inside the house, offer an offering to the Nae Yakun. This is known as "Cultural Syncretism." Through this, they balance both acceptance in modern society (appearing as Buddhists) and the traditional mindset (belief in protection) (Gunawardena, 1995).



Traditional beliefs

Modern beliefs

## Language and Social Stigma

The Veda language in the Anuradhapura District has now moved away from domestic usage. A primary reason for this is the social shame or fear of introducing themselves as "Veddas" (Stigma regarding indigenous identity) (Dharmadasa, 1990). School-going children are reluctant to speak the Veda language, having largely adopted the Sinhala language instead. This is not only a linguistic death but also a powerful psychosocial factor influencing changes in their cultural thought patterns (Meegaskumbura, 1990). The Veda community living in the *Vanni* areas of Anuradhapura, especially in areas like *Padaviya, Horowpothana, Welewa, and Kendewa*) has integrated deeply with Sinhalese society in recent times. Their language can be identified as a "Sinhala-Veda" dialect, which is a mixture of the authentic Veda language and Sinhala.

## Main Characteristics of the Veda Language

**Usage of Nouns:** Adding suffixes like "Pojja" or "Gejja" to any noun. Examples: Eye -> *Aspojja*, Fire -> *Ginipojja*, Rain -> *Wahipojja*. **Usage of Pronouns:** Instead of "I" (Mama) -> "Me Aththo". Instead of "You" (Oba) -> "Thopan" or "Thope Aththo". **Usage of Unique Words (Isolate Words):** For Eating -> *Bajanya karanawa*. For Going -> *Mangachchanawa*. For Dying -> *Diyaman wenawa*.

## The Veda Dialect of Rajarata: A Linguistic and Cultural Analysis

The language of the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, or the *Wannila Aetto*, is not merely a medium of communication; it is an indelible mark on Sri Lankan history and ethnology. Specifically, the language of the Veda communities living in *Padaviya, Horowpothana, Welewa, and Kendewa*, and the border villages of the Anuradhapura district, shows certain differences compared to the Veda dialect of *Dambana*.

## Origin and Structure of the Language (Wilhelm Geiger's View)

Renowned linguist Wilhelm Geiger points out that the Vedda language is not entirely independent of the Sinhala language but maintains its own unique vocabulary and structure while maintaining a close relationship with it. In the language of the *Rajarata Veddas*, ancient Sinhala (Prakrit) roots can be observed; although these words have faded from modern Sinhala society, they are preserved within the Vedda dialect.

### Main Structural Characteristics of the Vedda Language

According to Professor J.B. Disanayaka's work, "*Sinhala Wadi Wahara*", there are several prominent features of this language:

**Use of Suffixes:** Adding "*Pojja*" or "*Gejja*" to the end of a noun is a fundamental feature of the Vedda tongue. This symbolizes respect or intimacy toward an object.

*Examples:* *Ruk-pojja* (Tree), *Manda-pojja* (Food/Meal), *Diya-pojja* (Water).

**Use of Pronouns:** Instead of the words "I" or "We," they always use "*Me Aththo*" (These people/This person). This reflects a sense of humility regarding oneself. When referring to others, terms like "*Thope Aththo*" or "*Othana Aththo*" (Those people there) are used.

**Qualifying/Descriptive Expressions:** When describing anything, they use descriptive phrases instead of short words. For example, the "Sky" might be referred to as "*Ihala Thana*" (The high place) or "*Nil-pojja*" (The blue thing).

### Hunting Language and Secret Language

As mentioned in the book "*The Veddas*" by C.G. Seligmann and B.Z. Seligmann, the Vedda people use a specific "Hunting Language" (*Dadyam Basa*) when they go hunting or wander through the forest. This was designed to avoid angering the forest gods and to prevent animals from identifying them.

*Example:* In the forest, they address an Elephant as "*Kan Loku Aththa*" (The one with big ears) and a Bear as "*Kalu Aththa*" (The black one).

### Linguistic Evolution of the "Village Veddas" of Anuradhapura

*Nandadeva Wijesekera*, through his research, points out that the Vedda people in the Anuradhapura area have transformed into "Village Veddas" (*Govi Waddan*) over time. Because of this, their language has blended heavily with modern Sinhala rural dialects. It appears that certain words found in the "Field Language" (*Kumburu Basa*) and "Threshing Floor Language" (*Kamath Basa*) used by the Rajarata farming community originated from the Vedda dialect.

**Food and Drink:** "*Bajana karanawa*" (Eating), "*Diyaman wenawa*" (Dying), "*Kon Pani*" (Honey).

**Verbs:** "*Mangachchanawa*" (Going/Coming), "*Pojja danawa*" (Doing/Placing).

### Cultural and Religious Influence

The language contained in the Vedda rituals (e.g., *Kiri Koraha*) and their folk poems is very powerful. The language used in the invocations (*Kannalaw*) for the "*Nae Yakun*" (Ancestral Spirits) worshipped by the Anuradhapura Veddas is difficult for an average Sinhalese person to understand. It is a wonderful blend of ancient Hela (Archaic Sinhala) and the Vedda tongue.

## Present Status

Today, the Vedda language in the Anuradhapura district is gradually facing extinction. Due to education and social integration, the new generation has become accustomed to the Sinhala language. However, among the older generation, this Vedda dialect is still preserved, either secretly or contextually.

### Biological Characteristics,

**Genetic Identity** Recent research (Chaubey et al., 2014; Welikala et al., 2024) points out that the Vedda people show genetic similarities to indigenous tribal groups in South Asia. However, due to the Vedda people of the Anuradhapura District mixing with the Sinhalese people for a long time, their biological distinctiveness is lower compared to the *Dambana Veddas* (Welikala et al., 2024).

**Physical Characteristics:** Traditional Australoid characteristics, such as short stature, curly hair, and broad noses, are gradually changing among Anuradhapura Veddas (Kennedy, 1984; Dart, 1960).

**Genetic Admixture and Phenotype** Genetic research has confirmed that the Vedda people of Sri Lanka are genetically related to indigenous tribal populations mainly in India (Chaubey et al., 2014).

**The Specificity of Anuradhapura:** However, the Veddas of the Anuradhapura District have engaged in intermarriage with the Sinhalese farming population (Vanni people) for centuries. As recent studies (Welikala et al., 2024) indicate, Sinhalese genetic traits are abundantly found within their mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA).

### Physical Changes:

Australoid characteristics possessed by traditional Veddas, such as small stature, broad nose, and prognathism, are gradually fading among the Veddas of this area. Today, it is difficult to morphologically distinguish them from the Sinhalese farming population (Kennedy, 1984).



Traditional people

A modern person

### Food Habits of Indigenous People

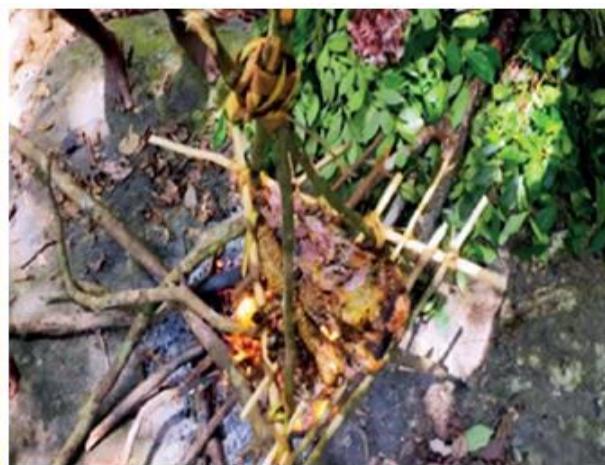
#### Traditional Food Pattern

The food pattern of the ancient indigenous people was based on Hunting and Gathering. It was a high-nutrient and organic diet (Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911). Their main food was meat. Animals such as deer, sambar deer, wild boar, and porcupine were hunted. Specifically, monitor lizard (*Thalagoya*) meat is considered the most delicious food of the indigenous people (Deraniyagala, 1963). Honey holds a unique place in the food culture of the *Wanniyalatto*. They used bee honey, wasp honey, and *Danduwel* bee honey for food as well as for preserving

meat (by immersing meat in honey) (Spittel, 1924). Yams found in the forest, such as *Katu Ala*, *Gona Ala*, and *Buthsarana*, were boiled and eaten. Wild fruits such as *Mora*, *Weera*, and *Palu* were also part of their diet (Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911). Often, roasting over fire, cooking on a heated stone surface, or sun-drying (dried meat) was done. The use of spices was very minimal (Brow, 1978).



Traditional foods, honey



firing meat

#### Modern Food Pattern

After the 1980s, with the Mahaweli Development Project and the tightening of forest conservation laws, indigenous people migrated to villages (e.g., Henanigala, Dambana) (Dharmadasa, 1990). This completely changed their food pattern. At present, their main food has become rice and vegetables, similar to the Sinhalese rural population (Silva, 2002). Since hunting was restricted, they have turned to cultivating corn, finger millet (Kurakkan), manioc, and paddy. *Kurakkan Thalapa* and *Roti* are commonly seen in the current diet (Stegeborn, 1999). The modern indigenous generation has become accustomed to artificial and processed foods such as bread, biscuits, sugar, and tea. Due to the increased consumption of starchy foods and sugar instead of natural meat and honey, non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and obesity are currently widely reported among the indigenous people (Jayasekara et al., 2017).



Fishing with *Karaka*



Modern people's *Deva danaya* (food)

#### Reasons Affecting the Change

- I. Forest Conservation Laws: Prohibiting hunting within forests (Dharmadasa, 1990).
- II. Development Projects: Evicting indigenous people from traditional lands under the Mahaweli Project and resettling them in colonies (Stegeborn, 1999).

### III. Social Mixing: Indigenous people embracing those food patterns due to mixing with Sinhalese and Tamil villages.

#### Food-related disease in modern society

The changing of the food patterns was associated with various diseases to people in modern society. The traditional peoples had to leave their traditional food patterns due to the above-mentioned reasons. Health data indicate that Type 2 Diabetes and Obesity are growing rapidly within the Anuradhapura Vedda community (Udagama, 2002; Jayasekara & Warren, 1995). A major reason for this is that their genetic makeup is not adapted to digest excessive sugar (Thrifty Gene Hypothesis). Disease Patterns and Kidney Disease Traditionally, when living in the jungle, malaria and animal bites were the main health threats. However, the current agricultural lifestyle has brought new biological challenges. The Vedda people have also largely fallen victim to the unidentified kidney disease (CKDu), which is an epidemic in the Anuradhapura District. The use of agrochemicals and the pollution of groundwater have caused this. Their ancestral immune system not being sufficient to withstand these new chemical intoxications is a serious biological problem (Samarasinghe, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

The study of the Vedda people in the Anuradhapura District shows that they function as a "Transitional Society". Psychosocially, although they have embraced the Buddhist agrarian culture, the fear and respect for "*Nae Yakun*" in their subconscious remains the same. Biologically, due to intermarriage and dietary changes, their indigenous genetic and physical characteristics are rapidly diluting. Although modernization has provided them with education and infrastructure, it is stripping away their unique anthropological identity. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Anuradhapura Veddas are a community demonstrating hybrid cultural and biological characteristics, oscillating between past heritage and modern existence.

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