

Deconstructing the Representations of the “Wild Men” in Sri Lanka: A Reinterpretation of the Indigenous Vedda Community as Reflected in Their Oral Tradition



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Abstract

The Vedda community is regarded as the indigenous people of Sri Lanka. Despite negative connotations attributed to the Veddas, implicating them as a community of uncivilized people as presented from a largely Eurocentric perspective, scholars and researchers have acknowledged their unique traditions, livelihood, ethics, language, and culture. The main focus of this research is to study traditional Vedda songs to evaluate depictions of their ancient livelihoods and social and familial relationships, as the oral tradition is an uncontested means of capturing the essence of a community. Through a content analysis, the study critically evaluates purposively selected translated versions of traditional Vedda songs while integrating ethnographic techniques to cross-validate the claims. The corpus primarily includes songs that reflect the Vedda community's livelihood, beliefs, rituals, and relationships. A mini-ethnographic case study was conducted in Dambana and Henanigala Vedda villages, which are considered traditional Vedda settlements. The study concludes that ancient Vedda songs express not only the hardships and volatile existence of the Vedda community but also highlight their resilience, spiritual beliefs, familial and communal bonds, and complex relationship with nature. This study is pertinent to the field in that it underscores the way the Vedda communities lived as represented in their songs before the overwhelming influence of external factors, which have compelled them to transition from their traditional, jungle-based lifestyle to one that closely mirrors mainstream society.

Keywords

Oral Tradition, Sri Lankan Indigenous People, Veddas, Vedda Songs

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Introduction

1.1. Tracing the Origins of the Vedda Community

Sri Lanka, although an island nation, is a land where different communities live. The Sinhalese are the majority community, and the minorities comprise the Tamil, Moor, and Burgher communities. Even though it is challenging to discover a government population census report that provides statistics concerning the population of one of its minority communities, the Vedda, according to the Sri Lanka Travel Pages (n.d.), it can be noted that they comprise less than one percent of the island's population. Despite researchers and scholars tracing the Vedda community's origins to their reference made in the historical chronicle Mahāvamsa, dating them back to the fifth century BC, Sri Lanka Travel Pages (n.d.) mentions that archeological evidence has traced the Vedda's origins as far back as 16,000 BC. An uncontested fact concerning the Vedda, based on our literature review, is that this community is inarguably the oldest known inhabitants of Sri Lanka.

Various historical narratives attempt to divulge the origin of the Vedda, with the most common being that they were descendants of King Vijaya's and Kuveni's two children, Jeevahaththa and Disala. According to the legend, Vijaya was a banished Indian prince who landed in Sri Lanka around the sixth century BC. Upon Vijaya's arrival, he falls in love with Kuveni, a Yaksha tribe princess. King Vijaya established the first Sinhalese Kingdom, but is said to have abandoned Kuveni and the two children he fathered with her. Although Kuveni seeks refuge for herself and her children from the Yaksha Clan to which she had belonged, she is killed for betraying the clan, and in fear, her children flee into the jungle. It is mentioned that they became the ancestors of the Vedda.

An alternative perspective found in Sri Lankan folklore suggests that the Veddas originated from a cannibal king and his followers, who were driven into the jungle (Nevill, 1886). In the 17th century, Robert Knox (1681) referred to the Veddas in his book titled *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, where he called them "wild men" and "savages" while later anthropological studies, such as the ethnographic study conducted by Seligman and his wife (1911), presents a more balanced perspective of the Vedda, their customs, language, music, invocations and livelihood. In this book, titled *The Veddas*, they observe that many of the original Vedda community traits had already begun to fade at the time of their research.

Although European researchers such as Knox (1681) presented the Vedda as primitive and uncivilized, gradually this misconception has been eroded as anthropological studies largely depicted them as a community that has its distinct, rich, and complex cultural heritage imbued with their moral values, language, and traditions that are in no way indicative of a primitive community.

1.2. Changes in the Veddas Lifestyles Due to Socioeconomic Factors

Originally, the Vedda were hunter-gatherers who largely depended on forests for sustenance. Their name derives from the Sanskrit word “Vyadha”, meaning hunter. However, as per the available literature, it is stated that government policies in the mid-twentieth century had a significant impact on their traditional way of life. Various initiatives in the form of government projects, such as the Mahaweli Development Project, and the declaration of protected forest in areas such as Maaru Oya and Dambana, where the Veddas largely resided, further limited their access to hunting and honey collecting. In addition, rapid deforestation due to development projects such as the Gal Oya Valley Development Project also became a contributing factor to their move from jungle-based residences to villages and towns inhabited by mainstream society, mostly in the Uva Province, Eastern Province, and North Central Province. Today, they primarily reside in the eastern regions of Sri Lanka, particularly in Dambana and Henanigala.

1.3. Identity and Terminology

Despite certain negative connotations attributed to the Veddas, implicating them as a community of unrefined, valueless, and uncultured people, the Sinhalese refer to them as *Adivasi*, meaning indigenous people. This is in recognition of their unique traditions, livelihood, ethics, language, and culture. The Sri Lankan people acknowledge and recognize their existence as a distinct ethnic group alongside other communities in the country. For example, even the government textbooks used across the island in the school system make references to them as an ethnic minority.

Traditionally, the Vedda lifestyle was deeply intertwined with nature. They viewed the forest as sacred and depended on it for food and other resources. For instance, their hunting practices were strictly for subsistence and not for poaching or profit. According to interviews conducted during our field research, it was mentioned that Veddas have followed ethical hunting practices; for instance, they do not kill pregnant or infant animals. Also, they utilize most parts of the animals they hunt. For instance, meat is consumed or preserved, skin is used for functional

purposes, and bones have been crafted into tools. The Veddas lived in hostile environments, facing various dangers encountered during hunting and gathering. To overcome these challenges, they often relied on traditional mantras as well as *yaadini*.

With the clearance of forested areas and the construction of roads, the Veddas gradually began to interact with mainstream society. This contact led to significant changes in their customs, language, and traditions. As they moved away from the jungles into villages and urban areas, their simple and self-sufficient lifestyle was altered by the increasing influence of money and material needs. Gradually, items that were once irrelevant to their way of life, such as modern tools and clothing, became necessities. The government promoted “chenna” (slash-and-burn) cultivation, and many Veddas adopted Sinhalese agricultural techniques. Traditional tools like the “keteriya” (axe) became more symbolic and were used mainly in ceremonial contexts and as a symbol of their Vedda identity.



Figure 1: Thala Warige Gunabanda, Chief of the Henanigala Village, Ampara District, Eastern Province. (Photo taken by Kamani Samarasinghe, 2024.08.25)

1.4. Social and Family Life

Historically, the Vedda community followed a strong caste lineage, with clans such as Morana, Unapana, and Uru. However, these distinctions have gradually faded over time. According to Gunabanda, during the interview, in the past, although Vedda marriages were based strictly on

blood relations, today, love marriages have become more common, and the legal recognition of marriage has evolved.

Despite modern influences, certain values remain intact. Veddass are known for their lifelong monogamous relationships and deep commitment to their marriage partners. It appears they shy away from publicly expressing love to their partners and, even more so, from physical intimacy. For instance, even today, during the field visits, it was found that Vedda men would not stay alone, even with their mother-in-law or any unrelated woman. Moreover, during the field visit to Dambana, it was observed that Vedda women rarely made public appearances in the presence of visitors. Nonetheless, it appears that they are treated with high regard, and during the interviews, it was mentioned that they often have a strong voice during decision-making. Thus, even though they seem confined to the domestic sphere and have the males in the household be extremely protective of them, they seem not to be subjugated as in a typical male-dominated patriarchal system.

1.5. Significance of the Study

With the changes in their habitat and way of life, many aspects of the Veddass' existence saw drastic changes over the past few centuries. The Vedda language, which is a creole, is also gradually ceasing to exist since the Vedda community has begun to recognize the importance of education, even though formal schooling was not part of their traditional way of life. As a result, they now encourage their children to attend government schools. As such, they are compelled to use either the Sinhala or Tamil language, which makes the Vedda children and youth less proficient in their first language.

This is the same situation with their song tradition. At present, the verbally transmitted Vedda songs are almost nonexistent, with the Veddass being able to sing only a handful of the songs sung by their ancestors. When interviewing the Veddass, their inability to recollect the songs of the jungle-inhabiting Vedda clans made us realize the obvious as well as the urgent need to achieve, preserve, and research these songs, as songs are an uncontested means of capturing the essence of a community. The decision to engage in the content analysis of the previously textualized songs was made as a starting point to a larger-scale project that would lead to capturing at least the remaining songs sung by the Veddass in their mother tongue.

The content analysis of traditional Vedda songs includes a critical evaluation of the implicit and explicit connotations in these songs, revealing certain traits of the Veddas that have mostly been recorded from a Eurocentric perspective. Unfortunately, it was observed that the few studies published by Sri Lankans on the Veddas have been written in Sinhala, thus resulting in a limited readership. As such, this study would support the contribution to the existing limited pool of literature that presents an unbiased and authentic depiction of how the Veddas lived through their voices preserved in the form of songs.

1.6. Aim and Objectives

Given the above clarification, the overarching objective of the study was to engage in a critical content analysis of the Vedda songs that had been sung by the ancient Veddas when they were less exposed to other Sri Lankan communities and had their unique style of living. The analysis arguably demonstrates how they were a sophisticated community with its own unique identity. For this particular paper, the following specific objectives were derived:

1. To examine the representation of familial and communal relationships within the ancient Vedda community as portrayed in their songs.
2. To unravel portrayals of the Veddas' livelihood as reflected in their songs.

According to the above objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How are familial and communal relationships exemplified through the songs sung by the ancient Veddas?
2. In what ways are the depictions of these people's livelihoods reflected in their songs?

Methods and Materials

This study critically evaluates the translated versions of traditional Vedda songs while integrating ethnographic techniques to cross-validate claims. It employed a qualitative research approach, incorporating a corpus-based critical evaluation of Vedda songs from the early 20th century. The corpus primarily includes purposively sampled songs that reflect the Vedda community's livelihood, beliefs, rituals, and relationships. The primary source was Seligmann and Seligmann's (1911) book, *The Vedda*, in which a separate chapter is dedicated to Vedda songs. These songs have been written as heard and translated by a Sinhalese; however, it is

noted that in certain instances, the translator and even the Veddas themselves were unsure of the exact meaning of a word, phrase, or line in the lyrics. In the book, the songs were in the Vedda language, and we had to depend on the translations in the books and explanations given to some of the songs by the Veddas during our visits.

The data gathered during the mini-ethnographic case study was primarily to cross-reference the premises presented following the critical evaluation of these songs. To select the study participants, convenience sampling technique was employed. A total of four Veddha families from Dambana and three from Henanigala were approached. Although children and women were reluctant to participate in interviews, the Vedda elders were vocal. Since they could communicate in Sinhala, the exchange was comprehensible for both parties.



Figure 2: In conversation with the Vedda elders during the field visit to Henanigala Village, Ampara District, Eastern Province on 2024.08.25

The field visits were conducted in the Dambana and Henanigala Vedda villages. These two sites were purposively selected as Dambana is considered one of the most traditional Vedda settlements, making it a site that would offer us authentic perspectives on indigenous song traditions. Similarly, Henanigala, the second key research location, also consists of Vedda community members, a few of whom shared their knowledge of traditional songs and other relevant information. Unstructured interviews were conducted and recorded in both locations, although to gather more data, observations, field notes, photographs, and audio/video recordings were also used.

Ethical considerations were adhered to during the visits. The researchers explained the purpose and nature of the study to obtain verbal consent from respondents. They were also informed

that their participation was purely voluntary and that they could opt out of the study at any given time. The Vedda community was hospitable, welcoming, and forthcoming with the requested information and permitted us to use the collected data, including photos and audio/video recordings, for research purposes. Participants were assured of anonymity throughout the study.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was applied to tabulate data gathered during the field visits through manual coding. The corpus data were analyzed using critical content analysis to discover how they explicitly and implicitly represent their lifestyle and relationships.

The following diagram represents the interpretive framework of the study:



Figure 3: Interpretive framework of the study

The lyrics of the selected corpus, as well as the data gathered during the mini ethnographic case study, were interpreted in order to consider how indigenous knowledge was represented in the Vedda songs. Furthermore, the translated lyrics of the selected songs were critically evaluated by decoding the metaphors and symbolism. The linguistic structures, mostly at the word and phrase levels, also supported the analysis of the corpus.

Results and Discussion

Vedda songs serve various purposes, including expressing emotions primarily to do with worry, sadness, expectations, joy, love, invoking blessings from malevolent and benevolent spirits, and providing entertainment. They express authentic and lived experiences of the Veddas' lives, expressed in melancholy, joyous, playful, or distressed tones. Unlike most communities, the Veddas do not have special occasions or events organized for singing; rather, songs seem to

originate organically from their day-to-day lives and prevalent emotions. Often, there are no musical instruments to accompany these songs.

Some common themes in their songs include beseeching good fortune or goods, invoking blessings or requesting assistance, expressing a mother's love, soothing children, and creating a light-hearted, jovial environment. The songs are abundant with imagery from their natural surroundings, such as the flora and fauna, reflecting their deep connection to the natural habitat.

3.1. Entertainment

An examination of the selected corpus of Vedda songs reveals that a relatively limited number of songs are sung purely for entertainment. This reflects the community's general approach to recreation – one characterized by simplicity. Even their dance traditions consist of basic movements, often performed without musical accompaniment, sometimes only with bodily tapping as a rhythm. Similarly, their songs rarely incorporate musical instruments or, in many cases, none at all. This minimalistic approach to entertainment reflects their overall way of life, which is evident in numerous aspects, from their simple, unadorned clothing to their organic diet and basic lifestyle. Although their lives are largely devoid of the stresses of modern city-living, due to the uncertainty of procuring their basic needs, only occasional instances of joy and fun are expressed through song. Nonetheless, the few songs that actually target entertainment seem to serve a dual purpose: instigating happiness and promoting rejuvenation. For instance, one popular song sung by Vedda women humorously mocks their husbands who return empty-handed from honey-gathering. In this song, the women tease their husbands for failing to bring home honey, using sarcasm and humor to highlight the disappointment. The song describes the elaborate process of honey collection, whereby men use the *mavila* creeper as a ladder to ascend and descend from high rocks, smoke out the bees or wasps from the hive, and cut through the hive with their *golden sword* a hyperbole as it refers to a sword-like knife. Also, by calling this sharp object a sword, the act of honey-gathering is elevated to heroic status. However, when these females' husbands return empty-handed, they become the subject of mockery, particularly in comparison to other men who succeed in bringing honey to their wives. Because of their inability to bring home honey, the listeners are told that the *Morane* women, singing the song, are left hungry.

From a critical lens, this song operates on multiple levels. At a superficial level, it employs a playful and lighthearted mocking tone; however, beneath the humor and sarcasm lies a more

serious reflection on their way of life, one that is dependent on fortune, nature’s bounty, and the ability to provide. By being the primary providers, it appears that the males of this community are burdened, and failure to sustain their families could lead to ridicule and, perhaps, feelings of frustration or even emasculation. Therefore, the superficial understanding of the song has the potential to evoke laughter, but at a deeper level, it depicts the pathos of being dependent on an unpredictable nature for sustenance.

Another example of humor in the Vedda songs can be found in a short verse, which evokes laughter by depicting an overweight man suddenly falling with a loud thud and struggling to get up while groaning in pain. Here, too, a male Vedda is ridiculed, although not maliciously. Both these songs highlight the use of comedy in the oral song tradition under study. Given that the Veddas do not appear to have a systematic means of entertainment, such as a formal dance or theatre tradition, except in the form of Shanthikarma (curative rituals) and other ceremonial performances, such humorous verses appear to serve as a means of instigating laughter and light-heartedness amidst their daily hardships. The short length of these songs further indicates that entertainment is not a primary focus of their cultural practices, reinforcing the notion that their lives prioritize survival and simplicity over creative indulgence.

3.2. Lullabies

In the Veddas traditional song collection, a notable number of lullabies exist. There is a refreshing departure in terms of the themes from the cradle songs that are sung by the main stream society as the “Sinhala cradle songs exemplify the unrealistic expectations placed on mothers, who often struggle to cope with them, and those who endure them because their love for their child surpasses their suffering and resentment” (Embogama, 2024, p. 54).

On the contrary, the Vedda mothers, based on the content analysis of the selected lullabies, constantly reiterate their love for the child. The self-sacrificial nature of these women is reflected in a majority of the lullabies as the mothers communicate directly with their children, whereby their selection of words and melodious tone overflow with maternal affection.

Rō-rō-rō
Ammi mōkatada añḍannē
Ammi gösiga tēlūtai
Ekat nindama dipawu denna
Ammi mokaṭada añḍannē
Ammi gonala bokkaṭayi añḍannē

Ekat nindama dewu denna
 Ammi mōkatada aṇḍannē
 Ammi waṇḍurage ihaṭayi
 Ekat nindama dewu denna
 Ammi mōkatada aṇḍannē
 Ammi rosage ihaṭayi
 Ekat nindama dewu dennā
 Rō-rō-rō
 Ammi kalawalta patuni
 Nindōṭayi aṇḍannē
 Nidigannā paṭūni
 Nindōṭayi aṇḍanne
 Rō-rō-rō
 Amma ro-ro-rō
 Ammā mōkaṭa aṇḍanne
 Ammā dīsi nāṇḍayi aṇḍannē
 Ammi mōkctayi aṇḍanne
 Ammi nidi nidundayi
 Ro-ro-ro ammā. (Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911, p. 367)

(English Translation: Ro Ro Ro, my darling child, why are you crying? Do you want the oil of the land monitor? Give all that to the child. My child, why are you crying? Do you want *gonala* (a wild yam)? Give all that to the child. My child, why are you crying? Do you want the head of a monkey? Give all that to the child. My child, why are you crying? Do you want the head of the Toque Macaque? Give the whole thing to the child. Ro ro ro ro...)

This lullaby vividly captures the deep sense of love and affection a Vedda mother feels for her infant. The lines reflect an overwhelming willingness to provide for the child, offering anything s/he desires to soothe the crying. What should be further noted is that, unlike modern cradle songs, which often make references to material comforts, this lullaby revolves around the limited yet essential food sources within the Vedda community, such as jungle yams and meat from animals such as monkeys and the Toque Macaque, both considered delicacies. One striking observation is the absence of references to lactation or mother's milk, which is a common element in Sinhala lullabies. This omission invites exploration into the nutritional practices of the Vedda community. References to organic wild food and jungle meat suggest that small children had mainly been nourished with wild yams and other organic food found in the jungle rather than prolonged breastfeeding.

Beyond sustenance, this song also depicts the sacrificial nature of motherhood in Vedda society. The primary caregiver, who is the mother, is willing to part with valuable food sources, even at the expense of her own well-being, to soothe her child. Therefore, it can be said that based

on the corpus, Vedda lullabies depict strong familial bonds existing within the community. Moreover, there is the dichotomy between the mothers' and fathers' roles, reflecting a social system such as this, where the men are the breadwinners as hunters and gatherers, while the women are relegated to the domestic sphere for housework, child-bearing and child rearing. Given that male Veddas are mostly away hunting, fishing, or collecting honey, women engage in child-rearing, household tasks, and plant-based food gathering.

Yet another lullaby follows the same structure, with the mother attempting to pacify her crying infant by offering various types of wild edibles, such as *katuwalaala* and *ouila ala* (wild yams). This further underscores the Veddas' deep connection to their natural environment and their dependence on the availability of forest resources. The types of yams mentioned in the songs vary depending on the region in which a particular group resides, reflecting the minor differences within the Vedda community's foraging practices.

While not classified as a cradle song by the Vedda people, there is a popular song that reflects the deep affection and protective instinct of a mother as she tries to comfort her children during a thunderstorm.

Below is the English translation of the song:

My children, my children, the wind traverses across the seven seas. Look at the rain that is falling heavily; both of you should watch out. Thundering is not good; my body feels limp. Let's all go to the Rajawale stone cave. No, no, we won't be able to make it. Let's wait here. My precious princes, in the jungle, there are both demons and deities. Are we going to spend the night here? The sky is turning darker by the minute, all around us. Enagale (a rock) and Maagale (a rock), haven't the kon fruits (Ceylon oak) fallen there? Let's all go to the Rajawale stone cave.

This song movingly captures the effort made by a helpless mother to protect her children from harm during a thunderstorm. It highlights the vulnerability of the Vedda against nature's forces. Living in the wilderness, despite its immense benefits to sustain them, also exposes them to extreme weather conditions such as thunderstorms and floods. Lacking permanent, secure shelters, the mother's words express the need to find shelter in a cave. Her helplessness, exacerbated by her husband's absence, implies the harshness of their lives as the males are mostly away from home to hunt or gather food. Moreover, the mother's decision to find shelter in a stone cave rather than their usual mud-and-thatch homes highlights the temporary and

fragile nature of their dwellings. In times of crisis, the Veddas instinctively turn to natural shelters, reinforcing their intimate relationship with the land.

Getting the children to think about the falling Ceylon oak fruits in a different part of the forest suggests the mother's capability of employing a strategy to distract her children, who must be trembling with fear during this unprecedented incident. This song demonstrates the intellectual capacity of the Vedda adults' sophisticated understanding of child psychology. Rather than focusing on the impending danger, the female singer redirects her children's attention to a familiar, comforting element of their environment. This reflects an ingrained survival instinct and the presence of emotional intelligence that challenges the stereotypical representation of the Veddas as an "unintelligent" and "primitive" group of people.

Overall, critically evaluating the archived lullabies, we realize that they are not merely depictions of an overpowering sense of love given to the Vedda children but also serve as a window into the Vedda people's way of life, their survival strategies, and the deep connections they form within their community. These lullabies also exemplify this community's reliance on nature and foraged foods for sustenance, their simplistic way of life sans modern amenities, and their well-established moral codes. Through their lullabies, it is possible to gain valuable insights into the cultural identity of the Veddas, whereby the act of nurturing permeates from the immediate family to the community, emphasizing cooperation, resilience, and an unbreakable connection to their environment.

3.3. Veddas' lifestyle and hardships

Often, the Vedda oral tradition, as noted previously, highlights their simple and unsophisticated lifestyles. Their needs are not based on material indulgences but on necessities that can be procured from their natural surroundings. The following translated lyrics of a Vedda song exemplify this premise:

My fair cousin, I am running out of betel leaves and areca nuts
My fair cousin, give me some gifts,
Then I will leave you alone.
My fair cousin, the fair sister in Morane, is feeling hungry,
So give me gifts so that I can leave here.

Here, in this song, the singer, possibly a male, is requesting nothing more than betel leaves and areca nuts, both of which are commonly consumed within the Vedda community. According to our conversations with the Veddas, even today, as was observed during our field visits to

Dambana and Henanigala, this practice of eating betel leaves with areca nuts is prevalent. It is an innocent indulgence since the older Vedda generation did not drink alcohol or smoke narcotics.

The reference to “fair sister” is a common term to refer to the wife, whom he affectionately calls *sudu nani* (fair) as a term of endearment. His urgency to return to her proposes his responsibility to provide her with food, underpinning the Veddas' social structure, where men are the primary providers while women take on caregiving roles. Although the song has a lighthearted overtone, the constant theme of the volatile aspect of procuring food to sustain the family implies the precarious position of the indigenous Veddas in their reliance on natural sources of food gathered from the jungles, such as honey, edible plants or yams, and bushmeat.

The following translated song reflects the harshness of life and the high vulnerability of the Veddas, who remain closely connected to nature, both as a source of sustenance and as the force they constantly navigate:

My god, my husband.

The dove of the Kakuru Mountain is singing kudurun, kudurun. There was rain at Kokkägāla. There was rain at Mādēgāla. There was rain at Mādēgāla. There was rain on the highland. There is muddy water bringing down logs. (There has been) a yaka ceremony below the rock. Cannot go on the ground as there is dew. Let us ride on the back of the buffalo. Anē! our husbands having climbed up the *kobba* creeper, due to it breaking, having fallen; having climbed the *kalina* creeper, due to it breaking, too, having fallen; bending the bow (made) of *wal-kobbe* creeper, putting the canes at the back of the head, taking the betel bag at the waist, taking the axe at the waist, putting the dirty monitor lizard on the shoulder, sending in front the dog Kadiyā, (You are) to come, they say (or he says or we say) Potubanda Nayide, (you are) to come, they say (or he says, or we say) Potubanda Nayide.

(Seligmann and Seligmann, 1911, p. 373)

The above song is said to have several versions, but the same main theme. Two main themes emerge: the Veddas' struggles in a harsh environment and their resilience against life's travails. The unpredictable weather conditions result in rain that leads to flooding (muddy water and the floating of logs). The terrain is so uneven that the Veddas use buffalo to travel from one place to another. There is a constant risk of physical harm, as the repeated mention of falling off a broken creeper indicates the constant life-threatening situations faced by these people as they struggle for survival. Nonetheless, their resilience and skills are also illustrated throughout the song as we realize that they are equipped with tools such as axes, canes, and bows, demonstrating their preparedness at all times. Their hunting skills and expertise are further

indicated, as there is a reference to a hunting dog that is moving ahead of the people. This is a strategic hunting technique used by so-called sophisticated hunters as well.

Apart from their impressive knowledge of survival skills, we can also note how they maintain their cultural identity as the lyrics refer to the spiritual ceremony conducted before embarking on this journey through a rocky landscape. The fact that they seek spiritual intervention underscores the vulnerability and unpredictability of their existence. When referring to songs that mention hardships during their struggle to survive, we can observe that beyond lullabies and entertainment-themed songs, the Vedda's oral traditions include a notable number of mantras and yaadini, chanted by them at various instances of their existence.

When considering the mantras, they are mostly chanted when encountering wild animals commonly found in Sri Lankan jungles, such as elephants, bears, venomous reptiles, and leopards, during their hunting expeditions. The Veddas are known to hunt as a small group and not as individuals. This communal hunting practice demonstrates the close-knit nature of this community. Moreover, it serves the pragmatic purpose of successfully hunting animals such as deer, wild boar, monkeys, monitor lizards, and small games through the technique of track and ambush. In the old days, Vedda males mainly used bows and arrows, and spears for hunting. As they enter the jungle cover, their sense of vulnerability is obvious, as there is always the chance of being attacked by a ferocious animal. In such circumstances, the fact that they have to depend on apotropaic mantras that are chanted to deter wild animals from approaching them or attacking them indicates the highly volatile nature of the Veddas' way of life. There is a constant refrain of the word "hitu!" which means "stay!" or "pala!" meaning "go away!" is uttered in such a strong and loud manner that there is potential for the animal to refrain from attacking and back off. Practically, this act of shouting these mantras may serve as both a psychological means and a means of startling the animals into retreat. The following is such a mantra used to chase away wild animals that the Veddas encounter in the jungle:

Ichchta vallai
Pachchata vallai
Daela de-vallai
Hari-maeri vallai
Paehedam botackada numi bota kadinami
Kaelae pojja pata aeraegena
Hani hanikata mangacjanava tuh
(Thala Warige Abaya, Age 57, Dambana on 09.12.2023)

These mantras provide insight into the ancient Veddas' primary livelihood, i.e., hunting. The possibility of such life-threatening encounters does not discourage the men from going on these hunting expeditions, reflecting their strong commitment to their families and survival. Significantly, as stated by Seligmann and Seligmann (1911), the Veddas refrain from attacking animals unless necessary. This can be seen as a tactical decision to avoid provoking them, reflecting a deep understanding of wildlife behavior; also, it could reflect the fact that they hunt not for pleasure but sustenance. Ultimately, these mantras, which have been passed down through generations, encapsulate survival strategies in a song format while also depicting the extreme dangers that Vedda men face in their pursuit of food. Interestingly, the structure of these mantras often begins by honoring the animal with respectful adjectives such as “wana raja” and “gaja veriya”, subtly elevating its status. This reflects the Veddas' recognition of the delicate balance within the ecosystem. Unlike indiscriminate hunters, they kill only for food and have a profound respect for their environment and its wildlife.

Beyond hunting, even when gathering honey from wasps or beehives, Veddas recite protective chants. Through these chants, we can identify how they seek the guidance of deities to lead them to honeycombs and also to safeguard them from harm. The following translated lines of a yaadini illustrate this practice:

Honorable deity, please show me a beehive today.
I will break it and hide it.

Later, in the same song, the mention of hiding the hive suggests a practical measure to protect it from bears attracted to its scent. This once again demonstrates the high level of pragmatic intelligence of this community, as they seem to harmoniously co-exist with the natural habitat.

Similarly, just before leaving their homes as well as during the task of gathering wild yams or hunting, the Veddas call upon spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, to support them in procuring food and shielding them from danger. These yaadini chants often include pleas for benevolence and protection, revealing a deep spiritual connection with unseen forces. Often, they are sung to appease their dead ancestors, who are assumed to be assisting them in their day-to-day living. There are ceremonies held to appease such spiritual forces in the form of Shanthikarma, whereby offerings (*dola pideni*) are made to demons or deceased relatives (*Na yakun*). It is a belief among Veddas that such spirits can influence their fortune or misfortune brought about by supernatural forces. Sometimes, rituals are conducted to appease the dead

spirits that cause them affliction. These acts, in a way, provide them with the psychological strength needed to face hardships. Moreover, the unpredictable nature of their existence, which is heavily dependent on good or bad fortune, is accounted for in the rationalization of the existence of benevolent and malevolent entities.

Interestingly, the reliance on deities and spirits instead of fellow human beings for assistance suggests a profound sense of isolation experienced by the Vedda community. This detachment from both external communities and, to some extent, their own people indicates a survival-driven social structure. Given the scarcity of resources like meat and honey, competition among Veddas is likely. The challenges of acquiring food and having to share their limited resources could, at times, threaten individual sustenance. Moreover, dependence on spiritual assistance invariably represents their alienation from mainstream communities that hardly acknowledge their existence.

3.4. Social and familial practices

Historically, Vedda communities were structured around a caste-like system (Morana, Unapana, and Uuru); however, these classifications have gradually disappeared. Marriages, once largely based on blood relations, have evolved into love marriages, with some couples opting for formal registration.

Veddas are known for their commitment to monogamy, often maintaining lifelong partnerships. Looking at their love songs, it is evident that the men treated their women with respect and adoration. Although the Vedda women appear to remain protected and domesticated as they are wary of coming out of their domestic confines when outsiders are present, during the field visits, it was observed that women withdrew from view, reinforcing their reserved and domesticated role within the community. Based on the interviews, this dichotomized system emerged from pragmatic necessity rather than for the subjugation of females, as is the case in patriarchal systems. The love-themed Vedda songs suggest that their monogamous traditions align with societies that uphold strong moral principles and values.

In contemporary contexts, the older male members noted that Vedda women are generally shy, domestic-oriented, and rarely vocal in public settings. From a feminist perspective, this could indicate the silencing of women's voices, suggesting a degree of passivity and social constraint. Nonetheless, the songs reflect strong female voices that are in control of their female subjectivities. Evidently, within the community, the females have a strong sense of autonomy,

and there is no major power imbalance between the two genders, despite their dichotomized gender roles in the public and domestic spaces.

In addition, in spite of their reserved public appearances, Vedda women appear to be well cared for by their partners. Unlike men, they are not burdened with the physically demanding tasks of hunting and gathering. Husbands express deep affection for their wives, as reflected in their songs. For example:

Waccen pinnen pana nōyeyi
Waccen pinnen paṇa nōyeyi
Kudi peta naëttan paṇa yanneyi
Kudi peta naëttan pana yanneyi.

(English translation: Even if I don't have soup or food, I will not die. From the cold or wind, I will not die. From the rain or the dew drops, I will not die. But without my wife, I will die.)

Here, the repeated utterance “I will not die” is sharply contrasted with the last line, where the singer states that he will surely die without his wife, emphasizing the significant role played by a wife in her husband's life as the male partner equates her absence to be an unbearable loss, so much so that it would result in a figurative death. The juxtaposition between his ability to cope with external hardships as opposed to being unable to live without his wife indicates both resilience and emotional dependency within Vedda male-female relationships. This song acknowledges women's crucial role in sustaining the community, elevating their status, and affirming their importance within the Vedda community.

Similarly, the following love song underscores the emotional and physical bond between a Vedda couple:

Ayyo nanage date walalu gigiri dena nada datdeyi kiri nana
Nanage baṇdata icunu gōmara petiwan gōmara icila
Nanage baṇdata icunu gōmara mayo bandet iciyo
Nanata bæṇdapu panimula ayiyo pot pani kaḍā wætenna
Nanata wiyaṇu padura ayiyo kelin raṭa watīga
Kadiraṇwallē baṇdi wiyaṇē nangiṇat wiyaṇ damanni
Etul wiyaṇ damanni bala atul wiyaṇ no danna nānā
Pitet wiyaṇ damanni ele wina panan wina ennaw nana
Cappi cili bili kiyanni yannata nidikimidiya nana
Oye kelala waccō awidin nandage paduraṭa wiruwālā.

(Seligmann and Seligmann, 1911, p.378)

Here, the man describes his wife's beauty using vivid imagery, mentioning her tinkling bangles, slender waist, and the honey overflowing in the comb, symbolizing sweetness and abundance

meant for his wife. The song also references the traditional *viyan* (cloth partitions) used to provide privacy in sleeping areas, subtly alluding to intimacy between husband and wife. Although there is no direct reference to sexual intimacy and carnal love, the subtle but obvious implications of how the act of sexual consummation is enjoyable and fulfilling are present throughout the song. The recurring mention of “nana” (wife) and descriptions of her attractiveness suggest a deep romantic connection as well as sexual attraction towards her. The final lines depict a serene morning scene, where birds begin to chirp, and animals awaken, signifying the end of the night of fulfillment together. This implicit imagery conveys love, companionship, and the natural cycle of life within the Vedda community. Moreover, the fact that there is a partition to separate the couple suggests how the Veddas perceive sexual intimacy as a private act. This once again challenges the misconception of the Vedda as uncouth and savage-like.

Based on the above discussion, as per the critical content analysis of the lyrics of the Veddas' love songs, it is evident that they express not only love and devotion for their partner but also the strength of familial bonds, reinforcing the idea that women, despite their reserved roles, hold a vital place in the survival and harmony of their society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the study findings, the original Vedda community, through their chants and songs, expresses not only their hardships and volatile existence but also their resilience, spiritual beliefs, familial and communal bonds, and complex relationship with nature. Although Vedda songs are available as a limited corpus, mostly recorded in the early 20th century, it is evident from interviews with the present-day Veddas that only a few of these songs have actually survived. As concerning as this may be, it reflects the reality of the influence of mainstream communities on this minority group. The Vedda youth are hardly capable of singing songs sung previously by their ancestors, as they are increasingly drawn toward modern living. The younger generation of Veddas has not only strived to assimilate into mainstream society in Sri Lanka but also acculturated their languages and song traditions. Consequently, the once-vibrant tradition of these songs is gradually fading from existence.

This study is significant in that it underscores how the Vedda communities lived before the overwhelming influence of external factors, which have compelled them to transition from their traditional, jungle-based lifestyle to one that closely mirrors mainstream society.

Intermarriage and the introduction of formal education have gradually impacted both the Vedda language and its cultural practices, including song traditions. Their once unpretentious lifestyle, despite its myriad challenges, appears less stressful and more unburdened when compared to the complex needs and demands of the larger society into which they have begun integrating.

Undoubtedly, there is more scope for studies on the Vedda community, especially for preserving and archiving their dying language, cultural practices, and performing arts traditions. Researchers should engage in longitudinal as well as comparative studies of the indigenous Veddas and their current generation. If in-depth studies are not conducted regarding this unique minority community in Sri Lanka, in a few decades, it will probably be too late to do so. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that state and non-state entities encourage and fund such initiatives to preserve the Vedda community and their identity, as well as educate the Vedda youth regarding the importance of retaining their ethnic identity as Veddas.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the cultural officers and Dambana and Henanigala for facilitating field visits. Moreover, much appreciation is extended to the elderly Veddas in these villages for willingly sharing their knowledge of the community.

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