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SOME ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES OF THE VEDDAS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Veddas are considered to be the indigenous people of Sri Lanka. A century ago, the Veddas were scattered across the Eastern Province, and some parts of the North-Central and Uva Provinces, although at present they are confined to Bintanne that stretches to some parts of the Uva and Eastern provinces. This paper explores the subsistence pattern of the Veddas in Sri Lanka in relation to their old equipment and practices. It builds on ethno-archaeological interpretations drawing from archaeological evidence from Prehistoric to Historical periods. Evidence of interaction of humans, technology, faunal and floral resources found from archaeological sites in relation to subsistence was interpreted through the method of ethnographic analogy. Evidence suggests that during the historical period, the Veddas lived in various parts of Sri Lanka including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Ratnapura, Buttala, Tambalagam pattu, Kattakulam pattu, Bintannae, Nilgala and Batticaloa. They bartered deer hide, dried flesh, cotton and honey for rice, Kurrakkan (*Elusine coracana*) , tobacco, salt, clothes and iron arrow heads a century ago. The existence of charred bones and arrow head type of bone tools shows the practice of hunting during the protohistoric and early historic periods. The Veddas did not adopt Sinhalese mode of life up till the 19th century. However, acculturation is gradually taking place at least in the lifestyle of Veddas in Dambana at present. Especially the Anuradhapura Veddas who lived outside the Bintanne area do not seem to possess traditional Vedda livelihoods, and maintain a lifestyle comparable with the Sinhalese Buddhist culture. Based on the above evidence, the paper concludes that the subsistence patterns of Veddas prior to the last century are quite comparable with similar evidence found from the Mesolithic, Proto and the Early Historic periods in Sri Lanka, though a certain decline in the distinction between Vedda culture and the dominant culture may at present be observed.

Keywords: The Veddas, Subsistence Strategies, Ethnographic Analogy, Middle Range Theory, Ethno-Archaeological Interpretation

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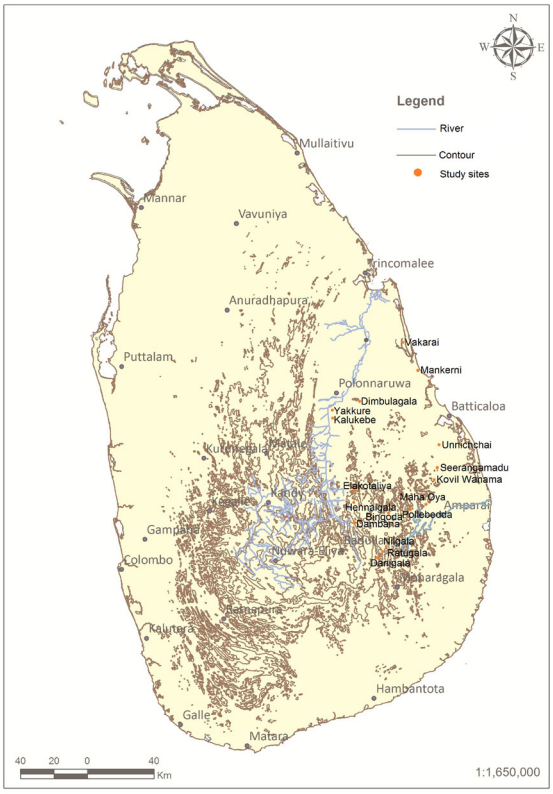
INTRODUCTION

A century ago, the Veddas were scattered across the Eastern Province, and some parts of the North-Central and Uva Provinces, although at present their Settlements are confined to Bintanne that stretches to some parts of the Uva and Eastern provinces (Map

Map 1: The Settlements of the Veddas in Sri Lanka



1). It is noted that the jungle in the area comprised great trees as canopy, (Photo 1) and the many patches of open space were covered with coarse grass and also consisted of small streams (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969). Similar conditions prevail in Dambana, where present day Veddas may be found, at present (Photo 2) (Chandraratne 2010). Other Vedda habitats have similar features: A scrubby jungle covers the northern part of Tamankaduwa in the North Central Province, while the Nilgala hills located between the Uva and Eastern Provinces include moderately dense forests (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969). The Nuwaragala hills consist of a densely forested area with a canopy. In northern Batticaloa, where the Veddas are known as coastal Veddas who have intermingled with the culture of local people for many centuries, features defining the habitat include numerous lagoons and creeks comprising fringes of mangrove with coastal vegetation.

The *Mahavamsa*, the chief chronicle of the majority Sinhalese ethnicity in Sri Lanka, observes that the origin of the Veddas was linked with the *Vijaya* legend. Prince *Vijaya* who is popularly believed to be from Bengal in India, was exiled from his kingdom by his father, and arrived at the shores of Sri Lanka. There he meets *Kuveni*, a *yakkani* (an indigenous woman with supernatural power), whom he marries and has two children with. Their son was called *Jivahattha* and their daughter, *Disala*. *Vijaya*, who wanted to marry a queen from a Kshatriya (royal) clan in India, left Kuveni and two children. Later, she departed with her children to the *malaya desa* (hill country) in the island. The descendants of Kuveni's children were known as *Pulinda.* Wilhelm Geiger has described *Pulinda* as a 'barbarous tribe' and noted this is a name that refers to the present day Veddas. However, apparently, the Veddas' folk stories do not carry any memory of the *Vijaya-Kuveni* legendary (Dharmadasa 1990).

The Physical Anthropological research that has been carried out on the human remains from the Mesolithic cave sites like *Batadombalena* and *Belilena* clearly revealed that the Mesolithic people of the island more or less resemble the Veddas' anatomical features (Kennedy et al 1986). On the other hand, a genetic analysis conducted on the Veddas revealed that they are more comparable with the Malayan tribes than the modern Sinhalese (Ellepola 1990). It is generally believed that the Veddas are the descendants of the indigenous people belonging to the Mesolithic period.

This paper explores the subsistence patterns of the Veddas in Sri Lanka in relation to their equipment and practices. Towards this end, it will build on ethno-archaeological interpretations drawing from archaeological evidence from Prehistoric to Historical periods. The paper will explain practices of hunting in the Vedda community during the protohistoric and early historic periods, explore the selection of animals for subsistence activities, elaborate on the methods of hunting and consumption of meat (with special reference to preservation methods), analyse means of food gathering used in the Vedda community, and conclude with some observations and remarks.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses the following methods for archaeological interpretation:

It was very important to consider published data that dated back a century or so because modernization or acculturation of Vedda tribes has caused in the vanishing of certain old practices and alteration of yet others. The new literature reflects these trends and therefore, in order to acquire a sense of the olden condition, it was necessary to refer to very old data. A desk review was used for this purpose.

Ethno-archaeology is the discipline of reconstructing past cultures with the help of primitive cultures. The aims and methods of ethno-archaeology are discussed for interpretations and explanations in many other methods including ethnographic analogy. Ethno-archaeological research is one of the most powerful tools used to recognize the relationship between human behaviour and material culture (London 2000). Ethno-archaeological studies as a non-digging approach are significant to interpret archaeological records through existing traditional societies and practices (Allchin 1998). The gap between ethnographic data and archaeological data can be filled by the ethno-archaeology through ethnographic analogy. According to Bridget Allchin (1998), this is similar to putting flesh on the dry bones of archaeological investigations.

Ethnographic analogy is applied by archaeologists to reconstruct past cultures through observation of present practitioners of those cultures. In particular, their behaviour, material culture, environmental and cultural situations are paid attention to (Renfrew and Paul 2005). ethnographic analogy involves generalization of hypotheses on models, and the testing of such models (Stiles 1977).

Middle range theory is another method for archaeological interpretation which is about knowing the past and relating this knowledge to modern issues like cultural evolution, cultural systems, cultural viability and problem orientation (Renfrew and Paul 2005).

The author intends to apply the above mentioned methods for ethno-archaeological interpretations in relation to the subsistence strategies of the Veddas. This discussion will be based on recently unearthed evidence from prehistoric, protohistoric and early historic cultures in Sri Lanka.

PRACTICES OF HUNTING IN THE EARLY INHABITATION SITES DURING THE PROTOHISTORIC AND EARLY HISTORIC PERIODS

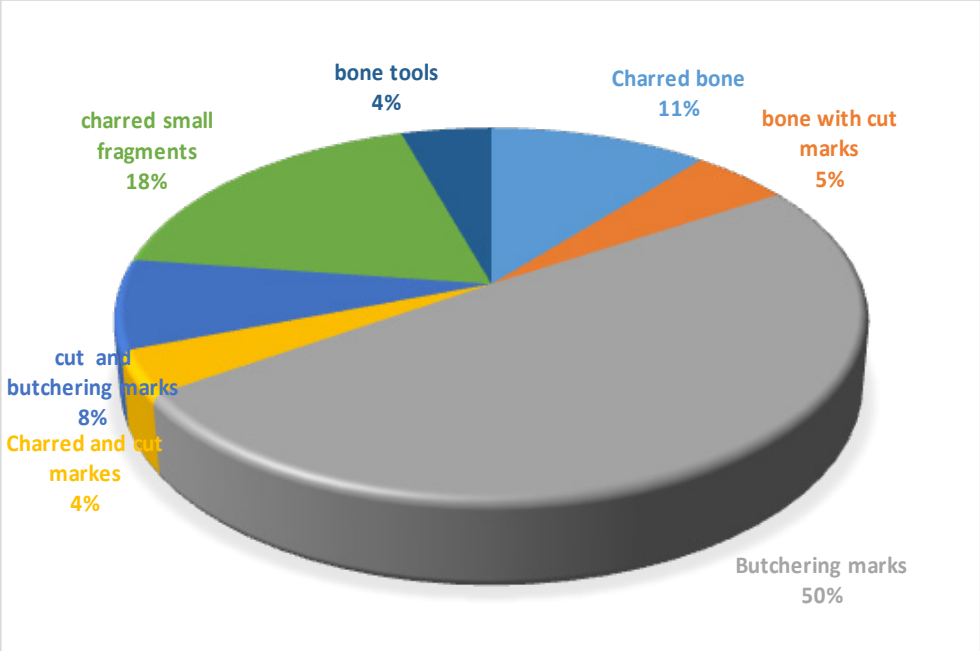
The Protohistoric period (1000- 400 BC falls between the Mesolithic period (37,000 BP- 3800 BP) and the Early historical period (400 BC-300 AD) in Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala 1992). Faunal remains that were subjected to thorough study are available in the Citadel of Anuradhapura, and have been categorized as belonging to the Protohistoric and Early historical periods (Chandraratne 1998).

It appears inhabitants who lived near the jungle naturally practiced hunting as a subsistence activity during these periods. The *Mahavamsa* records that king Pandukabhaya built a line of huts for huntsmen (*vyada*) between the *Nicasusna* (lower cemetery) and Pasana mountain (Mahavamsa 10:95). *Vyadha* means a hunter or an archer (*Dampiya-atuwa-getapadaya 1974*). The huntsmen had a deity called *vyada-deva* (God of huntsmen) who is comparable to the hill god of South Indian aborigines (Parker 1981). The huntsmen of Anuradhapura had provided the necessary meat to the city and had been honoured by King Pandukabhaya by devoting a palmyrah tree the near the western gate of the capital to this deity (Mahavamsa 10: 89). There is reason to believe that these huntsmen were Veddas because literature on this period of history reports several incidents about the Veddas who generally furnished honey and animal products to the Royal Palace (Dharmadasa 1990).

Concerning the subsistence strategies of the Veddas in terms of hunting, they were endowed with separate land for hunting by virtue of being skilled archers, and so they demarcated their boundaries for hunting activities (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969). In this exercise, certain primitive methods were used by the Veddas that were mainly in the areas of chasing, overpowering, hunting and game hunting. Some primitive forms of the traps they used are known as habake and false pits. In addition, as is commonly known, the Veddas used bow and arrow to hunt. Occasionally they used other methods like throwing sticks and stone slings (Wijesekera 1965). During the prehistoric period, stone tools constituted the main artefacts of the Veddas. They also used a tool called *gal rakki* which referred to axes. *Gal* means stones in Veddas' language as well as in Sinhalese. It could be considered as a continuation of a Stone Age name at present too.

Elephants (*Elephas maximus maximus)* were generally not hunted for food although a few bone fragments belonging to the Mesolithic period have been unearthed

Chart 1: The distributional patterns of charred bones, cut and butchering marks on animal bones



Source: Chandraratne 1998

(Deraniyagala 1992). With regard to the other periods, it appears that tusks were used for making various artefacts. The Citadel of Anuradhapura has yielded the earliest evidence of the use of ivory artefacts (Chandraratne 1998). Traces of this practice were found in explorations done in Vedda's areas.

It appears that charred meat was consumed by the early inhabitants during the early historic period, including and especially the Vedda community. It is interesting to note that excavations in the Citadel of Anuradhapura consisted of 33% of charred bones. The chart 01 shows the distributional patterns of charred bones, cut and butchering mark on animal bone totaling 2148 bone fragment (Chandraratne 1998). Some Pail literary sources also cite a few incidences relating to consumption of charred meat (*Angara mamsa*) during the early historic period (Rahula 1966).

SELECTION OF ANIMALS FOR SUBSISTENCE ACTIVITIES

During the Mesolithic, Proto and Early Historic periods in Sri Lanka, the modern human being (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) widely exploited flora and fauna (for food and other purposes), as evidenced by the material remains of the period (Tables 1 and 2). The Faunal remains of the Mesolithic sites in Sri Lanka display occurrence with large mammals, small mammals, reptiles, birds and fish species (Table 1).

With reference to the Veddas, they kept domestic animals such as dogs (*Canis familiaris*), fowls (*Gallus sp.*) and pigs (*Sus sp.*). Most of the Veddas in Anuradhapura kept cattle (*Bos indicus*) as a family property, though beef was never consumed (Brow 2011). Besides that, they also kept tamed animals like buffalos (*Bubalis bubalus*), spotted deer (*Axis axis ceylonensis*), and jungle fowls (*Gallus lafayetii*). Dogs as well as buffaloes were trained for hunting. They usually consumed buffalo milk (Parker 1981). However, there is a contending narrative that says that Veddas did not keep domestic animals except dogs (Le Mesuriee 1886).

The most frequently hunted animals have been identified as langur (*Prespytis entellus*), torque monkey (*Macaca sinica*), sambar (*Cervus unicolor*), spotted deer (*Axis axis ceylonensis*), and jackal (*Canis aureus lank*). Small mammals such as mouse deer (*Tragulus meeminna*), wild hare (*Lepus nigricollis singhala*), Pangolin (*Manis crassicodata*), porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), giant squirrel (*Ratufa macrora*) were also easy for hunting, and therefore widely targeted (Table 1). The usual method was to smoke pangolins to lure them out of their holes, but this method was not applied for the monitor lizard. In Divulana, tortoises and pangolin were used as food resources, although the community hated to eat porcupine meat due to the belief that the porcupine was a filthy animal. However, Sinhalese eat the abhorred animal (Spittel 2003).

Selected reptile species were used for their substance, for example, soft shelled terrapins (*Lessemys punctata ceylonensis*) and hard soft shelled terrapins (*Melenochlys trujuga*), monitor lizard (*Varanus bengalensis*) and crocodile (*Crocudylus palustris* or *Crocodylus porosus*) (Table 1). A large number of tortoise carapaces were found from archaeological sites bearing cut marks, indicating that those animals were killed for food (Chandraratne 1997; Deraniyagala 1992). Evidently, the tortoise shell was used as a dish (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969). Similarly, some tribes in Africa utilized this type of shells to have food in. The subsistence pattern of the Veddas was also connected with birds like jungle fowls (*Gallus lafayetii*), and pea fowl (*Pavo cristatus*), whose remains were found in archaeological sites (Table 1).

Bones of Monkeys were predominately

Table 1: Animals species associated with the Veddas

Animal species	Scientific names	Mesolithic Period	Proto- Historic Period	Early Historic Period
Domestic animals				
Cattle	*Bos indicus*	+	+	+
Dog (*balakukka adura*)	*Canis familairis*	?	+	+
Wild animals				
Indian bision (extinct)	*Bos gaurus*	+	+	+
Buffalo (*madaya,am berawasa*)	*Bubalus bubalis*	+	+	+
Langur (*gasgona , botakuna*)	*Presbytis entellus*			
Torque Monkey (*Kadan paninna basaloka, botakuna*) Torque monkey	*Macaca sinica sinica*	+	+	+
Elephant (*botakanda*)	*Elephas maximus maximus*	+	+	+
Jackal (*walkukka, kunubala*)	*Canis aureus lanka*	+	+	+
Pig (*hocedike, hosadika*)	*Sus scrofa cristatus*	+	+	+
Leopard (*kerikotiya, bedimutta*)	*Panthers pardus fuscus*	+	?	+
Bear (*kaluwa*)	*Ursus labiatus*	+	+	+
Spotted deer (*ambera*)	*Axis axis ceylonensis*	+	+	+
Sambar (*gavara, kankuna*)	*Cervus unicolor (sambar, kara-kolaya,*	+	+	+
Meminna (*mouse deer, kekka*)	*Tragulus meninna*	+	+	+
Pangolin (*bagusa, potta*)	*Manis crassicodata*	+	+	+
Porcupine (*katukeca, katuboika*)	*Hystrix indica*	+	+	+
Giant squirrel (*panina*)	*Ratufa macrora*	+	+	+
Mouse (*miya*)	*Rattus sp*	+	+	+
Wild hares	*Lepus nigricollis singhala*	+	+	+
Reptiles				
Monitor lizard (*bimbadu, kerela*)	*Varanus bengalensis*	+	+	+
tortoise (*Kabala pite huda, Kiri ibba*)	*Lissemys punctata ceylonensis*	+	+	+
tortoise (*Kabala pite huda, gala ibba*)	*Mellanocheleys trijuga*	+	+	+
Crocodile (*Mahabada, pitagasa*)	*Crocudylus sp*	+	+	+

Animal species	Scientific names	Mesolithic Period	Proto- Historic Period	Early Historic Period
Birds				
Jungle fowl	*Gallus lafayetii*	+	+	+
Pea fowl	*Pavo cristatus*	+	+	+
Land snails	*Cyclophorus involvulus*	+	+	+
Fish (*diamace*)		+	+	+

Sources: Chandraratne 1998; Deraniyagala 1992; Parker 1981; Spittel 2003; Seligmann, C.G. and B.Z. Seligmann 1969.

found in the Mesolithic sites of Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala 1992), whereas deer and wild pig remains were found in Proto and Early Historic sites (Chandraratne 1998). With regards to the Veddas, it appears that venison and fork were traditional food items among the community. The Veddas loved pork because it clears blood. However, they believed venison is not so suitable due to the fact that it causes itching (Spittel 2003).

HUNTING AND CONSUMPTION OF MEAT

Spittle has recorded his personal experiences with the Vedda community in the early 20th century. For example: “The whole carcase of monkey was placed on a slow fire. When it was half roasted, the animal was cut into pieces with the help of the blade of an arrow. Finally, those pieces were fully roasted and served on Kenda (*Macaranga peltata*) leaves” (Sittel 2003).

FOOD GATHERING

A very few botanical samples are found in archaeological sites in Sri Lanka, owing to elements in the ecological condition conducive for preservation. It is essential to refer to ethno-botanical samples for archaeological reconstructions, since they provide insights into the dietary patterns of the community in question.

A large number of wild fruits grow in the dry zones of Sri Lanka where the Veddas widely harvest those fruits as their supplementary diet (Table 2). For collecting honey, the Veddas had some special locations in the Bintanne and Nilgala area comprising a considerable part of the hills and the rock massif where bee colonies were largely concentrated (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969). Further, hide of deer utensils as well as whole gourd were used for collecting honey (Parker 1981).

In addition to fruits, they selected strong material to make bows and arrows, generally using the wood of plants such as Dunumandala (*Stereospermum chelenoides*), Kaekala (*Adina cordifolia*), Kolon (*Adina cordifolia*) and Kobbe, (*Allophylus cobbe*). Bowstrings made of aralu (*Termanelia chebula*) were coated with Resins of Timbiri (*Diospyros embropteries*) (Parker 1981; Seligmann and Seligmann 1969).

Although their main weapons were bow and arrow, they also used nets for catching birds such as jungle fowls (*Gallus lafayet*ii),

Table 2: Ethnobotany of the Veddas

Name of the plant	Scientific names
Material for making bow and arrow	
Aralu	*Termanelia chebula*
Dunumandala	*Stereospermum chelenoides*
Kekala	*Cyathocalyx zelanica*
Kolon	*Adina cordifolia*
Kobbe, kobba	*Allophylus cobbe*
Timbiri	*Diospyros embropteris*
Velang	*Pterospermum suberifolium*
Riti	*Antiaris toxicaria*
Niyanda	*sansevieria zeylanica*
Plants used to poison fish	
Kala-vel	*Derris Scandens*
Kukuru- mahan	*Randia dumetorum*
Pus -vel	*Entada scandens*
Masticatories	
Dawata	*Carallia brachiata*
Demata	*Gamelina asiatica*
Fruits	
Etamba	*Mangifera zeylanica*
Gal siyambala	*Dailium ovoideum*
Hin-eraminiya	*Zizyphus oenoplia*
Karamba	*Carissa spinarum*
Kon	*Schleichera oleosa*
Leeniya	*Helicteres isora*
Mora	*Nephelium longana*
Nebedda	*Vitex leucoxylon*
Palu	*Manilkara hexandra*
Veera	*Drypetes sepiaria*
Ulkantha	*Salacia reticulata*
Yams	*Dioscorea*
Madu	*Cycas circinalis*

Name of the plant	Scientific names
Val-kidarang	*Arisaema leschenaultti*
Wild date palms	*Pheoenix pusilla*
Flowers/Seeds	
Manel	*Nymphea stellata*
Nelum (water lilies)	*Nelumbium speciosum*
Olu	*Nymphaea lotus*
Leaves	
Kenda	*Macaranga peltata*
Kora	*Memecylon umbellatum*
Tora	*Cassia tora*
Yams	
Gona-ala	*Dioscorea spicata*
Katu-ala	*Dioscorea pentaphylla*

Sources: Parker 1981; Spittel 2003; Seligmann and Seligmann 1969; Deraniyagala 1992

pea fowl (*Pavo cristatus*), parrot (*Loriculus beryllinus*), etc. (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969).

Two sticks of velang (*Pterospermum suberifolium*) were rubbed together for making fire (Photo 3) (Spittel 2003). Bags were made of out of the barks of riti tree (*Antiaris toxicaria*) for storing food (Ibid). The same barks were also used for making clothes (Parker 1981).

Generally, they gathered wild plant seeds like *olu* and *nelum* (Table 2). *Olu* seeds were consumed as roasted seeds and with cooked rice. They grow in clusters in the vicinity of the *Sorbora weva*. There were plenty of Kurrakkan and maize hence the community was self-sufficient in food (Spittel 2003).

There was a traditional method for fishing at a stream, a pool or small lake (*weva*), which they do not practice currently. According to this method, the Veddas added leaves of the following plants to the water for poisoning of fish: timbiri (*Diospyros embropteris*), kala-vel (*Derris scandens*), kukuru- mahan (*Randia dumetorum*) and pus-vel (*Entada scandens*). The poisoned fish were easily collected after this. Moreover, they had used the bow and arrow for fishing (Spittel 2003; Seligmann and Seligmann 1969).

Chena cultivation has prevailed in the Vedda community for over a thousand years. Generally, five-six families as a group prepare land to cultivate crops in the Chena lands. The main crops were Kurakkan (*Eleusine coracana*) and maize (Zea mays). Evidently, the Veddas did not make chena jointly with the Sinhalese (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969).

Some of Veddas' equipment exhibited in the Basel Museum in Switzerland are important for ethno archaeological interpretations. Arrows were made of ivory and wood. The ivory arrows were specially used for ceremonial activities. Other equipment like a digging stick, a drill for making fire, a tortoise shell used as a dish, a pouch made of squirrel skin, deer hide for sleeping and

an apron made of riti bark (*Antiaris toxicaria*) are present in the collection (Seligmann and Seligmann 1969). The Veddas used other equipment namely riti-malla (*durable bag*) as a pouch, and whole gourd (*labukete*) as a container (Parker 1981) (Photo 04). It should be noted that perishable material such as wood, the bark of trees and animal hide can rarely be found in archaeological sites in Sri Lanka. Such artefacts are important for ethno-archaeological reconstructions, which are based on interactions between humans, technology, faunal and floral resources, time and space that portray a comprehensive picture of a bygone era. Archaeologists assume the above mentioned primitive artefacts were probably used by ancient inhabitants (Photo 05).

The Veddas predominantly practiced hunting, whereas food gathering was a secondary practice. The practice of fishing was not widespread due to the scarcity of inland water holes or tanks suitable for fishing. However, where present, these bodies of water have proven to be better suited for primitive methods of fishing.

CONCLUSION

Building on ethno-archaeological interpretations drawing from the a rchaeological evidence of the Mesolithic period, this paper has explored the subsistence patterns of the Veddas in Sri Lanka. The author has studied the Veddas through field research, reference to previous literature as well as archaeological material that date back to over 30,000 years BP.

Evidence suggests that during the historical period, the Veddas lived in various parts of Sri Lanka including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Ratnapura, Buttala, Tambalagam pattu, Kattakulam pattu, Bintannae, Nilgala and Batticaloa. However, they are confined to the Bintanne and Nilgala areas at present.

They bartered deer hide, dried flesh, cotton and honey for rice, Kurrakkan (*Elusine coracana*), tobacco, salt, clothes and iron arrow heads a century ago. Subsequent to the arrival of Western Nations, the Veddas learnt how to use guns to drive out monkeys. A result has been that at present, the method of setting up and using a habake for catching animals, and hunting animals using bow and arrow are used only for symbolic and demonstrative purposes. As the Sarasins brothers (1907) have mentioned, the material culture of the Veddas was perhaps represented by the early inhabitants from the cave sites in Bintanne. They also stated that the primitive nature of the original Veddas was extinct prior to the early 19th century AD.

With regard to the floral evidence of the subsistence pattern of the Veddas, it is necessary to apply ethno-archaeological interpretation in order to understand the past because of the lack of archaeological plant evidence in the island. Therefore, archaeologists have to engage in further research on floral material.

The Veddas did not adopt the Sinhalese mode of life up till the 19th century. However, acculturation is gradually taking place at least in the lifestyle of Veddas in Dambana at present. Especially the Anuradhapura Veddas who lived outside the Bintanne area do not seem to possess traditional Vedda livelihoods, and maintain a lifestyle comparable with the Sinhalese Buddhist culture.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that the subsistence patterns of Veddas prior to the last century are quite comparable with similar evidence found from the Mesolithic, Proto and the Early Historic periods in Sri Lanka, though a certain decline in the distinction between Vedda culture and the dominant culture may at present be observed.

PHOTOS

Photo 1: The Veddas' community gathering area with a canopy of trees (photograph - R.M.M. Chandraratne 2008)

Photo 2: The chief of the Veddas, Vanniyala Attho (right) (photograph - R.M.M. Chandraratne 2013)

Photo 3: A Vedda youth making fire in Dambana (photograph - Sammani 2009)

Photo 4: Bottle gourd and hand made pottery (*Courtesy of the Adi Vasi Jana kala Kendra, photoraph by RMM Chandraratne*)

Photo 5: Preparation of a wooden grill to bake food in Dambana (photograph- Sammani 2009)

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