

The Present of Past Slaves: The Socio Economic Situation of Sri Lankan *Kaffir* People

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Introduction

Sri Lankan *Kaffir* is a group of people or an ethnic group living in Sri Lanka for nearly four hundred years. They were traditionally scattered in some parts of the country, mainly Negombo, Batticaloa and Trincomalee; but they are largely found today about 45 in number, in Sirambiyadiya, a small village located in Puttalam District (Hussein, 2009). The *Kaffir* community had its early origins in the slave labor brought into the country from Africa during the colonial period. Colonial powers brought them as a part of the naval force, domestic workers, soldiers, servants, sailors, merchants, mystics, mothers, musicians, linguists, dancers, divers, concubines, commanders, administrators, nurses, nannies, palace guards, and bodyguards living a range of experiences across diverse societies, cultures, conditions, and periods (Omar, 2011).

Kaffir people are referred to as *Kapiriyo* in Sinhala and as *Kapili* in Tamil without any specific meanings attached to those terms. However, the term *Kaffir* has a different meaning. It is often used in much of the Indian Ocean world (outside of East Africa) to describe any person of African descent, regardless of religion or faith (Jayasuriya, 2000; Gwyn Campbell, 2006; Omar, 2011). According to the first census of Sri Lanka there were 245 Caffres¹ (*Kaffirs*) living in Sri Lanka and only one *Kaffir* was found in Colombo town, others resident in other parts of the country (Ferguson, 1873). *Kaffirs* served as slave people in Sri

¹ The term *Caffres* was used to denote *Kaffir* people in the early census of Sri Lanka Ferguson (1873).

Lanka and their music tradition, dance, dressing patterns, their language, and religious practices are unique (Brohier, 1973).

Sri Lankan *Kaffirs* are a distinct ethnic group, but are not known to many of the other Sri Lankan groups. They are now no longer a community of slaves, but still live under relatively poor socio economic conditions and without the recognition of others that has been taken as a research problem of this study.

Objective

The main objective of this research is to find out the socio economic situation of Sri Lankan *Kaffir* people. In this regard, it is important to understand the community structure of Sri Lankan *Kaffir* people, because it is highly related with the socio economic structure of the specific *Kaffir* people. Their community structure can be thought to influence the socio economic situation, and vice versa.

Methodology

This qualitative research study used direct observation, participation observation (moderate participation or participant as observer), focus group discussion, and key informant interview for the primary data collection. In addition, video documents, photos, previous research and media sources were used for secondary data collection. The study selected the whole *Kaffir* community as the study population, which includes 45 members and 9 families. Sirambiyadiya, a small village located near Puttalam, in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka is the study area of this research. It comes under GN 615 division and in where the *Kaffir* people are living.

Results and Discussion

Even though many *Kaffir* people returned to their homelands before the independence of Sri Lanka, some of them continued to stay. It is mainly because of their socio economic situation. They thought that it would be difficult to start a new life in Africa again.

As the *Kaffir* people were brought here as slave people, they were refused educational opportunities at that time. Due to their poor educational background, they could not obtain good employment opportunities which in turn caused their low level of income. This pattern has continued. Now they are no longer slave people, but no one has passed the GCE O/L examination recently. As a result of this poor level of educational background, *Kaffir* people are in a low socio economic status. However now they are giving importance to the education of their children.

Kaffir people do not face any official discrimination right now but in many places, they are joked and teased at based on their physical appearances such as their black colour, curly hair, and big lips. It happens mainly in schools, work places, markets, and hospitals. Due to this situation, they cannot have a productive mindset to engage in a gainful occupation.



Images 1, 2. Physical Appearance of *Kaffir* people

Kaffirs generally find work as daily paid laborers, cleaners, security guards, and in doing menial jobs. It affects their social status. In the

Kaffir community, no one is engaged in self-employment they do not have an interest in developing their career. However, some families engage in small-scale poultry farming. It is not as a business but for their home needs.

After Sri Lanka gained independence, some members of the community worked in the Puttalam and Palavi salt factories, but there are no more *Kaffir* people working in the Puttalam salt factory. Another important means of making some earnings by the *Kaffir* people is their unique *Kaffirinja* dance program. In special occasions, *Kaffir* people are hired by private companies, cultural show committees, TV, radio and other media, and government authorities to perform a *Kaffirinja* dance and music program.

The dance and music performance of *Kaffir* people helps them to earn a considerable amount to solve their financial difficulties. At present *Kaffir* people demand Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000 for one full program, running from 3 to 4 hours. Shorter programs normally comprise half an hour to one hour for which they charge Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 7,000. Nevertheless, in many cases, they are cheated by the program organizers by not providing their payment.

Kaffir community maintains good gender relations. Gender equality is very high in their families. It is because women are considered as an important part of their culture and they have the big responsibility to maintain family bond in *Kaffir* community.

Kaffir people do not have much property. There are only nine *Kaffir* families living in Sirambiyadiya. Each has their own land inherited from their Elder (grandfather), and these lands were given by the colonial and Sri Lankan governments to the early *Kaffir* people.

Kaffir people have very poor or limited knowledge of present affairs including the political, social, and economic situation. It is because of their poor educational attainments, and economic status. As daily paid workers, they do not have the time to spend more on outside matters and individually do not taken an interest in world affairs.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

As a small group of people, the *Kaffirs* have to depend on other majority ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, mainly the Sinhala community to fulfill their needs and satisfy their demands. However due to the physical appearances they are facing difficulties to integrate with other communities and being isolated by others and themselves.

Kaffir people are considered as a distinct group in Sri Lanka. As an indigenous group, the “*Varda*” community gets many advantages and recognition from government and other peoples because they are considered as the Sri Lankan tribal people. From their arrival up to now, *Kaffir* people do not get much recognition and support from both government and the public. As the smallest minority group, Sri Lankan *Kaffir* people should be protected and legally recognized as an endangered group, and the government and other authorities especially media should pay considerable attention to *Kaffir* people.

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