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**Hybridization and Creolization of the Culture of Indigenous People: A Study  
of the coastal Indigenous people in Vaharei, Batticaloa**

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**Abstract**

*The Coastal Indigenous people of Sri Lanka are a distinct minority group, even though they have acculturated with Tamil people in Vaharei, Batticaloa. This is because majority communities in the world tend to assimilate minority communities. There are many research studies in the field of indigenous people of Sri Lanka and yet, there is a marked dearth of such studies on the creolization of the culture of coastal indigenous people. This knowledge lacuna forms the research problem of the current study, which uncovers the manner in which the coastal indigenous people of Sri Lanka are fast losing their identities in contemporary society due to the creolization of their culture. The present research study aims to answer the following question: what are the cultural characteristics of coastal Vaddahs (coastal creole people), and how do such characteristics manifest themselves? How is a specific culture creolized with features and components similar to or different from modern non-indigenous cultures? Qualitative research methods were used primarily for the study, and interviews and observations were utilized for data collection. Data analysis was carried through thematic analysis. The coastal Veddahshh's dress patterns, religious beliefs, cultural rituals and language are interconnected with Tamil culture. Assimilation into the dominant Tamil culture, weak traditional economic standing and loss of traditional lands has contributed towards erasing their identity. This article argues that due to the creolization of the culture of this indigenous community, their identity has suffered erosion and degenerative transformation.*

Keywords: Indigenous people, Culture, Discrimination, Cultural hybridization, Cultural creolization, Identity

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## **Introduction**

Coastal Indigenous people in Sri Lanka were colonized for several hundred years by the British. British rule in Sri Lanka had a deep and broad impact on Ceylonese society and culture, and transformed educational, economic and social policies. However even in the face of British neo-colonization, the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims have managed to preserve to a great extent, their cultural, religious and ethnic identities. However, sadly, the indigenous people of Sri Lanka have been unable to protect their identities, as did the other ethnic and religious groups living in the island. In the modernized structure of society, created by economic and social development, indigenous people become Internally Displaced Persons. In this context, there emerged a struggle for land and rights, due to the Veddahshh's loss of living areas, areas they claimed belonged to them because these regions were -where their ancestors had lived, and this minority group has not been able to claim equality and respect in the new Sri Lankan Post-Independence society. Sri Lankan indigenous people, also known as 'Veddahshs', represent a minority group of the country. Since they belong to a small proportion of the population, they are considered a minority community when compared to the dominant population. Many academics have researched on the indigenous people of Sri Lanka; however, there is a dearth of research on the creolization of the culture of coastal indigenous people. Consequently, the research problem of this study centered on the reason why coastal indigenous people of Sri Lanka lose their identities in contemporary society, and whether this is due to the creolization of their culture in contemporary society. Considering these above factors, this study was carried out and the results were based on the fieldwork carried out in the main geographical area where the coastal Vaddahs live. The present research study, then, aims to answer the following question: what are the cultural characteristics of coastal Vaddahs, and how do they manifest themselves? How is the culture of the Veddahs creolized by the specific cultural features derived from Tamil/other cultures and how are components from modern non-indigenous cultures creatively integrated into Veddah culture?

## **Materials and Methods**

This study has relied on a qualitative methodology to generate profound insights into the creolization process. Qualitative methods enable an exploration of the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Multiple meetings with the community's oldest residents were held as primary information sources during the data collection process. Because they had had real experiences and had undergone certain cultural dynamics, the data collection efforts were centered on interviewing or having discussions with the longest-serving members within the shifting social and cultural milieu. Existing literature reviews of studies where historical and contemporary information on both the social and cultural aspects of the area were conducted and secondary sources were also used. To define the culture of the community, qualitative approaches, specific methods of cultural anthropology or ethnographic methods, such as "participant observation," "semi-structured interviews," and "qualitative document analysis," were utilized. The data collected in 2019 were based on 25 interviews which were conducted within four weeks. The

respondents were coastal indigenous people in the Waharei, Batticaloa District. An in-depth interview was conducted to uncover in-depth details of an interviewee's experience and perspective on a subject (Showcat & Parveen, 2017). The Thematic Analysis method was selected for the data analysis process. Thematic Analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. By focusing on purpose across a dataset, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared experiences and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

### **The Background to a Sri Lankan Indigenous Community**

According to Rao (2012), assimilation is the pattern of intergroup relations. A minority group is either forced or encouraged to blend into the majority population and eventually disappears as a distinct group within the larger society. Rao points out that assimilation can happen culturally or racially, or both. Cultural assimilation means that a minority group gives up its distinctive cultural traits and adopts those of the dominant culture. In contrast, racial assimilation refers to the disappearance of physical differences between groups due to inbreeding. Because of cultural assimilation with the dominant Tamils, Coastal Veddahs look very much like "Tamils". "Today, most of what is remaining of this tribe of East Coast Veddahs have mixed with various 'races' living in and around the Batticaloa town, especially with the Tamils (Thamarai, 2009).

The modernization process such as the transformations in the economy, transportation, education and infrastructure have also influenced Veddahs' assimilation with the Tamil community. Consequently, the indigenous culture has almost become one with the Tamil culture. The Coastal indigenous community has suffered a diminishing identity and the members of this community express doubts as to whether they would be able to transfer their identity as Veddahs to the next generation. Irrespective of cultural assimilation, then, this indigenous community faces prejudice, discrimination and marginalization at the hands of the dominant Tamil population of the region. They are discriminated against by the Sinhalese as well. Assimilation into the dominant group, weak traditional economic standing and loss of traditional lands have contributed to the diminishing cultural identity of coastal Veddahs in Sri Lanka.

In the face of colonization and incorporation, indigenous groups worldwide share many common thoughts that Chief Seattle has once expressed very well (Benson, 2002). Faced with the challenge of integration, we now fear the loss of our own 'Fathers of the Land,' the Veddahs of Sri Lanka. The Sanskrit word 'Vyadha' is the source of the expression 'Veddah.' The meaning of which is a bow and arrow hunter. Unlike the Sinhalese, who speak an Indo-Aryan language and assert Aryan ancestry, the Veddahs are similar to the Austro-Asiatic people who live in many parts of southern Asia today (Benson, 2002).

Veddahs are also known as 'Vanniyalaththo,' which means 'tree-dwellers.' This term is often misinterpreted as the name of a single person or a tribe among the Veddahs. Still, there is good reason to believe that it was coined to describe the fact that members of Sri Lanka's indigenous community were, and still are, forest dwellers (Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka The Veddah,n.d). The Veddah way of life is inextricably linked to forest ecology. Internal

constraints imposed due to lack of resources and their nomadic lifestyle has resulted in the tribes being divided into small groups. Therefore, a nuclear family or a few extended families make up each party of Veddahs.

According to the population survey of Sri Lanka, there has been a gradual decrease in the indigenous population. According to the population survey of 1921, there were 4510 Veddahs. In 1946, that number decreased to 2361. From 1963, the indigenous people had not been counted as a separate population group (population survey of Sri Lanka 1921, 1946, 1963). However, in the study that was conducted in 1978, there were 6000 indigenous people, only in the Anuradhapura district (Brow, 1978).

These Veddah groups live within borders and territories that are clearly defined. These particular territories are in coastal areas like those in the Batticaloa and Ampara districts. This reality has unconsciously influenced the creation of a distinct yet sustainable lifestyle for these "land dwellers." Hunting, ration collection, Chena cultivation, and the size of each group affect the division of labour within each group. Throughout history, the indigenous community of Sri Lanka did not have inherited possessions, and they moved from place to place for a long period of time, over several centuries. Therefore, individual controls are uncommon among the Veddahs, and this lack of controls allows them to move about freely.

### **The history of the Indigenous people of Sri Lanka**

The indigenous community is introduced by various names in the *Namwaliya*, *Sahawaththuwa*, *Thisara Sandeshaya*, *Maura Sandeshaya*, etc. The word "Veddahs" originated from the Sanskrit word "Vyada". In line with this, the word Vyada became Viyadda, and then it was transmuted into the Sinhala word "Veddah". The meaning of the word Veddah is "hunter". The word "Sabare", was also used to describe this community. The meaning of Sabare can be deconstructed in two ways. One is a synonym for "Veddah", and another is a term that describes the place where they lived, in Sabara trees. There is a historical myth or narrative that says that Sabaragamuwa was the original dwelling place of this Veddah community (Wijesekara, 1960).

Indigenous people are a community that does not belong to any particular ethnic group. In prehistoric times, they lived in a specific geographical area. Sri Lanka's Veddahs are descendants of a direct line of Neolithic Sri Lankans. Their origins are thought to go as far back as 16,000 BC. However, current scientific evidence indicates that there have been settlements and civilizations on the island of Sri Lanka since 125,000 BC. The present Veddahs' lineage, on the other hand, can be traced back to between 18,000 and 15,000 BC (Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka The Veddah, n.d).

Anthropologists such as Seligmann claimed that there were similarities between the *Yakkas* and modern-day Veddahs as early as 1911. The term Sabaragamuwa, the province in which the Ratnapura District is located, is derived from the word describing the Veddahs' dwelling place (Sabare), according to Nandadeva Wijesekara, author of *Veddahs in Transition* (1964). 'Sabares means 'forest dwellers,' similar to the Vanniyalaththo. Many locations in the District's environs

still bear names like "Vedhi Gala," "Vedha Ala," and "Vedhi Kanda," all of which bear witness to this school of thought (Wijesekara, 1960).

Split says that indigenous inhabitants of Sri Lanka are steeped in prehistory, much more so than other communities (Split, 1978). This community is, as was mentioned earlier, introduced as Veddahs or Vannilaaththo (Forest Dwellers). The community boasts of 14000 years of prehistory, and has a direct relationship with the Neolithic community of Sri Lanka (Sunday Island, January 1993).

According to chronicles such as the *Mahawamsa*, the traditional indigenous people have a mythological origin related to *Kuveni*. The *Mahawamsa* claims that the Veddah lineage is linked to Vijaya, the mythical father of the Sinhalese. On the shores of 'Thambapanni,' Prince Vijaya (5 BC - 6 BC), who, according to legend, later became the first king of Sri Lanka, met Kuveni (Senevirathna, 1980). Kuveni was the queen of the Yakkas, one of the two tribes of Sri Lanka at the time, the other tribe being the Nagas. Vijaya married the queen and the couple had two children, a daughter and a son. Vijaya, the island's king at the time, left Kuveni for a Pandyan princess, but the marriage to the Pandyan princess was short-lived.

According to the *Mahawamsa*, the history of the indigenous people of Sri Lanka is directly linked to the supposedly mythical story of Vijaya and Kuveni. King Vijaya got married to Kuveni to sustain and establish his kingdom and kingship. After the establishment of kingship, Vijaya abandoned Kuveni and married a Madhurapura princess to legitimize his kingship (Senevirathna, 1980). Subsequently, Kuveni was killed by her own community and her children, Jeewanthana, and Disala fled to the forest. It is believed that these children were the parents of an indigenous community called the Veddah community (Mahawansa, 1967). The Indigenous community of Sri Lanka are addressed by various names. Among them, Yaksha and Rirra are the most well-known names. Sometimes, these words are also used as synonymous for particular indigenous people (Meegaskumbura, 1991).

Literature sources that were written during the Polonnaruwa era have mentioned this community, and this literature explains that King Parakramabahu had sought the support of the indigenous community for warfare. The Nadukamby epigraph shows that the Sinhala community and the Tamil community were living amicably in the Batticaloa area as the two main communities. Robert Knox, the Englishman who was a prisoner in Sri Lanka at the time, named these Veddahs 'wild men' in his book *Eda Heladiwa* (Knox, 1981). He also classified this community as Wild Vaddas and Tame Vaddas. According to him, Tame Vaddas served the king, and other Vadda community, the Wild Veddahs, maintained their cultural life in their former way as forest dwellers. Further, he has noted that the Veddah communities did not much desire to interact with others nor mingle with other communities in public places (Knox, 1981).

Colonial texts have depicted the Veddahs community as a primitive community. Anthropologist Edward Bernard Tylor has mentioned that the Sri Lankan Veddahs or hunters community are a nervous community living in the jungles and getting by, by fighting with animals (Obeyesekere, n.d). Seligman (Seligman, 1911) wrote a book called "The Veddahs" after doing a regular study on the indigenous community in Sri Lanka. This book has focused on the religious

life of the Veddahs community. Seligman classified the Veddahs community in three ways as follows:-

Tree Vaddas,  
Pure Vaddas and  
Genuine Vaddas.

Seligman focused on “Pure” Vaddas separately in his book. Here, he identified some “pure” Vaddas as “purer” than other “pure” Vaddas. Based on criteria such as bloodlines and cultural integrity, he claims to have identified the “purity” of these people.

The Indigenous people of Sri Lanka have been categorized as Village Veddahs and Sea Veddahs as well. According to Senevirathna, the indigenous people of Sri Lanka are a hunting and gathering community. He explains that they can be considered as village Veddahs whose livelihood consists of Chena cultivation. Sea Veddahs who are fisher-folk, live in coastal areas of Sri Lanka (Senevirathna,1989).

### **Geographical Spread of the Indigenous Community in Sri Lanka**

It has been identified that several parts of the country became living areas of the indigenous community of Sri Lanka. These communities have always been spread out in areas where the community was able to hunt and collect, and later grow, their own food. Thus, massive tracts of jungle areas became their lands and shelters. These communities later migrated from the Western province to the Eastern province. According to Wijesekara, this community migrated from the Central hills to the Eastern province of the country due to European colonization (Wijesekara, 1987, 44). There is evidence that the Sri Lankan indigenous community lived in Uwa Bimthenna, the Eastern Province, the Ruhunu (Southern) Province), and the Northwestern part of the country. The Kohombakankariya, a traditional dance/cultural item, indicates that there are 84 villages where Veddah communities lived (Wijesekara, 1987).

Previously, the settlement of indigenous people had been spread over a broad area of the country. But, as of late, the situation has changed. "Vadi Rata" is where these indigenous people lived in ancient times, comprising of the northern part of the Monaragala and Ampara district. The Mahiyaganaya area, the Western part of the Batticaloa district, and the Southern part of the Polonnaruwa district are included in this Vadi Rata.

### **Sea Veddahs**

The Veddahs of the east, also known as 'Muhudu Veddahs' or 'Veddahs of the Sea,' live primarily in the districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Despite being inextricably linked to the land's "true settlers," this group bears no resemblance to the original Veddahs (Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka; The Veddahs, n.d). The word Veddah is often associated with a mental-picture of a bare-chested man wielding a sword with his thick, shoulder-length, black hair bound behind his neck. However, this broad definition does not apply to today's Veddahs in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. They bear no resemblance to the indigenous Lankan prototype.

The only acknowledgement of these Eastern Veddahs as a distinct indigenous people is purely theoretical. The United Nations' definition of an indigenous population was first formulated in 1972 and has undergone several revisions since then. 'Indigenous communities, according to this UN report, 'are made up of living descendants of peoples that had once populated the entire territory of a nation.'(World Bank, 2021) According to the original description, or at least partially so, people of a different culture or ethnic origin arrive from other parts of the world, overcome the original settlers, and reduce them to a non-dominant or colonial status by conquest, settlement, or other means; and these original people live today more as per their own social, economic, and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country under which they now reside (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs,n.d).

Therefore, it is quite plain that the Veddahs of the East fall within the scope of the above description. However, it remains unclear when Veddahs first arrived on the coast and when they began intermarrying with the Tamils. Veddahs have lived in the neighbourhoods of the sites they now inhabit since the coastal Veddahs first settled near the sea, according to Seligmann. Still, the Veddahs themselves believe that they migrated from the inland areas. Robert Knox does not mention the relocation of these Veddahs, but Hugh Neville believes they came from the Sabaragamuwa Province (Sufferagam), from which they were expelled during the 17th century (Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka, The Veddahh, n.d).

However, now there is scholarly consensus that Neville's argument is faulty. Despite not being able to provide a precise date or location for these Veddahs' arrival on the coast, the older generation of Veddahs firmly believe that their forefathers migrated to the East of the country from a place known as 'Gala' (stone). Given the above evidence, it is possible to conclude that these Veddahs migrated from Dimbulagala or Nilgala, habitats located near the Batticaloa River(Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka, The Veddahh, n.d). According to Seligmann's study, the coastal Veddahs and the Veddahs from Dimbulagala share certain similarities, including association with the Aemalawa clan, and this is used to prove the relationship between the Dimbulagala Veddahs and the coastal Veddahs, refuting the claim that they were driven out of the Sabaragamuwa Province in the 17th century (Seligman,1911). According to Seligmann's study, these inhabitants do not know much beyond the hills to the west,' writes Seligmann in his acclaimed book *The Veddahs* (1911). They also claim to have originated in the Kukulugammedda and later dispersed along the coast. Some scholars claim that Kukulugammedda is Kukulugama near Verugal, while others think it is somewhere far away. Some coastal Veddahs lack unique characteristics that would enable people to distinguish them from village Tamils (Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka, The Veddah, n.d).

According to Seligmann's study, the coastal Veddahs and the Veddahs, in general, are linked. The people we call coastal Veddahs are also averse to being associated with Indigenous people. This is primarily due to the caste system in the country's Eastern and Northern regions. The Tamils place a great deal of importance on a person's caste, and many practices that discriminate against people based on their caste are still in place in Tamil-dominated areas today. People of higher castes in the area shun the Veddah tribe, which is considered the lowest of all the

regional castes. As a result, the coastal Veddah people have lost a great deal of their history which includes their origins. According to Seligmann's study, the coastal Veddahs and Veddahs, in general, are linked. Unfortunately, in the area where Veddahs live, the word 'Veddan,' which is Tamil for Veddah, is now only used to chastise a stubborn child or a child who is misbehaving, or even pejoratively to describe a person in a very negative context.

In the vicinity of Muththur and Thopur today, there are fifteen villages comprising a mainly Tamil-speaking Veddah community. Thiruchelvam claims that his clan has over ten thousand members in Kallady, Mankarni, Kadiraweli, Poddichenei, Nayangani, and other small habitats in and around Batticaloa. In addition, villages like Thiriyaya, Kuchchaveli, and Jaffna have a sizable Tamil-speaking coastal Veddah community.

The coastal Veddahs claim that their forefathers discovered divinity in the dead (Uththi Akkal); and worshipped that divinity. This phenomenon is observed in almost all Indigenous communities across the world. However, in contrast to their ancestors, today's coastal Veddahs seem to have a more sophisticated belief system, with many opting to worship Hindu gods. Apart from Hindu gods, the group honours deities such as Kunchi Mahappa, Meehachchi Amman, Paimaththu Thevangal, Kanthimar, and Aandiyani, most of whom they regard as gods of the seas. They speak the local dialect and do not know the Veddah language. They often name their girl children Poonamma or Vasanthi, and these names seem to imply their natural integration with the local Tamil culture.

### **The Concept of Creolization**

Creolization is a phrase that refers to the process of blending aspects from many cultures to form a new culture. The term "creole" first appeared in Spanish around 1590, and it meant "Spaniard born in the New World." (Webster, 2016). Participants in creolization choose specific elements from entering or inherited cultures, and then transmute them. In other words, they give them meanings that differ from those in the original cultures, and then creatively combine these elements to produce new forms of experience that replace the previous forms. Creolization, then, is the process of cultural creativity (Hylland, 2003). When cultures collide, expressive forms and performances arise, encapsulating the sources that shape them and forming new and distinct entities. Creole forms are expressions of culture in transition and metamorphosis, fluid in their adaptability to changing circumstances and susceptible to numerous meanings. Even after the initial cultural encounters, these emergent forms incorporate plurality, render multi-vocality, and negotiate contestation while also acting as vehicles of national identity and creative expression (Hylland, 2003).

### **Cultural Hybridization**

Cultural hybridization is the process of changing an aspect in a certain culture to match cultural norms in order to merge it into another culture. In globalization studies, cultural hybridity is a relatively under-researched topic. The phrase refers to synthesizing previously disparate cultural forms and activities to produce novel cultural forms and practices. Hybridization is the

process of creating new cultural forms and behaviours by combining previously disparate cultural antecedents. Hybridization differs from "integration," in which interdependencies emerge while antecedents stay unchanged. Currently, the research on cultural hybridization (CH) encompasses many issues that have arisen due to modernism and tradition, through a concern for and interest in mixing cultures in the context of an increasingly globalized world (Burke, 2010). Hybridization is "the coalescence of new personal and communal identities from innovative combinations of previously unrelated cultural qualities, practices, and influences emerging from situations of being cut off from one's roots and left without a place of one's own". Hybridization's discontinuities can result in various consequences, some of which are paradoxical (Flusty & Steven, 2004).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Indigenous People: Cultural identity and Assimilation**

The revitalization of the Veddah in the eastern parts of the island can be traced to the country's socio-political upheaval. Many Veddahs have married into native Tamil families and have assimilated into the Tamil community's usual way of life. The current community's forefathers were Veddah prototypes who hunted with bow and arrow and other traditional weapons. Today's coastal Veddahs, on the other hand, say that they cannot hunt with conventional arms. 'We have the bows and arrows that our forefathers used; however, we revere them and pay them homage, rather than using them to secure food.

Defining indigenous people or original inhabitants is quite difficult. There is no particular or unique definition for identifying them. However, some common characteristics can be identified. These are Ancestral territories, Mutual relationships with natural resources that existed in those territories, Original inhabitants being identified as a distinct cultural group by other cultural groups, Self-Identification, Having an indigenous language, Having identical traditions, customs, social and political institutions and Subsistence oriented production.

These common cultural features are decided by the geographical area in which these indigenous people live, the climate in that particular area, their production mode, etc. Changes in these factors directly affect the culture of these inhabitants (Veddahs, in this case).

#### **Livelihood and Income earning activities**

The majority of Veddahs living along the coast work in a variety of occupations. Some of them explained that they don't have the luxury of cultivating the land because they don't have any paddy fields. 'Since we don't have any land to farm, all we can do is to help out in a (somebody else's) paddy field,' they explained.

Despite the lack of conventional arms, Veddahs seem to have retained their traditional occupation of hunting, although in a more modern and sophisticated manner. 'We have hunting dogs that we use to kill animals like monitors and rabbits.' We also use them to chase and hunt wild boar now and then, and then we use our spears to kill them once they've been caught.

The traditional lifestyle of Veddahs in the Sri Lankan context has changed from that which was present during British colonial times. The modernization process has destroyed the original

identity of the Sri Lankan Indigenous tribes. The leader of the coastal indigenous community has this to say:

We used to live in the jungle when the British came, they made schools, and they imposed rules against cutting trees in the forest. Now deforestation is prohibited. So we came out from the jungle and made huts where the British ordered us to settle. Also, we live a little far away from the coastal area; therefore, it is difficult to go fishing. Now we cannot find yams in the forest. So, we had to settle down to eat rice and vegetables (Coastal Indigenous Leader, Male, 66 years, March 2019)

From the above example, it is clear that the coastal indigenous community has been subject to a reshaping of their social identity and a transformation towards a new lifestyle due to the intervention made by British colonization. Modernization has greatly impacted their lives, and their habitus has undergone massive change. Moreover, their cultural uniqueness has collapsed.

However, dominant ethnic communities of the country have been somehow able to preserve their own identities, while the indigenous people of the country have almost lost theirs. The annual pilgrimage to Kataragama by the coastal Veddahs has a long tradition that can be traced back several centuries. According to them, in the ancient times, the old shrine was nothing more than a small hut. 'Unlike today, our forefathers used to make this pilgrimage in groups of two or three. They prayed to Lord Ganesh, Lord Kataragama's brother, to make the journey less difficult. They said that Lord Ganesh answered their prayers by sending elephants to clear the jungle path during the journey'. The coastal Veddahs demonstrated that their forefathers had hunted to feed themselves during the journey. Due to fear of provoking the Gods' wrath, it is rare to see pilgrims visiting the shrine after eating meat. The modern-day coastal Veddahs seem to have made the appropriate change. The leader of the coastal indigenous community explained this further,

We have intermingled with the Sinhala and Tamil community. Now our sea-faring indigenous community does not have a special identity. Our indigenous languages are declining. During the era of governance of President Mahinda Rajapakse, we went to a commission to protect our languages. Now our old equipment is tucked away in museums. I think a new museum should be established in this area as well. There should be a way to protect our culture, habitus and habits for future generations. Otherwise, they will vanish (Coastal Indigenous Leader, Male, 66 years, March 2019)

Furthermore, the researchers observed that the sea indigenous community communicated with one another in the Tamil language and very few people, including the sea indigenous leader, was fluent in Sinhala as well. However, researchers identified that they did not use any indigenous languages. In addition, as per the above-mentioned statement related to sea indigenous leaders, the Tamil community's assimilation highly impacted the diversion of these Veddahs' commanding language, and gradually their indigenous language started to disappear. In the face of this erosion,

the Veddahs emphasized the importance of protecting their cultural values such as ritual equipment and language.

Indigenous people who still live in the study area face the same fate as indigenous people who live in other parts of Sri Lanka. They have almost lost their traditional livelihood. Their traditional occupations were hunting, fishing and cultivation. Now, they have fewer opportunities to engage in those occupations due to current circumstances, not to mention the Covid 19 pandemic. Cultivated lands and hunting places have been lost to them due to certain steps taken by government authorities, and this has made their lives very difficult. One woman of the indigenous community said,

In earlier times, we had opportunities for hunting and gathering, but due to the laws of Sri Lanka, hunting is no longer legal. Thereafter, we shifted to farming. But due to the climate in this area, we cannot farm every season of the year; thus, currently, most young people move into towns and seek jobs in factories and in the apparel industry (Female, 59 years, March 2019)

As a specific ethnic community, the coastal indigenous people continue to practice their lifestyle, which is mainly hunting and gathering. However, due to several policies and legal interventions enacted in the country, this community had to withdraw from its usual practices and find alternatives to their traditional ways of living. Consequently, this affected the uniqueness of their cultural practices. Since these Veddahs adopted practices of other lay communities, that is, these communities' ways of living, such as farming and seeking jobs in urban areas, these indigenous peoples began to identify themselves as part of the Tamil community of the Northeastern part of the country. As such, they could no longer be recognized as a specific indigenous community in the country.

The Coastal Veddahs have become expert fishermen and make and use various forms of nets, including a cast net. They also spear and shoot fish, using a bifid iron spearhead which they have adopted from the Tamils. For shooting fish, they use the usual Veddah bow, but the arrow becomes a harpoon with a shaft as long as the bow, into which the iron with its running line fits loosely (Seligman, 1911-Pg 333).

Due to modern knowledge of fishing, the above-mentioned methods cannot be used any longer; apart from that, due to the impact of Veddah activities on current development projects, the government was forced to evacuate these traditional inhabitants from their lands. This situation escalated to a great extent during the civil war. The primary source of income for the residents of this area is fishing. However, they seem to have forgotten the 'Mullambu,' their simple and unique weapon that they used to catch fish. According to the current Veddahs, their forefathers used this tool to spear and kill fish with great skill. The coastal Veddahs use this tool to capture fish like the

Striped Snakehead (Loola) and the Green Chromite with great success (Coraluya). The leader of the community said,

There are two varigas called the 'Ambala Variga' and the 'Uru Variga'. All of us living here, in the coastal area, belong to the Ambala Variga tribe. We are also called Sea indigenous people. We had our language. I could speak the languages which have been used in this area. But they are now too difficult to speak. Now I can only speak the Sinhala language and the Tamil language (Coastal Indigenous Leader, Male, 66 years, March 2019)

The above statement of the leader of this community symbolizes the falling off of the social identity of this community. As per this quotation, it was identified that even the leader of this community was no longer familiar with and had total command of their own indigenous language. On the other hand, he was fluent in Sinhala and Tamil, since these languages were used by the dominant ethnic groups in the country. This was another situation that exemplified the hybridization and creolization of the coastal indigenous community.

### **Changing of Social institutions and Language**

After they had settled in the villages, the community's unique identity was affected by modern social institutions such as those that dispensed education, law enforcement agencies, road and telecommunication access, etc. The mainstream educational system does not represent Veddah values, beliefs, traditions or norms. That system compelled them to transform their traditional way of thinking into a modern context which is influenced by the dominant culture and the westernization process. This education system forced them to learn the dominant language of the area and adapt to a new way of life, internalizing the belief that the indigenous identity is comparatively uncivilized, wild and inferior.

There is a school in Madurankulama, about 35 children from our community are going to that school. There are classes up to grade 12. Only seven classes have teachers. The primary classes 1-5, the principal is looking after those classes. The children like to learn; some children come from other areas also. No, there are no such problems; they are learning in the Tamil medium. (Female, 37 years, March 2019)

Our children go to Tamil medium schools. They don't fight with other children who belong to other ethnic groups. But sometimes, there is a gap in learning level between the indigenous children and others. I would like it if our children could learn in the Sinhala medium, but we have only a few resources. We want to learn the Sinhala language because the majority of this country talks in that language. Our children need to learn the English language too (Male, 44 years, March 2019)

Language is one of the most important components of group identity. Tamil has influenced indigenous people of the study area as the dominant language. The Tamil language is used for the needs of administration and other official work of the community. Consequently, this group does not have an opportunity to use their own language in public affairs. Their leader declared,

After me, the leadership should go to my elder son, but he can only speak in Tamil; he cannot speak either the indigenous language nor the Sinhala language. But my brother would be eligible for the position of a leader since he can speak all three languages - Sinhala, Tamil and our Indigenous language (Coastal Indigenous Leader, Male, 66 years, March 2019)

From the above examples, it is quite clear that the indigenous community emphasizes the importance of learning in Tamil and Sinhala. They have realized that their own indigenous language or their indigenous practices would not be given their rightful place within the country's education system. Therefore, their children are obliged to learn in Tamil, Sinhala or English in order to adapt to the ongoing cultural practices of the dominant ethnic groups. Furthermore, fluency in a dominant ethnic language is also a requirement as far as the appointment as the community leader is concerned. The leader's statement revealed that there are only a few people who have a fluent command of the indigenous language and the Sinhala language, and that even that is not enough as far as being appointed as the leader of the community is concerned. The leader of the tribe needs to have a command of English as well.

In the same way, most members of this community have become Hindus, which is also a reflection of their losing identity. In terms of their original religious rituals, they worship their own deities rather than Hindu deities. Their own indigenous religious rituals were based on indigenous people's natural settings. One woman said,

We worship goddess Paththini, we also go to temples (devala), but it is difficult to go to temples when we have financial problems, and the buses do not run on time. Our religious festivals start after April. In December we celebrate "Theru", and in January we celebrate "Thaipongal (Female, 50 years, March 2019)

Religion is also a fundamental component of culture. A specific and unique belief system and its related practices determined the cultural uniqueness of that community. However, the assimilation with the Tamil community led the indigenous community to practice Hindu religious beliefs, customs and rituals as well as their own. As a result, they also worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and celebrate Hindu festivals. This assimilation has led the indigenous community to mingle their indigenous religious belief system and the Hindu belief system. This is another example of the hybridization and creolization of coastal indigenous people.

The prevailing identity of the community is also affected by a lack of state support. Furthermore, due to an assimilation with and adaptation to mainstream socio-cultural processes,

the community's younger generation does not make much of an attempt to protect their traditional identity. Their leader has this to say,

Now, our younger generation who is educated is ashamed to acknowledge that they belong to the Veddah community. But that was how our ancient people lived (Coastal Indigenous Leader, Male, 66 years, March 2019)

According to the above statement, that the young indigenous community has internalized the fact that they are also a part of the Tamil community, and now they are rather ashamed to acknowledge that they are a separate community. This was another specific finding of this research study, because the attitude of rejection by the young people of this community of their “belongingness” to the indigenous community symbolized that they are actually more related to another ethnic community, and that these type of perceptions can tear the fabric of the 'we feeling' or the 'belongingness' of the Sri Lankan coastal indigenous community. This is a considerable threat that serves to diminish the uniqueness and cultural identity of this community.

That said, there are some prejudices that the community has to face. Dominant socio-cultural groups marginalize this community, and they have had to face discrimination in social affairs within their domain as well as discrimination based on their identity. One interviewee said,

When we interact with the masses, with broader society, we are identified as Tamils, since we use the Tamil language and the Tamil dress patterns. Therefore, outsiders rarely recognize us as an indigenous community. I think we will no longer be identified as indigenous people after a few years (Male, 38 years, March 2019)

The names of the members of this group have also been erased with the gradual change in the world in which they were nurtured, just as they have forgotten the distinct and distinctive language that had been a part and parcel of Veddah living. Many names have taken on a Tamil identity, but the task of tracing the transitioned names back to their Veddah origins using a linguistic close examination is fairly easy.

### **Customs, Birth, Marriage and Death**

Many conventional Hindu marriage rituals have been incorporated into the customs surrounding the marriage of Veddahs over time. Unlike other Veddahs, who tie a cord around their husband's waist, this tribe's (the interviewees) marriage is sealed by an elder linking the couple's fifth fingers together. However, unlike in Sinhalese and Tamil cultures, there is no string that is used to bind them together. There are elements of Tamil and coastal Veddah culture in their funeral customs as well. The respect with which the deceased is regarded is the defining and most distinct difference between the two cultures. The Veddah community reveres the dead as deities who protect the living, and the coastal Veddahs of the region also share this sentiment. They have a deep fear and respect for their ancestors, which all Veddahs living in the region share. The wealthy

are given a casket, while the poor get a white cotton cloth to wrap around their bodies before burial or cremation.

Before burial, the dead are washed, cleaned, and wrapped in a white cloth with a red mottu painted on their foreheads. The body is buried the day after death, and the unburied body is held outside the family's house or dwelling till burial. The Veddahs claim that the gods will not recognize the soul residing inside the body unless the body is clean. They also insist on the burial taking place within a day, believing that the spirit cannot escape the body if it is kept uninterred for more than a day, and if so, it could cause harm. The body is held outside the house or dwelling because of the fear of 'dark spirits,' who, it is believed, could hurt the dwelling and its occupants. The Veddahs travel away from the burial site as quickly as possible after the funeral is completed. This is due to an apprehension that the spirit inside the body will pursue them and injure them. They often use a stick to mark the location of the grave in order to prevent the spirit from escaping and causing damage to the village. When the Veddahs return to their homes, they pierce the surrounding trees with a knife to fend off any potential evils associated with the dead.

### **Beliefs and Rituals**

The coastal Veddahs have been greatly influenced by the Hindu beliefs of their neighbours, the Tamils. These Veddahs primarily worship Pilliyar, the god of knowledge, Murugan, the god of Kataragama, and Mari Amman. These are some deities or gods/goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.

The Kunjankalkulam Veddahs pray to their deities at various locations in the village. The clan's chieftain, Sellathambi, offers his prayers to a specified tree behind his home. These Veddahs make their offering to the tree, surrounding which is a simple holy structure. A plain red and white box and fabric make up the structure. In the Hindu religion, these colors are revered as sacred. Because of the Tamil community's presence, they use the colour red in their worship. The box which includes these components, is known as the 'Anjuru Petti.' The rituals associated with this temple are known as the 'Sadangu.' The typical prayer or offering takes place in the middle of the year when the winds are blowing away from the ocean or at the time of the 'goda sulan (land wind)' in Sinhala. The Veddahs divide their primary deities into two categories: male gods (Pirimi Deyyo) and sea gods (Muhudu Deyyo).

'Parangiya' and 'Landes' are the names of two of their sea gods. The Sinhalese use the terms Parangiya and Landes to refer to the Portuguese and the Dutch, respectively. The colonial masters' covert power over the indigenous group can be inferred from this act of naming and the appropriation of names.

Many of the Kalkudah Veddahs' conventional practices and observances have become obsolete, with Hindu influence taking precedence during the transition. The Veddahs claim that their forefathers performed rituals and ceremonies that were unique to them and that they did not dilute the rituals due to the influence of their habitat's location. The Veddahs' funeral services, however, represent the most important departure from Hinduism's influence. The Veddahs have

their own section of the general cemetery in Kalkudah, which may lead some to believe that they are treated as a group different from the Tamils who live there.

In the same way that Muslims do, their dead are generally wrapped in white cloth and buried. The Vardars throw sand into the dead man's grave before filling the burial site with sand. When the grave is fully closed up, the Veddahs throw flowers on top of it and then hold a ritual at the deceased's home to invoke blessings on their relative.

The Veddahs use water, rice, and the king coconut's crust in this ceremony. The ritual is led by a 'Poosari' (hindu temple priest) who is said to communicate with the dead and have supernatural abilities. During the ritual, the Poosari summons a deceased member of the clan, who then takes possession of the Poosari. The dead man then informs his family, through the Poosari, of the reason for his death and confirms whether it was caused by natural causes or not. If the death was caused by anything other than natural causes, the Veddahs assume that the spirit will tell them all about it, including the name of the killer and the method of murder. The Veddahs hold this ritual highly and believe that the deceased will communicate with them eventually.

After that, three days after the funeral, the family pays a visit to the deceased's grave. The relatives decorate the grave with flowers and pour milk on the burial site during this visit, but there is no contact with the dead. The seventh-day ceremony, on the other hand, takes a dramatic turn, with relatives performing a rite involving milk rice and symbolic singing in order to summon the souls of the deceased, that is clan members who are deceased. The soul re-lives the moment of death and reveals the cause of death during this seventh-day ritual. The relatives then return to the grave in the early morning hours on the eighth day to shower the grave with flowers and fresh water. Finally, the relatives invite all the gods they believe in and release the soul to the safety of the gods on the eighth day's night. During this ritual, gods and deities with links to the Veddah community are given priority as far as invitations are concerned. The relatives of the deceased are required to remain in the house of the deceased person for eight days to protect the home from evil spirits, as is customary in many Sinhala funerals.

## **Conclusion**

The history of the indigenous community of Sri Lanka was established as existing beyond the written history of the Sinhalese and Tamils in the island. Even in the present context, the modern Veddah community has a worldview different to that of other people. They also have a prehistoric cultural memory and habitats similar to the forest habitats they had of old. Now there is a challenge to their identity and culture, the identity and culture of their ancestors. That scenario is considered a serious challenge to their collective identity and survival. Historically, the indigenous community has faced various transmissions and colonization imposed by multiple parties. To deal with these changes, they had to choose two alternatives to survive, that is, two survival strategies. Among them, one is assimilation to other dominant cultures or selecting a forest to live in without the restriction and intervention of other communities. Historically, it can be seen that these inhabitants' forest dwellings were often captured by the dominant group of the country

making these indigenous peoples homeless. As a survival strategy, this community has chosen the first option, that is to assimilate themselves to Tamil social and cultural norms.

Since the Veddahs are so reliant on the state and the Tamils in the region, it is quite safe to say that they were forced to give up their cultural identity. The Vakare Veddahs have described three distinct phases through which the state has interfered in their lives, each of which has led to an identity crisis. They claim that the first move was when the government agreed to evacuate them and resettle them some place away from the jungles; phase two was attributed to civilian migration to Veddahs territories, and phase three was attributed to ethnic tensions between the country's native Sinhalese and Tamil peoples.

The majoritarian individual project of modernization was carried out by the majoritarian community in the name of development, and this served to erase the identities of the indigenous communities living in the country, and the existence of multiple identities among the Veddah tribes has been limited by the majoritarian individual development project.

The indigenous community of the country is a separate community that has its own special identity. Losing their habitats in forest areas where they had lived for several generations paved the way for loss of traditional lifestyles and mergers with other cultures. So, these communities have lost not only their habitats but also their traditional lifestyles. As a result, many of them have become poachers. All these changes have been caused by modernization and westernized development phenomena.

The colonization of Ceylon and the modernization of post-independent Sri Lanka drove coastal indigenous people into an assimilation process. As a result, this community merged, culturally, economically and socially, with the Tamil community. Since they were a minority cultural group, they were not able to preserve their identity due to the impact of the modernization process. Through this process, their culture and identity was creolized and hybridized with the influence of the majority of cultures of the country. The current study has found that assimilation into a dominant group, weak traditional economic modes of production, and losing traditional lands have contributed towards erasing the identities of these indigenous communities in Sri Lanka.

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