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Charles Gabriel Seligmann and Brenda Zara Seligmann

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL

THE Vedda country at the present day is limited to a roughly triangular tract lying between the eastern slopes of the central mountain *massif* and the sea. This area of about 2400 square miles is bounded on the west by the Mahaweli Ganga, from the point where, abandoning its eastern course through the mountains of the Central Province, the river sweeps northwards to the sea. A line from this great bend passing eastwards through Bibile village (on the Badulla-Batticaloa road) to the coast will define the southern limits of the Vedda country with sufficient accuracy, while its eastern limit is the coast. So defined it includes the greater part of the Eastern Province, about a fifth of Uva and a small portion of that part of the North Central Province known as Tamankaduwa, and is traversed by a single high road capable of taking wheeled traffic. This runs from Badulla, the capital of Uva, lying at the foot of the central mountain mass of the island, to the coast a few miles to the north of Batticaloa, the capital of the Eastern Province.

Excepting only the mountain scenery of Upper Uva and the Central Province, the Vedda country even in its present diminished form presents every variety of scenery met with in Ceylon, including alike the magnificent Uva park lands and the sandy mangrove-fringed flats of the Eastern coast. Within its borders is situated Mahayangana (Alutnuwara) the ancient assembling place of the Yakkas where, according to the Mahawansa, Buddha appeared and struck terror into their hearts before propounding his doctrines to the hosts of *deva* who

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attended him there. Here was erected the Mahayangana dagaba, the oldest in Ceylon, built over the relics of the very Buddha and from its inception to the present day the goal of countless generations of pious pilgrims reaching it by descending the Gallepadahulla, the pass of two thousand steps, that leads in less than an hour from the breezy uplands of the Central Province to the steamy river valley two thousand feet below. It is from this, the old pilgrim path, wending its way above the pass through the pleasant hills of Uva from the forgotten city of Medamahanuwara, that the best idea of the Vedda country is obtained. A sudden rise in the ground gives the first view of the Vedda country through a V-shaped frame of hills, and from such a spot as this Knox must have looked upon Bintenne. "It (the country of Bintan) seems to be a smooth land and not much hilly, the great river running through the midst of it. It is all over covered with mighty woods and abundance of deer, but much subject to dry weather and sickness. In these woods is a sort of wild people inhabiting, whom we shall speak of in their place¹."

Continuing along the path a little further, a wider view is obtained where the track seems to end abruptly in a great rock, the Ballangala or look-out rock, upon which the pilgrim halts to gaze reverently upon the ancient dagaba and the flat land spread out before him.

Here flows the Mahaweli ganga, soon to be hidden in the great sea of forest-clad lowland stretching away to the north, from which rise Kokagalla and other hills, the traditional homes of the Veddas, like rocky islands in the distance. To the east tower the Uva Mountains, stretching onwards in a diminishing series towards the uplands of Nilgala. In Bintenne, including in this term parts of both Uva and the Eastern Province, the jungle consists of a forest of great trees without much undergrowth, occasionally interrupted by open spaces, covered with coarse grass, which, however, does not grow much higher than the knee. These open patches are more numerous in the Eastern Province than they are in Uva Bintenne (which is traversed by

¹ *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies*, London, 1681. Chapter II, p. 5.

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Plate I

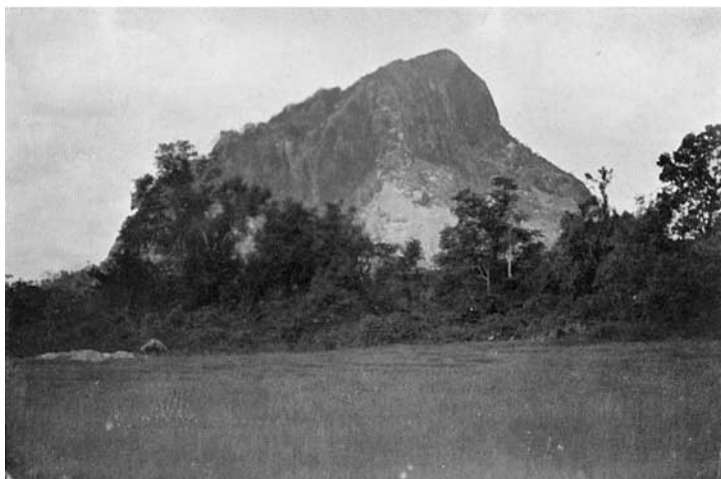


Fig. 1. View from the P. W. D. bungalow at Nilgala



Fig. 2. The Gal Oya river near Nilgala

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many small streams) and it is generally supposed that they are the sites of ancient cultivation; there are comparatively few streams in this country though swamps and small water holes containing stagnant water are common¹.

Northward in Tamankaduwa (a division of the North Central Province) the great trees give place to poorer growth and a scrubby jungle is found. On the east of the Badulla-Batticaloa road lie the Nilgala hills, the best of the Vedda domain and the most pleasing country in Ceylon. Here, broad valleys lie between jungle-clad ranges of much weathered gneiss, among whose rocky crags and rounded domes, *bambara*, the rock bee (*Apis indica*), builds its combs. Here is no gloomy jungle, but in the valleys are many thickets and small trees growing scattered as in a young orchard, their trunks protected by coarse lalang grass which often attains 5 or 6 feet in

¹ The character of the Bintenne of the Eastern Province has been well stated by Mr H. Freeman, Government Agent for the Eastern Province, in his Administration Report for 1908, for the following extract from which I am indebted to Mr John Ferguson: "This is an unsatisfactory region; a wretched population of about 3,000 in the largest pattu of the Province has, with the exception of three or four small patches of paddy land, nothing to live on except chenas and jungle produce; they have not the advantage of the hundreds along the coast who can get a sort of living by begging from their neighbours. Necessarily the Bintenna folk are miserable in appearance; nearly all of them are sick. There are many abandoned tanks, but the people have neither the physique nor the will to restore them. There are no coconuts to speak of in Bintenna; the few trees are either infertile or barren. Still we must take the people and the country as we find them, and rather than let the population drift away from Bintenna to the chena country of Uva, I would concentrate them on the more fertile spots about Kallodai, Maha-oja, Pullumalai and Tempitiya, on or near the Badulla road, and endeavour to teach them to do tank work; there are promising, abandoned, tanks, which could be restored, and the land settled on the people on easy terms. Plentiful chenas would be necessary to fill the stomachs of the people to get work out of them; maize grows well in Bintenna; it is now imported in large quantities from Uva; large tracts of Bintenna could be turned into maize fields for the supply of the people on the coast also, while Uva could then keep to itself its supplies of this commodity sent down to this district....In addition to the Sinhalese population of Bintenna there are the Veddass,...and bands of gipsies find a good hunting ground there. Some of these have just been prosecuted and imprisoned for violating the Game Laws, and also made to pay road tax, payment of which they have evaded for years; the gipsies have considerable wealth in cattle and other property; they also drink and steal. Since writing the above on the condition of Bintenna I have explored other and remoter parts of that division, and find that whatever prosperity in paddy cultivation it enjoyed in the distant past must have been due to the Rajakariya system, in the absence of which Bintenna will probably remain a wilderness for an indefinitely long period."

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THE VEDDAS

height. Clear rock-strewn streams abound, their banks brightened by the deep green leaves and the bright red flowers of the *ratmal* (*Ixora coccinea*). Scattered masses of rock often of great size form convenient shelters for the Veddas, and assist the rapid drainage of the country, which does not become water-logged even during torrential rains. This beautiful country is rich in game. To the east, where many Veddas have drifted, the jungle is thicker, the land lies lower, and is generally less healthy. The Nuwaragala Hills to the north of the Nilgala ranges are perhaps the wildest part of the island and are more densely clothed in jungle, but there are plenty of streams, while the slope of the country permits of ready drainage.

The coastal zone north of Batticaloa inhabited by the coast Veddas is flat and sandy, and the vegetation though dense is often less tall and less abundant than in other parts of the country. Salt water marshes are common, and the country is cut into by numerous lagoons and creeks, often bounded by a fringe of mangroves which stretches some distance up the mouths of the rivers. Although this area may now, and for yet a few years, be rightly called the Vedda country it must not be thought that any considerable number of its inhabitants are Veddas, or that they exercise any territorial or political influence; on the contrary, they constitute an insignificant fraction of the Tamil and Sinhalese inhabitants before whom they are rapidly disappearing, partly by intermarriage and absorption, partly owing to misery and a high death rate brought about by sheer inability to cope with the new state of affairs that the increased settlement of this, the wildest part of the island, has brought about.

Formerly the Vedda country is known to have embraced the whole of the Uva, and much of the Central and North Central Provinces, while there is no reason to suppose that their territory did not extend beyond these limits. Indeed there is no reasonable doubt that the Veddas are identical with the "Yakkas" of the Mahavansa and other native chronicles.

The seventh chapter of the Mahawansa relates the arrival in Ceylon, B.C. 543, of Vijaya who married Kuweni an aboriginal princess (*Yakkini*) and by her assistance destroyed a great

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number of her people, and established the earliest Sinhalese kingdom. Later, after she had borne him a son and a daughter, Vijaya being urged by his followers to take a royal bride sent an embassy to Madura, asking for the hand of the daughter of King Pandava. The latter agreed to the alliance. Vijaya "receiving the announcement of the arrival of this royal maiden, and considering it impossible that the princess could live with him at the same time with the yakkini, he thus explained himself to Kuveni: 'A daughter of royalty is a timid being; on that account, leaving the children with me, depart from my house.' She replied: 'On thy account, having murdered yakkhas, I dread these yakkhas: now I am discarded by both parties; whither can I take myself?' 'Within my dominions (said he) to any place thou pleasest which is unconnected with yakkhas; and I will maintain thee with a thousand bali offerings.' She who had been thus interdicted (from uniting herself with the yakkhas) with clamorous lamentation, taking her children with her, in the character of an inhuman being, wandered to that very city (Lankapura) of inhuman inhabitants. She left her children outside the yakkha city. The yakkhas, on seeing her enter the city, quickly surrounded her, crying out: 'It is for the purpose of spying us that she has come back!' And when the yakkhas were greatly excited, one of them, whose anger was greatly kindled, put an end to the life of the yakkini by a blow of his hand. Her uncle, a yakkha (named Kumara), happening to proceed out of the yakkha city, seeing these children outside the town, 'Whose children are ye?' said he. Being informed 'Kuveni's' he said, 'Your mother is murdered: if ye should be seen here, they would murder you also: fly quickly.' Instantly departing thence, they repaired to the (neighbourhood of the) Sumanakuta (Adam's Peak). The elder having grown up, married his sister, and settled there. Becoming numerous by their sons and daughters, under the protection of the king, they resided in the Malaya district. This is the origin of the Pulindas (hill-men)."

Such chronicles though interesting tell us little or nothing concerning the habits and customs of those Veddas who did not adopt a Sinhalese mode of life; the same may be said

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of the earliest foreign records such as that found in the tract *De Moribus Brachmanorum* written about 400 A.D., the author of which professes to have obtained his information from a Theban traveller.

To Robert Knox, who wrote in 1681 after a captivity in Ceylon lasting 20 years, belongs the credit of having first accurately described the Veddass. "Of these *Natives* there be two sorts *Wild* and *Tame*. I will begin with the former. For as in these Woods there are Wild *Beasts* so Wild *Men* also. The Land of *Bintan* is all covered with mighty Woods, filled with abundance of *Deer*. In this Land are many of these wild men; they call them *Vaddahs*, dwelling near no other Inhabitants. They speak the *Chingulayes* Language. They kill *Deer*, and dry the Flesh over the fire, and the people of the Countrey come and buy it of them. They never Till any ground for Corn, their Food being only Flesh. They are very expert with their Bows. They have a little ax, which they stick by their sides, to cut hony out of hollow Trees. Some few, which are near Inhabitants, have commerce with other people. They have no Towns nor Houses, only live by the waters under a Tree, with some boughs cut and laid about them, to give notice when any wild Beasts come near, which they may hear by their rustling and trampling upon them. Many of these Habitations we saw when we fled through the Woods, but God be praised the *Vaddahs* were gone.

"Some of the tamer sort of these men are in a kind of Subjection to the King. For if they be found, tho it must be with a great search in the woods, they will acknowledge his Officers, and will bring to them *Elephant-teeth*, and *Honey*, and *Wax*, and *Deer's Flesh*; but the others in lieu thereof do give them near as much, in Arrows, Cloth, etc. fearing lest they should otherwise appear no more.

"It had been reported to me by many people, that the wilder sort of them, when they want Arrows, will carry their load of Flesh in the night, and hang it up in a *Smith's Shop*, also a Leaf cut in the form they will have their Arrows made, and hang by it. Which if the *Smith* do make according to their Pattern they will requite, and bring him more Flesh:

but if he make them not, they will do him a mischief one time or another by shooting in the night. If the Smith make the Arrows, he leaves them in the same place, where the *Vaddahs* hung the Flesh.

* * * * *

“About *Hourly* the remotest of the King’s Dominions there are many of them, that are pretty tame, and come and buy and sell among the people. The King once having occasion of an hasty Expedition against the *Dutch*, the Governour summoned them all in to go with him, which they did. And with their Bows and Arrows did as good service as any of the rest but afterwards when they returned home again, they removed farther in the Woods, and would be seen no more, for fear of being afterwards prest again to serve the King.

“They never cut their hair but tye it up on their Crowns in a bunch. The cloth they use, is not broad nor large, scarcely enough to cover their Buttocks. The *wilder* and *tamer* sort of them do both observe a Religion. They have a God peculiar to themselves. The *tamer* do build Temples, the wild only bring their sacrifice under Trees, and while it is offering, dance round it, both men and women.

“They have their bounds in the Woods among themselves, and one company of them is not to shoot nor gather hony or fruit beyond those bounds. Neer the borders stood a *Jack-Tree*; one *Vaddah* being gathering some fruit from this Tree, another *Vaddah* of the next division saw him, and told him he had nothing to do to gather *Jacks* from that Tree, for that belonged to them. They fell to words and from words to blows, and one of them shot the other. At which more of them met and fell to skirmishing so briskly with their Bows and Arrows, that twenty or thirty of them were left dead upon the spot.

“They are so curious of their Arrows that no smith can please them: The King once to gratifie them for a great Present they brought him, gave all of them of his best made Arrow-blades: which nevertheless would not please their humour. For they went all of them to a Rock by a River and ground them into another form. The Arrows they use are of a

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different fashion from all other, and the *Chingulays* will not use them.

“They have a peculiar way by themselves of *preserving Flesh*. They cut a hollow Tree and put honey in it, and then fill it up with flesh, and stop it up with clay. Which lyes for a reserve to eat in time of want.

“It has usually been told me that their way of *catching Elephants* is, that when the Elephant lyes asleep they strike their ax into the sole of his foot, and so laming him he is in their power to take him. But I take this for a fable, because I know the sole of the Elephants foot is so hard, that no axe can pierce it at a blow; and he is so wakeful that they can have no opportunity to do it.

“For portions with their Daughters in marriage they give hunting Dogs. They are reported to be courteous. Some of the *Chingulays* in discontent will leave their houses and friends, and go and live among them, where they are civilly entertained. The tamer sort of them, as hath been said, will sometimes appear, and hold some kind of trade with the tame Inhabitants, but the wilder called *Ramba-Vaddahs* never show themselves.”

From Knox’s account it is evident that in his time or a little before this, some of the Veddas were in touch with the court and were even sufficiently amenable to discipline to be of use as an auxiliary fighting force, indeed, there is abundant evidence that long before this a part of the inhabitants of Ceylon, with enough Vedda blood in them for their contemporaries to call them Veddas, were politically organized and constituted a force whom the rulers of the island found it necessary to consider. Upon this subject we cannot do better than quote part of a letter from Mr H. Parker in which this authority states his views on this subject. “At the time when Sinhalese history begins, a part of them [Veddas] had reached a far more advanced state than the others. They were politically organised, and according to the Mahavansa had a supreme king and subordinate chiefs 80 years after Wijaya became king¹.

¹ “He established the yakkhas Kalavela in the eastern quarter of the city [Anuradhapura]; and the chief of the yakkhas, Citta, he established on the lower side of the Abhaya tank. He (the king), who knew how to accord his protection with

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“The invaders, or rather settlers, from the valley of the Ganges intermarried with these more advanced natives, and became the Sinhalese of the present day (with a later mixture of Tamil or Indian blood).

“The wilder natives continued to lead the life of their primitive ancestors, and only to a very limited extent intermarried with the Sinhalese.

“Three or four centuries ago the Vaeddass were spread over the Matale district and the North-western Province, and I believe Sabaragamuwa¹.”

discrimination, established the slave born of the yakkha tribe, who had formerly rendered him great service, at the southern gate of the city. He established within the garden of the royal palace the mare-faced yakkhini, and provided annually demon offerings to them as well as to others.

“In the days of public festivity, this monarch, seated on a throne of equal eminence with the yakkha chief Citta, caused joyous spectacles, representing the actions of the devas as well as of mortals to be exhibited.....

“This monarch befriending the interests of the yakkhas, with the co-operation of Kalavela and Citta, who had the power (though yakkhas) of rendering themselves invisible (in the human world), conjointly with them, enjoyed his prosperity.” *Mahavamsa*, Chapter x, p. 44 (Tournour’s translation). Further, the same king “provided.. a temple [or “tala tree,” the readings differ] for the Vyadha-deva” which Mr Parker states must refer to the Veddha God.

¹ Additional evidence for this is given by Nevill who says—“I have unpublished MSS. which represent the Vaeddass as found in the forests north of Putlam at the time of Bhuwaneka Bahu Raja of Kotta (about 1466 A.D.), and another which represents Vaeddass as the chief inhabitants of the Matale district in the region of Raja Sinha, about 1635 A.D.” (*Taprobanian*, Vol. II, April 1883, p. 30). With regard to Veddass in Sabaragamuwa, Bailey notes that—“Though traces of their former existence there are evident and numerous, there is every reason to believe that many centuries have passed since they were there. Fields, villages and families yet retain the name Veddahs, as Weddeya pangoo, Wedde coombore, Wedde watte, Wedde ella, Wedde gala, Wedge etc.Indeed, Saffragam, or Habara gamowa, means the district of Veddahs, or barbarous people : and in this form of the word, the former existence of Veddahs again can be traced, as Habara goddege, Habara kadowa, etc. It is traditional throughout Saffragam, that once Veddahs predominated over Sinhalese in that district, and that, as the latter gained ground, the former withdrew towards Bintene and Wellasse.....Mr Macready, of the Civil Service, has given me very important proof of the existence of Veddahs ‘near the Sumanta mountains’ [Adam’s Peak]. He has given me the translation of some stanzas from a Sinhalese poem, written about 400 years ago, called the Pirawi Sandese, or the dove’s message. The poem treats of a message sent, by means of a dove, from Cotta (near Colombo) to Vishnu at Dondera, at the extreme south of the island. The dove takes its course exactly over the district lying below Adam’s Peak. The poet addresses the dove, and tells her she will see ‘the daughters of the Veddahs’ clothed in Riti bark, their hair adorned with peacock’s plumes. So wild are they that the poet describes the herds of deer as being startled at the sight of them.” (“Wild Tribes of the Veddahs of