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The Veddas

Dr C.G. Seligmann (1873–1940) was a renowned anthropologist who was President of the Royal Anthropological Institute between 1923 and 1925. After joining the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait in Melanesia in 1898, he changed his career from medicine to anthropology and began his career as a distinguished field anthropologist. This book contains his pioneering ethnology of the indigenous Vedda people of Sri Lanka. The social, political, religious and economic life of the Veddas is systematically examined in this detailed study, first published as part of the Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnological Series in 1911. This ethnology remains the standard reference work for the social structure and material culture of the Vedda people, as they have ceased to exist as a separate community in Sri Lanka. This volume contains views on ethnicity which were acceptable at the time it was published.

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CHARLES GABRIEL SELIGMANN

BRENDA ZARA SELIGMANN



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The Vedda country, view from Bendiagolge rocks.

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THE VEDDAS

BY

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LECTURER IN ETHNOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

AND

BRENDA Z. SELIGMANN

WITH A CHAPTER BY

C. S. MYERS, M.D., D.Sc.

AND AN APPENDIX BY

A. MENDIS GUNASEKARA, MUDALIAR

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TO
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PREFACE

THE Veddas have been regarded as one of the most primitive of existing races, and it has long been felt desirable that their social life and religious ideas should be investigated as thoroughly as possible. The welcome opportunity of conducting this research was afforded me on the initiative of Dr A.C. Haddon, who suggested to the Honourable Mr John Ferguson and Dr Arthur Willey that it was desirable that the Ceylon Government should continue its enlightened policy of studying the anthropology, archaeology and history of Ceylon and its peoples. This proposal received the warmest support of the Governor, Sir Henry Blake, G.C.M.G., and his successor the present Governor, His Excellency Sir Henry E. McCallum, G.C.M.G., A.D.C., of the Colonial Secretary and of the other members of the Legislative Council who made a liberal grant covering the expenses of the expedition in the field.

Not only was the work urgently needed on account of its scientific importance, but it was known that the Veddas were a numerically small people verging on extinction, and so affected by contact with Tamils and Sinhalese that if they were not studied promptly there was every possibility that it would soon be too late to study them at all; indeed, with all my efforts I was able to meet only four families, and hear of two more, who I believe had never practised cultivation. Pure-blooded Veddas are not quite so rare as this statement implies. The Danigala community, the best known "wild" Veddas of Ceylon, are still reasonably pure-blooded, though they have adopted many Sinhalese habits, including cultivation, and have assumed the rôle of professional primitive man. They are commonly fetched to be interviewed by travellers at the nearest rest house, where they appear clad only in the traditional scanty Vedda garment, whereas, when not on show, they dress very much as the neighbouring peasant Sinhalese.

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PREFACE

In spite of the decay into which the Vedda social fabric has fallen, I believe that the expedition may be considered to have achieved a considerable measure of success, since it has brought to light a number of facts hitherto unknown. This result is largely due to my wife, for I feel convinced that the measure of success attained in gaining the confidence of these shy and extremely jealous people was entirely due to her presence and assistance. Not only would it have been impossible otherwise to obtain certain important results in special departments, as for instance the phonograph records of lullabies, but I should never have had the opportunity of studying Vedda family life with the degree of intimacy which her presence made possible. It must not however be thought that the assistance she rendered was of the somewhat passive kind which the presence of any sympathetic woman would have given. Indeed, the opposite was the case, for, with a single exception, the ceremonial dances described in Chapter IX were recorded by Mrs Seligmann, while I devoted the whole of my attention to obtaining a reasonably complete series of photographs. So fully did she share in the work in this and many other ways that when working up our results I found that my original idea of a volume containing a number of jointly written chapters by no means did justice to her work, and her name therefore appears as that of joint author of this book.

With regard to the dances photographed, those witnessed at Sitala Wanniya and Bandaraduwa were performed in the depth of the jungle under circumstances which necessitated under-exposure in spite of the use of the most rapid plates. Hence a number of the photographs reproduced in Chapter IX have been more or less "faked," the detail being painted in on bromide prints and fresh negatives prepared. Probably no one will have any difficulty in recognising the photographs which have been treated in this way, but in order to avoid any possibility of a mistake those plates which have been touched up are indicated by an asterisk.

The translations and transliterations of the charms in Chapter VIII and the invocations in Chapter X have been prepared by Mr Henry Parker, late Assistant Director of the Ceylon Irrigation Department, who has also read through and

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criticised Chapters I, VI, VII, VIII, XIV and XV. But the assistance he has thus rendered is by no means the full measure of our indebtedness, for there is scarcely a chapter in which we have not availed ourselves of his great knowledge of Ceylon, and although we have endeavoured to acknowledge in the text the help he has given us, we feel we have scarcely done justice to the benefit we have derived from discussing many points with him. Dr C. S. Myers is responsible for the chapter on Music; to him we are greatly indebted for undertaking this work in spite of the many other calls on his time.

We owe to Mr A. Mendis Gunasekara, Mudaliar, the transliteration and translation of the songs given in Chapter XIV. Mr Gunasekara has also worked over the vocabularies we took in the field and has added greatly to the value of these by the derivations which he has been able to suggest for many of the words, and we desire to express our appreciation of the energy and knowledge he has brought to the task.

It is a pleasure and a duty to refer to the assistance rendered by friends and officials in Ceylon. In the first place our thanks are due to the Colonial Secretary, Sir Hugh Clifford, K.C.M.G., and the Hon. Mr John Ferguson, C.M.G., for constant advice and help. We received the greatest assistance from Dr Arthur Willey, F.R.S., until recently the Director of the Colombo Museum, who not only placed his own knowledge and experience at our disposal, but encouraged us to make the freest use of his department. He thus saved us much trouble and a considerable expenditure of time, and to him we owe a debt of gratitude which we cannot adequately express. Our obligation to the officers of the Survey Department is very great, and we desire to record the assistance rendered by the Surveyor General, Mr P. Warren, C.M.G., the Assistant Surveyor General, Mr R. S. Templeton, and Mr W. C. S. Ingles. Encouraged by his success with plates exposed in Colombo Mr Ingles took an immense amount of trouble with a number of colour-plates which had been exposed in the jungle, but the results though interesting were not such as to be of scientific value. Mr Frederick Lewis, F.L.S., of the Land Settlement Department, who has travelled much in the Vedda country, also rendered valuable assistance, and we have made free use of his paper (*Journ. Roy. As. Soc. C.B.* 1902) giving the vernacular

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names of many trees and flowering plants of economic importance to the Veddas. We are also under obligation to Mr J. Harward, Director of Public Instruction, and we must not omit to mention the attention shown to us by Mr G. A. Joseph, Hon. Secretary of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

While in the field we received help from so many friends from Government officers to peasant Sinhalese that it is impossible to mention all by name. We must specially thank Mr H. White and Mr H. R. Freeman, the Government Agents of Uva and the Eastern Province respectively, not only for much kindly advice but for putting at our disposal such adequate interpreters as Mr W. R. Bibile, Ratemahatmaya, the Muhandiram Kumarakulasinghe and Mr D. C. de Silva, Kachcheri Interpreter. We are greatly indebted to these gentlemen as we also are to Mr Samuel Perera for his assistance in locating a group of Veddas, for whom we had been searching for some weeks, and to Mr C. Herft, District Engineer, Batticaloa, who twice supplied us with coolies when we were in serious difficulty for transport. Our thanks are also due to Mr G. T. Bradley of the Irrigation Department and Mr G. D. Templer of the Forest Department as well as to Mr G. W. Woodhouse, District Judge, who spent a whole day of his holidays interpreting for us.

We received much help from Mr G. P. Greene, General Manager of the Ceylon Government Railways, and from Mr C. Donald of Bandarawela, whose assistance in the transport of stores was of the utmost service. We must also refer to the many acts of kindness and help rendered both officially and unofficially by our friend the late James Parsons, Principal Mineral Surveyor, whose recent tragic death has deprived the island of one of the most scientific of its officials.

By the kindness of the Colonial Secretary and the General Manager of the Ceylon Government Railways one of the Government motor cars was put at our disposal for a week soon after landing. For the benefit of others who may be engaged in similar work we desire to refer to the value of a preliminary survey of the country conducted from a motor car. Our survey enabled us to gain valuable information without going more than ten miles on foot from the main road.

We are indebted to the following gentlemen for help and

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advice on various matters, Dr L. D. Barnett, Mr R. I. Pocock, Professor Ridgeway and Mr Vincent A. Smith. It remains to thank Dr W. H. R. Rivers for the unflagging interest he has shown in this volume, the whole of which he has read in manuscript and discussed with us, to the very great advantage of the work. We are also indebted to him for permission to reproduce from the *British Journal of Psychology* the block which appears on p. 403; while some of the figures of quartz implements reproduced in Plate VIII have already appeared in *Man*. The index and glossary have been prepared by Miss M. C. Jonas.

C. G. S.

10 February 1911.

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NOTE ON transliteration

THE transliteration of unfamiliar oriental words must constitute a difficulty to all who are not oriental scholars. In the present instance the matter is further complicated by the phonetic changes undergone by many Sinhalese words in the mouths of Veddas and the peasant Sinhalese of the Vedirata. Under these circumstances it seemed best not to attempt to polish the dialect in which our informants talked, but to treat it as an unwritten language, and to write all native words according to some generally recognised and easily applied rule. We selected the scheme recommended by the Royal Geographical Society, under which consonants are pronounced as in English and vowels as in Italian, only modifying it by writing *c* for the *ch* sound in *church*. Satisfactory as this plan proved to be in the field it is obviously wholly unsuited to that part of the work which consists of the transliteration and translation of songs or invocations written down in Sinhalese by our interpreters. Mr Parker and Mr Gunasekara have therefore made use of a system of transliteration suggested by the former, consisting of that prescribed by the Ceylon Government (cf. Mr Gunasekara's Sinhalese Grammar, pp. 8 and 9) with the following modifications :

(1) Long vowels are indicated by the sign –.

(2) The letters ඇ, ඩ්, ඒ, ශ් are represented by æ, c, ch, ś respectively.

ව් has been represented by v or w.

Hence the transliteration of the Sinhalese alphabet according to this modified system is as follows :

Vowels—අ a, ආ ā, ඇ æ, ඇ̄ ǣ, ඉ i, ඊ or ඉ̄ ī, උ u, උ̄ ū, ඩා ri, ඩා̄ rī, ශා li, ශා̄ lī, එ e, ඒ ē, අභ ai, ඔ o, ඔ̄ ō, ඔා au.

Consonants—ක k, ක් kh, ග g, ග් gh, ඞ ṇ, ච c, ඡ ch, ජ j, ඣ jh, ඤ ñ, ට t, ට් th, ධ d, ධ් dh, ඳ ṇ, භ t, භ් th, ඳ d, ධ dh, න n, ප p, ප් ph, බ b, බ් bh, ම m, ය y, ර r, ල l, ව v or w, ශ ś, ෂ sh, ස s, හ h, ළ l, ට් ṭ, ට් ṭ.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

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The semi-nasal sounds (represented by the symbol ɾ, as in ඳ ṅg, ඳ ṅj, ඳ ṅḍ, ඳ ṅd) are represented by ṅ, and the semi-nasal sound (represented by the symbol ɽ as in ඳ) of m is represented by ṁ.

The use of two systems of transliteration in the same book, though far from ideal, has, we believe, not led to any ambiguity, for the absence of all diacritical marks (with the exception of an occasional – over a long vowel) will immediately indicate that a word is written as it stood in our field notes. Thus in the vocabulary the words are given as we took them down in the field, while the more elaborate system of transliteration is used by Mr Gunasekara in his notes on the origin of these words. From one standpoint there may even be an advantage in the use of a simple system of transliteration. Being ignorant of Sinhalese we have recorded the sounds we heard, without the modifications which a knowledge of the language would suggest. Thus *hatera* is everywhere written for *hatura* (bear); *Baṇḍara* pronounced *Bandar* by all Veddas and many peasant Sinhalese will be found printed in both forms, and the spelling of many other words is varied in the same manner. Perhaps the most striking example of variation in spelling is in the name of the people of whom this book treats. We have thought it best to use the common English spelling and to write the word Vedda, but this word is spelt in at least two other ways, in the *verbatim* quotations from the manuscript or printed works of others.

C. G. S.

B. Z. S.

3 February 1911.

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Charles Gabriel Seligmann and Brenda Zara Seligmann

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ERRATA

- Page 16 line 25 to p. 17 line 4 for “mm.” read “m.”
 Page 18 line 24 for “chaemaeprosopes” read “chamaeprosopes”
 Page 21 line 24 for “I” read “we”
 Page 25 footnote line 1 for “I” read “we”
 Page 35 line 1 for “*ruwela*” read “*ruwala*”
 Page 44 line 7 for “1.530 mm.” read “1.53 m.”
 Page 45 footnote line 7 for “*tavilam*” read “*tavalam*”
 Page 141 line 23 for “Panikki Yaka” read “Panikkia Yaka”
 Page 149 line 26 for “Vijeyo” read “Vijaya”
 Page 150 line 12 for “Galmeda” read “Galmède”
 Page 153 line 34 for “Chapter VII” read “in the Addendum to this chapter”
 Page 165 line 25 for “Wanegatha” and page 170 line 36, and page 172 line 20 for “Wanagata” read “Wanagata”
 Page 167 line 12 for “Ganga Bandar” read “Gange Bandar”
 Page 204 lines 6, 10 and 12 respectively read
 “Go and cleave it in the tail, by the ribs”
 “Go and cleave it in the neck, by the ribs”
 “Go and cleave it in the stomach, by the ribs”
 Page 204 for lines 20 to 22 read “*Laetten* is the ablative case of *ila-aēta*, rib”
 Page 229 line 6 for “many *yaka*” read “many *yaku*”
 Page 231 line 19 for “hangalla” read “*hangala*”
 Page 245 line 21 for “Ala Yaka” read “Ale Yaka”
 Page 302 line 11 and p. 333 line 14 for “Chapter VIII” read “Chapter VII”
 Page 322 last line for “Chapter xv” read “Chapter xiv”