



**Indigenous Food Practices of the Dambana Vedda Community in Sri Lanka: Past and Present Scenario**

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**ABSTRACT**

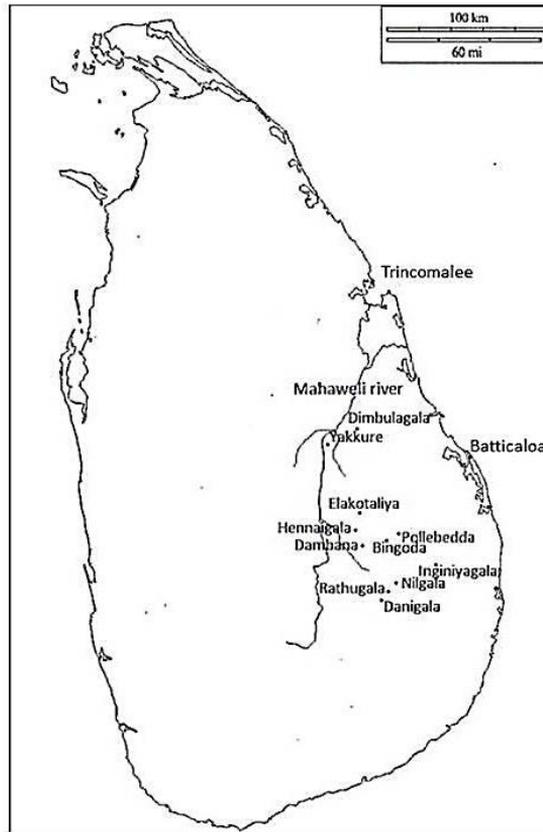
*Veddas are considered to be the indigenous community of Sri Lanka. A century ago, the Veddas had scattered across the Eastern Province, North-Central and Uva Provinces. Presently, their main settlement is confined to Dambana in the Badulla district. They inherit unique indigenous knowledge from their ancestors to hunt animals, gather forest goods, collect honey and dig yams to fulfill their food needs as 'Forest dwellers'. Therefore, they had simple and efficient indigenous techniques for gathering and processing food. The main objective of the present study was to identify and document the past indigenous food practices and current food practices of the Dambana Vedda community. Focus group discussions were carried out with the different age categories of the Vedda community at Dambana to collect information. The indigenous lifestyle of the Vedda community was affected by modernization and civilization. Wild Veddas who lived in the forest have transmitted to village Veddas in colonies with modified food culture. Their indigenous food culture is mixed with the neighboring Sinhalese and Tamil communities. However, with forest reserves restricted, the Veddas are still engaging in a questionable struggle to protect their indigenous tradition and culture. Consequently, they have consumed indigenous foods rarely and novel food varieties become the daily diets of Veddas. Therefore, Veddas have been facing many challenges to protect their unique indigenous food practices for future generations.*

## 1. Introduction

Any isolated group of communities living in any part of the region who are descendants of the original inhabitants using a special language and culture is known as indigenous people (Sarivaara et al., 2013). The Sri Lankan indigenous community, the Veddas, is

considered the most ancient indigenous or aboriginal people and the oldest settlers of Sri Lanka (Seligman et al., 1911).

The Veddas are proud of their distinct heritage and call themselves 'Wanniyaleththo' which means 'the forest people'.



**Figure 1.** The current settlements of the Veddas in Sri Lanka (Study location: Dambana)

The Veddas have roots that date back to the earliest human settlements in Sri Lanka over thousands of years. The 'Mahavamsa', the ancient chief chronicle of the Sinhalese ethnicity in Sri Lanka, revealed that the origin of the Veddas was linked with Jeewahaththa and Disala, the son and daughter of Prince Wijaya (believed to be from Bengal in India and the first recorded Sinhala king in Sri Lanka) and Kuweni (an indigenous woman with supernatural power in 'Yakka' tribe)

who later evacuated into the forest (Chandraratne, 2016). However, centuries ago, the native 'Yakka' ethnic groups are said to be the forefathers of the Veddas (Seligman et al., 1911). According to the excavations conducted at Bandarawela and Balangoda, the Veddas can be considered a 'primitive human' type descending from the Homo Sapiens. Based on the descriptions of Deraniyagala, 1992, there is clear evidence that the people who lived in the caves of

Balangoda and Kuruvita were the ancestors of the present Veddas. Moreover, the physical anthropological research that has been carried out on the human remains from the Mesolithic cave sites at Batadombalena and Belilena revealed that the Mesolithic people of the island more or less resemble the anatomical features of the Vedda community (Kennedy, 1984). However, it is generally believed that the Veddas are the descendants of the indigenous people belonging to the Mesolithic period.

A century ago, the Veddas were scattered across the Eastern Province and some parts of the North-Central and Uva Provinces in Sri Lanka (Chandraratne, 2016). However, Vedda settlements are currently restricted to certain areas of the Mahaweli valley.

Recently, they have formulated their colonies in Dambana, Watuyaya, Gurukumbura and Henanigala in the Mahiyangana Dambana region. In addition, Rathugala and Nilgala, situated beyond Inginiyagala in the Ampara district, Pollebedda situated beyond Maha Oya and areas close to the sea in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts were also selected for their settlements (Figure 1). The Veddas living near beach areas are called 'Coastal Veddas' and those living by chena cultivations are called 'Village Veddas'. The coastal Vedda settlement was limited to the north of Batticaloa. The coastal Veddas are expert fishermen and use various forms of nets including a cast net. For shooting fish, they use the usual Vedda bow, but the arrow has become a harpoon with a shaft.



**Figure 2.** (a) The present leader of the Vedda tribe, Uruwarige Wannialeththo, (b) Elder son of Uruwarige Wannialeththo

Generally, Veddas were referred to as 'forest dwellers', who lived from hunting wild animals and gathering forest produce. Accordingly, their foods were meat, eggs, honey, fish, fruit, leaves, yams and vegetables. Later, the hunting and gathering life style was transformed into a form of agriculture called chena cultivation to supplement the food for their families mainly due to the government's restrictions on utilizing the forest. However,

with the wild life preservation laws, at present, 'Village Veddas', who live in permanent settlements subsist principally from the cultivation of crops. Very few Veddas live principally from foraging and collecting wild honey which is becoming one of their traditionally ascribed occupations. Under the rain-fed cultivation of wet and dry agriculture, both are commonly practiced.

At present, the unique lifestyle of the indigenous Vedda community has still not been changed much by modernization. Even though they have to interact with modern society, the Vedda community has maintained their unique identity to some extent. They still practice some of the culinary traditions of their own. However, existing strict wildlife protection laws have created limitations to their unique delicacies and food habits. Unlike the past, most indigenous food resources, food procurement techniques, processing and preservation methods, and eating habits have been significantly altered.

The main objective of this study was to identify and document the indigenous food practices of the Dambana Vedda community in Sri Lanka. The specific objectives were the identification of their past indigenous techniques of hunting, gathering, processing and preservation of natural foods from the forest and the changes that occurred in their food habits due to modernization and civilization.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted as an exploratory and descriptive study by selecting respondents purposively. Mainly, focus group discussions were held to collect information according to the modified method of Sasini, 2017 from the selected members of the Vedda community. Secondary data were collected from relevant sources and information available in the Vedda's Museum (*Adivasi jana kala kendraya*) located at Dambana, Mahiyanganaya. The service of a translator who is conversant in both Sinhala and Vedda languages was obtained for discussions.

### 2.1 Selection of Location

This study was conducted at the main settlement area of the Vedda community located at Dambana, Mahiyanganaya in the Badulla district in the Uva province of Sri Lanka.

### 2.2 Selection of Respondents

Three age groups were selected for the discussions from different generations of the Vedda community. The first group was between the ages of 20-30, who had minimum experience in forest life. Most of them are somewhat modernized and have mixed with other cultures such as Sinhala and Tamil. Members of this group can speak the Sinhalese language other than their traditional Vedda language. The second age group was between the ages of 30 to 60 years. Most of the Vedda members who belonged to this group have spent half of their life in the forest and become village Veddass. The third age group was above 60 years. This group has lived more than half of their lives in the forest as hunters and gatherers. Most of the information regarding their indigenous food systems and the present situation was given by Uruwarige Wanniyaeththo, the chief of the Vedda community and the elder son of the chief at Dambana who belongs to third age group. Each group included 3-5 people, both men and women. Strictly, most of the male Vedda people dislike meeting women Vedda members by outsiders and therefore most of the information was collected from the male Vedda people. The sampling method used for the study was purposive sampling with a total number of 12 people. Focus group discussions were recorded and later translated into the Sinhala language by the translator.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 The Way of Hunting, Gathering and Processing of Foods- Past Practices of Wild Veddass

Early Veddass who lived in the forests were originally hunters and gatherers. They subsisted solely on hunting wild animals and gathering fresh forest produce. Using simple techniques and equipment, they gathered food to fulfil their needs including their families' food requirements. The Veddass generally did not have specific meal times

within a day, as they used to eat when they felt hungry. Excess food was preserved for future consumption. The following section describes how the Vedda people collected different types of food from the forests.

### 3.1.1 Consumption of Meat, Fish and Eggs

Early Veddas utilized different equipment and techniques to hunt animals, fish and birds. Among them, the most abundant methods were bow and arrow (Figure 3), a small axe called 'Gal rakki' (Figure 4), sharpened sticks and different deadfalls.

The bow and arrow were the primary equipment used by the Veddas and later they developed effective equipment to hunt forest animals. In the past, bow and arrow were made from natural materials from the forest. Bows were made out of wood obtained from the plant 'Kolon' (*Adina cordfolia*), 'Kakilla' (*Cyathocalyx zeylanicus*) or 'Kobba-val' (*Allophylus cobbe*). The bow string was constructed using the inner sheath of the bark of the 'Aralu' (*Terminalia chebula*) tree. The shaft of the arrow was made of the wood of the 'Velan' (*Pterospermum suberifolium*) and feathered with the plums of an owl (*Strigiformes*) and/or jungle cock (*Gallus sonneratii*). Arrow heads were made of different natural materials found in the forest and were matched with the size of the hunting animal. The shells of the river mussels (*U. lamellatus* Lea and *U. marginatus* Lam) were used to formulate arrow heads. Arrow heads made of the shells of fresh water bivalves were used to kill small animals such as iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) and monkeys (*Macaca Fascicularis*). Moreover, the arrow heads were made from flattened iron obtained from local black smiths. These arrow heads were in a lanceolate shape with sharp edges. With the introduction of steel arrow heads the utilization of shells was abundant because they could hunt larger animals easily using arrows with metal heads. Based on the size of the animal they developed bows, bow stings, arrows and

arrow heads with varying capabilities. Stronger and larger bows and metal head arrows were reserved for hunting larger animals such as wild pigs (*Sus scrofaaffinis*), deer (*Axis axis ceylonensis*) and Sambur (*Rusa unicolor unicolor*) while small/medium size bows and wooden made arrows were used for small animals such as peafowl (*Pavocristatus*) and land monitors (*Varanus bengalensis*). Another indigenous technique used was the deadfall known as 'Habaka' to kill the animal instantly. These were traps placed in paths used by the animals for water or foods. The trap comprised a frame made of wood over which a bundle of stones/ stone was hung. 'Habaka' was designed for each type of animal; for example 'Rila habaka' was for monkey (*Macaca sinica*), 'Ha habaka' for rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) and 'Talagoyi habaka' for monitor lizard. Such traps were also designed for other animals including pangolin (*Manis crassicodata*), spotted deer (*Axis axis ceylonensis*), hare (*Lepus nigricollis*), sambhur (*Cervus unicolor*) and jungle fowl (*Gallus lafayetii*). Moreover, sharpened sticks were used to kill the animals by hitting them once trapped. Later, Veddas used metal axes called 'Gal rakki' in addition to bow and arrow for hunting purposes. Generally, it can be observed that, Veddas always carry a small metal axe on their shoulders (Figure 4).

Occasionally, they used other methods like throwing sticks and stone slings. Besides all these types of equipment, dogs greatly contributed to the killing of the animals. Veddas have trained their dogs from a younger age for hunting small animals, especially, monitor lizard, sambhur and pigs. However, Veddas never tried to hunt bears (*Ursus arctos*), elephants (*Elephas maximus*) and buffaloes (*Bubalus bubalis*). But tortoise (*Lissemys ceylonensis*), giant squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*), peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) and the common brown monkeys were victims of Veddas in their hunting.



**Figure 3.** The bow and arrow of Vedda used for hunting animals



**Figure 4.** Metal axe called as ‘gal rakki’ used for hunting purposes

Other than these animals, the Veddas used to hunt certain types of birds. The most enjoyed bird meats include ‘Batagoya’ (*Treron pompadora*), ‘Vali Kukula’ (*Gallus lafayettii*), ‘Haban Kukula’ (*Galloperdix bicalcarata*) and ‘Dum Bonna’ (*Coracias benghalensis*). Wooden poles coated with plant-based gummy substances were used for this purpose. Plant sap obtained from ‘Daluk’ cactus (*Euphorbia antiquorum*) was dried to make the gummy material.

Thirsty birds used to rest on these poles before going to water directly. Once bird’s feet stuck onto the pole, the Vedda boys who had remained hidden would catch them. These sticky traps were used to catch waterfowl (*Anseriformes*) and cormorants (‘Diya kawa’, *Phalacrocorax niger*). Vedda boys used to collect bird eggs from their nests. Besides, bird eggs of ‘Wali kukula’,

‘Haban kukula’ and ‘Watu kurulla’ (*Perdicula asiatica*) were collected and used raw or boiled.

More than meat and eggs, fish consumption was abundant among the Veddas due to the availability of rivers and water streams in the forest. Fish were caught by using plant-based poisons. Abundantly used plants for fish poisoning include the juice of the ‘Pus-vel’ (*Entada scandens*), milk from the ‘Daluk’ (*Euphorbia antiquorum*) (cactus milk), crushed fruits of ‘Kukurumahan’ bush (*Randia dumetorum*), unripe fruits of ‘Thimbiri’ (*Diospyros malabaricus*) and bruised roots of ‘Kala wael’ (*Derris uliginosa*). These poisons were exploited either individually or as a mix of selected poisons depending on the target fish variety. Among the freshwater fish consumed by the Veddas were ‘Lula’ (*Ophio cephalusstriatus*), ‘Magura’

(*Clarias brachysoma*) and 'Hunga' (*Heteropneusts fossils*). Another relish fish type 'Kavaia' (*Anabas testudineus*) was found from the muddy areas after digging the dry ponds. However, the consumption of fish is still in practice by the Veddas as a part of their forest life.

In general, food processing methods practiced by Vedda were not very complex. They knew the fire formation techniques from their ancestors, particularly from the stone age man. The fire was made by rubbing two dry sticks together or by dashing the blade of an axe on a very hard surface. Therefore, from the beginning of their forest life, meat was consumed as roasted or burnt on the fire. The meat was also roasted in ashes while deer's flesh was dried on a rack and smoked. Venison was often sun-dried on the floor or on the rack made by wood and smoked by lighting a fire underneath before consumption. Veddas used both fire and sunlight to smoke and/or heat venison after tearing into stripes.

Among the animals hunted by the Veddas, rabbit, deer, monitor lizard and sambhur were abundantly consumed using diverse and simple food formulations. To prepare sambhur meat, first, the carcasses were skinned and cut using the arrow head and axe. The meat was then dried on the wooden frames using sunlight. Similarly, the meat of the monitor lizard was roasted on a grill or with heated charcoal after removing the skin and other unnecessary parts.

Pangolins (*Manis crassicaudata*) and tortoise (*Lissemys ceylonensis*) meat were among the other favored meat types and considered as Veddas 'good eatings'. In general, these meats were formulated as a curry after removing its hard-outer cover (scales or shell) in a special manner. The carcasses were placed on two pieces of wood under which firewood is lit and turned around. After heating to a certain extent, they were removed from the flame and scales were removed by a small axe. Then

spices, especially, wild green chilies (*Capsicum annuum*), pepper (*Piper sylvestre*) and turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) were added in to cut pieces of pangolin flesh and cooked. However, Veddas' most favored meat was the monkey and its other varieties. In addition, roasted paws and tails of the small animals were the other popular diets of the Vedda people. Besides roasting, drying and smoking, meat was formed in different ways. Vedda had different cuisines with meat based fillings; the best known three 'Perume' (meaning of perume is kind of filling) dishes were, 'Gona perume', 'Goya-tel-perume' and 'Le-perume'. 'Gona perume' is a sort of sausage containing alternate layers of sambhur meat and fat. 'Le-perume' is also similarly prepared adding a layer of blood clots. 'Goya-tel-perume' is made using the tail of the monitor lizard and stuffed with fat obtained from its sides and roasted in embers.

Veddas prepared the fish for consumption after cooking or roasting. Fish was cooked in water with salt and different herbs. Fish was also dried over a wooden frame similar to drying meat over a slow fire or sunlight. Cooking the head and tail of the larger fish varieties such as 'Theliya' (*Mastacembelus armatus*) and 'Magura' (*Clarias batrachus*) followed a different preparation method which was formulated as an accompaniment for 'Thalapa' made of maize flour. In this process, the fish parts were boiled in water with salt and chilies, after adding a small amount of corn flour to thicken the gravy.

### **3.1.2 Gathering and processing methods of forest produce**

During the forest life of Vedda, they had exploited different forest produce such as edible plants, fruits and yams. Both were easily found from the forest to fulfill the hunger needs of Vedda compared with hunting animals which is a difficult exercise. Among the yams, the tubers of three *Dioscorea* species namely 'Gonala' (*Dioscorea spicata*), 'Katuala' (*D. pentaphylla*), 'Hiritala'

(*D. oppositifolia*), 'Kidaran' (*Arisaema leschenaultii*) and cassava roots (*Manihot esculenta*) were widely consumed. Generally, yams were boiled in a water pot placed over three stones and occasionally, they were roasted in hot ash like meat. Sometimes, yams or tubers were prepared as curries with a few spices, such as chilies and curry leaves. Especially, larger yams such as Katuala were cut into pieces and boiled with spices to make a curry called as 'Katuala-bokka'. From the early days to more recent times, boiled or roasted manioc has gained an important place in their diet.

Moreover, various types of herbs such as leaves of 'Penithora' (*Cassia tora*), 'Kirimadu' (*Ipomoea cymosa*) and 'Kara' (*Canthium coromandelicum*) were used. Several wild fruits including wild mango (*Mangifera zeylanica*), 'Mora' (*Nephelium longana*), 'Weera' (*Hemicyclia sepiaria*), 'Palu' (*Manikkara hexandra*), 'Bulu' (*Terminalia bellirica*) and 'Gal siyambala' (*Dialeum ovoideum*) were also consumed.

Besides those foods, one of the staple foods gathered by the Vedda was wild honey, which they collect by climbing trees and burning dry leaves to make the bees fly away. Every year around June, they go on a two-month-long journey to collect honey from the forest. 'Mee' (from Bees), 'Bambara' (from Wasp), 'Danduwel Kaname Kolha' were the different types of honey collected from the forest. The Vedda has been used to track down the honey combs by listening to the sounds on the route taken by the bees and wasps, and by carefully following their flying path. They mentioned that, it is difficult to break a wasp-comb.

They tied up the branches of the 'Pana' tree (*Cassipourea ceylanica*) underneath and prepare a torch by putting fire wood over it. When the comb was smoked by the fire, bees flew away from the comb and immediately the honey comb was dropped into the hollowed gourd and lowered along the rope. The honey was then gradually collected in the

gourd and divided equally among those who joined the expedition which is known as 'Bambara Kepilla' in the Vedda language.

### 3.2 The Way of Fulfilling Food Needs Through Cultivation

Dramatically, Vedda people have transformed their lifestyle into cultivation while practicing hunting and gathering life intermittently. While living in the temporarily settled huts, cultivation was carried out after clearing a selected area from the forest by making fire. This is referred to as slash and burn cultivation. The capability of predicting the periods of rainfall and drought was great support for their cultivation. Two forms of cultivation were practiced as wet farming (muddy agriculture) and dry farming (Chena cultivation/slash and burn).

Crops grown under shifting cultivation include finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), maize (*Zea mays*), beans, yams, gourds, melons, pumpkin, peas, squashes, manioc, chilies, eggplants, tomatoes, and okra. Maize is the most abundant crop type used for cultivation from the past and even today. Yams, gourds, melons, pumpkin, peas and manioc were also cultivated. For the cultivation of different crops, yams and vegetables, Veddas did not use any form of chemical fertilizer. In earlier times, when the soil was found to be barren, they changed to another land for cultivation from the forest. Once the harvest was gained from the Chena, they planted a form of paddy known as 'Goda el'. Consequently, the use of jungle land was prohibited, and their land acquired, they could no longer look for new land areas from the forest.

Grains of maize and finger millet were harvested and dried before processing. However, freshly boiled maize seeds with scraped coconut were a much-relished delicacy. Besides, fresh or dried (soaked before boiling) maize seeds were cooked with rice in clay pots.

### 3.3 Transition to Colonies and the Present Situation

The wildlife of the Vedda community has undergone change and the Veddas have transmitted to villages or colonies with the influence of different laws, restrictions and many development projects conducted around the inhabitants of the early Veddas. After independence from the British government, many development projects were implemented by the Sri Lankan government. The accelerated Mahaweli river development project was one of the development projects that affected the wildlife of the indigenous community severely. When accelerated Mahaweli development project evolved, the old "Veddas' Country" was segmented into "systems" labeled with alphabetic designations: system A, B and C, and colonized with indigenous Vedda population and ordinary people who wished to settle down from the rest of the country. Their hunting forests were destroyed and traditional honey bee sites were leveled by bulldozers by different development projects conducted by the governments. Different water streams and rivers were diverted for rice paddies. Their hunting forests were reserved as wildlife conservation ground and new laws for wildlife conservation were settled. Consequently, the Veddas could not enter the forest without permission. Therefore, they moved to the colonies or villages allocated for them by the governments.

Veddas had been occupational hunter-gatherers and guardians of the forest for many years and were later 'rehabilitated' as rice cultivators. These resettlement areas are situated outside the forest, near Sinhalese villages. Rice-growing areas are unfamiliar to the Veddas and are unsuitable for their indigenous lifestyle. Gradually, they have practised to live with those environmental conditions while struggling to protect their traditional way of life. However, with forest

reserves restricted, the Veddas are still engaging in a questionable struggle to protect their tradition and culture. The biggest threats to their existence are the scores of new settlements being opened up in their traditional 'homelands' by rural and city populations which decrease spaces, hunting grounds and sources of food. Wild Vedda used caves as their homes in the ancient age because hunting was their means of living. When the cultivation of chenas (plots of land for cultivating crops) became an alternative of gathering, they constructed small temporary huts near the cultivated areas and with the changes of location for chenas, their settlement also changed. With the forest conservation laws, they were forced to settle in one place without changing cultivated areas and their settlements. These confined areas allocated by the government were referred to as 'Vedda colonies'. The new life in colonies has allowed them to have a higher level of social interaction with the Sinhalese and Tamil people in the adjoining villages. With the changes in their settlements, food habits also changed drastically because of mixing with other cultures. Mainly, maize and finger millet are cultivated in the lands near the settlement areas. They have formulated different foods from the maize and finger millet using their indigenous processing techniques. Harvested maize seeds have been dried or smoked to make maize flour by using stones. 'Roti' and 'Thalapa' formulated from maize flour are the most popular meals among the Veddas as energy-rich foods even now. 'Roti' is a flattened dough formulated by mixing flour with scraped coconut and salt. A grill formed by placing a few sticks over two or three stones is used to make the 'Roti' (Figure 5).

Maize flour is boiled in salted water until it becomes thick paste or balls to cook 'Thalapa'. Clay pots or thick fruit shells are used as cooking utensils. Occasionally, gravy made with the meat of hunting animals is much relished with 'Thalapa'. Besides, gravy made with different seeds of wild beans is

largely consumed with 'Thalapa'. Similarly, finger millet flour is used to make 'Roti' and 'Thalapa' (Figure 5). Sometimes maize seeds are boiled and eaten simply. In addition to that, different yams, and tubers are consumed



with scraped coconut. Among them, manioc is the most consumed diet of Veddas in recent days.



**Figure 5.** Formulation of *Roti* on a grill made of sticks by making fire

Another important food preparation is based on flour obtained from the various wild food sources. 'Madu' (*Cycas circinalis*) seeds are consumed by being cut into slices, dried, ground and baked into hard cakes. The flowers of the 'Mee' tree (*Bassia longifolia*) are collected, dried under sun and made into flour. Even today, 'Roti' or 'Thalapa' made from flower of 'Mee' tree is very popular among Vedita people. Besides, they gathered wild plant seeds like 'Olu' (*Nymphaea lotus*), 'Manel' (*Nymphaea stellata*) and 'Nelum' (*Nelumbium speciosum*) from the water tanks near their settlements. These seeds are consumed as roasted seeds or cooked with rice.

They chew betel (*Piper betle*) as much as they consume rice. They have made it a habit to chew betel whether it be for sorrow, happiness, hunger or even to get over their loneliness. In the earliest times, they use 'Demata' (*Gmelina arborea Roxb*) instead of betel and instead of dried tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) they used raw tobacco.

Other than eating roasted or dried meat directly, Veddas create curries from the smoked or fresh meat with things they can find easily in the forests such as salt ('*Diya lunu*'), chillies, lime juice and aromatic leaf

'*Karapincha*' (*Murraya koenigii*). It also happened that the meat would be stewed with wild yams. They also know of a stew of venison or pork in Manioc gruel.

Although the Veddas were originally hunters and gatherers; nowadays Veddas have been engaged in chena cultivation and other commercial activities. Among the present Veddas, maize and finger millet from the chenas have become the main food resources to make different foods to fulfill their hunger needs. Although in the past, very simple techniques were used to grind the seeds into flour, nowadays they use '*Kurahan gala*' to grind the finger millet seeds and mortar and pestle for maize flour processing. 'Roti' and 'Thalapa' made with maize and finger millet flour are much relished among the present Veddas. Generally, hunt meat was used to cook a gravy for the 'Thalapa' in the early days and now they make green gram or other wild bean curries for consuming 'Thalapa'. Besides, different beans are cultivated and used for their foods. Rarely would they be able to hunt animals or collect honey.

When considering their food habits, it seems that they are consuming highly nutritious food that give more energy for maintaining their life in the jungle. However, recent

Veddas have to mix with other cultures and consequently, rice, bread and curries which are typical of Sinhalese food have become their common diet now. Therefore, money has become a critical factor to buy the food needs for their family. As a result of this, the Veddas have been subjected to many changes during the past half-century or so. Today they hunt animals to earn money rather than utilizing them for family needs. Sometimes, hunted flesh or meat is sold to the Sinhala traders to buy the required food. They gather bee honey to sell and earn money. However, due to the influence of modern society, young Veddas have become used to a sedentary life and have begun to consume artificial food. Hence, there is now a threat of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, etc among the Vedita community. Veddas are coming more and more in contact with their Sinhalese neighbors, and it is extremely unlikely that the next generation will remain pure Vedita.

### 3.4 Occasional Food Preparations

Specific food preparations were carried out depending on the situation among the Vedita community. During the pregnancy period, pregnant women are given specially prepared food with the hoof of deer and samburs, eggs and tail of iguana and other wild animals' meat, seeds of breadfruit (*Artocarpus nobilis*), yams, leafy green vegetables and bees' honey to provide an adequate level of nutrition. However, they are not given Bhraamara honey (honey collected by Bhrunara type of bee) and meat of the hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*), hare, deer as it is believed that if a pregnant woman eats those foods, the fetus becomes somnolent. In addition, a pregnant woman avoids cycas seeds, which are said to produce diarrhea and vomiting.

Feeding mothers are given the rice with special gravy prepared with garlic (*Allium sativum*), pepper (*Piper nigrum*), ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) and curry leaves. In addition, feeding mothers do not eat either

the fat of monitor lizard or monkey flesh, because they believe that these would produce purging and would kill the infant. However, the mother is allowed to eat the meat of grey monkeys.

When they got sick, herbal remedies are sought. Two decades ago they rarely went to the hospitals for medicine. They used only coriander and porridge prepared with 'Ela batu' (*Solanum melongena*) for any sort of illness. Leaves and roots are ground to get the juice and the porridge is prepared by boiling rice with this juice. This herbal preparation is effective for ailments such as cough, cold, fever and asthma.

### 3.5 Indigenous Food Preservation Methods

Indigenous food preservation techniques are unique to the Sri Lankan indigenous Veddas. Among those, preserving meat in honey was the most popular technique. They used this method not only to preserve meats but also to make the meat softer and fitter to be eaten without any further cooking or seasoning. They used a hollowed tree or hollowed rock and later clay pots to store the meats in honey. In this method, the honeycomb was placed at the bottom of the hollow, upon which raw venison or sambhur meat was placed. Then, bees' honey was poured over it. Similarly, a few layers of meat and honey were formed to almost fill the hollow. Another honeycomb was placed upon it before it was covered over with leaves and a large circular piece of rock. Finally, a mixture of clay and wood ash was used to seal the hollow and to protect it from rainwater, insects, ants and wild animals.

Other than the preserving meats with honey, drying and smoking were used to preserve excess foods for future use. When there was excess meat, it was often sun-dried on the floor or surface of a rock or on a rack made by wood. Moreover, excess meat was smoked on a wooden rack and set a fire underneath to preserve them for a longer time. After they

become 'Village Veddas', harvested maize and finger millet seeds were kept for a longer time by sun-drying the grains on a rock or handmade wooden racks. Besides, whole maize cobs were hung over the cooking place of their huts and kept for drying by smoking. When they need them to prepare the foods, they removed the seeds from the cob and soaked them in water before grinding or boiling.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The Veddas, the indigenous community of Sri Lanka, are a most valuable and unique group which live in Sri Lanka who are the descendants from the prehistoric stone age man. As forest dwellers, hunting animals, gathering fruits and vegetables, digging yams and collecting honey were mainly their source of foods. With time, wild Veddas have become village Veddas who also cultivate crops in Chenas for their food. Presently, the Veddas have settled in confined places with changes in their lifestyles and indigenous food habits. The hunting and gathering lifestyle of indigenous Vedda has diminished due to varying impacts from modernization and civilization. As a result, the Veddas have mixed with the Sinhalese and Tamil, and their culture. With that, indigenous practices of hunting, gathering and processing of foods have disappeared among the recent Vedda generations. Consequently, modern food has replaced indigenous food. However, the Veddas continue to struggle to protect their own indigenous food culture from the modernization of their future generation.

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