



Cultural Borrowing and Religious Transformation: Yakkure and Henanigala Vedda Syncretism with Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

The Vedda, recognized as the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, originally practiced a religious belief system centered around Na Yakku. However, development projects initiated during the late 90s, forced them to resettle, and create a process of cultural erosion and the syncretism of Sinhalese Buddhist and Hindu practices into their life. This research aimed to examine the extent of religious borrowing and syncretism with Buddhist practices and its impact on the Vedda people's entire socio-cultural system, as well as efforts that can be undertaken toward cultural preservation and restoration. The research problem addressed in this study is how external pressures, particularly resettlement, led to a decline in the Vedda's unique religious belief system. Data collection was done through interviews, life-histories, focus group discussions, and participant observations that were conducted at Yakkure and Henanigala Vedda villages. In addition, sociodemographic data were collected from 193 families in Henanigala and 107 families in Yakkure through a questionnaire. Qualitative insights gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis, and quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS. Results reveal that resettlement caused significant disruption to the Vedda's traditional way of life, with extensive borrowing and adoption of Buddhist and Hindu practices, leading to extensive damage to their cultural system. While all the people of Yakkure identify their ethnicity as Sinhalese, only 41% of Henanigala residents identify as Vedi. Notably, both villages identify as Buddhist. The sudden resettlement into a new sociocultural location forced them to adopt ways of life from their neighbors, as there was insufficient time for natural adaptation. The forest-based Na Yak belief system, once central to their culture, was disturbed due to the resettlement. While rituals such as Bodhi Puja and almsgiving centered around Buddhist practices now dominate their religious life, remnants of traditional rituals like the Kiri Koraha and Hathma dances are rarely performed, often only as exhibitions. In conclusion, the Vedda communities of Yakkure and Henanigala have undergone profound cultural and religious transformations due to forced resettlement. These changes have led to the assimilation of Sinhalese Buddhist and Hindu practices, resulting in the erosion of their indigenous religious identity. The study highlights the urgent need for documenting and preserving Vedda culture and advocating for land rights to safeguard their traditions.

1. Introduction

The Vedda of Sri Lanka represent the indigenous hunter-gatherer population of the island. Currently the word “Indigenous” is used as a general term to refer to native people living in many countries all around the world. They are defined as “... *the descendants of those who were there before others, who now constitute the mainstream and dominant society. They are defined partly by descend, partly by features that indicate their distinctiveness from those who arrived latter and partly by their own view of themselves*” (Corry, 2011). Accordingly, Vedda people can be identified as the Indigenous people of the country and they have been recognized as a distinct group of people due to their cultural and biological uniqueness (Ananda, 2019; Ananda & Nahallage, 2022).

However, the indigenous hunter-gatherers, documented by ethnologist C. G. Seligman (1911), now have largely disappeared, and their traditional way of life have been confined to historical records. The remaining Vedda population is also rapidly integrating with the mainstream, borrowing life ways to survive in their current habitats, as their traditional lifestyle no longer sustains them. The cultural uniqueness that once defined them is now preserved only among the older generation, while the younger generation shows little interest in maintaining their identity/culture, leading to a rapid decline of their indigenous traditions (Ananda & Nahallage, 2018; 2022).

Historically, they lived in *Bintenna*, known as *Maha Vedhi Rata* or Vedda Country, as noted by Robert Knox and John Davy (Knox, 1817; Davy, 1983). Seligman visited about 16 Vedda communities in 1911 (Seligman, 2011), and by 1978, James Brow reported about 44 villages with a population of approximately 6,000 only in Anuradhapura (Brow, 2011). The Mahaweli Development Project initiated during 1960s, further restricted them into a few regions in Sri Lanka. Currently, they are mainly found in the Eastern, Uva, and North

Central Provinces, specifically in the districts of Moneragala, Ampara, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, and Badulla with the total population of about 10,000 (Silva & PUNCHIHewa, 2011). Despite their geographical confinement, the influence of the Sinhala and Tamil cultures have significantly impacted on them, and these influences are obvious in every aspect of their culture. Consequently, among only a few of the older Vedda people that live today, memories of their original way of life are preserved in the form of oral traditions.

The cultural impact of the Vedda communities in Sri Lanka is not an isolated case, but part of a worldwide narrative of how indigenous peoples have been shaped by dominant religious and sociocultural systems. Many other indigenous groups around the world have experienced similar shifts. The Ainu of Japan, for example, were steadily absorbed into mainstream Japanese society, losing much of their language, spiritual practices, and traditional ways of life (Sjöberg, 1993). In Australia, Aboriginal communities suffered decades of forced removals and missionary interventions, which led to the replacement of their ancestral beliefs with Christianity (Attwood B. , 2003). And in North America, Native American cultures were intensely altered by assimilationist policies like boarding schools and land allotments that aimed to erase indigenous identities (Adams, 2020). These examples show how indigenous cultural and religious systems often do not simply vanish—but evolve, merge, and sometimes survive in hybrid forms. The Vedda experience, then, repeats a larger historical pattern, one where adaptation, resilience, and loss are all tightly intertwined. These transformations of Vedda lifestyle, including the original ways have been extensively documented and reported by researchers from around the world, including Sri Lanka. Beginning with the significant, and comprehensive ethnographic research conducted between 1908 and 1911 by ethnologists C. G. Seligman and Z. B. Seligman

(Seligman, 2011), and continuing through the works of N. Wijesekara, James Brow (1970), Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe (1990), Jon Dart (1990), Thangaraja (1995), Obeyesekere (2002), Punchihewa and Silva (2011), up to the more recent studies by Ananda and Nahallage (2022), hundreds of publications have filled gaps in our understanding of various aspects of the Vedda people. As one of the cultural domains, the religious belief system of the Vedda people, especially the basis of their entire cultural system, which is primarily centered around the worship of Na Yak (kin demons) has also been extensively documented (Seligman and Seligman, 1911; Davy, 1983; Meegaskumbura, 1990; 1995; Wijesekara, 1982; 1987). While these works provide valuable ethnographic insights into Vedda religion and the early influences of Sinhalese and other major communities, there is still a significant gap on the evolution of religious belief system in terms of their resettlements. Specifically, the transformation of *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* Vedda people's religion under the pressures of resettlement, how they lost entire cultural system due to this sudden cultural shift, the way they built survival strategies to adapt into the new sociocultural setting through cultural borrowing, primarily from the dominant Sinhalese Buddhists and to a lesser extent from Tamils' Hindu belief system.

Vedda people living in both study settings of the present study; *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* have similar experience on significant cultural and religious transformations due to development projects and resettlement, resembling to other Vedda communities of the country. When comparing both groups, *Yakkure* has shown a more advanced assimilation patterns in their religious belief system, while *Henanigala* is still at the midway of this transformation (cultural evolution). This phenomenon raises questions about the nature and extent of this religious borrowing, its impact on the Vedda communities' entire cultural system, and extent and patterns of religious syncretism.

Some scholars might interpret Vedda's evolving belief system through the lens of cultural hybridization, emphasizing reciprocal blending, or even *survivance*, as proposed by Gerald Vizenor, framing these changes as strategies of cultural continuity rather than passive loss (Vizenor, 1999). While these perspectives are relevant, this study foregrounds *syncretism* to emphasize Vedda's selective adaptation to dominant religious systems under structural pressure, which has contributed to the erosion of their autonomous cultural identity.

Hence, the research aimed to examine the extent of religious borrowing and syncretism with Buddhist practices and its impact on the *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* Vedda people's entire cultural system, as well as efforts that can be undertaken toward cultural preservation and restoration. In addition, the research also examined the *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* situations to understand how indigenous religions adapt and transform in response to external influences. The primary problem addressed in this study is how external pressures, particularly resettlement, have led to a decline in the Vedda's unique religious and cultural identity.

2. Materials and Methods

Yakkure and *Henanigala* indigenous groups were purposively selected as the study groups of the present research, concentrating on their historical and present cultural aspects and the attention of early researchers. Although *Henanigala* has gained considerable interest in previous research, *Yakkure* has only been mentioned as a Vedda village in the writings of Seligman, leaving its historical and present sociocultural background largely unknown. The selection of *Henanigala* as a well-known, previously studied Vedda village and *Yakkure* as an unknown entity is intended to allow a comparison between the two communities, each of which appears to be at different stages of cultural evolution.

Yakkure village is situated in the North Central Province in Polonnaruwa District. It belongs to the *Dimbulagala* Divisional Secretariat and Pahala Yakkure Grama Niladari Division. They have been resettled into their present village (*Pahala Yakkure*)

from their traditional village *Parana Yakkure* in 1987 was affected by the Mahaweli Development Project. The distance from the main city; *Kaduruwela* to the Village is approximately 56 km and there are about 284 km from Colombo to *Yakkure*.

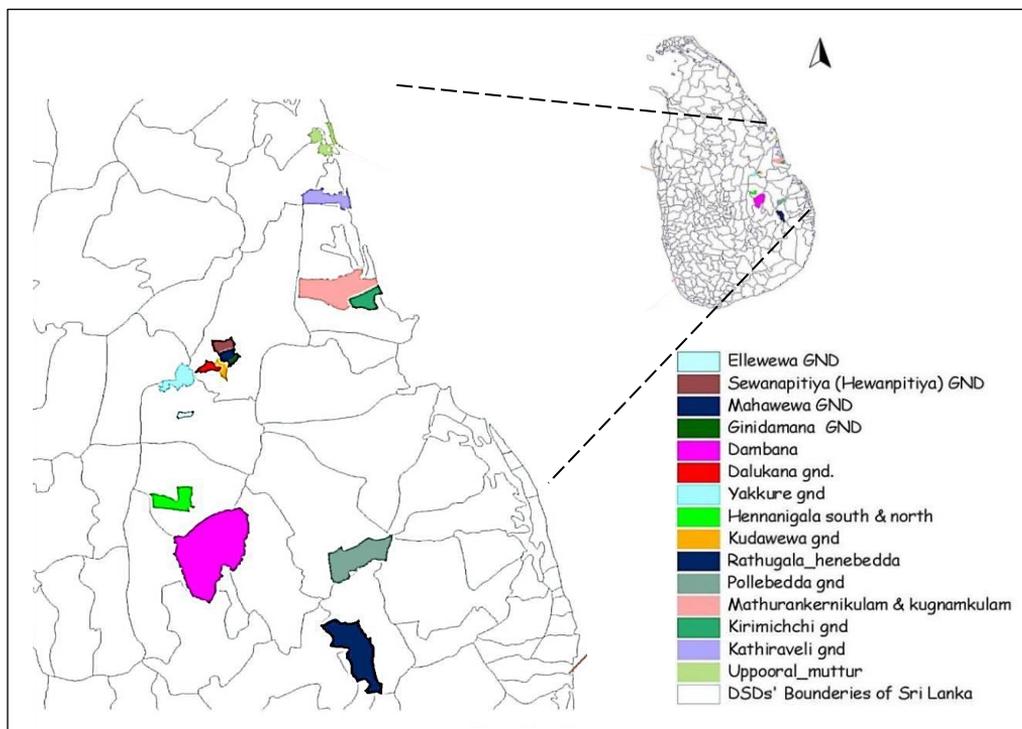


Figure 01. Current Indigenous Habitations in Sri Lanka (Silva & Punchihewa, 2011).

Henanigala is situated in the Eastern Province, Ampara District. It belongs to the *Dehiaththakandiya* Secretariat Division and to *Parana Gama* GN (Grama Niladhari) Division. *Henanigala* South, *Paranagama* and *Kale Gama* are three villages that belong to the *Parana Gama* GN Division. *Kandeganvila*, *Dambana*, *Kotabakiniya* (In Uva *Bintenna*) Vedda families were relocated to *Hennanigala* South in Mahaweli System 'C' under the Mahaweli development project during 1980s. There are about 255 km from Colombo to *Henanigala*.

2.1 Population, Sample and Sampling Techniques

During the data collection period (from 2017-2019) the population of *Henanigala* South

division consisted of 1930 people belonging to 485 families (GN Reports). But only about 1450 people that belonged to 320 families were reported as the decedents of the Indigenous population (GN Reports) while others were Sinhalese by ethnicity. Population of *Pahala Yakkure* GN Division is 380 that belong to 133 families (GN Reports).

Purposive sampling method was used for the selection of participants for the study. This method of selecting individuals was chosen to ensure participants who can provide rich and unique cultural information and who are descendants of the Indigenous lineage. Based on the population data gathered through village officers, sample sizes to gather sociodemographic data through a

questionnaire were calculated using the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) formula. The number of families in each village was considered as the population. Accordingly, 193 families from *Henanigala* and 107 from *Yakkure*, (including dropouts) were selected as the sample sizes. For the qualitative data on historical context and pre-resettlement practices, impact of development and resettlement, syncretism of Buddhist

practices, community perspectives and experiences, cultural shift, borrowing, adaptation and cultural preservation the oldest descendants of the indigenous lineage were purposively selected after a pilot survey. Sample sizes for these qualitative data were decided based on the concept of saturation as explained by O'Reilly and Parker (2013).

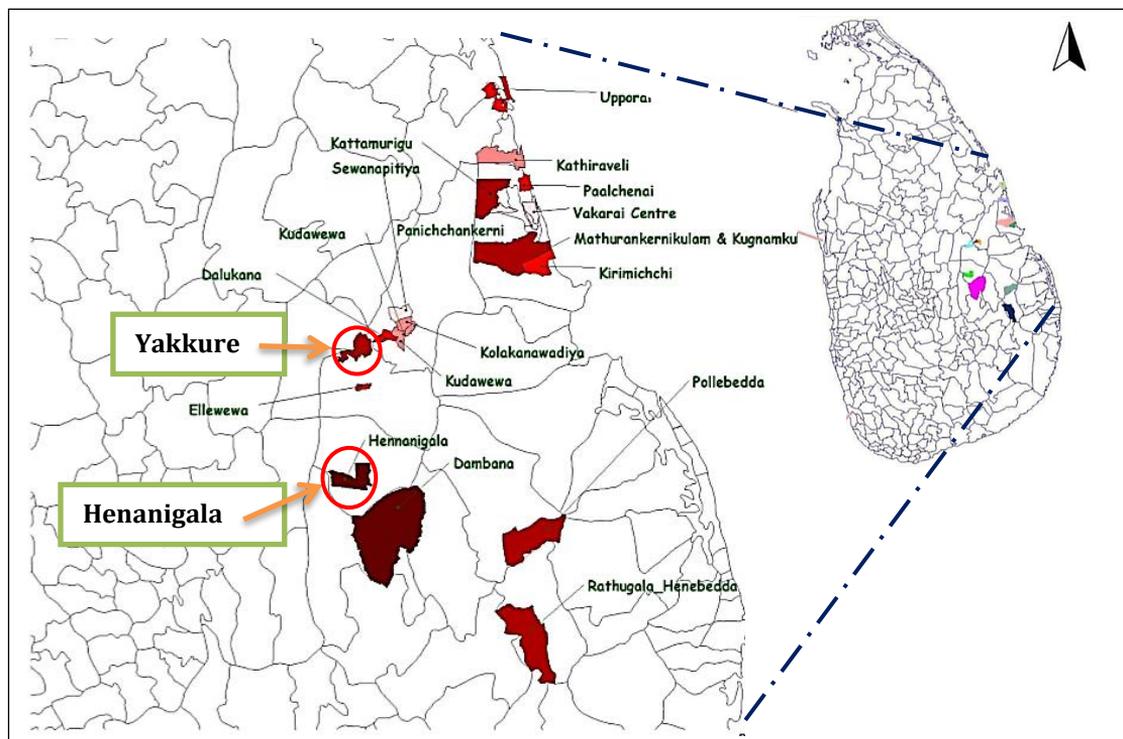


Figure 2. Yakkure and Henanigala Villages (Silva and Punchihewa, 2011)

2.2 Data Collection Techniques

One member of each family that belongs to the indigenous lineage (*Henanigala*: $n = 193$ and *Yakkure* $n = 107$) was selected to collect sociodemographic data through an interviewer administered questionnaire.

Secondly, interviews were conducted by the researcher. Informants were identified as 'Key Informants' and 'Specialized Informants' based on their knowledge on religious belief

system, culture, resettlement etc. Data saturation was reached after the 6th interview (with 2 specialized informants and 4 key informants, above 55 yrs, 3 females and 3 males) carried out at *Yakkure* village. In *Henanigala*, data saturation was reached after the 7th interview (with 3 specialized informants and 4 key informants, above 45 yrs, 3 females and 4 males).

Further three oral histories from each village were conducted (above 55 yrs, 4 males and 2

females) and participant observations on religious behaviors and rituals were conducted in between the research period and later.

In addition, two focus group discussions (FGD) in each village were conducted on the 'resettlement, influence of dominant groups, cultural change, the ways of that can implement for the cultural preservation', with the participants representing both genders (age above 18), in local language (Sinhala). Nine members from *Yakkure* (4 females and 5 males) and eight from *Henanigala* (3 females and 5 males) participated in these FGDs led by the first researcher.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data collected in quantitative form were analyzed using SPSS (16.0 version). Most of the data was in qualitative form, and, therefore, the thematic method was used to analyze. The thematic analysis involved several key steps to develop and refine the themes. Initially, tape-recorded interviews, FGDs, Oral Histories were transformed into transcripts and merged with additional written records (notes that the researcher gathered during the research through observations and participant observations). Later these transcripts were reviewed to gain a general understanding of the data. This was followed by initial coding, where segments of text were labeled with codes considering significant ideas and patterns. These codes were then organized into emerging themes through a repetitive process of grouping and re-grouping related codes.

Few of the main key themes identified were '*the impact of development and resettlement on traditional practices*', '*syncretism of Buddhist practices into Vedda religious belief system, and community's responses to these changes*'. Each theme was further refined by re-reviewing its relevance and consistency with the data. Final themes and sub themes were clearly defined and illustrated with

direct quotes and researchers' own observations that were collected with the minimum effect of personal bias.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained by the Ethics review committee of the Faculty of Medical Sciences in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (Ref No-18/18). Participation in this research was entirely volunteered. After obtaining necessary consents researchers commenced the data collection through prior mentioned techniques according to the convenience of the informant with higher assurance of their privacy.

3. Results and Discussion

Because of the Mahaweli Development Project, the *Yakkure* people were relocated to their present locality, "Pahala Yakkure," in 1987, situated 3 to 4 km away from their traditional land (formerly located beside the *Yakkure Wewa*). After resettlement, they began living among Sinhalese people. At the time of the resettlement, each family was given half an acre from the dry land for a house and 2 ½ acres from wetlands for paddy cultivations.

Seligman described *Yakkure* as a village about six miles from *Kalukalaeba*, where the inhabitants identified themselves as Veddas, though they showed less traditional Vedda features (*Vedda* blood according to Seligman) compared to the *Kalukalaeba* people. The *Yakkure* people had been living in around 40 closely built mud houses. Seligman noted many cattle foraging around the village and has referred to *Yakkure* as an important center for cattle farming (Seligman, 1911, p. 168). Furthermore, they had been engaged in Chena cultivation but had not provided evidence of paddy cultivation.

In 1981 under the Mahaweli development project new lands from the *Henanigala* south were shown to the indigenous chieftains that

lived in *Kendeganwila*. They cultivated their last *Chena* season in 1982 at *Kandeganwila*¹ and moved in to the *Henanigala* with the harvest of their final *Chena* cultivation. Accordingly, in 1983, 56 families were

relocated to *Henanigala* South that belongs to Mahaweli C Zone. Later twenty-eight families were relocated from *Kandeganwila* in two phases.

Table 01: Sociocultural Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Attributes	Yakkure		Henanigala	
		Number	%	Number	%
Gender	Female	63	58.9%	98	50.8%
	Male	44	41.1%	95	49.2%
	Total	107	100%	193	100%
Age	18-29	8	7.5%	16	8.3%
	30-39	14	13.1%	45	23.3%
	40-49	14	13.1%	55	28.5%
	50-59	34	31.8%	35	18.1%
	60-69	19	17.8%	25	13.0%
	Above 70	18	16.8%	17	8.8%
	Total	107	100%	193	100%
Ethnicity	Sinhala	107	100%	114	59%
	Vedi	0	0%	79	41%
	Total	107	100%	193	100%
Religion	Buddhist	107	100%	193	100%
	Total	107	100%	193	100%
Spoken Language	Vedi	0	0%	87	45%
	Sinhala	107	100%	2	1%
	Vedi & Sinhala	0	0%	104	54%
	Total	107	100%	193	100%
Marital Status	Married	85	79.4%	118	61.1%
	Unmarried	2	1.9%	2	1.0%
	Unmarried (Living together)	17	15.9%	57	29.5%
	Widow	2	1.9%	12	6.2%
	Separated	1	0.9%	4	2.1%
	Total	107	100%	193	100%

(Field Survey 2017-2019)

3.7 Socio-Demographic Background of *Yakkure* and *Henanigala*

The sociodemographic characteristics of both *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* villagers are shown in the Table 01. Significant differences

between the two villages were found, particularly in their self-identification. In *Yakkure* none of the villagers identify themselves as Veddas while only 41% of the *Henanigala* claimed themselves as Veddas. In addition, Vedi language as their traditional

¹ Situated about 4 to 5 km away from the Dambana, which was the foremost traditional habitat of the Henanigala people.

form of communication is only evident among 45% of *Henanigala* people. In relation to their religion which is the prime consideration of the present study, none of the villagers of both villages identify and acknowledge their religion as Veda but as Buddhists. These findings reveal that, in terms of identity, the *Yakkure* Vedda have been entirely Sinhalized and socioeconomically ruralized, whereas the *Henanigala* Vedda are still in the midst of Sinhalization and transitioning from their traditional cultural stage toward the rural village stage. On the other hand, it can be said that the latter are amid their evolutionary pathway toward a new socio-cultural stage. More evidence to prove these ideas are discussed in detail in the following sections.

3.7 Historical Context: Pre-Resettlement Religious Belief System of Vedda People

The ancient Vedda religious belief system is centered around *Na Yak* worship and associated practices, including magic, ceremonial dances, and invocations. This religious way of life has been described through 4 lengthy chapters (more than half of the entire book) of Seligman's ethnographic work (Seligman and Seligman, 1911). Firstly, this is due to the significant place that religious belief system was given within the entire cultural system, secondly due to the interlink their belief system with all the other aspects of life that cannot be described independently. However, in this section we only focus on the descriptions of Seligman and a few others that are relevant to our study settings and objectives.

Seligman noted that the Veddas had no concept of a single god in either their nature or culture. Their belief system is categorized into three layers:

1. The Cult of the Dead: This included worship of recent ancestors' spirits (*Na*

Yaku) and older spirits who were considered heroes, with *Kande Yaka* being the most important.

2. The Cult of Foreign Spirits: These spirits had become part of the Vedda belief system and were seen as protective.
3. The Cult of Hostile Foreign Spirits: These spirits retained their foreign nature and were often seen as hostile. Some true Vedda spirits were also given foreign attributes (Seligman and Seligman, 1911).

Wijesekara after about 70 years of the Seligman work, described Veddas religious beliefs under three categories, (a) belief in *Na Yaku* or cultural leaders who once served to the whole community, (b) naturalized animas worshiped from the ancient era, like *Kiri Amma*, the great female ancestor, and (c) deities borrowed from the Sinhalese. *Bandara* cult (*Gale Bandara*) is one of them; *Gale Deviyo*, *Gale yaka* and *Kande Wanniya* are among others (Wijesekara, 1982, p. 17). Meegaskumbura in 1995 added a fourth category called '*Bodhi puja widi*'² in to the aforementioned categories of the Seligman (Meegaskumbura, 1995, p. 105). The categories identified by Seligman, Wijesekara and Meegaskumbura represent different stages of their religious and cultural evolution. The transformation that has occurred over the past hundreds of years has altered the Vedda belief system rapidly and has generated a need for a new form of categorization to resemble the present nature of it. Consequently, we recategorized it as: (a) the traditional *Na Yak* centred belief system, and (b) Sinhalese Buddhist practices that include Hindu and Sinhalese deities.

Notably, religious practices pertaining to both categories are evident only among the older generations of both villages while representing two evolutionary stages of cultural evolutionary theories presented by E. B. Tylor (Tylor, 1971) and James Frazer (Frazer, 1995), illustrating characteristics

² practices used in the worship of Bo Tree by Buddhists.

belonging to a primitive stage and a developed stage. However, the younger generation does not belong in this duality, as they fully embrace the developed stage in both material and non-material cultures.

In the traditional belief system Vedda's most faithful Yak (demon) was *Kande*. Many generations ago, he had been a Vedda individual called *Kande*, a celebrated hunter, who on his death had become '*Kande Yaka*' (demon of the mountain), constantly invoked to assist in hunting. The majority of Vedda people believe that after the death, their spirits go to *Kande Yaka* and become his attendants and only the great warriors, hunters obtain the status of '*Yak*' after death. *Kande* is often associated with his younger brother *Bilinde* or *Bilinde Yak*. Both are generally invoked at the beginning of the "*Na Yak*" ceremony (ceremony of Kin Demons)" (Seligman, 1911).

In their traditional belief system, a strong link exists between the dead and the living. The desire to appease *Na Yak* is the constant concern of living. A magical ritual has also been developed for invoking spirits of dead ancestors with specific powers at various crises for different purposes. These are hunting, collecting honey (especially hornet honey), undiagnosed illness and pregnancy etc., (Wijesekara, 1982, pp. 18-19; Wijesekara, 1987, p. 114). For example, *Kande Yaka* especially helps in the tracking and hunting of sambur and spotted deer; another *yaka*; *Bambura*, is thought as helpful in killing pig, and especially assists them in finding yams, which are a major source of energy and a staple in the diet of the wild Vedda community (Seligman, 1908). This is an example that reveals how their traditional belief system has been intertwined with almost all their daily activities, habits, and behaviors. One of the most ancient traditional ceremonies practiced by the Veddas is '*Kiri Koraha*' in which the exorcist invokes the *Na Yaku* on special occasions, such as during pregnancy (for the protection of both the

mother and fetus), sickness, and before gathering honey (Seligman, 1908, p. 79). This ritual is one of the most well-known ceremonial dances (also a form of ancestral worship) of the Veddas, which Seligman and others have explained comprehensively (Seligman, 1911).

During Seligman's visit, the *Yakkure* people were aware of their ancestral spirits and practiced the invocation of *Na Yak*. They had a small temple made of mud in the shape of a hut, where they worshiped Sinhalese deities like Gale Bandara Deyo. Seligman also observed two rough stones near a tree on the bund of *Yakure Wewa*, which were sacred to Gane Deyo (Ganesa) (Seligman, 1911, p. 168). Among the deities worshiped by the *Yakkure* people were Gange Bandara, *Genikandia*, *Palugamman*, Vihara, and Mangara. Although they knew little about *Na Yakku* like *Indigolle Yak*, they were unfamiliar with others such as *Kande Yak*, *Bilindi Yak*, and *Bambura Yak*. They believed that shamans became *Na Yak* after death, but they did not know what happened to the spirits of ordinary people. Even though their knowledge of *Na Yak* and associated spirits was limited, they practiced dances and invoked spirits during crises such as illnesses and pandemics. *Kataragama deiyo* (deity) was especially invoked to protect chena (swidden fields), and offerings were made during the harvest. Mangara deiyo was also invoked to protect cattle, and there was a small temple dedicated to Mangara deiyo at the time of Seligman's study (Seligman, 1911, p. 177).

Henanigala people were living in *Dhambana* and later arrived in *Kandeganwila*. Therefore, their pre-resettlement religious belief system resembled the traditional form described above. *Na Yak* belief was the fundamental core of their entire cultural system. They have traditionally performed *Kowil*, *Hathma* and *Kiri Koraha* and other rituals as well.

Kowil (ceremonial dance) is performed annually in the forest. There are various types

of *Kowil* such as *Welan Pale Kowila*, *Seran Kowil* and *Dehigolla Kowila*. However, offerings and incantations are made for the same *Yakku* that are offered in *Hathma* and *Kiri Koraha*. According to their belief, if these are not conducted before the *Diya Kapeema* (water cutting ceremony) in *Mahiyangana* procession, protection of the village will be destroyed, and epidemics will enter the village. Deities and *Yakku* such as *Manik Bandara*, *Kumara*, *Parakasa*, *Maralu*, *Kalubandara*, *Serangala*, *Mawaragala*, *Helamungala*, and *Kehelpotha* are offered through *Kowil*. After the possession of these *Yakku* and deities, 14 *Mahasen Yakku* (Mahasen Demons) and 14 *Yakku* from Boo tree are invited and finally, exorcists become an oracle. Next *Baththugala*, *Komali*, *Kadu Pahe*, *Kadawath*, *Indigolle*, *Bandara*, *Alle*, *Malwadam* and remaining *Na Yakku* dance in turn, chanting incantations until dawn. At the end *Yakku* are invited to leave exorcist's body and the village with the epidemics and other crisis.

Similarly, *Hathma* is performed annually, and the same deities are offered as in *Kowil*, but it is conducted within the village. In *Hathma*, *Dolaha Yakku* (12 demons) dance is performed which includes *Manik Bandara*, *Kumara*, *Maralu*, *Parakasa* and *Kalubandara*. Next, *Wanniyabandara yak* is danced followed by *Seran*, *Helamungala*, *Mawaragala* and *Kehelpotha*. Afterward, another 14 *Yakku* from each of the Na tree (*Mesua nagassarium*), Boo tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and *Barathu Gala* (Barathu rock)³ dance followed by the dances of *Komali*, and *Indigolla Yakku*.

Formerly *Kiri Koraha* was performed throughout the night for the protection of the village and mainly for the protection of the cattle. Coconut milk, betel, a present (*panduru*), and bead (*Pabalu Wela*) are put in the earthen pot and is placed on a mortar. On another side of this *Kiri Koraha* a *Maduwa* (hovel) is made of tender leaves of coconut

tree to offer betel and oil lamp to *Na Yakku*. Both *Na Yakku* and deities that are invited in *Hathma* and *Kowil* are summoned one after another and invoked for their protection. Exorcist possessed by each of them dance walking towards *maduwa* and then to *Kiri Koraha* and again to *maduwa*. This continued until the arrival of all the *Na Yakku*. At the end, all the *Na Yakku* and deities are invited to return to their dwelling places.

The diversification and depth of belief are evident in the hundreds of *Yakku* and deities that were included in the Vedda religious pantheon, as mentioned above. These *Yakku* are closely tied to the forest, with some specific to trees, rocks, and other distinct places in their forest habitat. Prior to resettlement, Europeans deliberately initiated a program to convert the Vedda people to Christianity in the mid-19th century. As a result, by 1844, 163 men, 48 women, and 85 children had been baptized in *Bintenne* (Gillings, 1853, p. 88). They were formally baptized, promising to believe in Christ and to abandon their superstitions, but almost all of them eventually returned to their former forest habits. They forgot what they had pledged during baptism and declared that it was impossible to live without Na Yak worship. Furthermore, they stated that when they abandoned their Na Yak, their children became sick, their cattle died, their trees did not bear fruit, and their crops were cut off (Rev. Gillings, 1853, p. 88). This incident demonstrates the Veddas' faith in their belief system, how they were socialized within it, and how their belief system formed the core of an interlinked cultural system. Specifically, it signifies the uselessness of Christianity in their forest habitat, where they needed *Na Yakku* assistance for every part of their daily lifestyle. This should be considered important when discussing the external influences not only on their beliefs and culture but also on their traditional habitat, the forest which is

³ These demons believe to be residing in these trees and said rocks.

the fundamental basis of their whole cultural system.

3.3 Post-Resettlement Religious Beliefs of Yakkure and Henanigala Vedda People

Even though there was no evidence of Yakkam Dance (*Yakkam Nateema*) among the traditional Vedda people, it is a famous ritual practiced in Yakkure. Yakkam dance is performed to dispel illnesses, epidemics, unfruitful occurrences, and perils from individuals and the entire village. Additionally, this ritual is considered a powerful practice capable of healing any type of disease, including fractures, cuts, mental imbalances, and other problems. It is unknown when this ceremonial dance was integrated into their culture.

Although Seligman mentioned *Galebandara* as a Sinhalese deity invoked by the Yakkure people, the Yakkam dance had not been performed for *Galebandara* during that time. Thus, it can be assumed that even though the belief in *Galebandara* was integrated into their cultural system, the practice of this ceremonial dance may have been borrowed later from the Sinhalese as an established method of invoking blessings.

Traditional *Na Yak* beliefs seemed to have been replaced by the *Galebandara* and the associated rituals that facilitated the living in the village where *Na Yak* no longer can protect them. They seemed to have forgotten and paused the inheritance of *Na Yak* centered knowledge long ago as even among older generations that live today have no knowledge of them. Similarly, *Palugamana* and *Vihara* deities that were described by Seligman are no longer included in their belief system.

However, Mangara deity still holds a significant place in their belief system, as they continue to engage in cattle farming, which

Seligman also identified as a specific feature of their culture. This continued worship of Mangara has been linked to this secondary subsistence pattern, which has not changed from Seligman's time, even with the resettlement. Hence, traditional rituals for Mangara deity have continued as they needed his blessings and protection continuously. This highlights a significant aspect of the continuation of traditional religious practices in human cultures: *they are often sustained alongside traditional ways of life, particularly in relation to continued subsistence patterns.*

Even though the Yakkam is one of the famous rituals performed in Yakkure at present it is rarely performed, as there are no skilled exorcists to perform this ritual. On the other hand, villagers simply tend to western medicines instead of these traditional rituals that need prior arrangements that are expensive. They must summon exorcists from other villages for money, which was previously done as a service. According to an elder woman of the village, when they were in *Parana Yakkure*, (traditional habitat) they had not used medicines for their diseases or illness:

"For every disease such as for, fever, headache and epidemics we did not take oral medicines. As well as for any other special life transitional periods such as birth, pregnancy, we did not seek medical support (western). Only thing we did was to perform Yakam thowila. This was the best method to cure any illness caused by Yak. There was a group of people that belonged to a specific generation that are capable of performing these rituals. However, today they are lack and no one tends to continue those, as they do not have skills. Moreover, some of the apprentices of the previous great exorcists are afraid to touch these sacred weapons that we kept inside a box⁴ when we came here. I do not know where that

⁴ Sacred weapons of the deities that are invoked during the ritual.

weapon box is now?" (Per. Comm., 11 Aug, 2017).

This shows the final link of knowledge pertaining to the *Yakkam*, which is soon to be forgotten as it has been replaced by modern Western medicine and other belief systems.

Na Yakku and deities are no longer worshiped in *Yakkure*, as most traditional rituals are not currently performed. However, when someone remains unwell after taking Western medicine, a ceremonial dance is sometimes performed. None of these rituals follow the traditional methods; the timing of the performances has shifted from night to daytime, exorcists are summoned from other villages, and efforts are made to complete the rituals quickly and affordably. Often, these performances are also staged as displays for tourists willing to pay the requested amount.

Without difference in all the dances, a small *Yahana* (loft) is made in front of the patients' house and one exorcist chants the mantra and sometimes he himself plays the drum while dancing. This is a simple performance that was adapted to the contemporary lifestyle. At the beginning Lord Buddha and popular deities among Sinhalese are worshipped which was not included in the traditional ritual and ceremonies.

Knowledge of these dances, rituals and magic have become an intangible heritage that is retained only among a few of the older individuals of the village. They still have the intention to perform these traditional rituals as they still have faith in those *Na Yakku*.

"My elder son escaped from death by dancing a Hathma⁵. He got an illness that we did not know what. Soon I arranged Hathma and danced over one night. All our Na Yakku and deities were invited and danced. After two days my son was able to drink water and little by little he got cured. Now we are not doing

this. One reason is that we do not have enough money and skilled people among us. Earlier we did not need money. We had everything that was needed for any ceremonial dance. Now, vegetables are also expensive, and we must buy all from the shops. In addition, as in the old days, we no longer live and depend on the forest. So how can we request blessings from our Na Yakku who are dwelling in the forest? Our youngsters perform Kiri koraha and Hathma for money. I do not like that. However, I do not tell anything to them as there should be a way for them to earn money" (Per. Comm., 15 Sep, 2017).

Participation in the *Mahiyangana Vedi Perahera*⁶ is one of the traditional customs associated with the *Na Yakku*. Although they were not able to participate in the *perahara* after the resettlement, when they were in *Kandeganwila* and *Dambana* they performed *Kowil* and *Hathma* and had collectively participated in the *Mahiyangana Vedi Perahera* as well. At present, it has become a difficult task to gather villagers to participate in such a journey as most of them are engaged in paid labor work out of the village. Nevertheless, at present the majority have no intention of participating in *perahara*, as they are no longer performing *Hathma* and *Kowil* which are interlinked practices of *Na Yak* cult.

According to Seligman due to the historical influence of Indian invaders and the interactions between Veddas and Sinhalese over the centuries, foreign beliefs had gradually merged with the native Vedda religion (Seligman, 1911). After about 30 years, in 1937, the Veddas Wijesekara studied identified themselves as Buddhists. However, as he further noted, they were not aware of five precepts (*Panchaseela*), which is an elementary aspect of Buddhism that every Buddhist is expected to know (Wijesekara, 1987, p. 46). This brief overview of the historical transformation (native way

⁵ *Hathma* has healed his son's illnesses.

⁶ Mahiyanganaya procession.

according to Seligman) of the Vedda religious belief system raises the importance of considering these changes under forced diffusion, acculturation attempts, and other patterns of assimilation. The acceleration of

assimilation and the consequent massive cultural annihilation occurred after the resettlement and was further intensified by the prohibition of access to traditional forest lands.

Table 02. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Resettlement Religious Beliefs and Practices of Vedda People

Aspect	Pre-Resettlement	Post-Resettlement
Core Belief System	Centered on <i>Na Yakku</i> (ancestral spirits)	Shifted towards Sinhalese Buddhist and Hindu deities
Main Deities/Spirits Worshipped	<i>Kande Yaka, Bilinde Yak, Bambura Yak, 14 Mahasen Yakku, 14 Boo Tree Yakku, Indigolle Yak</i> , etc.	Deities such as Mangara, Gale Bandara, Kataragama, Ganesha, Saraswathi, <i>Pathhini</i> , Saman and <i>Wishnu</i> etc. with reduced knowledge of <i>Na Yakku</i>
Rituals Performed	<i>Kiri Koraha, Hathma, Kowil</i> (e.g., <i>Welan Pale, Seran, Dehigolla</i>), <i>Na Yakk</i> ceremonies	<i>Yakkam</i> Dance (borrowed), Mangara rituals maintained; traditional rituals mostly abandoned
Purpose of Rituals	Invoking spirits for hunting, honey collection, protection during pregnancy, illness, epidemics	Healing (<i>Yakkam</i> Dance), protection of cattle (Mangara), warding off misfortunes
Knowledge Transmission	Ritual knowledge held by specific generations, widely practiced and understood	Ritual knowledge largely lost; younger generations unfamiliar or uninterested
Role of Forest and Habitat	Integral; spirits associated with trees, rocks, animals, and ancestral lands	Reduced relevance due to resettlement and loss of forest dependence
Use of Medicine	Reliance on spiritual healing; no use of western medicine	Increasing dependence on western medicine; rituals seen as expensive and outdated
Community Participation	Collective and traditional generation -based ritual roles	Rituals now rare; exorcists summoned externally for a fee, often absent
Cultural Integration	Belief system fully integrated into daily life and environment	Fragmented; spiritual practices partially replaced by mainstream religious elements
Examples from Fieldwork	Worship of <i>Na Yakku</i> during childbirth, illness, before honey collection, etc.	Elderly recall using <i>Yakkam</i> exclusively before resettlement; no current practitioners

3.4 Impact of Development and Resettlement

Development Projects that were initiated after independence forcibly led Vedda into

new settlements that consequent by significant loss of cultural consistency, as their traditional forest-based way of life was disrupted. They were no longer able to depend on hunting, gathering, and shifting

agriculture (Chena cultivation), and were instead given land for paddy cultivation. Changes in the forest-based lifestyle and subsisting patterns have intensively impacted on their entire life style and have turned them into a minority group suffering by severe poverty (Ananda & Nahallage, 2022). The environmental impacts of such projects, notably the Mahaweli Development Project, resulted in the destruction of vast forested areas, directly affecting the Vedda's access to vital resources, such as medicinal plants, and disrupting the ecological balance they had maintained for centuries. This not only impacted on their material survival but also eroded the spiritual connection they had with the forest, which was integral to their religious practices. Moreover, policy shortcomings during these developments failed to protect the Vedda's cultural and land rights, particularly their ancestral forest lands, which were often ignored or displaced without consultation or compensation.

One of the most profound changes are found in the Vedda religious belief system. Pre-resettlement religion was centered around the worship of *Na Yak* (kin demons). With the resettlement, these traditional practices began to disappear, and they started adopting Buddhist and Hindu practices (Table 02). During Seligman's visit, three main deities adored and worshiped by the *Yakkure* villagers were *Gale Bandara* (*Gale Bandara*), *Pulleyar* (*Ganesha*) and *Mangara*. However, at present, deities and goddesses such as *Saraswathi*, *Pathhini*, *Katharagama*, *Saman*, *Wishnu* etc. are worshiped. Further, beliefs in the supernatural entities and demons that are famous among Sinhalese culture are adored by them.

Gale Bandara is a famous deity found in the Sinhalese pantheon and seemed to have diffused into the *Yakkure* cultural system a long time ago. There was a temple dedicated to the *Galebandara* in the Parana *Yakkure* Village which was observed by Seligman as well. Later, *Pulleyar* (*Ganesha* deity) one of

the main deities in the Hindu belief system has been included into their belief system and presently he has become the main deity of the *Yakkure* village. In the *Sinhala Aluth Awudda* (Sinhala New Year) *Pulleyar* is offered with green gram mixed milk rice. Belief in *Pulleyar* has spread throughout this region with the south Indian invasion during the Polonnaruwa period. With time he has become the foremost deity of *Yakkure* making *Gale Bandara* second of the deity hierarchy. This is further confirmed by the establishment of a permanent temple dedicated to the *Pulleyar* at the entrance to the village. This place is called *Pulleyar Handiya* (*Pulleyar* junction). Besides, stones that have the shape of a trunk of an elephant are placed at other places in the village especially at junctions after highlighting these imagined shapes with a white chunam into the head of an elephant as a symbol of *Pulleyar* (Figure 3).

Surprisingly these people have forgotten (or dropped) their ancient belief on *Na Yakku* and none of the evidence related to traditional Vedda belief system is found. This shows a complete syncretism of Buddhist and Hindu practices. The influence of Buddhism became more pronounced, and the previously held belief in *Na Yakku* has almost entirely forgotten with the time. Due to their disconnection from the forest and the introduction of a sedentary, agriculturally based lifestyle, many traditional religious and cultural practices linked to hunting, gathering, and the forest have either been abandoned or modified. Rituals such as *Na Yakkun Pidima* (offerings to *Na Yakku*) have disappeared, especially in *Henanigala*.

The *Yakkam* dance (Devil Dance), which was not originally part of Vedda culture, was later adopted from the Sinhalese as a method of invoking blessings. This shift illustrates how external pressures from development and resettlement catalyzed a religious transformation.



Figure 03. Left: Sketch of Ganesha deity on a stone at a Junction of Yakkure. Right: A Buddha shrine made outside a *Yakkure* House

The development and resettlement projects have greatly impacted the Vedda people, resulting in cultural and religious assimilation with dominant Sinhala Buddhist practices. However, among the older generation still remains an attachment to their traditional spiritual practices, though these are diminishing over time. Especially during life crises. Both *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* villagers occasionally return to traditional rituals for blessings and healing when Western medicine fails or during prolonged illness. The ritual, while still practiced occasionally, now incorporates Buddhist invocations at the beginning, where Lord Buddha and popular deities from the Sinhalese pantheon are called upon before invoking the traditional Vedda spirits.

3.5 Religious Borrowing and Syncretism of Buddhist Practices

This process of religious borrowing highlights a transformation in their belief systems, driven by external influences, while they attempt to adapt to a new sociocultural environment. Especially when they have no time to build their own cultural system, borrowing becomes the utmost strategy for survival and a way to an immediate adaptation to the new environment.

Specifically, when they are far away to receive blessings and protection from the ancestor spirits reside in their traditional lands. Rather, paddy cultivation and labor work they had to start at the new locations did not belong to *Na Yakku* but unknown deities of the Sinhalese pantheon. Therefore, to survive and obtain protection over these new roles and duties despite of merging or adopting novel identities into their native *Na Yak* it became easier to burrow Sinhalese deities and to seek their protection within the new socio economical setting. Thereby paddy cultivation-based customs, associated Buddhist practices and deities were borrowed from the Sinhalese specially with new explanations for the unknown phenomena like afterlife and rebirth in a better place with merits gathered during the lifetime.

At present entire population of the Parana *Yakkure* are Buddhist by religion and as they admitted. There was a small temple (temporary hut) in their old village without a Buddhist Monk which has mentioned in Seligman writings as well. They summoned a monk when they needed from the *Kaduruwela* town. As they believe they are the *Yakshas* tamed by the beams of the Lord Buddha at his visit to *Mahiyanganaya* (Situated in Central Province and believed to

be a one of three places that Lord Buddha visited). After tamed by the Lord Buddha's beams they came to *Parana Yakkure* and settled. Similar ideology is found among *Henanigala* people as well.

Establishment of a permanent temple with a boo tree and Buddha shrine in *Yakkure* has taken place in 1989; 2 years after their resettlement. Since they were given responsibilities to look after the monk providing all the necessities. From the initial establishment to the present renovations of the temple are done by the donations of the villagers. They are usually engaged in observing *sil*, almsgiving, *dharmadeshana* and *pirith* ceremonies like Sinhalese. Similarly, some of the elders of *Henanigala* observe *sil* at the nearest *Henanigala* South temple on *poya* days. This temple was built in 1980s by a monk that came from *Mahiyangana*. At present this temple consists

of *bodhiya*, *stupa* and shrine, which are the three main places of a Buddhist temple. Some of the *Henanigala* Vedda families have donated money for the constructions. Details of these donations are stated on a board placed in front of the Buddha statues. For an example, "This statue was built by the donation of *Thalawarige Kiri Banda* on behalf of his mother and farther". This signifies complete trust in after life that will be given a better status through the merits that are sent to the dead by living instead of obtaining the status of *Na Yak* according to their traditional belief. Additionally, *Henanigala's* integration of Sinhalese practices is evident in the worship of Sinhala deities such as *Manik Bandara* and *Kataragama* etc. who were borrowed from Sinhalese. This shift has been driven by the Buddhist monk residing in the village, who has become a spiritual guide for the community.



Figure 04. Buddha Statue Donated by an Indigenous Family (The full name denoted by the initials is *Thala Varige*, which mean belong to the *Thala* Clan).

These temples serve not only as a religious core but also as spaces for community gatherings, where Buddhist monks guide the villagers in religious observances. The monks encourage the Vedda people to follow

Buddhist precepts, participate in almsgiving (*Dana*), and attend *Dharma Deshana* (Buddhist Preaching), which have gradually reshaped the community's religious practices. It is also signified *Alawaka*

Dhamanaya or *Yaksha Dhamanaya* included in the Buddhist stories where Lord Buddha used his power to tame demons. It seemed that the Buddhist monks follow same ways in their attempts to convert Veddas into Buddhism, considering it as a meritorious act. What they have done without knowing that they were doing is a cultural genocide when considering it through an anthropological aspect.

As mentioned earlier following statement reveal how *Henanigala* people believe on the Buddhism and the way they became Buddhists.

“Our connection to the Buddhism started thousands of years ago, from the Lord Buddha’s first visit to Mahiyanganaya. Saman Dey Handuruwo (Saman Deity) invited Lord Buddha to tame troublesome Yakksha Gothra (Veddas as she believe) from the Mahiyangaa area (Here, she has mistaken Saman deity’s invitation to the Lord Buddha to the Adam’s Peak) After Lord Buddha spread out his rays, (Budu Ras) our ancestors scatted into various groups and spread to different parts of the country (Explained how they spread into various regions of the country). This was the beginning of our faith in Buddhism. Though we said that our religion is Buddhism we had not seen Buddha’s statues, monks, had not gone to temples, had not worshiped and had not offered flowers. With time, distance between the external world and us fell. Then onwards we began to hold on to the things such as religion and dharma (aagama dhahama)” (Per. Comm., 6 Sep, 2017).

Further, the following is a Mantra (charm) used by a *Henanigala* exorcist for the patients who are at death’s door. This mantra is also

connected with the story of Lord Buddha visit to *Mahiyanganaya* and his miracle displayed to tame *Yakshas* (clan of demons). According to myths *Yakshas* that were tamed through this incident have later become Vedda people of the country. Similar to *Yakkure* people, when they are asked about their relationship with the Buddhism and its beginning, *Henanigala* people adduced this story. Further, the following mantra denotes their belief in this story and on the way their ancestors scattered into various parts of the country.

*“Ooom Namō Narayana...
Apage budurajanā wahanse
mahiyanganayata wadamuwa
Jaya Kontha malawa wihiduwa yakshayin
duru kirimata pirith wadaramiy sitha
Palamuwa thun saranaya pirawu seka
Yakshayo thun gawuwak bime ida hara
giyoya
Dewanuwa pansil pirawu seka
Yakshayo pas gawuwak bime ida hara giyoya
Thunwanuwak Dasasil pirawu seka
Yakshayo Dasa Gawuwak Bime Idahara
Giyoya
Satharawanuwa Atanatiya Suthraya Wadala
Seka
Yakshayo ata yodaunak bima ida hara giyoya
Paswanuwa mahamangala suttraya wadala
seka
Yakshayo this yodunak bimin ida hara giyoya
Yakun yakshayin nam pitasak kota athi
budun wahansege agnawen anubhawayen
Adath me athura panchaskandaya ata siyak
sandi pitin ida ari
Nawa siyak nahara pitin ida ari
This derinak pawu badawala yatin ida ari
Nawa leda hamarak le manshayen ida ari
Yanidha bhuthani yaksha pretha durukara
budhdhanubhawayen
athura dishti ida hari palayan yesh wabh.....”*

⁷ According to traditional accounts, Buddha arrived at Mahiyangana, radiated his aura with the intention of chanting *Pirith*. He first recited the *Thunsarana* (Three Refuges), which retreat the *Yakshas* three miles. Following this, the chanting of

the *Pancha Sila* (Five Precepts) led them to retreat an additional five miles. These recitations, including later chants such as the *Dasa Sila*, *Atanatiya Sutta*, and *Maha Mangala Sutta*, are believed to have gradually driven the *Yakshas*

Nevertheless, this practice appears to have been borrowed from the Sinhalese, as the *Henanigala Vedda Yakadura* (exorcist) has adapted to the new socio-cultural setting by shifting his identity into an exorcist with blended capabilities drawn from both Vedda and Sinhalese traditions. This is the only known instance where the power of *Na Yakku* is currently invoked, particularly in their present locality. It is seen as a powerful fusion of Sinhalese and Vedda supernatural elements that not only enable greater control over various tasks but also provides the exorcist with a source of income for economic subsistence.

According to Seligman, *Ithala Natuma* (Arrow Dance), *Na Yakun Pideema* (Offering of Kin Demons), *Bambura Yaka Pideema*, *Patta Yaka Pideema*⁸, *Dola Yaka Pideema*⁹ were among the rituals performed by the Dambana Vedda people. However, these rituals are not performed by the Henanigala people, even though they are descended from the Dambana people, especially as they no longer depend on the above subsistence patterns. There are specific *Yakku* that are supreme over certain trees and rocks/stones and are believed to be responsible for various types of illnesses, misfortunes, and influences on human fate (Davy, 1983, p. 89; Forbes, 1994, p. 78), as discussed above. Accordingly, when traditional exorcists need to prognosticate or chant mantras, they hold small parts of these trees and stones as symbols in their hands as a method of receiving these *Yakkas'* powers (Figure 5). The main demons (*Yaka*) that are supreme over rocks include *Mavawaragala*, *Rerangala*, *Baruthugala*, and *Mehaloku* (a she-demon). Demons that are supreme over trees include *Nagaha* (supreme over the *Na* tree)

and *Bogaha* (supreme over the *Bo* tree). They are called by the name of the tree they occupy (Seligman & Seligman, 2011, pp. 240–243). The Dambana Veddhas made offerings to these *Yakku*, requesting blessings and their guidance for prognostication. Even though these traditional dances are no longer performed, the supremacy of *Yakku* is still sought in prognostication, magic, and exorcisms today. Especially, the exorcist mentioned above uses his traditional *Na Yak* power for various types of exorcisms. Most of the Sinhalese from neighboring villages seem to be interested in his prognostications, magic, and other rites, and they regularly visit him or summon him to their homes for assistance with problems such as dispelling evil eyes and obtaining blessings.

Resettlement exposed both the *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* Indigenous Peoples to a new multicultural environment and a market economy, both of which were subject to rapid cultural change. This unexpected shift resulted in a 'cultural shock' among them. Furthermore, soon after the resettlement, they became a group lacking cultural coherence with the new environment and subsistence patterns. None of these new ways of life were connected to their *Na Yak* associated religious belief system. They had no religious explanations or protective feelings regarding many of the life incidents they faced in the new environment. Religion had been the backbone of their traditional culture. One of the significant functions of a religious belief system is that it offers explanations for the unexplainable, around which supernatural belief systems are often constructed. Therefore, without a belief system coherent with their lifestyle, members

farther away from the sacred site, scattering them across the country and illustrating the power of Lord Buddha in establishing sacred space and taming the *Yakshas*.

Remembering the power of Lord Buddha through these chants, the exorcist pledges this blessing for the patient: '*May the blessings of Lord Buddha, who drove away the Yakshas with his divine aura, bring*

healing and protection. Just as the sacred chants of the Buddha established sacred space and overcame obstacles, may the power of these words cleanse you of illness and suffering...''

⁸ Patta Yak offering for the protection of pregnant mothers

⁹ Offering of Dola Yak before collecting beehive

of the group found it difficult to survive. Moreover, these people were not given sufficient time for a natural adaptation process through which they might have developed a new cultural system consistent with the environment they were forced to inhabit after resettlement. However, forming an adaptive culture takes time. When a group lacks that time, they tend to borrow essential

cultural domains and traits, such as religious beliefs, from neighboring cultures that have evolved in relation to particular subsistence patterns and environments. As a result, most of the current religious belief system of the Indigenous people consists of cultural traits resembling those of the Sinhalese, as they have borrowed many of these elements.



Figure 5. An exorcist from Henanigala chanting a mantra while holding a stone in his hand

Additionally, the economic pressures faced by the Vedda communities, increased by their limited access to skilled exorcists and ritual specialists, have significantly contributed to the decline of traditional religious practices. The transition from their traditional subsistence practices, such as hunting and gathering, to labor-intensive agricultural work has altered the sociocultural landscape of the community. In this context, the sacred rituals that once aligned with their subsistence patterns and provided spiritual guidance have become increasingly difficult to perform due to the loss of necessary resources and expertise. The absence of trained ritual specialists, who once held the knowledge of invoking the *Na Yakku* and conducting complex ceremonies, has further diminished the practice of these rites. This situation has created a dependence on more accessible forms of religious expression,

primarily those of the Sinhalese Buddhist tradition. In seeking immediate spiritual support through the Sinhalese Buddhist rites and pantheon, the Vedda communities have gradually distanced themselves from their traditional religious heritage, leading to a shift in their spiritual identity. As economic survival demands greater conformity to mainstream societal practices, these shifts have resulted in the weakening of their indigenous rituals (Ananda & Nahallage, 2023).

Although traditional rituals are no longer frequently performed, in cases of incurable or prolonged illnesses, particularly when prognostications reveal misfortune the people of *Henanigala*, especially the older generation, tend to perform rituals dedicated to their *Na Yakku* and deities. These rituals are now referred to as *Thowil* (a Sinhalese

term for ceremonial dance) or Guru Kam (sorcery), and are typically conducted during the daytime, lasting about three to four hours. Similarly, when the Yakkure villages are affected by illnesses that take a long time to cure, they occasionally perform traditional rituals and make offerings (*Adukku*) to deities—a practice referred to as *Yakkam*. A notable feature among the Yakkure people is their avoidance of the terms '*Yakku*' or '*Na Yakku*' when speaking about their religious beliefs and rituals. Instead, they use the term *Deiyo* (deities), which appears to have been borrowed from the Sinhalese language. This shift may reflect an attempt to conceal their belief in *Na Yakku*, which has often been perceived by Sinhalese society as a primitive belief system, and to align more closely with the dominant socio-cultural norms. As observed by Meegaskumbura and Wijesekara, although these communities have altered their lifestyles and forgotten much of their traditional religious system, they continue to believe in and appeal to their ancestral deities and *Yakku* during times of crisis. Nevertheless, in everyday discourse, they refer to these entities as deities rather than using the term *Na Yakku* (Wijesekara, 1982, p. 46; Meegaskumbura, 1990, pp. 99–140; 1995, pp. 98–103).

Traditional Vedda funeral rites, which focused on invoking *Na Yakku* to guide the deceased's spirit, have also been replaced or supplemented with Buddhist funeral rites. For instance, in *Henanigala*, death rituals now often include Buddhist *Pansakula*¹⁰ which was not part of the Vedda's original practices. Similarly, marriage and puberty rituals that once had no Buddhist influence are now conducted with Buddhist blessings and ceremonies of both villagers (Ananda & Nahallage, 2023).

The syncretism of Buddhist practices and adaptation within the Vedda communities of *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* showcase the

blending of traditional Vedda religious beliefs with dominant Buddhist and Hindu customs. This process, influenced by their resettlement and assimilation into Sinhalese society, reflects how these communities have revised their spiritual lives to accommodate their changing sociocultural environments.

3.6 Resistance to Change

It's difficult to identify resistance to many changes that the Vedda people have faced over the past hundred years. They have not protested or shown persistence as a community for any of the actions taken by the outsiders. This is a specific feature that sets them apart from other indigenous/tribal people of the world. Māori in New Zealand, Australian Aboriginals, and Native Americans fought against their relocations and cultural genocides, asserting ownership of their ancestral lands. They are now internationally organized and have spread their voices globally. Many of their rights have been legalized, and some have been recognized as living heritages of the world (Keenan, 2021; Smith, 1996; Attwood B., 2020).

Instead, a slight sense of cultural pride can be seen only among the older Vedda people of *Yakkure* and *Henanigala*. Most of the younger generation conceal their Vedda identity and have changed their given names, dropping their clan names. This raises the question: why do they hide their Vedda identity? It is due to the dominant society's acceptance, particularly by the Sinhalese, who often hold negative views of the Veddas, perceiving them as an untamed group with primitive ways and limited capabilities. Additionally, since their traditional belief system no longer offers protection in their new habitat, and because it is widely considered primitive, the Veddas have largely abandoned it and adopted Buddhism as a means of distancing themselves from traditional *Yakka* beliefs. These perceptions appear to have been

¹⁰ The offering of robes to Buddhist monks is made in memory of the deceased.

influenced further by early Europeans who wrote inaccurate descriptions of them. Ultimately all together have led to cultural genocide, with prevailing non-resistance against their cultural demise, without attempts to protect them. Specifically, the younger generation, who have no sensitivity to their forefathers' heritage, have gained nothing from survival in the new socio-cultural setting except poverty, unemployment, and discrimination.

3.7 Loss of Traditional Knowledge, Cultural Preservation and Restoration

The loss of traditional knowledge resulting from resettlement needs to be addressed through cultural preservation. Over the years, these indigenous people have experienced a significant erosion of their cultural and religious traditions. However, efforts to preserve and restore their cultural heritage have not yet emerged, indicating their acceptance of a 'minority' status among dominant communities. As they are not standing up for themselves and lack the strength and power to do so, anthropologists and other responsible bodies should intensify their efforts to preserve and restore the Vedda people and their entire culture. Specifically, this could have been done during the initial process of resettlement, particularly through the concept introduced by researchers as "Cultural Rehabilitation" (Ananda, 2019; Ananda & Nahallage, 2022). Communities with unique cultural traditions should be given great consideration in relation to any external influences, such as development projects, resettlements, education programs, awareness programs, health-related community initiatives, etc. These efforts should be led by individuals or groups who are well aware of the cultural uniqueness and its fragile nature.

With the prohibition of access to their traditional lands, the rituals and practices that were united with subsisting patterns began to fade. Knowledge of the *Na Yakku* and associated rituals were either forgotten or

abandoned/dropped entirely. Younger generations, having grown up in the resettled villages, show little interest in maintaining these customs that are unfamiliar to them, and that involuntarily accelerate the cultural loss. This generational disconnect in cultural transition has been a key factor contributing to the disappearance of the most traditional Vedda knowledge. The incomplete socialization process they went through has significantly impact on creating dual identities among them (Ananda & Nahallage, 2023). However, even they identify themselves as Buddhist they are unaware of basic Buddhists practices and on the other hand native Vedda beliefs are completely unfamiliar to them. As a result, the Vedda people have not raised their voices or made demands, as many other tribal or indigenous communities around the world have, to protect and restore their cultural system. This is largely because they lack a strong and recognized sense of identity, unlike many other ethnic groups, both within the country and globally. This stems from fragmented and incomplete socialization, which has deeply affected their sense of self, particularly in terms of belonging to a community with a well-defined identity (Ananda & Nahallage, 2023).

04. Conclusions and Reccomondations

The Vedda communities of *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* have experienced complicated cultural and religious transformations as a result of the Mahaweli Development Project and subsequent resettlement. These changes have led to a significant loss of traditional knowledge and practices that once defined their unique identity as indigenous hunter-gatherers. The Vedda people's cultural and religious landscape, centered around *Na Yak* belief deeply intertwined with the forest and their traditional subsistence practices, has been largely replaced by Sinhalese Buddhist religious practices through cultural borrowing. The growing disconnection between generations, economic pressures, and the loss of access to traditional lands have

accelerated the erosion of Vedda culture, specifically traditional belief system.

Even though much has been lost, future cultural restoration and preservation efforts can be made considering the following sectors.

The preservation of oral traditions remains a key aspect of maintaining cultural memories of these people. Oral traditions as one of the key forms of intangible cultural heritage include majority of their traditional knowledge. Elders in both *Yakkure* and *Henanigala* holds precious knowledge on their religious belief system. As their own younger generation do not accept those, preservation through digital media becomes a way and should be done through immediate research and digital preservation methods (Ananda & Nahallage, 2024). These can be activated using UNESCO's initiative that recognizes individuals with great knowledge in traditional wisdom as living heritage (Guidelines for the Establishment of National "Living Human Treasures" Systems, N.D.).

Governmental and non-governmental organizations should invest in programs aimed at preserving Vedda culture. This can include providing financial and logistical support (within their villages) for the performance of traditional rituals, promoting traditional crafts and livelihoods. Specifically, 'Vedda Heritage Museums' should be built in selected locations to showcase their cultural heritage, providing access to both tangible and intangible aspects of their culture (Ananda & Nahallage, 2023).

Efforts should be made to integrate knowledge of Vedda culture into the education system of the country. Specifically educational centers or above mentioned museums in Vedda villages could offer workshops, educational programs on Vedda history, traditional religious practices, and cultural identity, helping bridge the gap between generations and ensuring that younger people have access to their cultural

heritage. Specifically, the Vadi language, which is the core of religious belief system-based knowledge, as a disappearing traditional language, should be digitally preserved in these museums. Recordings of everyday conversations, Vadi songs, invocations, lullabies, etc., should be made available in digital formats to preserve the language for future generations and keep it alive.

The loss of access to traditional lands has been one of the major drivers of cultural erosion for the Vedda people. Advocacy for the recognition and protection of their land rights is crucial to restoring their connection to the forest and entire cultural system. Government policies should support the return to the forest and allow for sustainable use of these lands which is a must for the restoration of their entire cultural system including the core religious beliefs. In addition, rights to self, education, language, cultural practices, rites etc. should be recognized and included into the constitution under separate category, recognizing them as a unique group of people of the country (Ananda & Nahallage, 2023).

Responsible and community led cultural tourism could be explored as a way to preserve and promote Vedda traditions. By allowing visitors to engage with their cultural heritage the Vedda people could generate income while raising awareness about their heritage and by performing their endangered practices, rituals, dances etc.

By implementing these recommendations, the Vedda people, their cultural heritage including the ancestral knowledge and precious religious belief system that are at the edge of disappearance can be preserved ensuring that their traditions continue to thrive in the future while creating their own identity as the "Veddas".

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