

From Aristocrats to Primitives

An Interview with Gananath Obeyesekere

Interview >
South Asia

Gananath Obeyesekere lives on a mountaintop in Kandy. From his eyrie he has a sweeping panorama of the eastern hills of Sri Lanka, and it is in those hills where the wild Veddas were once supposed to have lived, according to Sri Lankan histories and stories. These Veddas are the focus of his present research.

By Han ten Brummelhuis

The genealogy of Obeyesekere's research project can be traced back to a classic work, *The Veddas*, written by Charles and Brenda Seligmann in 1911. The Veddas were first recognized in anthropological terms as a classic hunting and gathering society. Edward Tylor, in his textbook on anthropology (1881), refers to them as 'shy wild men', or primitives, living by hunting and gathering. The Seligmanns, however, pioneered with one of the first field studies of any group from the British side of our discipline. C.G. Seligmann and W.H.R. Rivers were the first systematic fieldworkers who, in turn, taught the two great anthropologists Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, the founding fathers of British Social Anthropology.

'What I found puzzling about the Seligmanns' study is that the Veddas were confined by them to a small area in the northern and eastern part of the country called Bintanna, 'the flat lands.' Unfortunately, given that their work was still rooted in the nineteenth-century preoccupation with the primitive, the two Seligmanns were out to find the 'pure' Veddas; and of course they didn't find any. This was a kind of futile quest, because ultimately only four families, who were living in utterly desperate economic and social conditions, were found to approximate their ideal. Looking from my balcony up on my hilltop, I know that the mountainous area north of the Seligmanns' field site was known in ancient Sinhala texts of nearly three hundred years ago as 'the Vedda country,' or as 'the great [*maha*] Vedda country', a huge expanse of well over a thousand square miles. But in my wanderings and meanderings in that latter region I found that there are no Veddas today; all who live there claim to be Sinhala Buddhists. So the question that posed itself to me was: whatever

happened to the Veddas who once lived in this part of the country?

'Then, as my fieldwork and thinking progressed, I asked myself: if the Veddas were in this vast region north of the area in which the Seligmanns did their fieldwork, let me figure out whether they existed in other parts of the country, too. So I probed the sixteenth-century classic literature and poetry written by Buddhist monks and other erudite scholars. And some of their texts refer to Veddas in other parts of the country, for example, roughly around Sri Pada – sometimes known as Adam's Peak – where the sacred footprint of the Buddha is embedded. Other texts speak of Veddas in the very south of Sri Lanka which is now entirely – and passionately – Sinhala Buddhist. Another text refers to Veddas living about twenty miles south of the main city of Colombo which is unthinkable as a Vedda habitat nowadays, except symbolically, I suppose, if one were to designate capitalism as a form of hunting and gathering.'

Obeyesekere also re-examined some of the ritual texts which he had worked on some twenty or thirty years ago. These texts also referred to Veddas as living in different parts of the country. In one fascinating post-harvest ritual the priest (never the monk) recites an invocation known as 'the roll-call of the Veddas' in which he lists about ninety Vedda villages in a fairly large area north and south of Kandy, and some settlements in the heart of the city of Kandy itself. Further enquiries led Obeyesekere to believe that when the city of Kandy was founded in the fifteenth century it was a Vedda village named Katupulle, the chief of that village being known as Katupulle Vedda. Very much later, Kandyan texts mention a group of police officers called *katupulle*; the same term.

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Boundary books

'Now what we have at this point, is a very intriguing proposition; Veddas were not just confined to Kandy and its outlying regions but they were also, at least three hundred years ago, living in every part of the nation. Though their numbers are indeterminate their physical presence is extremely significant. Thus I became very much excited in the possibilities of the project, both from an historical and also from an ethnographic point of view. I put several research assistants to tackle certain kinds of texts which were different from the ones that Sri Lankan historians normally look at, that is Buddhist and 'canonical' literary texts. In the University of Peradeniya there is a cupboard containing virtually unread palm leaf manuscripts; not monks' writings, but that of ordinary people, some of them local elites, scribes, and village leaders. These texts provide a fabulous source of information on contemporary Kandyan social organization, including the position of the Veddas.'

One genre among these multiple texts is called 'boundary books'. One particular type gives the boundaries for all of Sri Lanka, the main provinces demarcated by named rivers, well known landmarks, or, even, rocks and trees. Often, carved stone boundary markers are used.

'One nice example of such a boundary book is the 'Matale boundary book' (Matale being a district north of Kandy). In this text the local king Vijayapala summons a chief and asks: who are the respectable families in this vast region of Matale? The chief then recounts and says that there are such and such named aristocrats and then proceeds to say there are also such and such Vedda chiefs guarding such and such named villages. And there is another Vedda leader a little bit further, guarding such and such a village. And the king asks: beyond that territory who are the residents? And the chief names a list of about fifteen Vedda chiefs guarding various parts of the remoter frontier. Interestingly, these chiefs have a multiplicity of names; some of them have Sinhala ones, while others possess aristocratic names and titles, indicating that they have been 'knighted' by the Kandyan kings. And what is especially fascinating is the reference to five women chiefs also guarding the frontiers. Vedda women in the Seligmanns' account and in other accounts by colonial authorities were sort of shy creatures, hiding from the foreign gaze and refusing to emerge when people came to visit their communities. By contrast a different type of Vedda female erupts from our texts.'

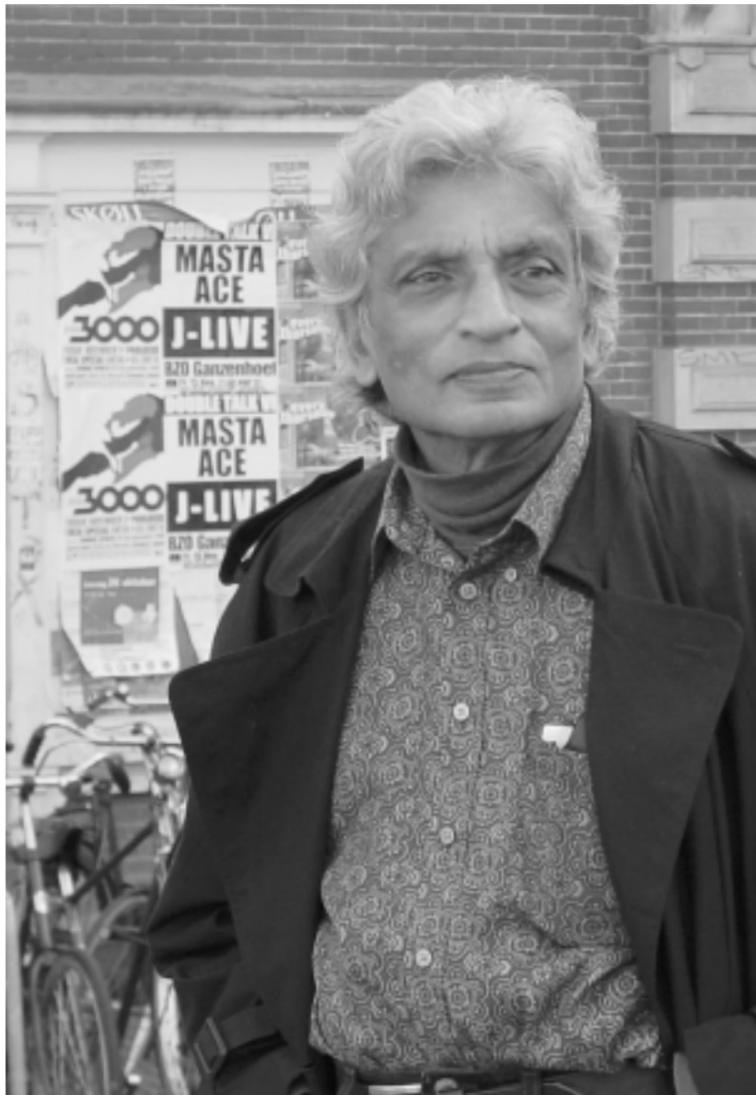
The confrontation with such texts spurred Obeyesekere to want to understand the historical complexity of these people, the so-called primitives. Now it becomes clear that they were not only scattered everywhere in the country, but there were also different kinds of Veddas.

'There are aristocratic Veddas who were given the prefix *bandara* which is how Kandyan aristocrats were designated. One was called *kadukara*, meaning 'swordman', a military role. One was called *raja* (petty king) and their descendants intermarried with Buddhist *rajas*. It is therefore not surprising that they were employed by the Kandyan kings to guard the frontiers, leading from Kandy into Matale, thence into Bintanna (or Mahiyangana as it is now popularly called), and from there, I suspect, into the east coast ports in Trincomalee and Batticaloa. We are beginning to understand that Veddas were as internally differentiated as the Sinhalas, though without their loose and un-Indian caste system. And far from being nude or wearing leaves, branches, and so forth, which is the colonial view of the Veddas, some of these people were well-dressed bodyguards of the king.'

A Buddhist nation?

Independent European sources can also enhance our understanding of the Veddas. A Dutch account of 1602 by Joris van Spilbergen and others describes the same place, Bintanna, as Bintanna-Alutnuvara, meaning 'new city'. When the main city, the *old* city of Kandy, was abandoned temporarily during times of war the kings used to send their families to this 'new city' in the charge of the Veddas. The Dutch accounts say Bintanna-Alutnuvara was one of the most prosperous towns in the nation, a bustling metropolis. Something happened to bring it into ruin, a course of events which requires further investigation. In the light of this data the common prejudice that Sri Lanka has always been a Buddhist nation has also to be revised. As people subscribing to an 'ancestor cult', the Veddas were also non-Buddhist for the most part.

'In my current fieldwork I am studying shrines in different parts of the former Vedda country to show how Vedda ideation of dead ancestors and so forth still exists in some way, but has been given Buddhist meaning and significance.



Han ten Brummelhuis

Thus, when we examine current beliefs among Buddhists in my region of fieldwork and elsewhere, one can 'excavate' prior beliefs, using the wonderful accounts of Vedda ancestor worship provided by the Seligmanns, and data from the shrines which are permeated with Vedda ideation.

In 1815, the British captured the Kandyan kingdom and the Kandyan chiefs made a treaty with the British, the so-called Kandyan Convention. But in 1818 the first rebellion against the British commenced. When, in 1818, a claimant to the throne came forward and declared himself a relation of the last king of Kandy, he and his entourage went to the great shrine of the Murugan, (who is a Hindu god, a Buddhist god, and a Vedda god) at Kataragama, in the south of Sri Lanka.

'The priest of the shrine gave the claimant a sword and other paraphernalia of the god. There he was met by one of the aristocratic Bandara Veddas, whose name was Kivulegedera Mohottala, the latter term indicating a distinguished Kandyan chief. He, with two hundred other Veddas, led the resistance. And the claimant to the throne hid in the Vedda country and was guarded by Veddas. When the claimant was formally crowned as king, it was, again, the Veddas who participated in the rituals of kingship along with some Buddhist Kandyan chiefs. This event is pretty much forgotten in "normal" history except by one important historian, Paul E. Pieris, who, in 1950, wrote a fine account of the resistance in his *Sinhale and the Patriots*. Of course both Veddas and Sinhalas were totally crushed in an extremely brutal reaction on the

Gananath Obeyesekere, November 2002

Professor Gananath Obeyesekere

Professor Gananath Obeyesekere is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Princeton University. From 1 July – 30 November 2002 he was a senior visiting fellow at the IIAS. He is the author of, among other works, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (1984), *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (1984), and *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (1990) – three studies remarkable for their attention to both psychological and cultural reality. His *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (1992) led to a polemical controversy with Marshall Sahlins about the Western representation of 'primitive thinking'. At present he seems more productive than ever. He has almost finished a first draft of a book tentatively entitled *Cannibal Talk: Dialogical Misunderstandings in the South Seas*, contents of which he expounded in a seminar at the University of Amsterdam. His comparative study *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* has just arrived in the bookshops. In this book Gananath Obeyesekere shows the wide dispersal of rebirth theories outside the orbit of Indic religions. He demonstrates how the kind of 'rebirth eschatology' found in small-scale societies developed into the more complex forms associated, in India, with its karma doctrine and, in ancient Greece, without karma. We asked him about his present fieldwork in Sri Lanka, which connects reflections on the beginning of anthropology, historical research, the Western concept of the 'wild man', and contemporary global activism.

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part of the British. I think the dispersal of populations during this period resulted in large parts of the "Vedda country" being converted into tea plantations. Whatever happened to the Veddas who lived there is anyone's guess.'

Wild man

The first part of the book Obeyesekere has in mind would deal with the colonial representation of the Vedda. This has some similarity to the argument in his *Captain Cook* book about European myth-making regarding Hawaii.

'There is no question that the first step towards this form of colonial representation was taken by the famous British prisoner held in the kingdom of Kandy, Robert Knox, who wrote his book *The Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* in 1681. Knox, and others in his ship, were captured and taken to Kandy with several other European prisoners. They married, they produced children, they traded, hunted, did all sorts of things, except that Knox, a good Scottish Calvinist, resisted most of that. He stayed for about twenty years, went back to England and wrote this wonderful book, one of the most interesting early ethnographies ever written. Like everything else he sees Sri Lanka through the prism of his Calvinist persona. Knox was one of the first Europeans to mention the Veddas and in his book he has a section describing what he calls the 'wild men' and making the conventional European distinction between nature and culture. He said that just as you have wild and tame animals, so you have wild and

tame human beings. Tame Veddas are fairly civilized and are mostly farmers; they are the Veddas Knox was familiar with. He admits he never saw the wild ones but says that they live in the area known as Bintanna, which he could see from the hill country, just as I can from my own perch in Kandy. Nevertheless, Knox provides a detailed account of these wild Veddas through hearsay.'

Knox, and those who followed him, incorporated those wild Veddas into the medieval European frame of the 'wild man'. That image of the Veddas was later absorbed into Portuguese and Dutch accounts. Colonial writers of the time totally ignored the multiplicity and complexity of Vedda society. When the Seligmanns arrived, most of the Veddas had been assimilated or dispersed. The Europeans, however, had a fascination for the primitive. In this conception the Australian aborigines were the ideal type. The Veddas, along with some of the hill-tribes in South India, were seen as part of a large diaspora of primitive people who once had an affinity with those aborigines.

'So what is happening, then, is a European obsession with 'primitive watching'; though it was difficult to watch the Australian aborigine in desert habitats, you could see their cousins, the Veddas, from the convenience of the government rest house in Bintanna-Alutnuvara.'

Self-primitivization

Both colonial officers and visitors arriving by ship came in person to see the Veddas living in primitive conditions. The Sinhala village headmen of the area would dress these people up in a wild garb and present them to the curious (in more than one sense) Europeans.

'The Seligmanns have a very insightful description of what they labelled "show-Veddas". Gradually, the "show-Veddas" became the dominant image of the Veddas both for Europeans and, later on, the Sinhala. Thus, even when I was doing field-work in this area in the late 1950s and I drove towards Mahiyangana where the Buddha shrine is located, I could see Veddas lining the roads dressed as primitives with an axe on their bare shoulders, some with antediluvian bows and arrows (which, in reality, they had long given up for shot guns).'

Here Obeyesekere observes an interesting phenomenon. It is not just a matter of 'show-Veddas'; what is happening here is what he calls 'self-primitivization'. To this very day such self-primitivization takes place when former primitives put on shows for the benefit of foreigners and wealthy local tourists. But self-primitivization is not necessarily to be deprecated, because it gave people a sense of dignity and a cash income even though they went along, sometimes with self-deprecatory cynicism, with the European idea that they were aborigines and therefore the original inhabitants of the land.

'In the case of the Veddas, they can say "we are the *adivasi*, or ancient residents", and I will admit that this historical fiction does give them some dignity and a sense of self-worth. This newer notion of *adivasi* has, in turn, been taken over by European liberals and romantic primitivists searching for the noble savage and hell bent on wanting to liberate the Veddas from Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony (which, historically speaking, hardly occurred), highlighting their current plight (which no one denies because the whole nation is in a frightful plight). But this means that the Veddas have become an endangered community and an "indigenous people", though their endangerment was a product of the colonial enterprise and they are no more "indigenous" than I am myself. Vedda chiefs have gone to Geneva to the UN conferences on indigenous and endangered peoples, something any jet-age traveller would surely applaud. The whole picture becomes completely fascinating from the "Captain Cook" angle, you might say, when colonial and post colonial definitions of "primitive", "aborigine", "native", "indigene", and other such terms have become reified, reformulated, and introjected as a new "truth" of an old past by the new *ancient residents*.' ◀

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