

A Case Report: the Coastal Vedda Community Trapped in the Civil War in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Sri Lanka is a small island in the Indian Ocean, located close to the southern tip of the mainland India. Easy accessibility to the island from all the parts might leads to heterogeneous social composition, which is reflected in the different ethnic groups, religious faiths and tongues. Besides the mutually exclusive Vedda people, the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, the other minor ethnic groups include the Indian Tamils, Muslims, Malays, Burghers, Kaffirs, Mukkuvars, Paravars, Kuravans, Kinnaras, Vanni folk, Rodiyas, Colombo Chetties and Vaggei. The country's original inhabitants are known as Vedda people and there are three Vedda types in Sri Lanka: Stone Vedda (Cave Dwelling Vedda), Village Vedda and Coastal Vedda. Unlike the first two groups who are located in the middle of the country with hunting and gathering subsistence pattern, the Coastal Vedda inhabits the Eastern shoreline of the island and practices maritime fishing. The research access to Coastal Vedda was limited by the terrorist problem during the past 30 years. However, after the end of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the Sri Lankan Government, the research doors were opened. The objective of this research was to evaluate the impact of civil war on the Coastal Vedda people. The data was gathered from interviews with different levels of formality, firsthand observations and focus-group discussions. The most important discovery was the fact that the Coastal Vedda people were forced to work under the LTTE as soldiers, which clearly violates the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Unfortunately, the Sri Lankan government was not aware of the involvement of the Coastal Vedda people in the battlefield. However, the end result is that the massive damage to the indigenous culture. It was evident that the younger Coastal Vedda generations had only experiences of war and they were not aware of their valuable cultural heritage. Only a few elderly people knew the older Vedda dialect. They are not aware of their unique fishing techniques such as using crushed poisonous plants and special harpoons. Moreover, their fascinating rituals such as worship of cobras and demons, and beliefs such as the presence of dead souls to help them, are becoming obsolete. Therefore, it is really necessary to take measures to preserve these vanishing indigenous inhabitants and assist them in uplifting their intrinsic culture.