Indigenous Voices Within the Majority-Minority Discourse in Sri Lanka

Staroselski glasovi v razpravi o večini in manjšini na Šrilanki

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IZVLEČEK
Obseg šrilanške staroselske manjšine ljudstva Veda se iz leta v leto krči zaradi pritiskov sodobnega sveta, kamor sodijo politične odločitve, socialnokulturne okoliščine, vprašanja tehnologije in podobo. Bi lahko sodelovanje, ki bi se osredinilo na krepitev zavedanja skupnosti in samozavedanja posameznikov ter izboljšanje odnosa do izročila in vprašanj identitete koristilo ogroženim skupnostim?

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ABSTRACT
The presence of Sri Lanka's indigenous Vedda minority is subject to continuous shrinking due to imposed views of modernity, including political decisions, sociocultural circumstances, technological and other issues. Could the collaborative work on strengthening communal and individual self-perceptions and attitudes towards heritage and identity issues benefit the endangered community?
1. Background

Sri Lanka, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual island country in South Asia, was for decades perceived as the arena of mutually confronted interests of the two largest groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Beside them, the population of about 20 millions includes several minorities, which have not received much scholarly attention. This article provides a critical overview of ethnomusicological writings about Sri Lankan musics, and points to the underresearched musical practices of Moors, Malays, Burghers, Veddas, and other minorities. Special attention is paid to the indigenous Vedda people, who presently count to as little as few thousand individuals. The Vedda leaders are concerned about the prospect of their disappearance and search for solutions that would strengthen their identity and provide sustainable strategies for survival. The problems and dilemmas they are facing resemble, in various ways and to various extents, the problems discussed by ethnomusicologists and other scholars working with the indigenous peoples.¹

2. Sri Lankan Vedda People

The name of the Vedda people originates from the Sanskrit term vyadha, which means hunter.² The Veddas were originally hunters and gatherers.³ “Wanniyala-Aetto” is the other commonly used name for Veddas, which means “forest-beings”.⁴ According to a popular myth, supported by the historical source Mahāwansa,⁵ the ancestors of Sri Lanka's current Sinhalese majority, who came to the island from North-East India in the 5th century BC, brutally destroyed the native Yakkha and Nāga population.⁶ According to this myth, Vedda people emerged from the offspring of the Indian prince Vijaya and...
a Yakkha woman named Kuveni, while another interpretation suggests that Yakkha and Vedda are in fact the same indigenous people. According to Sri Lankan archaeologist Shiran Deraniyagala, the Veddas are related to the Balangoda mānavaya (Balangoda humans), who lived in the island in the period 11,000-500 B.C. In Michael Roberts’ words, “Sinhala mythology recognises the fact that there were autochthonous inhabitants in the island when Vijaya, the eponymous ancestor of the Sinhalese, is said to have arrived in the fifth century B.C. Subsequently Sinhala folklore refers to the Vedda people and these folk are deemed to be the lineal descendants of the original autochthonous peoples”. The current Vedda leader believes that the ancestors of the Veddas inhabited the island since prehistory.

Veddas of Sri Lanka count to those inhabitants of the planet who are associated with the concepts of indigeneity, ancientness, aboriginality, and firstness, but also with racist notions of being backward, wild, culturally deficient or uncivilized, primitive, and scantily dressed, timid, unclean, ill-mannered and aggressive. They are those “contemporary ancestors” in whose musical legacies comparative musicologists used to search for the origins of music. A Vedda song that uses two pitches, for instance, is the first example in Karl Wörner’s Geschichte der Musik. Ein Studien- und Nachschlagebuch, pointing to the most primitive form of music. In his book Firstness, History, Place & Legitimate Claim to Place-As-Homeland in Comparative Focus, Michael

7 According to Nandadeva Wijesekera, “The ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka explain the origin of the Veddas as the descendants of a brother and sister who were the children of prince Vijaya and Kuveni, the Yakkha woman” (Wijesekera, Vanishing Veddas, 2). According to James Brow, “Vijaya cohabited with the aboriginal Kuveni, who bore him two children from whose own subsequent union the Veddas are believed to be descended” (Brow, “The Incorporation of a Marginal Community within the Sinhalese Nation,” 12).


9 See in Michael Roberts, Firstness, History, Place & Legitimate Claim to Place-As-Homeland in Comparative Focus (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnics Studies, 2005): 15.


11 “In Sinhala Vedda means an aboriginal tribe living in the forest […]” (Wijesekera, Vanishing Veddas, 1) and “The Veddas are the present-day aborigines of Lanka” (see in Deraniyagala, The Prehistory of Sri Lanka, 397).

12 “A Veddah [Vedda] is a person who is scantily dressed and unclean, ‘backward’, and incapable of understanding what is in his or her best interest; the term applies to someone who is ill-mannered and aggressive […]” (In Stegeborn, “The Disappearing Wanniyala-Aetto of Sri Lanka: A Case Study,” Nomadic Peoples, New Series 8, no. 1 (2004): 44).


14 James Brow states that “Vedda means something like ‘culturally deficient’ or ‘uncivilized’” (more in Brow, “The Incorporation of a Marginal Community within the Sinhalese Nation,” 11).

15 This adjective was often used in scholarly writings in the past. It is strange that some academics in Sri Lanka still use it when writing about the Veddas. This will be discussed later in the article.

16 “They are a group of timid human beings who loved the jungle” (Wijesekera, “Vanishing Veddas,” 5).

17 For more, see Stegeborn’s “The Disappearing Wanniyala-Aetto (‘Veddahs’) of Sri Lanka: A Case Study,” 44.

Roberts considers “indigenous peoples of Australia, Malaya, Sri Lanka and other parts of the world, whose problems started with their political and cultural subordination following the occupation of large chunks of their space by foreign intrudors. It is not only that they lost land and clout, as time passed they were overwhelmed numerically.”

Ken S. Coates suggests that “The creation of a global movement of indigenous peoples has had profound effects on long-ignored and marginalized peoples, who have found common cause and political voice with comparable societies around the world.”

3. Geography and History

Sri Lanka is an island country situated in the Indian ocean, bordered by the bay of Bengal in the East and the Arabian sea in the West (Figure 1). It is located some 40 km south-east of India.

![Map of Sri Lanka](image)

*Figure 1: Map of Sri Lanka (author’s drawing)*

The history of Sri Lanka is marked by the successive colonial rules of Portuguese (1505–1658), Dutch (1658–1795), and British (1796–1948). None of them made systematic effort to affect the way of life of the Vedda people. The island proclaimed

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20 Coates, *Global History of Indigenous Peoples*. 
independence from the Great Britain in 1948, then, the subsequent governments started to interfere in various ways in Veddas' lifestyle. Following quotes show its starting measures,

[...] it is especially in the 20th century that the Wanniyala-Aetto [Veddas] have been displaced from their equatorial forests. [...] Between 1951 and 1955, Sri Lankan government evacuated several Wanniyala-Aetto settlements, forcing them to yield to the socio-economic needs of the dominant population. [...] At that time, minister of finance J. R. Jayewardene put an extremely negative light on the Wanniyala-Aetto [Veddas] when he mentioned that the aim of the government was to: '[...] lead them away from the hunter stage to the agricultural stage. We want to bring about a stage when the backwardness, the primitiveness of the Vedda [...] will disappear [...] and make them full citizens of Lanka'. [...] To expedite the development process, the government established 'The Backward Communities Welfare Board', which focused on the Wanniyala-Aetto [Veddas] of the Eastern and Uva provinces. This board facilitated the government's plan to move Wanniyala-Aetto [Veddas] to make way for the dominant Sinhalese and Tamil, who needed more rice-paddy land. The government argued that the hunters and gatherers should change their ways, and that the new life would be better. The Wanniyala-Aetto [Veddas] would benefit from living in permanent settlements and becoming agriculturists.21

4. Demography

The official census records from 1881 up to 1901 recognised six ethnic categories of the island's population.22 These were: Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Sri Lankan Moors, Sri Lankan Malays, Burghers/Eurasians, and Others. From 1911 on, the Tamils became bisected into Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils and the same was done with the Moors, creating the distinction between Indian and Sri Lankan Moors. Due to the steady decrease of the European and indigenous (Vedda) populations over the years, these two categories became included under Others from 1963 on.

Despite their [Veddas'] numerical insignificance, they remained a census category in British time and were counted: numbering 5,332 in 1911 and 2361 in 1946, figures that could not even make up 0.0 percent of the population. Since then their number has dwindled because the vast majority have become Sinhala-speakers and Buddhists, while yet others in Eastern province have become Tamil and Tamil-speakers.23

23 More in Roberts, Firstness, History, Place & Legitimate Claim, 15, 16.
Table 1 shows the dynamics of change during the second half of the twentieth century and in the two most recent censuses (2001, 2012) pointing to the inclusion of the two new categories (Chetti\(^24\) and Bharatha\(^25\)) expanding ethnicities up to eight categories.

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<td>All ethnic groups</td>
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<td>12,690</td>
<td>14,847</td>
<td>16,930</td>
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<td>7,513</td>
<td>9,131</td>
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<td>1,424</td>
<td>1,887</td>
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<td>1,175</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>855</td>
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<td>464</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>1,339</td>
<td>1,892.6</td>
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<td>Indian Moor(^{27})</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Europeans(^{28})</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38.3</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>55</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bharata</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18.2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Ethnic Groups of Sri Lanka\(^{30}\)**

5. Research

As ethnomusicologists, we should pose the following important question: is the unquestionable multiethnicity, multireligiosity and multilinguality, which led sociologist Neluka de Silva to name Sri Lanka “a hybrid island” (2004), reflected in music research? If we take a look into some pioneer publications about Sri Lankan musics, it appears

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\(^{24}\) Chetty is a Tamil term for all trading groups in South India. Sri Lankan Chetties are a class of Tamil-speaking traders who migrated from South India under Portuguese and Dutch rule from 16\(^{th}\) to mid 17\(^{th}\) century (“Sri Lankan Chetties,” Wikipedia, accessed March 25, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Chetties).


\(^{26}\) Note that 2001 census enumeration did not cover the North-Eastern part of the country (Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts) which was considered a war zone at that time (“Population Census and Statistics,” accessed February 10, 2019, http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Pocket%20Book/chap02.pdf).

\(^{27}\) Indian Moor ethnicity is under “others” in the years 1981, 2001, 2012 (“Population Census and Statistics.”).

\(^{28}\) Europeans are under “others” from 1963 onwards (“Population Census and Statistics.”)

\(^{29}\) Veddas are under “others” from 1963 onwards (“Population Census and Statistics.”)

\(^{30}\) Source of data: Department of Census and Statistics (“Population Census and Statistics,” 8.)
that domestic learners, researchers and writers, simply understood “Sri Lankan” and the majority “Sinhalese” as synonymous, with a fairly characteristic lack of sensitivity for the minorities. Pioneers of folk music research in the island, such as Devar Suryasena (1899–1981), W. B. Makuloluwa (1922–1984), and C. de S. Kulatillake (1926–2005), paid considerable attention to local music cultures and to their carriers with whom they shared language, religion, and ethnicity. This is in concordance with the notions and activities of folk music and dance researchers in Europe, such as for instance Zoltán Kodály or France Marolt. In Sri Lanka, it was foreign researchers who brought in a variety of new research topics, relating music to gender, cultural policy, war, popular music, and media (for instance, Jim Sykes, Anne E. Sheeran, Hege Myrlund Larsen, Max Peter Baumann, Caitrin Lynch, Shakuntala Rao & Pradeep N’ Weerasinghe). Sensitivity to the “other voices” – and not only to those of the Sinhalese majority – is increasingly present, partly as a consequence of the lessons learned from the three-decade long civil war, which ended up in 2009. The questiones posed by the younger generation of ethnomusicologists trained abroad testify to the value of comparative insights and raised sensitivity.

The rest of my article is entirely dedicated to the island’s indigenous Vedda people. Map 2 (Figure 2), points to the concentration of traditional Vedda settlements in the hilly and heavily forested central part of the island. Their community settlements were present in about one third of the island in 1950s. A much more recent map (Figure 3) (2018) suggests that the Veddas still live in some of these areas, but their habitat clearly shrunk and is currently limited to the following eleven settlements: Rathugala, Pollebadda, Dambana, Hennanigala, Laggala, Nilgala, Dalukana, Sorabora, Dimbulagala, Kukulagala, and Vakarai.

31 Kulatillake later did research on Veddas and published some articles about them, which will be mentioned later.
In his book, *The Veddas*, C. G. Seligman categorizes Veddas into three distinctive groups:

- **Gal Veddas/cave or rock Veddas**, living in caves and forests, associated with hunting and gathering;
- **Gam Veddas/village Veddas**, living in mud huts and associated with *chena* cultivation and farming;
- **Muhudu Veddas/coastal Veddas**, living in coastal areas and associated with fishing, boating, etc.

Out of three distinctive groups of the Veddas described in the literature, the first one is widely seen as a root source for the remaining two. It is currently obsolete due to the governmental policies that from the 1950s pushed towards their removal from the forest habitats. One of the measures made the Veddas subject to punishment if hunting beyond the officially set limitations. In Ken S. Coates’ words, “The indigenous societies

41 *Chena* cultivation refers to dry farming, “which involves clearing small plots of land from the forest, cultivating them by hand for one or two years. By Western standards, *chena* appears untidy, a jumble of diverse plants raised between the trunks of incompletely burned trees” (more in Siegeborn, "The Disappearing Wanniyala-Aetto," 46, 60; and James Brow explains chena cultivation as “[...] may thus be described as a nonmarket mode of production organized on a household basis. Neither land nor labor is here marketed, and production is for use rather than exchange” (Brow, "The Changing Structure of Appropriations in Vedda Agriculture," 451.)
identified closely with their specific setting and developed cultural forms, habits, movements, and harvesting activities which permitted them to sustain life in a particular ecological niche. As those “who share a complex moral universe with visible and invisible fellow beings in an environment where everything is alive”, Gal Veddas have lost much more than a simple space.

How they live under the changed circumstances? How do they cope with the challenges of a very different mediated world? How do they interact with the non-Vedda visitors? Where is the place of music under the changed and changing circumstances? These were some of the questions that motivated me to organise a fieldwork expedition with my Sri Lankan students in 2005 to one of the Vedda major settlements near Dambana (marked with a black square on Figure 3), which is also the seat of Mr. Ūruvarige Wanniyaletto, the leader of all Sri Lankan Veddas. He can be seen on Figure 4, sitting in his house with an axe over his left shoulder.

Figure 4: Ūruvarige Wanniyaletto, The Vedda Leader

As it is often the case with the indigenous peoples, there is a belief, shared by insiders and outsiders, that they – thanks to the knowledge about natural remedies – can be helpful as healers. Ūruvarige Wanniyaletto is known as the community leader, adviser, caretaker, priest and healer. His knowledge about native medicine, healing skills and methods

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42 Coates, Global History of Indigenous Peoples, 49.
43 More in Stegeborn, “The Disappearing Wanniyaletto,” 44.
44 His first name, Ūruvarige, refers to his family lineage. According to Nandadeva Wijesekera, “The Vedda society was divided into several clans (varuge) [varige]. About 12 were known but only a few are remembered now. […] Ūru and Monara are the best recognized […]” (Wijesekera, “Vanishing Veddas,” 9). Current Vedda leader belongs to Ūru clan.
45 Photographed by the author during her field research in the Dambana area on August 18, 2007.
are rooted in the oral tradition and were transmitted to him by the elderly ancestors. According to Beverley Diamond, “indigenous knowledge is bound to the knowledge of place and environment”. Until recently, he used his traditional medicinal knowledge to treat the Veddas after animal attacks, against various diseases and epidemics. During my second visit to the Dambana settlement in 2007, he sadly commented that young Veddas nowadays often prefer to seek instant remedies in the hospitals rather than using his traditional medicinal practices and products. They do visit him occasionally and seek advices, mostly for their elderly family members. The bottles next to him on Figure 4 contain liquids with medicinal qualities, meant for communal use and for selling to the outsiders. Photographs on the wall behind him display some of his visitors, from unknown ones to the President of Sri Lanka. For Sinhalese and other visitors from urban environments, Veddas look like an exotic curiosity.

Visit to a Vedda settlement is reminiscent of a visit to an open-air museum or eco-park, in which the community leader patiently poses for pictures with his axe and sells liquid products of the indigenous knowledge, while community members sometimes respond to special requests to demonstrate traditional music and dance. A house depicted on figure 6 is the Vedda leader’s house made of natural ingredients; twigs plastered with clay, lime, water, cow dung, chopped straw, barks of trees and more, which are available in their natural environment. The rest of the community lives in well-furnished, equipped and stylized modern houses comparable to those of neighboring Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims.

Figure 5: Visitors with the Vedda leader

Visit to a Vedda settlement is reminiscent of a visit to an open-air museum or eco-park, in which the community leader patiently poses for pictures with his axe and sells liquid products of the indigenous knowledge, while community members sometimes respond to special requests to demonstrate traditional music and dance. A house depicted on figure 6 is the Vedda leader’s house made of natural ingredients; twigs plastered with clay, lime, water, cow dung, chopped straw, barks of trees and more, which are available in their natural environment. The rest of the community lives in well-furnished, equipped and stylized modern houses comparable to those of neighboring Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims.

48 Photographed by the author during her field research in the Dambana area on 18 August 2007.
49 Wijesekera mentions that “The dance is a simple movement of a few steps. It is artless and simple. Musical instruments are not known to the Veddas. Time is kept by beating the thighs with the palms of the hands. Veddas sing simple songs. These are chants and lullabies. [...]” (in Wijesekera, “Vanishing Veddas,” 8.)
Opening of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Community Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages at the regional Sabaragamuwa University in 2006 is certainly a positive initiative, which reflects the government’s awareness of its responsibility for the survival of Sri Lankan Veddas. Due to a mixture of political, economic and social issues, Veddas became deprived from their dignity and choice to continue traditional life style in the environment they consider their own. Increasing encounters with the non-Vedda individuals, their religious beliefs, mediatized languages, values, habits and technologies, inform young community members of a reality in which they increasingly wish to participate. Hiding any connections with the indigenous minority commonly associated with “backwardness” is easier in modern urban settings. Will the mentioned University Centre be able to change this trend? The unknown’s author’s Figure 7 depicts the Centre at its opening in 2006 and Figure 8 from 2019 demonstrates its present look.

51 Photographed by the author during her field research in the Dambana area on August 18, 2007.
52 Unknown photographer on December 18, 2006.
53 Photographed by the author on March 22, 2019.
The aim of the centre mentioned at the University web is as follows: “providing facilities for those who are interested in postgraduate studies in indigenous knowledge and community studies”. The main objective of the programme is “to continuously produce professional researchers that are well equipped with theoretical and applied aspects of indigenous studies to contribute to the world of indigenous knowledge”. The centre has initiated an e-journal called Ākyāna (Narrations) and so far it has three volumes available online. Below are the excerpts of the author’s interview with the current director of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Community Studies, Prof. Suranjan Priyanath at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages of Sabaragamuwa University, on 22 March 2019:

Q: What is your area of specialization?
A: I am an economist.

Q: When were you appointed as the director to the centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Community Studies?
A: In 2018.

Q: Is there an ethnomusicologist engaged in the Centre?
A: Neither an ethnomusicologist nor any other employee has been appointed. Director is appointed to be in-charge of the Centre and a clerical staff member is shifted from another department to maintain the Centre and do the paperwork.

Q: What is/are current role/s of the Centre?
A: To accept postgraduate candidates for their higher studies (About 20 postgraduate candidates register each year at the centre for M.Phil and PhD studies).

Q: Do you have some research projects connecting Veddas, their rituals, customs and cultural values?
A: Yes, generally candidates focus on Veddas’ culture, history, religion, language, sport, livelihood activities, indigenous health system and indigenous knowledge about climate, environment and social changes, economic, legal and anthropological views, traditional technology, agriculture, medicine, management, fishery and fine arts, but so far there is no focus on ethnomusicological perspectives.

Q: What are your postgraduate candidates’ attitudes about Vedda community?
A: They are familiar with Vedda problems. They say that “real Veddas live only in forests, not in villages, only about 40 families. They do speak pure Vedda language and keep their tradition with their way of living, attitudes and values. In villages, Veddas just speak, behave, live and do all activities like us and whenever visitors come, they try to show their identity with an axe holding on a shoulder, speaking the language and acting as Veddas, nothing is genuine. Otherwise, they live with modern technologies, speak Sinhala and do business like us, no difference to be noticed.

Q: What are your initiatives for the Veddas’s sustainable future?

A: Nothing at the moment.
Q: What are the Veddas immediate problems to be addressed?
A: Land limitation and they have to have their own police and a court to understand and address their sensitive problems.
Q: Does the Centre have direct connections to the Vedda community?
A: No.
Q: Do you organize some lectures, cultural shows or discussions periodically about indigenous Veddas?
A: No, nothing at the moment. I do not think that it would be useful to organize Vedda cultural shows in an exhibitional manner in the university environment.
Q: Do you have an archive, a documentation centre, with audio and video data and publications about Veddas in your centre?
A: There is no sizeable collection at the moment, but we started to collect books, articles and postgraduate dissertations. University has an e-journal online.
Q: Are there any professional musicians in the Vedda community?
A: Yes.
Q: What are your proposals/suggestions/ideas to develop capacities of the centre for the betterment of Veddas’ sustainable future?
A: I would make changes at the university act to expand center’s capacity; to make academics and leaders of the university to see its value, not only to accept postgraduate applications, but to lead candidates to do applied research for Veddas sustainable future, to introduce a postgraduate course unit/s about indigenous knowledge, culture and language, to invite Vedda leader and some intellectuals to run a course/s, and in that way encourage young Vedda members to study, to make them aware of their identity and value. In this way, there would be a mutual benefit. There should be a national awareness of indigenous knowledge and community studies as well.57

After we discussed the experiences from some other parts of the world, for instance from Brazil, the director added that “he could apply for funds to invite Veddas to lead a course for the students in the Centre, develop the center with audio-visual materials and library facilities”.58

6. Publications

What do the publications about Sri Lankan Veddas tell us about their everyday reality (Table 2)? Ranging from an early study published in 1911 to our days, marginality appears to be a common thread. Assimilation with the Sinhalese majority or with the Tamils in the areas in which they dominate reflects conscious search for a more privileged lifestyle. A selection of publications is listed in Table 2:

57 Suranjan Priyanath, in discussion with the author, at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages of Sabaragamuwa University, March 22, 2019.
58 Ibid.

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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Name of the Publication</th>
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<td>C. G. Seligmann and Brenda Seligman</td>
<td>The Veddas</td>
<td>1911</td>
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<tr>
<td>James Brow</td>
<td>Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura District: The Historical Anthropology of a Community in Sri Lanka</td>
<td>1978</td>
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<td>Jon Anderson Dart</td>
<td>Ethnic Identity and Marginality among the Coast Veddas of Sri Lanka</td>
<td>1985</td>
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<td>James Brow</td>
<td>“The Incorporation of a Marginal Community Within the Sinhalese Nation”</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<td>E. M. Rathnapala</td>
<td>Lankan Veddas (in Sinhalese)</td>
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<td>“Where have all the Veddas Gone? Buddhism and Aboriginality in Sri Lanka”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dayananda Somasundara eds.</td>
<td>Sri Lankan Islanders and Indigenous People (in Sinhalese)</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dayananda Somasundara and Herath Madaka Bandara eds.</td>
<td>Primitive Societies of Sri Lanka (in Sinhalese)</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranga Samindini Weerakkodi and Ruwan Premasiri</td>
<td>Coastal Veddas of Sri Lanka (in Sinhalese)</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayananda Somasundara</td>
<td>Indigenous Research (in Sinhalese)</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: A Selection of Publications about Sri Lankan Veddas
The following four publications in one way or another include musical expressions of the Vedda people (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Name of the Publication</th>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. de S. Kulatillake</td>
<td>The Veddahs Still Sing the Oldest Melodies on Earth</td>
<td>No publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Brow and Michael Woost</td>
<td>“Vedda”. Encyclopedia of World Cultures</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gananath Obeyesekere</td>
<td>“Where Have All the Väddas Gone? Buddhism and Aboriginality in Sri Lanka”</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Publications on Vedda Music

The earlier mentioned C. de S. Kulatillake, widely regarded as the “father of Sri Lankan ethnomusicology”, referred to Veddas as to those who “still sing the oldest melodies on Earth”. Brow and Woost provide some information about music in their encyclopedic entry about the Veddas. The third listed source has musical reference in the title, pointing to Pete Seeger’s song “Where have all the flowers gone”. The fourth source is a book published in 2015 by a graduate from the University of Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo. The use of the term “primitive people” points not only to a lack of sensitivity, but also to a lack of familiarity with ethnomusicological standards where this term does not have space for several decades.

The ongoing disappearance of the Sri Lankan Veddas raises a fundamental question, which was in a way anticipated by Marcello Sorce Keller at a recent symposium in Vienna. He asked whether it would be acceptable to simply allow some musics to die, if their carriers do not show interest in them any more? Can the same question be posed in regard to Sri Lankan indigenous people in light of the choice of many among them to hide their Vedda roots and assimilate with the stronger ethnically defined communities?

I have no direct answer to this question at the moment, but if some action is to be taken, this should certainly be done on a collaborative basis and with consent of the community generally perceived as endangered. At my latest telephone interview with the first Vedda degree

59 In his booklet, *The Veddahs Still Sing the Oldest Melodies on Earth*, C. D. S. Kulatillake has mentioned that, “One important feature is that all Vedda songs are in the mono-melodic form. The Sinhala people in very remote regions have the binary form in their recitation of the common 4-line verse or *seepada* style of folk song, which is widely distributed in the country. The Vedda song may have even 10 or 15 lines, but all lines of the song will be sung in the same single melody. Not a single line will take a second tune other than the first tune of the starting line.” (C. D. S Kulatillake, *The Veddahs Still Sing the Oldest Melodies on Earth* (Ambalangoda: Bandu Wijesuriya, n.d., 10.)

60 At the ICTM Joint Symposium of the Study Group on Music and Minorities and the Study Group on Music and Gender which took place in University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna on 23-31st of July 2018.

61 James Brow and Michael Woost explain this attitude as; “Especially among the younger and more educated villagers, one is likely to encounter stronger assertions of their Sinhalese identity and disinterest, even embarrassment, about their Vedda origins [...].” See “Vedda,” *Encyclopedia of World Cultures Vol. III: South Asia*, eds. David Levinson et al. (New York: G. K. Hall and Company 1996), 12.
holder, T. M. Gunawardhena on 11 May 2018, I realized that he - being a village school teacher - tries his best to educate Vedda children, to make them appreciate traditional values, to teach Vedda language and to encourage them to use it for day-to-day needs, and in this way to protect his people from very real challenges leading to disappearance. He added that “teachers, who come from elsewhere first try to learn the Vedda language and customs, but our children refused that”.

In her keynote address, Michelle Bigenho argues that, for indigenous people, modernity began when their lives were first interrupted by colonizers, when their land was invaded. The newness that comes with encounter is central to other definitions of ‘alternative’ modernities as well. Indeed, the very application of the concept of ‘modernity’ to indigenous cultures is part of a broad movement to decouple the idea of the modern from Euroamerican centrism. Indigenous modernities often differ from the ‘developmentalist’ narratives of ‘the West’ and emphasize the fragmentation, deterritorialization, and struggles for reclamation that are parts of indigenous experience in most parts of the world. Reclamation, recontextualization, and expansions of ‘traditional’ concepts to include new realms of experience are important elements of ‘modernity’.

Beverley Diamond reminds us that, It is important to recognize, however, that local knowledge is neither homogenous nor isolated. Most modern people – indigenous and nonindigenous – have cross-cultural encounters, travel, or use various media and communication technologies that provide access to diverse social worlds. Powwow organizers, for instance, recognize the importance of the internet in circulating their protocols and descriptions of the meanings of various dances.

In my telephone conversation with T. M. Gunawardhena, he made clear that almost every younger Vedda member uses phone, internet and other media for their own commercial purposes, while he would like to add educational means to their use. “Our lives today have become square typed with telephones, televisions, houses, rooms and mobiles.”

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62 According to K. N. O. Dharmadasa, “[...] both Vedda and Sinhalese, favour categorizing Vedda as a dialect of Sinhalese’ (more in “The Creolization of an Aboriginal Language: The Case of Vedda in Sri Lanka (Ceylon),” Anthropological Linguistics 16, no. 2 (1974): 80; and Nandadeva Wijesekera, “It is not possible to know the exact nature of the original Vedda language. Some words of an unidentified language can be detected. The view of language experts is that on structural and grammatical grounds the language of the Veddas is similar to Sinhala [...]” (see in Wijesekera, “Vanishing Veddas,” 4).  
63 T. M. Gunawardhena, a telephone interview with the author, May 11, 2018.  
Obviously, tradition and modernity could function to mutual benefit if there are means to make the former attractive to a generation which, for most part, refuses to look back. Consequently, I believe that collaborative efforts of scholars and community leaders could benefit the sense of self-respect among young Veddas, and familiarize them with the useful experiences of indigenous people in the other parts of the world.

7. Conclusion

The almost three decades long civil war on the island prevented research in the considerably large portions of the country. Time has come for a sensitive, collaborative research on music of Sri Lankan diverse communities, including the Veddas and other minority groups and individuals. In addition to Tamils and Muslims, scholarly attention should also be paid to smaller minorities, such as the Burghers (descendants of European colonists from 17th to 20th centuries). European-derived genres such as *baila* and *kaffrigna*, which are a part of Sri Lanka’s musical soundscape should receive more attention, as well.

I am concluding the article with respect to Catherine Grant’s Twelve Factors in Music Vitality and Endangerment Framework (Table 4). While applying her system to test sustainability and resilience in the Vedda context, I do not refer to a specific genre but to their sonic/musical world in general.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twelve factors in Music Vitality and Endangerment Framework</th>
<th>Music/Cultural Practices of Vedda people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Intergenerational transmission</td>
<td>Intergenerational oral transmission is the efficient factor in regard to music-making related to ritual practices based on their belief in the power of “Ne Yakun” (dead ancestor spirits), also in regard to their customs and medicinal knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Change in number of proficient musicians</td>
<td>Oral transmission and practice keep up the number of proficient musicians for local needs, while professional musicianship is non-existent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Change in number of people engaged with the genre</td>
<td>The number of people taking part in ritual practices is decreasing due to the shrinking community numbers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

68 The verb “bailar” in Portuguese means “to dance” and kaffrigna is marked by Portuguese music and African 6/8 beat rhythms.


<table>
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<tr>
<td>4  Pace and direction of change in music and music practices</td>
<td>Negative attitudes about their “indigeneity” have negative impact on their participation in traditional practices. So far, there are no popular music performers among the Veddas (unlike e.g. among the Saami in Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Finland &amp; western Russia), Ainu in Japan, and aboriginal performers such as Yothu Yindi &amp; Troy Cassar-Daley and Narbalek band from Australia).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Change in performance context(s) and function(s)</td>
<td>“Demonstrations” of ritual practices sometimes take place based on demands of individual and organised tourists. These coincide with somewhat lesser number of ritual practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Response to mass media and the music industry</td>
<td>Veddas in general are glad to have a voice in the media. The interest of national media in the Veddas is rather limited, sometimes with the sole focus on the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People on 9 August. But, a community radio station named, “Dambana Radio”, established in Dambana in 2010 under the SLBC (Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation), aims to give voice to the indigenous community. Advisors of the station are Mr. Ūruvarige Wanniyaletto (the Vedda leader) and Mr. T. M. Gunawardhena (the village school teacher, who gave the earlier addressed telephone interview to the author of this article). Dambana radio enables indigenous people to publicly discuss their community needs, receive regional and national news, and learn about the programs on indigenous culture and environmental protection in Vedda language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Accessibility of infrastructure and resources</td>
<td>There is no infrastructure or resources beyond the community contexts and needs. The Centre for indigenous studies may provide infrastructure and resources not only for research and documentation, but also for performance and teaching in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  Accessibility of knowledge and skills for music practices</td>
<td>The leader and community members wish to keep the inherited knowledge and skills alive within the community. They make the musical part accessible also outside the original contexts and share it with visitors, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  Official attitudes towards the genre</td>
<td>Academic interest in Vedda culture is an unquestionable fact, but the sonic features of what we would call music attract minimal interest, limited to researchers and curious individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Community members' attitudes toward the genre</td>
<td>Like in most other cultures, young generation is more attracted to mediated than to communal traditional expressions. Access to new technologies increases the gap in attitudes across generational lines, but respect for the elders still enables intergenerational transmission of traditional contents to the young ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Relevant outsiders' attitudes toward the genre</td>
<td>Showcases of interest in their culture by the outsiders in a range from academics to tourists sends a basically positive message to community members. The most relevant case may be the earlier mentioned Centre for indigenous studies, whose full potential is yet to be realised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Documentation of the genre</td>
<td>A plenty of studies on Vedda culture is available in various formats, including books, articles, magazines, web pages, audio-visual materials and documentaries. The Centre for indigenous studies is expected to store and organise the data and collaborate in these processes closely with community members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Twelve Factors in Music Vitality and Endangerment Framework


73 “Some aboriginal performers such as Yothu Yindi and Troy Cassar-Daley comfortably occupy spaces in the world of mainstream Australian popular music. Other groups, such as the Narbulek band from the northern territory, perform and record almost exclusively for regional aboriginal audiences, a feature common to aboriginal bands, particularly in remote areas” (more in Chris Gibson’s “Declonizing the Production of Geographical Knowledges? Reflections on Research with Indigenous Musicians,” *Geografiska Annaler Series B, Human Geography, Encountering Indigeneity: Re-imagining and Decolonizing Geography* 88, no. 3 (2006): 279).

Veddas or Wanniyala-Aettos are widely considered the oldest inhabitants of Sri Lanka and associated with the concept of “firstness.”75 Their numbers are continuously shrinking due to a combination of factors, including the past governmental policies, development projects, urbanization, mixed marriages and modern technologies, despite the present policies marked by the growing attention to human and cultural rights. My analysis based on the application of Catherine Grant’s Music Vitality and Endangerment Framework suggests that there is a space for collaborative work involving scholars and community members to benefit the endangered community and strengthen the minority indigenous voices in Sri Lanka. The Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Community Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages at the regional Sabaragamuwa University and a community radio station, radio Dambana point to the government’s interest in Vedda’s sustainable future. These two initiatives have potential to be further explored and developed. The growing field of applied ethnomusicology certainly contribute to the improvements thanks to its valuable theoretically and methodologically grounded world-wide practical experiences in relating music-centered interventions to various benefits on both communal and individual levels.76 Using the tools developed within the realm of applied ethnomusicology at this critical point will be a challenge for all participants in the envisioned collaborative work, which has no alternative.

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