The Value of Protecting Endangered Language in Culture: With Special Reference to Examine the Vedda Language in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Veddas or Vanniyaletto; an aboriginal group of Sri Lanka have survived for several millennia by adapting and coping with internal and external stress imposed on them. Archaeological and historical evidence prove that they inhabited the island long before the arrival of Aryans and had spread all over it. At present their existence is threatened by modernization where they are forced to embrace the modernity which could also be ended up vanishing them as a cultural group. Language can be considered as the most important aspect of the identity of the culture. During the research it comes to knowledge of the researcher, lack of usage of the Veddas language was the fact behind the modernization, cultural and linguistic assimilation of the Vedda people. Through the empirical findings of this research it is clearly evident that the language of the Veddas is fading away. Finally this research has emphasized that the culture and the language of the Veddas are gradually diminishing and currently the original Vedda language does not exist anymore. The research is based on Qualitative Empirical Research Methodology and the Participant Observation Method based on Case Study has been used for data elicitation.

Keywords: Vedda Language, Endangered Language, Culture, Linguistics Assimilation, Extreme Language Mixture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Every culture represents an experiment in the survival of a unique and alternative way of life, solving or evading problems. Loss of cultural diversity is there for a loss of experience and knowledge that has proven its potential usefulness for mankind in general. Languages, besides being part of a people’s cultural heritage, constitute a complete and complex reflexion of it. As communities lose their language they often lose parts of their cultural traditions which are tied to that language, such as songs, myths, and poetry that are not easily transferred through other languages. An endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language. Language loss occurs when the language has no more native speakers, and become a dead language. If eventually no one speakers the language at all, it becomes an extinct language. The extinction of any language will be resulted in an irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental question of the future. Therefore, the language diversity takes a paramount importance which also decides the human heritage. In fact, the world confronts new challenges in keeping diverse languages intact and alive through all the time. Therefore, it is high time for the world, to pool their resources and reinforce the strength of their linguistic and cultural diversity.

As aboriginal inhabitants, the Veddas in Sri Lanka are rich in many cultural values with their own language. This tribal community lived a simple life having cordial interpersonal relationships with nature. Currently the Veddas are confined to small scattered communities in Dambana, Watuyaya, Gurukumbura, and Kotabakinya. Apart from that present day Veddas are scattered in Henanigala attached to the ‘Mahaweli C division’ in the Mahiyangana, Dambana region in Ratugala and Nilgala which are situated beyond Inginiyagala in the Ampara district, In Pollebedda situated beyond Maha Oya, and in areas in close proximity to the sea such as those in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts. According to the investigation, at present Veddas in Sinhalese speaking areas; Dambana, Henanigala, Rathugala, Nilgala, Dimbulagala, Pollebedda are greatly influenced by colloquial Sinhalese, particularly the regional dialect of Sinhalese. Moreover, the East coast Vedda, in close proximity to the sea beyond Dalukana, Vakarai, Patalipuram, Kungnamkulam, Mankanie, Vettalaikatti, Kalladi those in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts Vedda speak almost all the Tamil languages.

According to the UNESCO evaluation of the level of language endangerment, the Vedda language can be categorised as a severely endangered language. Thus, the field experiences of this research prove that the present day Vedda language is spoken only by a few in the grandparent generation and the parent generation may still understand the language, but they basically do not communicate with their children in the same language.

According to UNESCO, approximately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century and continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. Up to 90 percent of the worlds’ languages are likely to disappear before the end of this century, if current trends are allowed to continue. Language diversity is being threatened around the world, and this threat is acutely felt by indigenous people. UNESCO operates five
levels of language endangerment as follows: (Avtans, 2007, p.117)

- Safe.
- Vulnerable (not spoken by children outside the home).
- Definitely endangered (children not speaking).
- Severely endangered (only spoken by the oldest generations).
- Critical endangered (Spoken by a few members of the oldest generations, often semi-speakers).

More than Ten decades have passed since the the Seligmanns did their field work, and the life of the Veddas has changed considerably. Since such significant changes have been taken place, it creates the dire need for an updated investigation in the field of Vedda studies. The particular research is based on first-hand data elicited from the current Vedda settlement areas, predominantly Dambana and it will contribute to a sound understanding of the current linguistic perspective of the Vedda language based on their cultural uniqueness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the present day Veddas in Sri Lanka, cultural aspect and their distribution can be divided into three major groups. One group is scattered over a fairly large region in the Southeast of the island, interior from the coast, including portions of Monaragala, Badulla, Amparai, and Batticoloa District. These are the Veddas best known in ethnographic literature, chiefly through the work of the Seligmanns (1911). The other group of Veddas can be found in Anuradhapura District. In 1978 James Brow has done research on this group of Veddas and he has written a book named ‘The Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura’. The Anuradhapura Veddas practice wet rice agriculture supplemented with ‘Chena’ or swidden cultivation. James Brow’s study was based on two years of field research and it is an attempt to comprehend the whole network of kinship and marriage within an endogamous caste group that is dispersed among forty five other villages besides Kukulewa. Brow claimed in his work that he found scattered in forty five villages a Vedda population of about six thousand. Brow admits that the Anuradhapura Veddas speak Sinhalese, profess Buddhism and are closely integrated into the dominant Sinhalese culture. However, in identifying these people as Veddas Brow seems to have ignored a distinction between Veddas and ‘Wanniyas’ made by Parker. According to James Brow’s account (1978) they are the largely endogamous group compared to Veddas in other regions of Sri Lanka. However, he has claimed that he found scattered in some forty four villages in Anuradhapura district a Vedda population of about six thousand. But some scholars claimed that Brow might have categorized Wanniyas of the Northern jungles as Vedda in Anuradhapura. Even so, the number of villages of surveyed is also questionable.

Henry Parker who focused his studies on the Veddas ‘Ancient Ceylon’ published in 1909 has given a comprehensive account of distinction between Veddas and Wanniyas. The distinction between Vedda and Wanniya made by Parker is very important point for further research. He reported when the Wannyas engaged in hunting it did not differ very much from the Veddas but they did not speak the Vedda language or did not worship quite the same deities. Even at present distinction between Veddas and Wanniyas persists among the Sinhalese in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka.

Jhon Dart’s ‘The Coast Veddas: Dimension of Marginality’ (1990) is a significant contribution to Vedda studies. This is one of the comprehensive studies of the Tamil speaking Veddas and it has utilized the concept of marginality in examining the present situation of this community thus classifying their position vis-a-vis the mainstream Tamil society in the region. The previous scholars, Seligmanns, Hugh Neville and James Brow, have mentioned about the Cost Veddas, but Dart’s research is more important because he has tried to show how the idea of marginality can serve as a focus to examine the relative social position of the Veddas in terms of regional situation, subsistence basis, economic conditions, and position within the case system. According to his view, the coast Veddas are found along the eastern coast of Sri Lanka between Valaichchenai and Trincomalee and the local Tamil term for them is ‘VeDar’. The majority of them are fishermen and they are Hindus who speak Tamil. They have little or no contact with the Veddas of the interior, although it is likely that they originally come to the interior districts. James Brow’s (1978) has described at length the marginality of the Sinhala speaking Veddas relative to the Sinhalese and has suggested that the Sinhala speaking Veddas and in particular the Tamil Veddas are a marginalized people, both culturally and geographically. Finally Dart’s also confirmed this and he said that the Coast Veddas have maintained their identity as a separate named group, as well as some distinctive cultural features, despite a relatively high frequency of intermarriage with Tamils and continued close contact with Tamil culture, seems to be due largely to the marginal social and economic position which they occupy.

In 2011, the SAARC Cultural Center at Colombo has undertaken a research project on Diminishing Cultures in South Asia, and under this project the comprehensive sociological research has been done on the current status of Vedda Community particularly their socio-cultural life by Premakumara De Silva. He has discussed several sociological aspects of the current status of Vedda region, using qualitative and quantitative analysis, and the paper has concluded that unless speedy holistic action is not taken, there is always a chance for the Vedda as a community to become a vanishing ethnic group in the Sri Lankan history within a generation or two.

Gannanath Obeyesekara (2002) has given a critical analysis on colonial histories of Veddas, Vedda primitivism and Wanniyalaetto identity based on field work that he has conducted in the Vedda community.
Although too many diverse opinions and conflicting views exist within this area of scholarship, a systematic analytical linguistic analysis of the Vedda language considering the overall picture of the Vedda culture recently has not been undertaken. The classic study of the Vedda by C.G. Seligmann and B.Z. Seligmann (The Veddas, 1911) addresses these concerns. Over ten decades have passed since the Seligmanns did their fieldwork and the life of the Veddas has changed considerably. Since then, such significant changes created an urgent need for an updated investigation in the field of the Veddas study.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS
As this research is a qualitative empirical research and the objective is to get a better understanding through first-hand experience, truthful reporting and quotation of actual conversations through participant observation have been used as a research method for data collection. In this study, the most popular method of field linguistics, the interview method, was employed to collect data based on the case study and to improve the quality of information. Including the present chieftain of the clan Vannyalotto, there are twenty five key informants who have been used as key cases for generating information. Apart from the key informants, thirty general informants belonging to all social and economic classes, genders and all age groups above the age of twelve were interviewed from Dambana. A scheduled questionnaire for data gathering was not used because the study was specially based on the older generation of Veddas, who lakes in literacy. The tape recorder and digital technology were used to record the data. The recoded data was transcribed and turned into analyzable texts using International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA).

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION
The Veddas have been the focus of attention in recent years for the reason that the rapid change occurring in their habitat will drastically transform their life style. The most theatrical impact on the traditional Vedda mode of life occurred during the Multipurpose Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme inaugurated in 1977. The land provision requirements of this irrigation, power, and agricultural development project involved the conversion of some regions, in which the Veddas had lived from time immemorial, in to natural reserve. These Vedda populations were moved in January 1983. This was not the first time that social-economic needs of the lager society interrupted traditional Vedda life. In the early 1950s, with the work of the Gal Oya Development Scheme, several traditional Vedda settlements were evacuated and the people re-settled in new agricultural villages. Under this Mahaweli Development Scheme, several Vedda families were induced by Government authorities to abandon their traditional forest settlement in the Dambana region and to move into government colonies. Now after years of experience with colony life, many Veddas are deeply dissatisfied and resentful of official dom’s busted promises and continuing open hostility towards the Veddas who are distinctively different from other people of the island. The ancestral hunting grounds around Dambana that were taken over under the Mahaweli Scheme have turned into a wildlife sanctuary where swidden-fellow cultivation and hunting are now prohibited.

A recent research done by Premakumra (2011) on Vedda’s cultural aspects based on the present day Vedda scattered areas such as Dambana, Henanigala, Pollebedda, Rathugala, Dimbulagala, Vakarai with statistical analysis shows, that the Vedda language is diminishing from generation to generation rapidly. Further, he has stated, that unlike Dambana Vedda in the areas that are not considered as tourist destinations, such as Vakarai, Pollebedda, Dimbulagala, and Rathugala the Vedda language is diminishing faster as there is no monetary value given to the use of the language.

According to his data, the following figure stresses the fact that the Vedda language is fast diminishing from generation to generation. According to his analysis following figure shows, currently, only 11% of the Veddas in Sri Lanka are conversant in their own language in comparison to 85% of the Veddas who are not conversant in their traditional language. A majority of the Veddas that are fluent in their language skills represent the over 70 age category and the 56-70 age categories which can also be a reason for alarms of possibility of extinction of the language of the Veddas.

Fig.1 Transformation of Language Use/Disuse within a Generation
(Source: Premakumara, De Silva, 2011, p. 157)

Further, the data found by Premakumara shows the gradual disuse of the Vedda language from generation to generation as further elaborated in the following chart,

Fig.2 Percentage of the Population According To Indigenous Language Skills and Age Group
(Source: Premakumara, De Silva, 2011, p.158)
The above figures show that the Vedda language skills have come to near extinction considering the language abilities of the 5-18 year olds among the Veddas who are not at all conversant in the Vedda language. However, it was observed during the field visit that the elderly generation of Veddas is willing to speak the Vedda language but they use Sinhalese when they converse with their younger generation. Although a few of the younger generation can speak the Vedda language they prefer to speak Sinhalese. Some in the younger generation do not like to say that they cannot speak the Vedda language at all.

From the field investigation the reasons for language endangerment of Vedda language could be found that the language endangerment may be caused primarily by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation. It may also be caused by internal forces such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language or by decline of group identity. Internal pressure always derives from external factors. One of the major internal forces for language endangerment of Vedda was observed during the field visit. There is a negative attitude towards their own language particularly the younger generation of Vedda community. It is observed that, the young ones in the community generally felt that the Vedda language was not worth learning and speaking in Sinhalese according to them helps in identifying with the outsider's identity. Moreover, it was also observed that the children generally address their parents in Sinhalese and the parents also converse with them in Sinhalese. A language is in danger when its speakers no longer pass it onto the next generation. Today, many speech communities of minority languages are shrinking and their languages will ultimately vanish, if these tendencies are not reversed. Children may no longer acquire the language of the older generation even when these languages are still spoken by many thousands of elderly speakers. This tendency of a negative attitude towards their language has resulted in the endangerment status of the Vedda language which is very difficult to overcome. Many minority communities associate their disadvantaged social and economic position with their ancestral culture and language. Thus, they have come to believe that their languages are of no use anymore and not worth retaining. Speakers of minority languages in the world abandon their languages and cultures in the hope of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood and enhance social mobility for themselves and their children.

"Language endangerment may arise when communities with different linguistic traditions live side by side. Such contacts involve an exchange of products as well as an exchange of cultural elements. Very often, the communities do not enjoy the same prestige in contact situation: a dominant and inferior status may arise for specific reasons, such as numerical, economic, socio-historical or political strengths of each community. The communities with a lower status commonly acquire proficiency in the language of the dominant group. They may decide to adopt the language and culture of the dominant community" (Avtans, 2007, p. 124).

During the last six decades drastic cultural and social changes have occurred in the Vedda society. As discussed above due to cultural and social assimilation, Veddas had to shift from their ancestral hunter-gatherer society to agricultural society. In the field investigations it was observed that this external force is the major cause for the Vedda neglects their mother tongue.

"Cultural/ political/ economic marginalization/ hegemony; this happens when political and economic power is closely tied to a particular language and culture so that there is a strong incentive for individuals to abandon their language (on behalf of themselves and their children) in favor of another more prestigious one. This frequently happens when indigenous populations, in order to achieve a higher social status, adopt the cultural and linguistic traits of a people who have come to dominate them through colonization " (Avtans, 2007, p. 132).

Generally, the accelerated pace of language endangerment is considered to be a major problem for linguistic diversity in the world. However, some linguists have argued that language death is a natural part of the process of human cultural development, and that languages die, because communities stop speaking them for their own reasons. They argued that linguists should simply document and describe languages scientifically, but not seek to interfere with the processes of language loss.

However, the fundamental task for linguists is the research on the collection of data from endangered languages. Linguistics may preserve language data in documenting languages. If the members of the speech communities give up their language, the linguists may face enormous questions when they collect the data of the endangered language. In the field investigation, the researchers too face this issue. Thus, most of the members of the Vedda community, could not remember their original language. However, still there are some elderly people in the Vedda community, who adore their language and fondly remember the days gone by. In this research it was observed that, language documentation of a highly endangered language like Veddas is not only essential to protect its linguistic value and also reverses the negative attitude towards the language practiced in the community. In fact the very process of language documentation in the field is the first step towards stopping or at least delaying the language death. Riding on the wave of this positive attitude towards the language, the people involved in language documentation can devise multi-pronged strategies to maintain and preserve the language. In the field, it was understood that in this digital age, the use of computers and multimedia can be a good weapon against the forces responsible for the vanishing voice.

There is a pressing need to document endangered languages, as many of them will disappear within the next few decades. These languages may play important roles in the future of the speech community. For instance, the Vedda tribe is considered
as an indigenous community who had a close relationship with pre-historical 'Balangoda Man' and their language may reveal invaluable information about our history. Thus, the language loss leads to the irrevocable loss of human cultural heritage. Therefore, endangered languages raise concern among linguists, as languages are important sources of the speaker’s identity as well as for scientific research. The loss of each language reduces the linguistic diversity of the world, regardless of the reasons why people abandon their language regardless of whether they adopt another local language, an official state language or an international language.

Proficiency in nationally and internationally dominant languages will gain importance throughout the world and, for that reason, they will continue to spread. This development does not necessarily require the sacrifice of other languages. For instance, mother tongues of ethno-linguistic minorities, of most societies have always been multilingual. However, speakers might decide to abandon their low prestige ethnic tongue for the benefit of social mobility and career opportunities. In these situations, ancestral languages can only survive in the long run if meaningful roles for them can be established in the lives of the community members. Ultimately, in order to maintain and perpetuate the word's language diversity, these speakers have to find good reasons for keeping their ancestral language alive in natural every day communication with their offspring. Maintaining language diversity requires not only the speakers themselves, but also involvement of government, institutional organizations, linguists, language planners and policy makers. In the case of Veddas, the amalgamated effort of people involved in language documentation, environmental groups, local government and above all, the community itself, can only sustain the vanishing voice of Veddas.

"If you don't breathe, there is no air
If you don't walk, there is no earth
If you don't speak, there is no world"

V. CONCLUSION

Currently, Vedda settlements in Sinhala speaking territories such as; Dambana, Henanigala, Rathugala, Nilgala, Pollebedda, Dimbulagala are strongly influenced by Colloquial Sinhalese and it can lucidly be seen the so-called places have the effect of extreme language mixture of the Vedda language and the language context is severely endangered. However, the current Vedda settlements in the East-Coast, which is in close proximity to the sea beyond Dalukana, Vakarai, Patlapuram, Kungnamkulam, Mankanie, Vettalaikatti, Kalladi which is also located in Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, most of the Veddas use Tamil language for communication and in such context, the Vedda language is fading away as an extinct language.

In the critical analysis of the current state of the Vedda language in Sri Lanka, the researcher suggests the cooperative efforts of the language community, language professionals; government will be indispensable in countering this threat. A language that can no longer be maintained, perpetuated, or revitalized still merits the most complete documentation possible. This is because Vedda language embodies unique cultural and ecological knowledge. Documentation of such languages is important for several reasons such as;

- It enriches the human intellectual property.
- It presents a cultural perspective that may be new to our current knowledge.
- The process of documentation often helps the language resource person to re-activate the linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Thus, the field experiences of this research prove that the present day Vedda language is spoken only by a few in the grandparent generation and the parent generation may still understand the language, but they basically do not communicate with their children in the same language. Therefore, when conducting research on the Vedda language, it is a great challenge to obtain actual data from mother-tongue speakers. However, the field experience confirm that those who can speak the Vedda language, particularly the older generation is willing to provide data of their language, since most of them willing to preserve the language and cultural values even in the face of the drastic changes that they are going through. They basically prefer living in their traditional homelands. Their dream is to preserve their culture, language and its living standards for the younger generation and thus make sure that Veddas do not die away. The present Vedda language which can also be surveyed as a small speech community is much more prone towards decimation than a large speaking community. A small group may also merge with a neighboring group, losing its own language and culture. Thus, the findings of this research suggest that a systematic linguistic research on the Vedda language and its documentation is needed instantly. Linguistic Specialists, Educationists and also the government should be involved collectively and actively to preserve this language. New technologies can also help preserve language documents and make old materials accessible on new data carriers. Information technology allows for combing different types of information like texts, voice recordings, visual materials and they can be integrated into a language documentation system.

Throughout the human history, the language of powerful groups has spread while the language of small cultures has become extinct. Speakers of minority languages may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic opportunity. Thus a national language policy must support to preserve this language. A policy of various governments towards these endangered languages have become more popular in most parts of the world over the past decades and in 1953 UNESCO has been instrumental in this development through its policy statements and related activities. According to field experience Vedda as an indigenous community in Sri Lanka has no enough protection

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for their future. They have been struggling for the survival of their traditional lifestyle which is threatened by globalization and modernization. Thus the improvement of the living conditions and respect for the human rights of the minority speakers is essential to protect this community as a cultural group and the major role should be executed by the government. However economic and social development is essential to preserve the Veddas as a cultural group and it will directly influence their language maintenance.

Finally, through this study the researcher was able to identify several aspects of Vedda language particularly their present linguistic context. According to the experiences of the field, the researcher affirms that the members of the Vedda language community are not always neutral towards their own language. However, when members’ attitudes towards their language are very positive, the language may be seen as a key symbol of group identity. If members view their language as a hindrance to economic mobility and integration into the mainstream society, they may develop negative attitudes towards their language.

“I speak my favorite language, because that’s who I am, we teach our children to our favorite language, because we want them to know who they are” (Avtans, 2007).

Finally this research has emphasized that the Vedda language has become an extreme language mix due to long time cultural and linguistic assimilation of the colloquial Sinhalese. The present generation of the Veddas are neither conversant with their cultural practices nor are they fluent in their language, hence, making them rapidly Sinhalized. In the other parts of the country where the Tamil people live, they have already become tamilized. Therefore, the Vedda language is one of the Indigenous languages which have become a severely endangered and fast fading in the near future and also the Veddas as a community will become only an episode in history within the next few generations.

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