tame human beings. Tame Veddas are fairly civilized and are mostly farmers; they are the Veddas Knox was familiar with. He also knew he never saw the wild原瓦人ency that they knew in the area known as Bintantra, which he could see from the hill country, just as I can from my own perch in Kandy. Never-nevertheless, Knox provides a detailed account of these wild Veddas through his books.

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, later, the Sinhalas. Colonial writers of the early 19th century ignored the multiplicity and complexity of Vedda society. When the Seligmans arrived, most of the Veddas had been assimilated or dispersed. The Europeans, however, had a fasci-

ation 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 Aus-

tralian aborigine in desert habitats, you could see their cousins, the Veddas, from the convenience of the government rest house in Bintantra-Alutmuwara.’

Self-primitivization

Both colonial officers and visitors arriving by ship came in to

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 Seligmans 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, the Sinhalas. Thus when Knox was doing field-

dwork 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 shoulders, some with bamboo bows and arrows (which, in reality, they had long given up for shot guns).’

Here Obeysekere observes an interesting phenomenon. It is not just a matter of ‘show-Veddas’, what is happening here is what he calls ‘self-primitivization’. In this very day such self-primitivization takes place when former primi-

tives put on shows for the benefit of foreigners and wealthy local tourists. But self-primitivization is not necessarily to be decried, 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 adivasis, or ancient residents”, and I will admit that this historical fic-
tion gives them some dignity and a sense of self-worth. This newer notion of adivasis 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 Ved-

das from Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony. Historically speaking, the Veddas have hardly ever changed any current plig-

ing (which no one denies because the whole nation is in a fright-

ful 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 indige-

nous and endangered peoples, something any jet-age trav-

eller would surely applaud. The whole picture becomes com-

pletely fascinating from the “Captain Cook” angle, you might say, when colonial and post-colonial definitions of “primi-

tive”, “tribal”, “nativo”, “indigenous” and other such terms have become reified, reformulated, and introjected as a new “truth” of an old past by the new ancient residents.’

Bibliography

Knox, Robert, An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon, Glas-
gow: James Maclachone and Sons (1791) [1681].
Seligman, C.G. and Brenda Z., The Veddas, Cambridge: Univer-
sity Press (1915).

Jomo, arguably the foremost econo-
mist in Malaysia today, is an outspo-
ken personality with a critical mind, which on more than one occasion has brought him into open conflict with the Mahathir government. A key theme in his Amsterdarn lecture was the fate of the Asian values debate, which demonstrates so obviously as being and intellectual arguments and political concepts may – willingly or not – serve political agendas in a changing world. It is instructive to see how the same Asian values, in particular the virtues of Confucianism, may be twisted around and used as explanations of widely different historical develop-
ments.

Slow economic growth in China was once attributed to Confucianism. The East Asian Miracle, so uncritically applied by World Bank observers, was also ascribed to the unique Asian values of hard work and the prevalence of collective as opposed to individual interests. In the region itself, alleged superior Asian values, as opposed to Western ones, were frequently applied to legitimize why democracy was lag-

ging behind economic growth. Jomo wryly remarked that such reasoning is hardly convincing even when applied to relatively prosperous countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Then came the Asian crisis. Asian values were then associated with corruption and cromy-

ionism. This also failed to explain the cause of the collapse of several South-

east and East Asian economies.

The economic recovery was hardly underway in most crisis-hit countries when the region itself, allegedly superior Asian values, as opposed to Western ones, were frequently applied to legitimize why democracy was lag-

ging behind economic growth. Jomo wryly remarked that such reasoning is hardly convincing even when applied to relatively prosperous countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Then came the Asian crisis. Asian values were then associated with corruption and cromy-

ionism. This also failed to explain the cause of the collapse of several South-

east and East Asian economies.

The economic recovery was hardly underway in most crisis-hit countries when the region itself, allegedly superior Asian values, as opposed to Western ones, were frequently applied to legitimize why democracy was lag-

ging behind economic growth. Jomo wryly remarked that such reasoning is hardly convincing even when applied to relatively prosperous countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Then came the Asian crisis. Asi