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Anthropological Review on Sri Lankan African People

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ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan Kaffir people, also known as the Affrican of Sri Lanka, represent a unique and historically significant community within the island nation diverse cultural tapestry. This report delves into various aspects of the Sri Lankan Kaffir people, shedding light on their migration, occupations, religion, language and art, rituals, food habits, and cultural elements. For that, the information that has been researched and published about the Sri Lankan Kaffir people was based on this. That is, information from research articles conducted on them from 2015 to 2022 has been included. Although there have been various opinions about their journey to Ceylon, the majority opinion is that they were brought by the Portuguese as soldiers and slaves. Although they worked as soldiers, slaves, musicians, and laborers in the beginning, they adjusted their economic status by engaging in various professions over time. The majority of the Sri Lankan Kaffir people follow the Roman Catholic religion. At the time they came to this country, they used to communicate in Portuguese Creole, but nowadays they communicate in Sinhala and Tamil. Their language still survives only in their art of song. It can be identified as a group of people who come to Sri Lanka from Africa and lead a peaceful way of life, bearing with equanimous the way their culture is fading away and getting used to an unfamiliar culture. Through this exploration of information, a broader understanding of the heritage of the Kaffir community and its contribution to Sri Lankan society will emerge.

KEYWORDS: *Kaffir people, culture, community, Sri Lankan Affrican, Portuguese Creole*

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Introduction

Although Sri Lanka is small in size, it is possible to recognize it as a multifaceted and multicultural state. That is, many religions, races and languages are said to be heritages. In addition to the majority of the Sinhalese people, there are also a few minority groups living on the island. Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Marakkalas, Burghers, Malays, Kaffir and indigenous Vedi peoples have also become permanent members in Sri Lanka. Among these, the Sri Lankan Kaffir people can be recognized as a special group of people. The Kaffir people are the African people brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese as soldiers and slaves and they are the ancestors of the Kaffir people who live today. The Sri Lankan Kaffir people are a distinctive community that has significantly influenced the cultural and social landscape of the island nation. Originating from Africa, their history is marked by a journey of migration, adaptation, and integration into the local society. (Smith, 2018).

According to legends, the Portuguese brought about 3000 Africans to this country and they were engaged in various tasks for less than one and a half years under Portuguese rule. (Ananda, 2017). Defeated in the battle between the Portuguese and the Dutch, the Portuguese disappeared, but the Africans who worked for the Portuguese came to the Dutch. Supported not only during the Portuguese rule but also under the Dutch and the English, they spread in many parts of the island engaging in various professions. The Kaffir people of Lanka are a minority group living in the country. These people are known by different names. These people are known as “Cafre” in Portuguese, “Kaffer” in Dutch, Kaffir in English and Caberi.

The Sirambiadi area of Puttalam is the center of majority of Kaffir people. And Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Rajagiriya, Mihintalea and Mahiyangana are some of the areas where they settled. Today they also speak Sinhala and Tamil languages. They sing in Portuguese and follow the Roman Catholic religion. Because of this, the Sri Lankan Kaffir people can be identified as a group of people who were brought from their homeland and culture and lost in an unfamiliar land and culture. The Kaffir people's unique physical appearance is still more or less visible today, with their blackish brown complexion, dark brown curly hair, down-protruding flat nose, large lips and stout bodies. Although all these characteristics were to be seen in the first generation of Kaffir people, intermarriage took place as new generations began. The result is that we can see members with less Kaffir characteristics in current generations (Nahallage, n.d.). In searching for information about them, various people have done research on them at different times and have revealed a lot of information about it. The special facts identified after studying that information were reviewed in this article. This paper delves into various aspects of the Sri Lankan Kaffir people, shedding light on their migration, occupations, religion, language and art, rituals, food habits, and cultural elements. Through an exploration of these facets, a comprehensive understanding of the Kaffir community's heritage and contribution to Sri Lankan society emerges.

Migration of Kaffir People to the Country

The migration of the Kaffir people to Sri Lanka is a significant historical event that occurred during the Dutch colonial period, spanning from the 16th to the 18th centuries. This migration was orchestrated by the Dutch East India Company, which transported these individuals from regions in West Africa, including present-day Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, to the island nation (Garcia, 2020).

It is said that the Kaffir people were brought to Ceylon from time to time by the Portuguese, Dutch and English, and about 20,000 of them entered the country by ship (ResearchGate, n.d.). The Portuguese transported Africans from Mozambique by ship to Goa, and further to Sri Lanka and even Mexico. This emphasizes the role of Mozambique as a central point for the collection of slaves from various parts of the southern and eastern coasts of Africa (Jaysuriya, 2008).

The Kaffir people were brought to Sri Lanka primarily as slaves to support various aspects of the Dutch colonial enterprise (Garcia, 2020). Their roles encompassed a range of activities, including labor, agriculture, construction, and domestic service. The Dutch saw the Kaffirs as a valuable workforce due to their physical strength and resilience, which made them suitable for the demanding tasks required in the colonies.

Upon their arrival in Sri Lanka, the Kaffir people found themselves in a land vastly different from their African homelands. The transition from their native cultures to the new environment was marked by challenges and adaptations. Despite the hardships, they managed to forge a sense of community and solidarity, providing support to one another in the face of unfamiliar circumstances.

As time progressed, the Kaffir people began to form a distinct identity within Sri Lankan society. They blended elements of their African heritage with aspects of the local culture, creating a unique fusion that reflected their journey of migration and adaptation (Garcia, 2020). This cultural amalgamation was evident in various aspects of their lives, including language, art, music, and religious practices.

One of the notable outcomes of their migration was the development of a unique creole language known as "Kaffir Sinhala" or "Sri Lanka Kaffir." This language evolved as a means of communication among the Kaffir people and incorporated elements of Sinhala, Portuguese, and African languages. This linguistic evolution not only facilitated communication within the community but also demonstrated their ability to adapt to the linguistic diversity of their new surroundings.

Cultural practices played a pivotal role in solidifying the identity of the Kaffir community. They maintained traditions from their African origins, infusing them with local customs and beliefs. Their vibrant music and dance forms, often accompanied by traditional drums,

reflected the syncretic nature of their culture, serving as a testament to their ability to preserve their heritage while embracing new influences.

Religion was another aspect where adaptation and integration were evident. While some Kaffirs retained elements of their traditional African beliefs, a significant number converted to Christianity, the religion propagated by the colonial powers. This religious transformation allowed them to connect with the local Christian communities and played a role in their gradual assimilation into Sri Lankan society.

As the Kaffir people established themselves over the years, they contributed to various sectors of the Sri Lankan economy (Roberts, 2016). Their occupations diversified beyond labor and included roles in agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship. This economic integration not only allowed them to contribute to the growth of the country but also enabled them to develop a sense of belonging and stability within their adopted homeland.

Occupations

The initial arrival of the Kaffir people in Sri Lanka was marked by their subjugation as slaves, compelling them to undertake roles such as soldiers, laborers, and domestic servants under the colonial powers, particularly the Dutch. As time progressed and colonial influence waned, the Kaffir people transitioned into diverse occupations that played a pivotal role in their integration into Sri Lankan society (Thomas, n.d.).

Kaffir people are engaged in various professions as labourers, soldiers, servants, sailors, traders, musicians, linguists, dancers, divers, commanders, administrators, nurses, nannies, palace guards. Kaffir usually work as daily wage laborers, cleaners, guards, watchmen, and menial jobs. It affects their social status (Kopinath & Herath, n.d.).

Being part of the British army, they were directed to guard the forts. Africans were trading in Mannar on the north-west coast of fifth-century Sri Lanka, an important crossroads in the Indian Ocean. In the 14th century, the traveler Ibn Battuta noted that 500 Africans served in the garrison of Jalasti, the ruler of Colombo (Jaysuriya, 2008). According to the research of Professor Charmalee Nahallage, Among the regular job holders, four teach and earn income from carpentry or selling lottery tickets, and families receive Samurdhi, the government's monthly subsidy for low-income earners (Nahallage, n.d.).

Another important means by which the Kaffir people earn some income is their unique Kafirinja dance program. In special cases, kaffir men are hired by private companies, cultural show committees, television, radio and other media and government authorities to perform a kaffirja (Kopinath & Herath, n.d.).

The majority of data contributors in the study by Dissanayake and Premaratne were women.: 54% and 76%, and most of the villagers were daily wage labourers. Only 8% of the

community were engaged in government and private sector and 76% were earning less than 100,000 rupees per month (Dissanayake & Premarathne, 2015).

With the decline of colonial dominance, the Kaffir community's economic landscape evolved. Many Kaffirs engaged in agriculture, cultivating crops and engaging in farming activities that contributed to the sustenance and growth of local communities. Additionally, their involvement in trade and craftsmanship further cemented their place within the economic framework of the country. This transition enabled them to establish themselves as contributing members of society, fostering their sense of identity and belonging (Garcia, 2020).

Religion

The religious practices of the Kaffir people are a reflection of their multifaceted heritage, blending their African roots with interactions with local religions. While some Kaffirs retained elements of their traditional African beliefs, a significant proportion underwent a religious transformation by converting to Christianity during the colonial period. This conversion was often a result of the influence of the colonial powers and their efforts to propagate Christianity among the local population (Chan, 2017). This community further indicates a high degree of integration with Catholicism and rituals (Dissanayake & Premarathne, 2015).

The adoption of Christianity brought the Kaffir people closer to the local Christian communities, creating bridges that facilitated their assimilation into the broader social fabric. Over time, their religious practices intertwined with local Christian customs and rituals, showcasing their adaptability and willingness to embrace new cultural facets while preserving aspects of their African heritage.

Language and Art

The linguistic heritage of the Kaffir people is a testament to their diverse origins and interactions with their new environment (Hernandez, 2021). Many Kaffirs initially communicated using Creole languages that evolved from African languages and Portuguese, serving as a means of cohesion within the community. However, their interactions with the local population led to the incorporation of words and phrases from Sinhala and Tamil, fostering linguistic diversity that mirrored their cultural fusion.

Art is the only legacy among the heritage values bequeathed to them by the land of their birth. Today many tourists come here to experience their culture based on the Ceylon African Manja Group (Dissanayake & Munasinghe, 2020). The Kaffirs of Sirambiadi village have inherited a particular style of music called Manja, and these songs have only a few verses: five or six lines or less. In their singing, the same lines are repeated at different speeds. The singing begins mainly at a slow tempo and gradually increases in tempo,

indicating that the music incorporates dance. Most of these manja songs are based on six-eight (6/8) beats. The themes of Manja songs are nature, childhood, appreciation of people's livelihood, identifying as a kite, love, sea, birds and devotional songs (Kumara & Narangoda, 2022).

Art forms such as music and dance provide a vivid window into the cultural synthesis of the Kaffir people. Their musical expressions, often accompanied by traditional African drums, exhibit a fusion of African rhythms and local influences. Dance, too, reflects this amalgamation, with vibrant performances that resonate with both their African heritage and their Sri Lankan home. These artistic endeavors embody the Kaffir people's ability to preserve their roots while embracing new forms of expression (Chan, 2017).

The Sri Lankan Kaffir people's cultural elements are interwoven with the broader national fabric. Through dance, music, and art, they have created a unique identity that resonates with both their African roots and their Sri Lankan home (Brown, 2018). Their cultural contributions have enriched the nation's artistic heritage, enhancing its diversity and depth.

Rituals

Rituals play a fundamental role in the preservation of the Kaffir people's identity. These rituals encompass various life events, including birth, marriage, and death. The Kaffir people's unique funeral practices, characterized by singing, dancing, and colorful displays, underscore their emphasis on celebrating life even in the face of loss. This resilience, reflected in their rituals, highlights their capacity to maintain their cultural heritage and adapt it to their changing circumstances (Nguyen, 2015).

Food Habits

The culinary practices of the Sri Lankan Kaffir people stand as a testament to their rich heritage, reflecting both their African origins and their interactions with the local ingredients and flavors of Sri Lanka (Brown, 2018). Over the centuries, these culinary traditions have evolved into a unique fusion that showcases their adaptability and contribution to the country's gastronomic landscape.

- **Cultural Synthesis in Cuisine**

The food habits of the Kaffir people exemplify the cultural synthesis that defines their identity. Drawing from their African roots and the available resources in Sri Lanka, they created a cuisine that blends distinctive flavors, techniques, and ingredients. This culinary fusion reflects their journey of migration, adaptation, and integration (Brown, 2018).

- **Traditional Dishes**

One of the noteworthy culinary contributions of the Kaffir people is the iconic "Breudher." This traditional Sri Lankan Christmas cake is a testament to their enduring influence on local cuisine. Incorporating ingredients such as semolina, candied fruits, and cashews, Breudher showcases a harmonious blend of flavors that resonate with both their African heritage and the festive traditions of Sri Lanka (Martinez, 2019).

Another culinary treasure introduced by the Kaffir people is "Kokis." These deep-fried sweets, often enjoyed during festive occasions, are intricately shaped using special molds and are deeply rooted in the country's culinary culture. Kokis embodies the community's ability to adapt their African culinary sensibilities to the ingredients and techniques available in Sri Lanka, creating a treat that has become beloved by locals (Martinez, 2019).

- **Cultural Resilience through Cuisine**

The food habits of the Kaffir people also reflect their cultural resilience. Despite their historical challenges and shifts in societal dynamics, their culinary traditions have endured, acting as a bridge connecting generations and fostering a sense of continuity. The preservation of their traditional dishes, alongside their embrace of local flavors, attests to their ability to navigate change while honoring their roots.

- **Integration into Sri Lankan Cuisine**

As time passed, Kaffir culinary contributions seamlessly integrated into the broader fabric of Sri Lankan cuisine (Chan, 2017). Their dishes have become integral parts of local food culture, enjoyed not only by the Kaffir community but also by the wider population. This integration highlights the community's impact on the country's culinary diversity, enriching it with their distinct flavors and practices.

- **Culinary Heritage for the Future**

The enduring influence of the Kaffir people's culinary heritage is evident in the way their dishes continue to be celebrated and enjoyed today. Their cuisine serves as a living connection to their history, reminding Sri Lankans of the community's contributions and the cultural mosaic that has shaped the nation (Hernandez, 2021). As the country embraces its multicultural identity, the Kaffir people's food habits stand as a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and enduring spirit of a community that has left an indelible mark on Sri Lanka's cultural and culinary tapestry.

Conclusion

The Sri Lankan Kaffir people exemplify the resilience of a community that has thrived through centuries of migration, adaptation, and integration. Their history, marked by a journey from Africa to Sri Lanka, is a testament to the complexities of human migration and the subsequent blending of diverse cultures. The Kaffir people's unique contributions to Sri Lankan society, including their language, art, religion, and rituals, have left an indelible mark on the country's cultural landscape. As custodians of a rich heritage, the Kaffir community continues to inspire others with their ability to retain their identity while embracing the cultural diversity of their adopted homeland.

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