
An Ethno-archaeological Study of the Kinnara people in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka is home to many communities who have contributed to developing its multicultural character. Kinnara is one such small ethnic group, whose settlements are clustered in restricted geographical regions in Sri Lanka, although a small number of non-practicing Kinnaras may live in other areas in the island. Known as ‘*Karmanta minissu*’, ‘*Karmantakarayo*’, and ‘*Karamantayo*’ they are a distinct ethnic group undertaking decorative craft industries which provide their livelihood and identity. Kinnaras have been studied since the 19th century, but never received serious attention as *Veddas* have. Meanwhile, the lifestyles and cultural practices of Kinnaras are transforming due to the influence of modernization, demanding their immediate record before they disappear irretrievably. What the historical significance of Kinnaras in the wider context of Sri Lankan culture is, and how they are coping with the contemporary social changes are the main research questions that concern this study. Consequently, the objective of this research is to record the historical background, geographical distribution, material culture and social aspects of the Kinnaras. To achieve these objectives, 19 Kinnara families from the Kurunegala and Gampaha Districts were studied, recording their material culture, settlement and traditional crafts. Additionally, an individual from a family, the eldest or the person involved in crafts, was interviewed. It was revealed that while the number of families that practice traditional crafts has declined, a considerable number still continues to make mats (*Kalala*). The number of families involved in other traditional crafts, such as *chamara* and *havari* making, are limited. However, there is also a new tendency to make new non-traditional items, such as handbags and purses. Kinnaras use a specific vocabulary for their tools and the process of making crafts that differ from common Sinhala. Endogamy is the most prominent form of marriage prevalent among those studied, while marriages outside their own caste were rarely recorded. These rigid social practices are changing, as marriages between Govigama and Kinnara were observed. This study illustrates the continuity of certain cultural practices amidst social transformations which provides analogies to interpret past societies.

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