

A woman is shown from the side, bent over and harvesting rice in a field. She is wearing a white headscarf with a small floral pattern, a pink and white striped long-sleeved shirt, and a vibrant skirt with a large floral pattern in red, yellow, and blue. She is reaching down with her right hand to harvest a rice stalk. The field is filled with tall, green rice plants, some of which are already harvested and lie on the ground. A green diagonal banner with white text is overlaid across the middle of the image.

DENETH PIUMAKSHI VEDA ARACHCHIGE

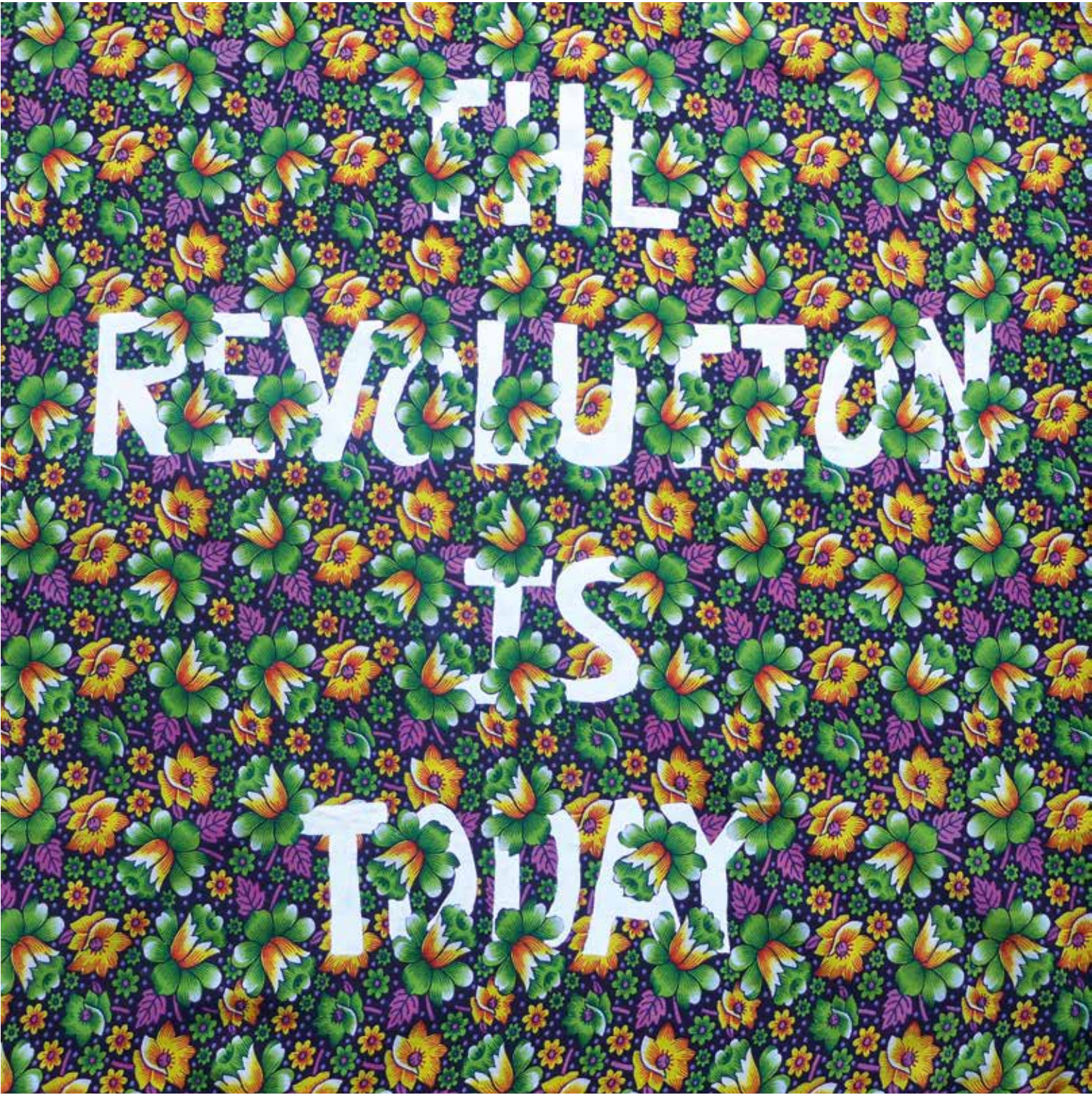
← **Rice harvesting season**
in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka
(cover photo)
photo by Deneth 2019

→ **“The Revolution is Today”** 2022
Natural pigment on Sri Lanka
Cheetha cotton textile
82 x 83 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Gandy gallery

Multidisciplinary works of Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige employ voices, videos, photography, sculpture, painting on traditional Sri Lankan ‘cheetha’ textiles and embroidery on different surfaces, including the palms of the volunteers. Her works carry past and present through hidden layers becoming visible through Deneth’s act of stitching, drawing, standing still, inquiring, bring light on the forgotten colonial entanglement of European countries in Ceylon during the 18th and 19th century, on the Sri Lankan diaspora in Europe, on untold stories of brown women who are domestic workers in the Middle East and women and children in the war zones, or on impossible restitution of the Sri Lankan cultural heritage by diverse European museums.

Her artistic practice runs along a thin line which separates art and activism; it is her intend to play with that tension.

Nataša Petrešin
(Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez [born 1976 in Ljubljana] is an interdependent curator, editor and writer.)





Installation view
Exhibition in Gandy
gallery 2020



Project 'I am not guilty'

The stories of Sri Lankan women domestic workers in the Middle East.

Rock has always been a part of my life. As a child I grew up in a house that was built on top of a large rock hill. We used to rest on the rock and play with its stones. All the scars on my body have been caused by falling on the rock while running or playing. On the other side of the rock was a large rock mine, where marginalized people made their daily income by breaking rocks into smaller pieces. Many of the women at the mine were among the category of people that leave Sri Lanka to go to other countries and become domestic workers.

This shows on one side 'the rocks' help them to earn a living when other side 'the rocks' decided their faith.

(Sri Lankan domestic workers are among the victims of Islamic sharia law which has been practicing the punishment of 'stoning to death' in many Middle Eastern countries until today)



Black & white photography
on cartridge paper
40 x 60 cm
Gallery Balzer projects
Basel, Switzerland 2017

Your's Sincerely, I am not guilty
8 x 9 cm
Embroidery on rock
Gallery Balzer projects
Basel, Switzerland 2017

Restitution of our ancestors and their memories

In 2019, during the research based art project about the Basel forgotten colonial history - ‘Voices from an archived Silence’ I was invited to study the anthropometric image archives and Swiss cousin brothers Fritz & Paul Sarasin’s scientific expedition to Ceylon (1883 – 1907). During my investigations at the Swiss National Archive in Basel which led me also to the Iconothèque of the Musée Quai Branly in Paris, I found most of the photographs of the people of Ceylon had been misplaced in archival folders dedicated to Africa, such as ‘Somalia’, Polynesian island ‘Samoa’, New Caledonia or India and also in a folder named ‘Divers’.

Those classification made in the 19th century had stayed until today within the archives. But the correct names were used for labelling all the anthropological measurements of Ceylonese people, who are Veddas, Tamil and Sinhalese in the publications of the European anthropologists to show the comparison with other “races”.

A TEXT BY ARI GAUTIER

The human skull has long been an object of fascination in various societies. Whether in poetry, literature or occultism, the skull has a very important symbolic place. In addition to these elements, the skull has also played a major role in the classification of races. Petrus Camper’s craniological works manipulated and misused, have given rise to sexist, racist and discriminatory theses for centuries.

As a brown-female-immigrant-multidisciplinary artist born and brought up in Sri Lanka, her identity & experiences within European society drove her to dig deep in the European museums and other institutional archives to search on forgotten colonial entanglement between Germany, France and Switzerland in Sri Lanka.

During the 19th century the obsession of studying “primitive’s races” and practicing of “othering” was popular among European anthropologists. The famous cousin brothers Paul and Fritz Sarasin from Basel, Switzerland were the very first naturalist who went to discover the “primitive” wild race of Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka.

The early communities of Sri Lanka, the Vedda, have been recorded in the ancient palm leaf chronicle Mahavamsa. The term ‘Vedda’ in Singhalese derives from the Tamil word Veden





In **1883** Paul & Fritz Sarasin in Ceylon
© Museum der Kulturen Basel



2019 Bakamuna, Nature Reserve, Sri Lanka
© Deneth

or Veduvēn which means forest or nature dwellers who use bow and arrow as weapons to hunt. Over the centuries, the term Vedda became derogatory to define anyone living a rural or nomadic life. In a larger context, they are also called Adivasi, a word coined in 1930s to define indigenous people of the Indian sub-continent. But the Vedda refer to themselves as Wanniyaletto or Wanniyalatto.

They believe in the transmigration of human spirit that allows for ancestors known as nayakku to assist with matters of the living. Every person in the community is enabled to call on nayakku to request specific assistance. There is a biological-historic continuum connecting the Vedda with early occupation at Batadombalena (ca. 31,000-13,000 B.P.) and other sites in South Asia where Mesolithic remains have been excavated.

A skull found at Fa Hien Cave, Pahiyaangala, has been dated to 37,000 B.P. making it the oldest Mesolithic finds in South Asia. It is important to mention this since the continuum is important for understanding such a rich and ancient past in the context of the historic era. Etymologically the term Vedda refers to a hunting group from the Sanskrit vyadha and has been applied to various peoples in Southern Asia, including Borneo and Sumatra. Among the Sinhala-speakers, this term Vedda is a reference to small scale forest-resource gatherers live in groups of about one to five families with four to ten members in a family.

Deneth's journey began in 2019 following the Swiss Sarasin cousin brother's scientific expedition to Ceylon and the Adivasi human remains collection built by them. In 1883, Swiss naturalists Paul and Fritz Sarasin started their first journey to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to study an amphibian species, the Ceylon caecilians, and elephant embryonic development. Their expeditions were privately funded and their associated research for the Museum of Ethnology Basel, Switzerland was conducted on an honorary basis. In their four subsequent expeditions the Sarasins shifted their attention from zoological studies to anthropological research on the Indigenous 'Vedda' people of the island. The German biomedical scientist Rudolph Virchow was among the first to recognize the biological links shared by South Asian Indigenous groups. His work inspired the Sarasin's to conduct detailed studies of the 'Vedda' people later on.

Finding pure blooded leaf clad Veddas and studying their primitive ways of living was a competition among the scientific expedition conducted by European anthropologist during the Dutch and British colonial period in Ceylon. The colonial system helped, supported, appreciated and accompanied those expeditions with their military forces. Hunting for elephant's embryo, taking anthropometric images, collecting cultural and religious objects were not enough for their hungry mind. They went further into digging graves without permission of the locals and descendent to remove human remains of the Adivasi and brought back to their countries.

"Owning" an Adivasi skull and adding it to their privet collection was needed by each scientist as "la mode" at that time. Therefore, they sent request to colonial secretaries, local governors and village chieftains to find purest Adivasi skulls and send them to Europe. In return, the local partners received gifts such as cigars and Swiss watches in exchange of skulls. This practice gradually developed into promoting and selling skulls of the Adivasi during the colonial exhibitions through the stall of the government of Ceylon.

With all these historical information Deneth wanted to know more and she began to dig deeper into their contacts which led her to Colombo, Paris and Berlin to find more of her ancestor's human remains that is forgotten within European archives. It was difficult to search for them as most information was misplaced among the archives. Therefore, archivist had to take time to really search in their collection and by surprise to discover that they at least had one skull or skeleton of the Adivasi in their collections that they had not previously come across. As a female artist coming from Sri Lanka her artistic responsibility and aim are to bring these forgotten archives, histories, the dialog of restitution and question of ownership of these properties to the surface.



139 years ago and now
Photographic series

These works were inspired by a personal desire, as a Sri Lankan, to set the record straight and to defy the indifference. The anthropometric photos of the Ceylonese people taken by the Swiss naturalist Paul and Fritz Sarasin's scientific expedition to Ceylon in 1883 was the starting point. Going beyond reductive categorizations of people and intrigued by their writings and expeditions, she decided to follow in their tracks 139 years later.

Like them she travelled with a camera, but the most important objects she carried with her were copies of old photographs taken by the Sarasins' themselves. These images of her ancestors from Sri Lanka were part of a forgotten colonial past. Her goal was to bring them out of the dusty box of archived history and let the images speak by bringing them back to light and recapturing their portraits in a contemporary Sri Lankan environment. The photographs were highlighted and brought into focus the past, while also showing the surrounding present, blurred, at a distance. This work made her imagine of bringing those souls back to their land of origin.



Tuti Vedda woman
 Danigala-Nilgala (wellasse)
 Sri Lanka
 C print
 40 x 60 cm
 2019



Tamil Man
 Batticalo
 Sri Lanka
 C print
 40 x 60 cm
 2019



Sinni
 coastal vedda woman
 Vandalous Bay, North of Batticaloa
 Sri Lanka
 C print
 40 x 60 cm
 2019



Anglo-arabe Man
 Eravur
 Batticaloa
 Sri Lanka
 C print
 40x60 cm
 2019



Jakoba
 Tamil woman lower caste (Fisherman caste)
 Batticaloa
 Sri Lanka
 C print
 40 x 60 cm
 2019



Vedda woman with a child
 Nilgala
 Sri Lanka
 C print
 40 x 60 cm
 2019



3D SLA-Print of the artist's body, real hair wig made to the length of the hair of the artist, glass eyeballs made to the color of the artist iris, text on the body are exact German text of the skin colour categorization that was done in the past and a replica of Adivasi Patabanda's skull that was unethically removed by the own hands of Dr. Paul and Fritz Sarasin in 1883. 'Cheetha' cotton rap around, a traditional textile worn by women in all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

Voices from an archived silence
Theater Basel 2020
Photo by Priska Ketterer

Our bodies were “othered”
Our bodies were experiment
Our bodies were weighed, measured
and compared with Europeans
Our body parts were categorized
according to a skin color chart
Our bodies were good samples and
sometimes were waste of time
Our clothes were removed,
Our naked bodies were looked at,
examined, photographed and exhibited
Our skin colors were labelled as
medium brown, red brown, light brown
and dirty chocolate brown
Our bodies, remains were exchanged
over gifts, sometimes with tobacco,
sometimes with Swiss watches
Our bodies were secretly dug off from
the graves and removed from the soil
and taken away
Our bodies, 100s of them, were taken
away
Our bodies were labelled as “primitive”
Our bodies were used for gaining
power and becoming pillars of imperial
culture
Our bodies were used by them, to
prove that we were species of homo
sapiens
Our bodies were carved with the name
of the white superiors
Our bodies became someone else’s
properties
Our bodies were never rested in peace
Our bodies were forgotten
Our bodies became “forgotten archive”
in the Superior world

Self-Portrait as Restitution – from a feminist point of view.

‘In this time of the de-colonizing movement, when the whole world is taking down the symbol of domination of colonial statues, as a female artist Deneth wants to build a monument that will mark this era of restitution and remind us of forgotten colonial histories.’

Artists use their bodies many ways to express their ideas, thoughts and imagination. White naked female bodies are often viewed in Museums, galleries or as public monuments in form of paintings and sculptures all over the western world. These bodies are repeatedly appreciated for its beauty, heroic appearance, serenity and almost given the image of “angelic”. How often do we see colored naked female bodies? When it is through a painting, a form of sculpture or a performance how often it is spoken about or written down? Why the colored naked female body does not get the image of “serenity” or “angelic” but “labelled” as “exoticize” and “sexualized”? Why do we still practice 19th century mind-sets?

This is why Deneth wanted the sculpture Self-Portrait as Restitution- from a feminist point of view to be as loud as possible. As a brown female artist, she decides to put her own body to experience a past event that her ancestors had to go through as a ‘primitive human being’ in the 19th century. As anthropological scientific practices it was common to be measured, categorized according to a skin color chart and photographed in front of white men. Deneth does the same along, in front of white men, with scanned, edited her half-naked body on a large computer screen, 3D printed with plastic materials and painted with chemicals to re-produce herself.

This brown female body has the same facial gestures that she studied through 100s of anthropometric images of her ancestors kept in image archives in Museums. The fear, unknown and shock was clear in the eyes of every man, woman and children that have been photographed in over 139 years ago. The tattoos on the skin of the figure, is the exact copy of German text that scientists had been used to categorize Paul’s Brocca’s Parisian skin colour chart according to the Iris coloured, skin complexe and nipple colours.

The Skull on the hand of the brown female body is an exact copy of the skull of male Adivasi, Patabanda from Omuna village in Sri Lanka. It is one of the skulls among many other skulls that were “un-ethically” removed by the hands of Sarasin’s around 1884. This skull is a representing all the other skulls that are kept at the archives in The Natural History Museum in Basel, Switzerland, Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory (BGAEU) in Berlin, Museum of Linden Stuttgart,

State Natural History Museum in Braunschweig, Germany and Musée de l’Homme in Paris, France at present.

During her first visit to the archive of the Natural History Museum in Basel, she was invited to see the remains of Adivasi. She was forbidden to touch the remains directly, but the curator of the Human Remains Collection could touch them without gloves. This is because her DNA could be too similar to the DNA of the remains. After putting on blue plastic gloves, she had the opportunity to hold the skull of her ancestor and this experience moved her deeply. She did not know what reason he had ended up half-way across the world in a plastic box, however she felt an unexpected connection.

The sculpture of herself included as an artwork aims to pay respect to all her uprooted ancestors and to their disregarded way of life, so in tune with nature yet so easily trivialized in this fast-paced world. Instead of reproducing the image of someone who had no say in the taking of their image, as in the case of the 19th century anthropometric photographs, in which several people clearly have marked expressions of fear, confusion, and alienation, she decides to you use her own body as the basis for a sculpture.



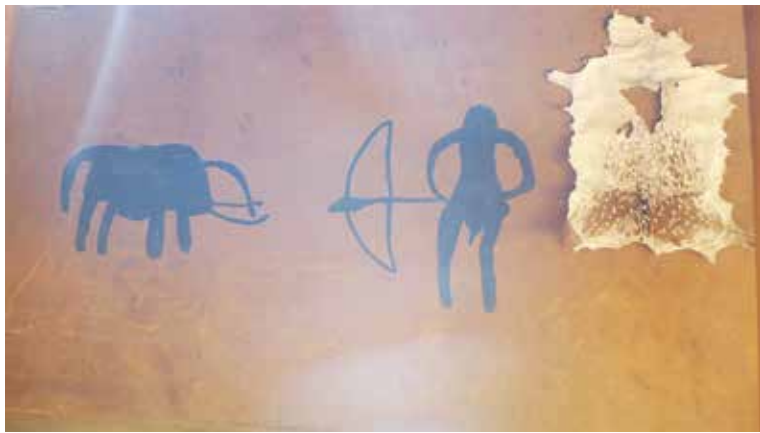
Who are the Adivasin (Vedda) today?

The Sarasin's focused on studying the Adivasi community and this motivated me to discover the ancestral lands of 'Veddarata' that they visited. Today some Adivasi live near endangered forests and boulder rock mountaintops, while others live in arid lands that are drier than a hundred years ago, with cattle dying in the fields and wells drying up. Land-seizures, economic development projects, and years of civil war, have contributed to marginalizing them once again. I was eager to speak with Adivasin from different walks of life. Among them was a 98 years old elderly man, one of the lone ancestors of the 'last pure blood' Adivasi, as the Sarasins' used to describe them, a true living legacy of the past.

I was also fortunate to attend a night time to morning Adivasi ritual, known as a 'Hekma', for which elaborate structures made of natural materials are built, drums are played, and spirits of the ancestors are worshipped. The Sarasins documented the Adivasin's trance rituals through drawings and the transcription of ceremonial music. I recorded audio and video during the ritual I observed. This ancestral ceremony was in sharp contrast with what I witnessed during an event for the International Day of the World's Indigenous People. At the event, crowds of local tourists, police, and officials, gathered around several Adivasin as they performed a ritual, filmed by onlookers' iphones, cameras, and the daily news.

This ceremonial 'performance' exemplified the paradox that the Adivasi community is faced with and reminded me of a statement made by the 2nd secretary of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Culture during my visit, who said, *"If we do not help them (the Adivasin) to develop, it will be a violation of human rights, and if we do help them to develop it will also be a violation of human rights. It's not like in the old days, development is fast-paced, so how we can ask them to continue to live in the jungle, hunt animals for food, and die with illnesses when we have housing, medicine, and food? Therefore we proposed to members of the community a different way of life and it is up to them to agree to it or to choose to go back to living in the jungle"*.

Today approximately 3000 Adivasi live in Sri Lanka. Many of them have intermarried with individuals of the Sinhalese and Tamil community, often adopting the groups' religion and culture. In their own community they practice their ancestral religion but most of them have also adopted Buddhism or



Hinduism. When the Sri Lankan government began a program to offer free land to some families of Adivasi, they stated that the lands would be given in priority to Adivasi. However they did not follow this rule and gave land to individuals from various communities, leaving many Adivasi behind. Today the main reasons for the disappearance of Adivasi culture and traditions are political influence, economic development, and urbanization. The use of money in towns and cities across Sri Lanka has changed the outlook of the forest-dwelling Adivasi community and they are often encouraged to forget their past and unique heritage. Many youths are leaving the Adivasi villages, going to big cities to find work or abroad to Middle Eastern countries to work on construction sites. The Adivasi can be divided into various sub-groups, such as ‘Danigala Adivasi’, ‘Heenanigala Adivasi’, Pollebedda Adivasi’, ‘Batticaloa District Adivasi’ and ‘Dambana Adivasi’.

Today the Dambana Adivasi are the largest group. Dambana has become a local and foreign tourist destination where visitors can see the “leaf clad Veddas”, promoted as ‘exotic’, with their long hair and beards, their topless demeanor, bows and arrows or sharp axes over their shoulders, and chewing beetle nut. There are some attempts to preserve Adivasi culture but often with mixed results. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Culture and Central cultural fund have constructed a small museum and a community center for all the Adivasi in Dambana to support the preservation of their heritage and culture. A model village and a traditional house with a typical roof made of clay and hay was created to welcome visitors, so that they can meet the Adivasi Chieftain of Dambana, named ‘Uru warige Wanniya-laetto’. Some visitors, including archeologists, and school and university students, are accompanied by Adivasi ‘guides’ who dress like their ancestors. Visitors often arrive with a distorted and “blind” view of the Chieftain and the Adivasi community. Many come with “gifts” of money, take photographs of the village and the Chieftain, visit the small exhibition center or view a ritual ‘performance’, then leave without grasping the complexity of Adivasi culture or knowing how to contribute effectively to their welfare. Behind the place where the Chieftain sits when greeting visitors there is now a sign in English that reads ‘No selfies with the Chieftain’.

Many female Adivasi stay together and help in a little shop that sells medicinal drinks, herbal tea, local foods, and decorative items. The women are often more invisible, remaining behind the scenes, while all the village leaders are men. The village center also includes a bookshop and a local radio station, a project on preservation of their language is run by a young Adivasi with minimum equipment to broadcast live singing of traditional songs and discussions in their native language every Friday. The bookshop presents literature written by educated members of the Adivasi community, including children’s books, novels, and other texts written in the native language.

At the entrance of the Dambana Museum, many Adivasi as well as villagers from the surrounding areas have set up small stalls made of wood. They sell hand-crafted bows and arrows, ‘labu keta’ (water collectors), decorative items made with seeds, as well as local honey and food products. Offering an uncanny mix of tradition and modernity, there is also an ice cream van and a lottery booth. Many Adivasi in the area now earn a small income thanks to the visitors who pass through the village, so there is ambiguity about the role visitors play and whether they are helping to preserve Adivasi culture or are actually participating in changing the Adivasi way of life, which survived for hundreds of years by remaining isolated from Sri Lankan society.

The museum is the main attraction in the village. It has six different rooms with exhibits presenting the history of the Adivasi, from roughly 35,000 years ago (the Balangoda Manawa’s time) until today. The museum was constructed with a traditional clay and hay roof. There is now also electricity in the museum but it offers only very dim lighting. It was interesting to see how the photographs and plaster ‘models’ of Adivasi people created by the European anthropologist in the 1890s had also inspired the design of the ‘model’ village in Dambana today. A photograph of the Sarasins was exhibited and labelled as ‘Sarasin brothers’ but it did not include any description and was regrouped among the images of other anthropologists and explorers who followed in the Swiss brother’s footsteps and shared their obsession with studying the Adivasi.

The museum exhibition ends with a presentation of an important speech given by the Adevasi Chieftain Uru Warige Wanniya-Laetto when he was invited to speak at the 14th session of the working group on indigenous people at the United Nations in Geneva in 1996.

Dambana has become a center for the Adivasin in Sri Lanka, and smaller groups of Adivasin have migrated and settled in the area. Even though each Adivasi village has its own Chieftain, they were not all as outspoken and confident when dealing with Sri Lanka society. The model village in Dambana has therefore proven that the Adivasin can “adapt” and in so doing also contribute to the survival of Adivasi indigenous culture and traditions.

When asked about the Adivasi human remains kept in European museums and the burial of the ancestors remains, the Adivasi chieftain Uru warige Wanniya-laetto’ said, “*It does not only involve physically burying their body in the earth, but it also has a deeper meaning. The funeral rituals in South Asian cultures and the Adivasi culture are very important. Someone who lived for 100 years, was alive because he received sustenance from the earth for 100 years. The earth fed him, and nature gave him strength. As part of the ‘bhu-ma-dhanya’ ritual, the deceased person offers their skin, muscles, bones, and blood to the earth. Removing a dead person’s body from the earth and from nature, so as to keep it on a table or in a glass case is therefore disrespectful to our ancestors and to us. The ‘bhu-ma-dhanya’ ritual is an ancient way of paying back the debt we owe to the earth for our life.*”

Questions remain regarding what to do with human remains collected by ethnographers during colonial times and kept at institutions in Europe and around the world. There are both practical, moral, and spiritual considerations, however the main question of where these remains ‘belong’ and should be in the end, is one which is for the living to address. It is our responsibility to remember these forgotten people, to decide how to bring some dignity back to their bodies, and to grant them some finality or ‘closure’. Will these forgotten remains continue to be kept in the drawers of museum archives or will they find another place or purpose?

Dr. Philipu Hewa Don Hemasiri de Silva (Dr. P.H.D.H de Silva) was the Director of the Colombo National Museum in Sri Lanka from 1965 to 1981.

He was the first man to raise the question of restitution and started to reach Museums abroad to request to return the cultural objects that were removed or stolen during the colonial era from Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was under foreign occupation first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch and thirdly by the British from 1505 to 1948. I was fortunate to find and meet him in person at his home at the age of 92 years old in 2019. Below extract from our long discussion and interview.

Dr Silva received a travel fellowship in 1968 from the John de Rockefeller 3rd fund to study premier museums in Asia, Europe, the US and Canada. In his visit to the Natural History Museum in New York, he discovered artefacts from Sri Lanka in the anthropology department. He recorded all the items found. This finding made him curious to travel around Europe to study further in other museum collections. 1971 he obtained a fellowship from UNESCO to conduct research only on four countries. He went first to the UK, at the ‘British Museum’ and the ‘Victoria and Albert Museum’. After that, he travelled to Paris, France, and went to the ‘Musée de l’Homme’. Finally, for the first time he went to Switzerland and discovered the collection at the ‘Reitberg Museum’ in Zurich. There he discovered ivory artefacts from Sri Lanka that he had not seen before. These objects were in private collections. In his return he wrote to various museums around the world and requested to send their collections’ and he listed all of them in one catalogue. ‘**Catalogue of Antiquities & Other Cultural Objects from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) Abroad**’ he published in 1975 as a result of the above long term research. This was the first time any country had prepared such a catalogue. It contains more than 15000 objects of cultural, prehistory, arts, religious and anthropological interest from Sri Lanka which is at present in the custody of foreign museums and libraries. It covers 23 countries and the collection of 140 institutes.



2nd April 1980 he received a letter from UNESCO director-general Mr. Amoudu Mahatar M.Bow appointing him to the UNESCO committee of Art advisors to represent Asia. He attended the first meeting from 19th – 23rd May 1980 in Paris on the subjects of ‘**Return and Restitution of Cultural Property by one time Masters to the countries of their origin**’. This was a subject that had interested him for a long time. When UNESCO announced to submit requests to obtain countries’ cultural objects back to all interested countries, Sri Lanka was the first country to submit its request in March 1981. Dr. Silva had also sent a copy of his catalogue along but he had received no response from UNESCO. Later he had learnt the information given by him about the objects to be restituted was insufficient.

The subject of Return and Restitution of Cultural treasures removed by Colonial Masters who occupied their countries to countries of their origin was debated by the UN general Assembly in 1973 & 1975. It was decided by the general Assembly that it was UNESCO’s responsibility to take meaningful steps. On a especial request from the Division of the Cultural Heritage UNESCO, in 1979 Dr. Silva had contributed an article on the above subject to the Quarterly review of ‘MUSEUMS’ Volume XXX1 NO.1 . The idea of ‘restitution and return’ was not a completely new to Sri Lanka. In the years of 1929, 1930, 1934 & 1936 British Dukes, Citizens and Museums had returned valuable artefacts of our last kings.

This article has been critically referred to his incessant call for restitution by foreign Newspapers and Magazines. Quote: “*The British Museum will have to close down*”, “*Dr. Silva’s pronouncement is anything but humoured*”, “*Fiery Director of the Colombo Museum, Dr. Silva’s request to return the arts and important documents from the British Museum collections, the chances of this happening are slim*”.

Dr. Amoudu Mahtar M’Bow Director General’s view was “*The men and women of these countries have a right to recover these cultural assets which are a part of their wellbeing*”.

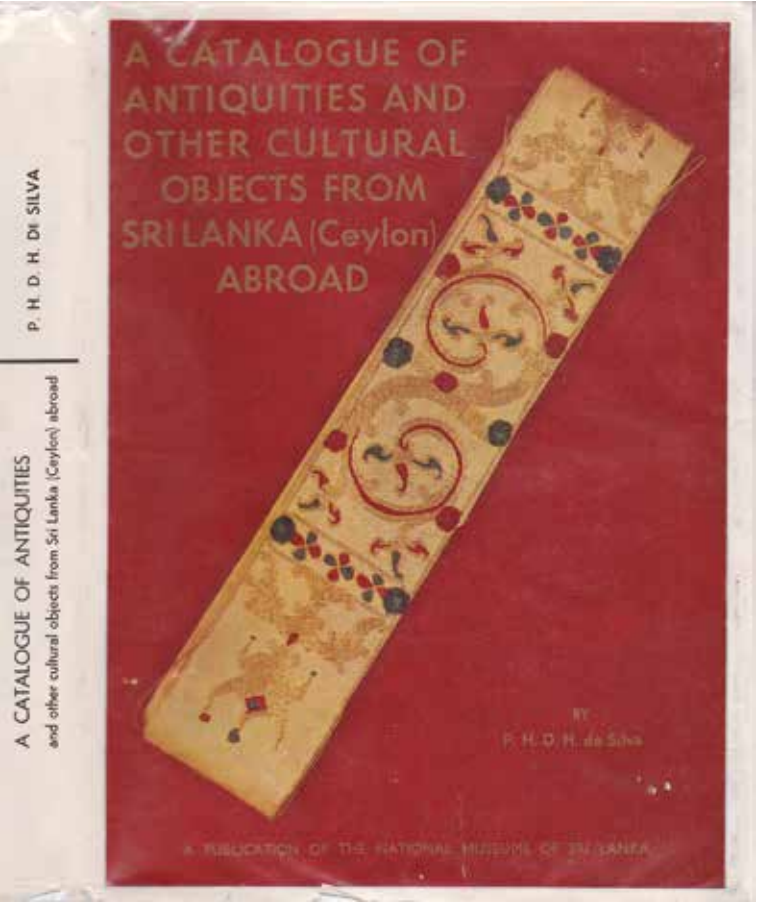
From the article MUSEUM - ‘Return and restitution of Cultural Property’ by Dr. Silva, Editor Georges Fradier had quoted:- The position of the ‘requesting countries’ is put clearly by the director of National Museum, Sri Lanka – “*We are asking for the restitution of only those unique and especially significant items which express to the world and to our own countrymen the unique cultural heritage that is ours*”

And the editor added:- “*These countries must also realize that with restitution of their cultural treasures their responsibility is doubled for these nations much keep in mind that these priceless objects are also the cultural legacy of the human race*”

Dr. Silva, the man who passionately worked for restitution of Sri Lankan cultural objects and antiquities, today is of in two minds. He was not confident and wondered ‘Are we looking

after our things properly?’ He had doubtful thoughts about the next generations; they might not care about these items and not preserve them properly. His hard works was forgotten and he was left with many questions about the future of restitution. He passed away in 2020 at the age of 93.

As part of the present generation, questions I would like to ask you are : how can European museums and institutions participate in a meaningful process of restitution and return of cultural objects, antiquities, and human remains? Is it important to restitute ancient objects or revive forgotten cultural practices? How do you begin the long road of a responsible and meaningful de-colonization?



About the artist

BORN IN 1980, Kurunegala, Sri Lanka. Living in the French Alps and working between Sri Lanka, France, Switzerland and Germany. Started first education in arts at home with my father and later studied in Academy of design in Colombo, Sri Lanka and Kathmandu Art University in Nepal.

As a multidisciplinary artist, I use textile, audio & video, photography, embroidery on different surfaces and performances in my visual artistic projects. Textile is a prime medium in my work, the “second skin” as it wears. I perceive clothes can transform fragile lives and strong woven threads can keep them together as long as they can resist natural and human violation. But there is also a limit to the life span of the textile as it breaks and tears over time.

For 22 years I have been working with ‘*Cheetha*’, a traditional Sri Lankan printed cotton textile that is worn by women in all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. This fabric carries a disappearing part of the Sri Lankan culture. It can be seen only in few villages or among the older generation because of the phenomenon of western fashion trends and mass made clothes from China. While the majority of the Sri Lankan population considers it low class and kitschy to wear clothing made from Cheetha. This material is highly nostalgic for me. It carries my childhood and the weightlessness of life as a kid. Not only Sri Lankan textile but any textiles which have a controversial meaning always attract my attention. (Eg: edelweiss textile shirt worn by farmers in Switzerland & Keffiyeh scarf from the Middle East).

The subjects I chose to work on are focusing on themes such as forgotten colonial histories and restitution, Sri Lankan diaspora, refugees and adaptation, identity, women immigrant workers and women and children in war zones. My artistic practice runs along a thin line that separates art and activism; I intend to play with that tension. For example, the performance work is entitled your faith is in your hand the body, identity, memories together with poetry and resistance has inspired me. Using the technique of layering different mediums in one work helps me to bring the past, present and future together into one dialogue.

Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige

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