



## Folk Craft in the Village Kudawa of the Sinharāja Rain Forest in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

The village “Kudawa” lying in the Kalawāna Divisional Secretarial Division of Ratnapura District in Sri Lanka also forms the north-western boundary of *Sinharāja* forest which is a wet tropical evergreen forest. The major livelihood of the people of *Kudawa* is the small scale cultivation of tea. Even at present, however, the majority of people in this village possess talent for making various tools necessary for day-to-day activities. Some people are engaged themselves in folk handicraft by means of which they spend their leisure treating the activity as a hobby. They have the necessary knowledge of making those creative products. *Sinharāja* Forest surrounding the village is the major source of raw material they need to make the products. Chief raw material used to make folk craft includes bata / bamboo (*Ochlandra stridula* Moon ex Thw.), wēvāl (cane), Vātakeyyā / screw pine (*Pandanus kaida* Kurz.), dunukeyyā (*Pandanus thwaitesii* Martelli), Indi kola (wild date palm leaves), katukitul (*Oncosperma fasciculatum* Thw.) and varieties of rush. Winnowing-fans, open baskets, milk-strainers, bags, mats and baskets can be identified as main folk crafts. Though there is a market for folk craft here on account of its tourist potential the community seems to have deviated from it to a large extent by now. Though the bustling situation created with the cultivation of tea has exerted a certain amount of unfavorable influence on traditional folk craft, actually speaking the present study revealed that it is the present forest conservation law which has had a decisive and adverse impact on the community to diverge from the folk craft. Community has been forbidden to enter the forest. In consequence a great difficulty in obtaining raw material has arisen. In view of the above it can be concluded that it is primarily the prevailing forest conservation law which made the community to deviate from the traditional folk craft.

**Keywords:** Kudawa, Folk craft, Folk life, Traditional knowledge, *Sinharāja* forest.

### Introduction

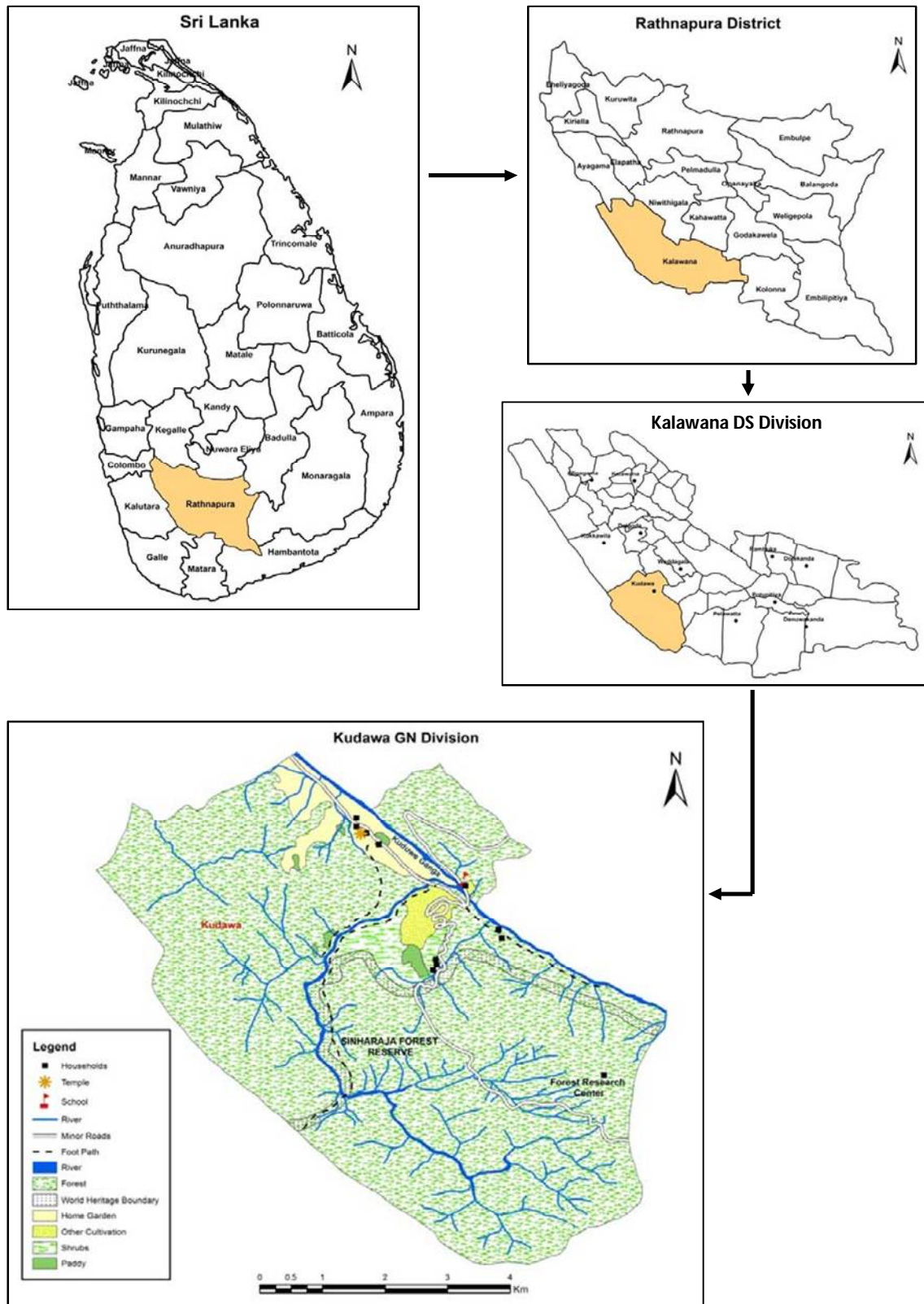
**Objectives:** The main objective of this study is to identify the folk craft tradition that exists in the village *Kudawa* and to find out what obstacles this traditional industry is facing at present.

**Methodology:** The methodology used to collect data included direct observation, formal and informal interviews and case studies. To present data notes, maps and photographs have been used.

**Study area:** *Sinharāja* forest reserve which has been identified as the Sri Lanka’s first world heritage of biological and both ecological importance. This is a tropical rain forest which is located in the south-western part of the island between the latitudes 6° 21’ and 6° 26’ North and longitudes 80° 21’-80° 34’ East (figure-1). At present the *Sinharāja* Forest Reserve including the natural forest complex and the secondary forest encloses an area of 11, 187 hectares<sup>1</sup>. The village *Kudawa* located in the north-west hillside of *Sinharāja* forest belongs to Kalawāna Divisional Secretarial Division of Ratnapura District in Sri Lanka. History of the village *Kudawa* does not go back to more than 300 years. Though the history cannot be definitely reckoned history of the genealogy and the physical surroundings do help one to ascertain it. It is evident from folklore that the first settlers who went there chose Chena cultivation as their

livelihood. Although wet cultivation was also later emerged it was very slight and the majority bent on chena cultivation. The simple life the community had enjoyed earlier became complex with the swift spread of tea cultivation in the latter part of 1970s. Owing to present day development in transport and communication, however, substantial and obvious changes have been brought about in the community of *Kudawa*.

The long-standing relations the community had with the jungle was taken away to some extent with the cutting of timber at the opening decades of 1970s by the state’s intervention and again later with the introduction of buffer zones by the Department of Forest Conservation adopting foreign plants. And the community distracted further from the jungle when the chena cultivation which had been carried out in the jungle was banned after 1977. Though human activities are forbidden in the *Sinharāja* Forest even today the community goes on making use of it without causing any damage as they had traditionally been in the past. In spite of the pressure of work due to tea plantation the traditional ties the community has been having with the jungle has not come to a total standstill. It is not infrequent to find even today in the village *Kudawa* village-folks engaged in folk-craft during their leisure using the traditional knowledge and skill.



Map-1  
Location of the Kudawa village

## Literature review

Folk Craft in Sri Lanka can be identified as a trade based on the hierarchy of caste. Robert Knox in his work titled “*An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies*” published in 1681 while referring to hierarchy of caste of the Sinhalese makes mention of folk craftsmen. Goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, mat weavers, and caners are also mentioned therein<sup>2</sup>.

“Next to the weavers are the kiddeas or basket-makers, who make fans to fan corn, and baskets of canes, and lace, bedsteads, and stools.

Then follow the Kirinerahs, whose trade is to make fine mats. These men may not wear anything on their heads—the women of none of these sorts ever do. Of these two last there are but few”<sup>3</sup>.

Knox makes but a passing reference to folk craft while mentioning the hierarchy of caste of the Sinhalese. Knox pays little attention to the nature of that trade. In the Sinhala work of poetry entitled “*The Janavansa*” based on a Pali source written by a Kessellena Sinha in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century A. D. mention is made to the contemporary composition of the caste in the Sinhalese society<sup>4</sup>. Even in this work it seems that trade determines caste. Accordingly in the hierarchy in question all of the folk craftsmen have been regarded as belonging to low castes.

A study was done on mat weavers by M.D. Raghavan in his paper titled “The Kinnaraya- the tribe of mat weavers” in 1951. This paper can be taken as the first comprehensive study on the Kinnara and their trade of mat weaving<sup>5</sup>. Though the book entitled “*Medieval Sinhalese Art*” by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy published in 1908 is the excellent work so far written on art of the Sinhalese it has taken little notice of reed and bamboo work. However, on the other hand the same volume devotes a chapter to study “mat weaving and dyeing” in Sri Lanka<sup>6</sup>.

The study done by Shyamali Rajapaksa on the village “*Mimurē*” lying in close proximity to Knuckles rain Forest in Sri Lanka titled “*Mimurē*” was published in 2007<sup>7</sup>. A notice has been taken of the trade of mat weaving in this book. But the lack of attention in this work to other crafts is a lapse.

“*The Royal Artificers of Mangalagama and their Descendants*”, a title composed by D.D.M. Waidyasekera pays attention to the artists of a village who made equipments for the royalty it required since 14-15 Centuries. The work gives a description of the service done by Mangalagama as a village which made jewelry, clothes, other wear and weapons which the royalty needed<sup>8</sup>.

Compare to the above studies the present work differs from them because it is an investigation into folk craft made of forest

products in a village lying in close proximity to the forest. Moreover, it is chiefly carried out for their own consumption. Folk Craft in the village Kudawa is a trade depending on the forest Sinharaja. While the technology employed for this trade is simple and traditional it uses no technical equipments at all.

**Folk craft made out of the forest raw material:** One of the chief patterns of forest consumption of the community living in the village kudawanorth-western hillside boundary of the Sinharāja forest is to get the raw material necessary for their handicraft from the jungle. From time immemorial the community of this region had been in the habit of using peels, barks and other herbaceous parts of trees and creepers naturally grown in the forest to make tools they need in day-to-day life. Even at present it is from the jungle they obtain raw material they need for various cottage industries although it is not to the same extent as it had been in the past.

Especially it is from the forest that they collect bamboo and cane necessary for bamboo and cane industry. Though cutting cane is banned by the Department of Forest Conservation on the one hand the community keeps on obtaining the necessary bamboo and the cane for their craft yet without causing any harm to the jungle. It will be proper if some of the laws made less rigid so as to encourage the community engaged in such industries.

**Cane industry:** Sinharāja forest is abundant in varieties of cane. *Mā vēvāl* (*Calamus thwaitesii* Becc. and Hook.f.), *Tudarāna vēvāl* (*Calamus sovoideus* Thw. ex Trim.), *Ala vēvāl* (*Calamus rivalis* Thw. ex Trim.), *Tambotu vāl* (*Calamus szeylanicus*. Becc. and Hook. f.), *Nara vāl* (*Calamus delicatulus*Thw.), *kukulu vēvāl* (*Calamus radiates* Thw. / *Calamus pachystemonus*Thw.) are some such varieties of cane (figure-2). The smallest member of the cane family is the *kukula vēvāl*.

Cane is used for making a multitude of utensils such as baskets, open baskets for sifting, furniture etc (figure-3, 4 and 5). In addition to which it is also used to weave chairs made of wood. Betel trays in the houses in this area and the *lāha*, a kind of measure used for paddy is also made of cane. Further, almost every man over forty in this locality has at least skill in cane work. Many men and some women have ability to weave several other tools in addition to cane open baskets.

Before making implements it is necessary to go to forest and - “vēvāl talāgena” – the cane must be beaten and brought. The Sinhala expression “vēvāl tālīma” means cutting, clearing and splitting the cane. As the cane has extremely sharp thorns the beating must be done very carefully. Cutting and drawing the cane out of the enmeshed growth of tall trees is equally problematic job. One must exert a lot of strain in pulling the cane which has entwined round the tree and gone very high especially when the one who does it is far below.

“Canes some three to four hundred feet long are cut. There are canes which stretch over the floor of the jungle to a great extent and then again stretch upwards along the trees. Too matured canes are, however, of no use. It is difficult to bend the cane at points where it is too matured. And if it is bent then the cane breaks. So, in vain the cane goes matured. We are not allowed to cut such a cane. If found in the act you are fined. There is no way to make use of our knowledge. But even then if and when in need we cut a cane.”

Of all kinds of canes “the kukulu vēvāl” is the strongest. Once thorns and spathes are removed “the kukulu vēvāla” (the cane) won’t be more than a pencil in width. A cane bed is made of “the kukulu vāl”(creepers). Then it is not possible to say how long the cane bed will last. Similarly even for cane chairs it was “the kukulu vāl” torn into extremely thin strips in width are used. Then the cane of the chair is very strong and it lasts long. Moreover using the “kukulu vāl” cane they made betel trays and picturesque flower vases which were not only extremely beautiful but also quite long-lasting. This kind of cane tools if not got wet would last very long and in fact longer than one can actually and definitely predict. Sometimes such cane goods may last for generations. One can find such equipments as old as the hills in many a house in the locality.

It is the timber of the tree called “Īpetta” (*Cyathocalyx zeylanica* Champ.ex Hook.f. and Thoms.) which is used as the brim of the tool. Even the kind of cane called “ala vēvāl” is used for this purpose. As “the ala vēvāla” is very fragile it cannot be of any use for a need other than this.

**Bamboo peels Industry:** Though the bamboo (*Ochlandra stridula* Moon ex Thw.)- (figure-6) industry had been very prosperous and widespread in this region about ten years ago by now it is being carried out only for private consumption. It is of course the rigid forest conservation laws which have been responsible for the decline of this industry. According to law cutting bamboo in the forest is forbidden. In spite of such laws the community keeps on cutting bamboo in the forest for its day-to-day needs.

They cut and split the bamboo in strips and then use it to make various equipments. They make out of the bamboo open baskets, boxes, open baskets for string hoppers, winnowing fans, milk-strainers etc. Again it is the timber of the plant called “Īpetta” which is used as the brim of bamboo peel tools. This kind of word called “Īpetta” is a loose, light one which could be split very well. The timber in width not more than a handle of a hoe is brought from the jungle after cutting it and then it is split into strips each of which in thickness is not more than a quarter inch. It is very important that the “Īpetta strip” must be made use of before it goes dry. Although “Īpetta” is a light wood and its strip by means of which the edge of the winnowing fan and that of the open basket is made it will endure so long as the container/device lasts provided that the wood contacts no water. The “Īpetta edge” does not decay easily.

Bamboo by which the forest abounds in goes rot to a considerable extent by nowadays as it is untouched and not being utilized by the community. Traditional industries such as these which depended on the forest did not cause damage to the latter. On the other hand, however, the present day rules and regulations cross swords with them. At present while only two or three folks are commercially engaged in the industry the rest of the people occasionally weave an open basket, a box or a winnowing fan for their own consumption (figure-6).

**Rush industry:** Yet another kind of forest consumption of the community living in the village kudawa north-western hillside boundary of Sinharāja is collecting raw material they need for rush industry. This industry which has been going on since the past is a shining example for man’s unusual skill in his adaptation of the surroundings for his benefit.

“Unlike today those days we had no synthetic (shopping) bags. To carry anything we used the bag made of rush. Even the paddy was stacked in large bags weaved of rush. Even the “hunumalla” in which the “kai bata” (lunch given to farmers) that was taken to the paddy field was packed in rush bag. Further, even the purse was made of rush. I am still having a rush purse. We sleep on the “minuvaṇ” mat. Even an important person has to sleep on the “minuvaṇ” mat. The “minuvaṇ” mat is very comfortable”<sup>10</sup>.

The forest yields a lot of varieties of rush. They differ in quality from one another. Accordingly, the people of this area seems to possess the necessary knowledge so as to select the kind of rush that suits his need.

“It was by “kaduruvaṇ” rush the bags were weaved those days. Even the bags used for paddy were made of this variety. They last even for twenty five years provided that they do not get wet. They are so much strong. The “kaduruvaṇ” rush grows beside brooks. It is the “minuvaṇ pādura” (mat) which is the most comfortable to sleep on. Even the “minuvaṇ” rush grows beside brooks. The kind of rush called “Gallāhā” is also very strong. Bags and mats are woven even out of the “Dunukeyyā” (*Pandanus thwaitesii*) which is found in the forest. These mats are very comfortable. They are like the “minuvaṇ pādura” (mats). As soon as this kind (Dunukeyya) is torn up the mats must be woven before the leaves go dry. Those days we used to go and fetch the “indikola” (Ceylon date palm) leaves, boil them and then weave bags and mats. Mostly it is for making hats that the wild date palm leaves are used. Three or four hats are woven for the season of Chena cultivation”<sup>11</sup>.

Though there are rush mats in almost every house even at present young women skilled in art of weaving bags and mats are extremely rare. Very often it is the women only well over fifty who possess the ability to weave mats by means of rush. Village folks here are of the opinion that bag and mat making (weaving) is exclusively a trade meant for the woman (figure-

8). Those days at the season of chena harvest the chief task of women was the weaving bags for storing the cereal. In spite of the fact that one cannot get a sight of the ancient bags meant for storing paddy nowadays almost every other rush product can be found in village houses in this area. Rush weaving women say that there is still a very good market for the “Ätulpata” a piece of fabric of plaited rushes used especially for slicing green leaves and for spreading the hot rice for quenching<sup>12</sup>. But nowadays mostly the “Ätulpats” are plaited not by rushes but by coconut leaves (figure-9).

## Discussion

It is clear that the people of Kudawa do make folk craft solely for their own day-to-day consumption. In that especially noteworthy feature is the procurement of most of the raw material from the surrounding forest. In addition raw material is also obtained out of plants such as coconut, areca etc. grown in home gardens. These folk crafts made without involving any primary cost serve the needs of the neighbors of course free of charges and at times they involve charges. In view of the above it is clear that the fundamental needs to make folk craft are the natural raw material and the labour. Most of the folk crafts are either professional instruments or household tools. By now, however, there seems to be a tendency of young women on handicrafts such as sewing and embroidery. It seems that the incongruous rules and regulations of forest conservation enforced in Sri Lanka are the greatest obstacle to this industry. In consequence, entry to the forest to obtain raw material is an offence punishable by law and the use of whatever forest product is altogether prohibited. Although this is a wholesome and protective approach on the part of forest conservation on the other hand it keeps away the people who had been consuming the forest in time immemorial from it. In this village frequented

by local and foreign tourists who visit Sinharāja forest there is a substantial demand for folk craft. Owing to lack of raw material, however, folk craftsmen have got to be despaired of because they cannot make use of their traditional knowledge of folk craft. It is due to factors such as difficulty with regard to procurement of raw material, busy life connected with economy of tea cultivation, and urbanization that the present day generation is completely cut off from the traditional folk craft. As a result within less than next two decades the traditional folk craft and the traditional knowledge of this industry will probably be vanished from the village Kudawa.

## Conclusion

Forest consumption patterns of the village folks of Kudawa lying in the north- western hillside of Sinharāja seem to have been taken root solely through traditions. With the introduction of economic pattern based on tea and of communication the villager gradually abandoning the traditional practices embraced novel habits. The changes referred to above also seems to have equally compelled the people to deviate from forest products which had answered many of their problems in day-to-day life. Folk craft to some extent still exist in the village culture. Rush industry, for instance, can be treated as still in action to a certain extent depending on forest products. The abandonment of the bamboo and cane industry by those who were engaged in it clearly manifests that it was primarily the forest conservation rules and regulations that were behind the decline of folk craft depending on forest products. In spite of the fact that there is a good demand for handicraft associated with the forest in this locality of tourist interest it is obvious that the main problem of catering to such needs are the forest conservation rules and regulations.



**Figure-2**  
Cane in Sinharaja forest. Photography by Dammika Hewage





Figure-3

Cane products, The bag and open baskets. Photography by Dammika Hewage



Figure-4

Can products. The bag, a traditional extract herbal oil filter and a stool, basket. Photography by Dammika Hewage



Figure-5

Cane products. The laha (a kind of measure used for cereals) and betel trays, a besom- made of cane and coconut eakles. Photography by Dammika Hewage



Figure-6

Bamboo(*Ochlandra stridula* Moon ex Thw.) in Sinharaja forest. Photography by Dammika Hewage



Figure-7

Bamboo craftsman, jaggery palm(*Caryota urens* L.) sap filter, coconut milk-strainer, winnowing fan. Photography by Dammika Hewage



Figure-8

The Mat (made of *minuvan*), hat (made of *Gallähä*), weaving *Ätulpata* (open basket -made of coconut leaf) Photography by Dammika Hewage



Figure-9

Dry coconut leaves for weaving *Ätulpats*, finishing *Ätulpats*. Photography by Dammika Hewage

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