

SINHALESE OF SRI LANKA – INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

The Sinhalese (pronounced sin–huh–leez) come from Sri Lanka, located at the southern tip of India. The name Sinhalese refers to the myth that the people of the major ethnic group, known as Sinhalese, are in fact descended from a mythical Indian princess and lion. The Portuguese landed in Sri Lanka in 1505 and named the country Ceylon. Dutch and English control of the island followed until independence in 1972. The Sinhalese make up approximately 80% of the 15 million people. Many Sinhalese still abide by a caste system. It is less stringent than in India and it is disappearing, particularly in the cities. It is mostly apparent in marriage. It is estimated that at least half of the Sinhalese belongs to the highest caste, the agricultural Goyigam. The other castes are washermen (Hinna), metalworkers (Navandanna), and drummers (Berawa). The Rodiya (formerly travelling beggars) are considered to be among the lowest castes.

LANGUAGE

The language spoken is Sinhala. The Sinhalese language developed separately from the languages in India. It has been influenced by Pali (the sacred language of Buddhism) and by Sanskrit and Tamil. It has its own alphabet. There are three official languages in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Tamil and English.

RELIGION

Most Sinhalese people follow the Theravada form of Buddhism that remains true to the original teachings of Buddha. Buddhist monks, known as bikkus, play a significant role in the day to day life of the Sinhalese.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

SINHALESE NEW YEAR - in April marks the end of the harvest. Observers visit the temple and take a ritual bath. Women begin the celebrations with drum playing.

VESAK FESTIVAL - in May commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.

ESALA PERAHERA - occurs annually in the city of Kandy. The Tooth Relic of the Buddha is paraded through the streets on the back of an elephant. A procession of decorated elephants marches through the streets.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Sinhalese rites of passage involve a mixture of Buddhist customs and folk traditions. Rural Sinhalese believe that if a pregnancy is difficult it is due to evil spirits and they will call on a magician to deal with the problem. Strength and beauty are valued attributes and so at the birth of a child the newborn is given a few drops of human milk and a small piece of gold.

The Sinhalese believe in reincarnation and karma. Death rites are fairly simple. White clothes are worn as a symbol of mourning.

MARRIAGE: The Sinhalese generally marry within their own caste, however, there are levels within each caste and it is accepted that women marry men of equal or higher standing. Astrology is used to aid the decision of a rightful match. It is customary for the wife to move in with the husband's family, however, more couples nowadays, if they can afford it, will move into their own house. The woman's role is to bear and raise children with the preference being for sons. Generally women are treated respectfully.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Like many other Asian countries the Sinhalese clasp their hands in front and bow slightly when they greet people. The greeting Ayubowan is said. The European style of handshaking is becoming more common and even the women will kiss friends and relatives on both cheeks.

CLOTHING: Though many Sinhalese wear western dress; a sarong called a sarama is still worn. The men wear a shirt on top of the sarama and the women wear a tailored short sleeved jacket.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Children are venerated and given enormous attention by the whole family. The introduction of solid food and the beginning of learning the alphabet are marks of maturation and seen as significant milestones in the child's growth.

CUISINE

The Sinhalese do not say 'thank you' but a phrase that means 'may you receive merit'. The staple meal is rice and curry. Orthodox Buddhists are vegetarian. Many Sinhalese dishes are cooked in coconut milk. Many Sinhalese, who are not orthodox Buddhists, eat meat, poultry, fish and eggs.

REFERENCES

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3. http://www.the-south-asian.com/Sep2003/esala_perahara.htm (accessed on 18/07/08)