

# The 'Original' Village

*Before the colonial incursion the Ceylonese village was feudal. The excerpts below from the 'work' of Robert Knox who was imprisoned in the Kingdom of Kandy for nearly 20 years give some impressions of the situation then.*

"The highest, are their Noblemen called Hondrews.....Tis out of this sort alone, that the King chooseth his great Officers and whom he employs in his Court, and appoints for Governors over his Country. Riches are not here valued, nor, make any the more Honourable. For many of the lower sorts do far exceed these Hondrews in Estates. But it is the Birth and Parentage that inobleth.

"These are distinguished from others by their names, and the wearing of their cloth, which the Men wear down half their Legs, and the Women to their heels: one end of which Cloth the Women fling over their shoulders and with the very end carelessly cover their breasts; whereas the other sort of women must go naked from the waist upwards, and their cloths not hang down much below their knees: except it be for cold; for then either women or men may throw their cloth over their backs

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"Next after the degree of Hondrews may be placed Goldsmiths, Blacksmiths, Carpenters and Painters. Who are all of one degree and quality. But the Hondrews will not eat with them: however in apparel there is no difference; and they are also privileged to sit on stools, which one of the inferior ranks of people hereafter mentioned, may do.

"No Artificers ever change their trade from generation to generation; but the Son is the same as was his father, and the daughter marries only to those of the same craft.....

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"Many of the Vehars are endowed and have farms belonging to them. And these Tirinaxnes are the landlords, unto whom the tenants come at a certain time and pay in their rents.



"Their houses are small; low, thatched cottages built with sticks, daubed with clay, the walls made very smooth. For they are not permitted to build their houses above one storey high, neither may they cover with tiles, nor whiten their walls with lime, but there is a Clay which is as white, and that they use sometimes. They employ no carpenters, or house-builders, unless some few noble-men but each one buildeth his own dwelling.

"The great people have handsome and commodious houses. They have commonly two buildings one opposite to the other, joined together on each side with a wall, which makes a square Courtyard in the middle.

"Their slaves and servants dwell round about without in other houses with their wives and children.

And now we are mentioning eating, let us take a view of this people at their meals. Their diet and ordinary fare is but very mean; as to our account.

"The great ones have always five or six sorts of food at one meal, and of them not above one or two at most of Flesh or Fish, and of them more pottage than meat.....

"The habit of the men when they appear abroad is after this sort.

The Nobles wear Doublets of white or blue Callico, and about their middle a cloth, a white one next to their skin, and a blue one or of some other colour or painted, over the white: a blue or red shash girt about their loins, and a knife with a carved handle wrought or inlaid with silver sticking in their bosom; and a complete short hanger carved and inlaid with brass and silver by their sides, the scabbard most part covered with silver, bravely ingraven; a painted cane and sometimes a tuck in it in their hands, and a boy always bare-headed with long hair hanging down his back waiting upon him, ever holding a small bag in his hand, which is instead of a pocket, wherein is betel leaves and nuts.

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"Where their houses consist but of one room, the children that are of any years always go and sleep in other houses among their neighbours which please them better than their own. For so they come to meet with bedfellows, nor doth it displease the parents, if young men of as good quality as themselves become acquainted with their daughters, but rather like well of it; knowing that their daughters by this means can command the young men to help and assist them in any work or business that they may have occasion to use them in. And they look upon it so far distant from a disgrace, that they will among their consorts brag of it, that they have the young men thus at their command.

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"But their marriages are but of little force or validity. For if they disagree and dislike one other; they part without disgrace.

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"At their leisure when their affairs will permit, they commonly meet at places built for strangers and way-faring men to lodge in, in their language called Amblomb, when they sit chewing betel and looking one upon the other very gravely, solidly, discoursing concerning the affairs at Court, between the King and the great men and what employment the people of the city are busied about."