

Wellassa (Moneragala): A Strategic Station of Commercial Passage in the History of Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The District Moneragala, also called as ‘Wellassa’ by its ancient residents, is one of the 22 electoral districts of Sri Lanka. It is located in the Province of Uva in the South Eastern part of Sri Lanka. In Moneragala, the Sinhalese are the predominant group which comprises 94.5% of the total population, the Tamils 3.3% and the Muslims 2.17%. The main objective of this study is to find the uniqueness of Wellassa (Moneragala) as a strategic station of commercial passage in the medieval history of Sri Lanka. It is an unfilled gap and there is no more academic research on the abovementioned area. Thus, this study takes this gap to be bridged throughout an academic field survey as a qualitative nature of research. In order to carry out this research, there has been used the folktales and utterances prevailed among the native public as well as the census reports and the ancient tombs. As the finding of this study, due to the location of Wellassa in the centre of the ancient trading route which was from Kandyan Kingdom to Eastern and Southern Provinces of Sri Lanka, it was concerned as a centre and a strategic station of Foreign and local trading activities which held between the Muslims of respective regions through this route during the medieval time.

Key words: Wellassa, commercial passage, muslims, Uva, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

It is only by a person that gathered perception of the traditional history of his ancient family lineage can become a civilized man keeping pleasant contact with the society not causing harm to the cultural values and dignity. Similarly, a civil society fully ignored of its past history cannot have a conceptual framework for a clear future of its energetic society. It is also very difficult for that civil society to move forwards, onwards and upwards with the designed ideal goals of its future progress and prosperity. So, it is very necessary for each and every civil society to maintain well and clearly formulated historic documents for the use of future generation to pave life-giving permanent path in good orders for the full benefits and safe future with various advantages. The aim of this research is to stimulate the Moneragala District Muslims to take good strides toward the episode of their past history and to move toward the years to come to display their future history. This is the service and benefit of the history is concerned. Each and every society or community should shoulder the motivating knowledge of the past history and move towards the bright and prosperous future with faith and confidence.

The District Moneragala, also called as ‘Wellassa’ by its ancient residents is one of the 22 electoral districts of Sri Lanka. It is located in the Province of Uva in the South Eastern part of Sri Lanka. In Moneragala, the Sinhalese are the predominant group which comprises 94.5% of the total population, the Tamils 3.3% and the Muslims 2.17% (Nanayakkara, 1996). The Muslims settled down in Wellassa (Moneragala District) during the time of Portuguese regime in Sri Lanka (1505-1656) from Central (Kandy) and Southern Provinces and from that period onward they have reached a stage of historic appreciation (Razick, 2007). In fact, this region seemed to be a historical resting station when the traders travelled from Kandyan Kingdom to Eastern and Southern Provinces across Wellassa. It can be explained further that, it had become each and every resting station of the traders as Muslim villages on this commercial path such existing villages, namely; Bakinigahawela, Kotabowa and Alupotha. Given the above backdrop, the main objective of this study is to find the uniqueness of Wellassa (Moneragala) as a strategic station of commercial passage in the medieval history of Sri Lanka. It is an unfilled gap and there is no more academic research on the abovementioned area. Thus, this study takes this gap to be bridged throughout

an academic field survey as a qualitative nature of research. In order to carry out this research, there has been used the folktales and utterances prevailed among the native public as well as the census reports and the ancient tombs.

COMMERCIAL PATH-KANDYAN KINGDOM TO EASTERN PROVINCE

Researches on histories have brought out the fact that in the olden days Wellassa region had been a strategic station of commercial passages. Bintenna, Wellassa and Uva were the three regions (Fig. 1) that were the main provinces of the Kandyan independent kingdom during the periods of 15-20th centuries. These all regions Wellassa was considered as a region with very popular

and famous in the history. Through this region, commercial contacts had taken place between Kandyan Kingdom (1469-1815), Eastern and Southern Province of Sri Lanka. There are evidences to show that these commercial contacts had taken place at the start during the period of king Dutugemunu (B.C 161-137). In Eastern Province, Irakkamam, Konduwattan, Batticaloa, Sammanthurai, Pottuvil were the areas with which these commercial activities were conducted. In the Southern Province, Devundara, Weligama, Dickwella and Hambantota were the areas with which trading activities were carried on by the Muslims lined in Kandyan Kingdom. In the mediaeval time, the Muslims lived with a great influence in the Kandyan Kingdom, especially in terms of commerce and they were the pioneers of trading. At the same period, in the Eastern and Southern

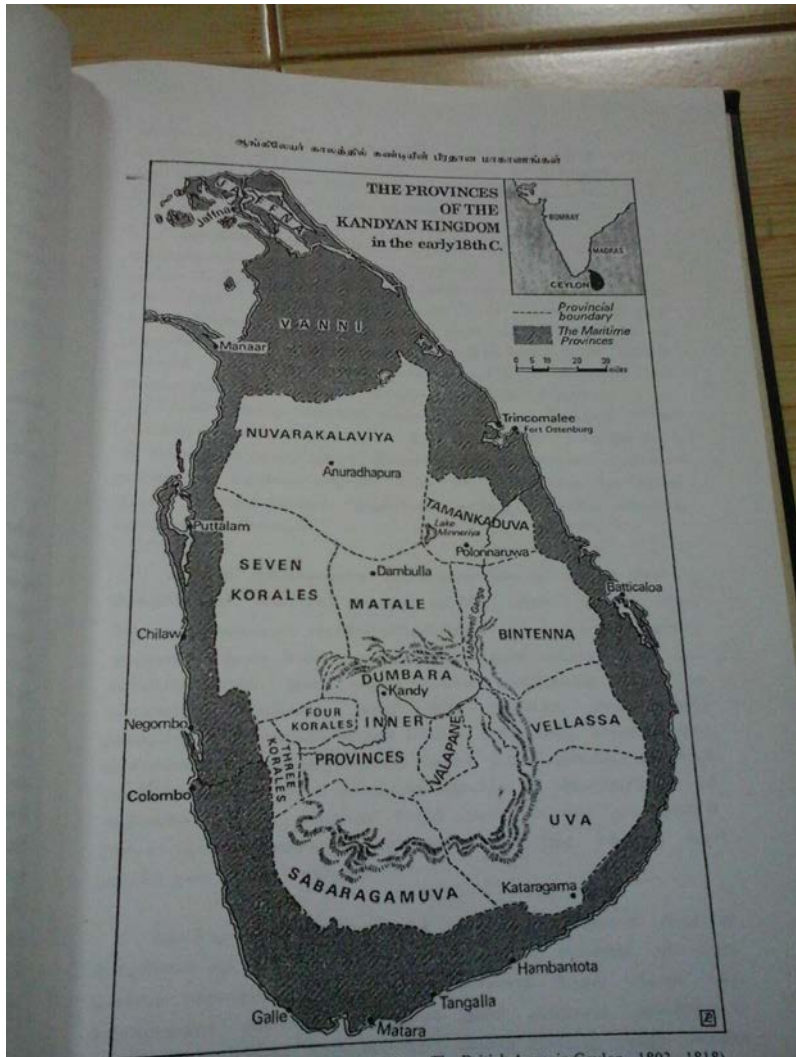


Fig. 1: The provinces of Kandyan Kingdom in the early 18th century (geographical map)

Provinces the Muslims influenced on local and Foreign trading. It is unfortunate that the evidences to show these kind of activities started in practice in which year or when is not available. However, few observations indicate that this commercial contact had started in 1350 AD and lasted for 650 years. There are some evidences to show this fact also.

In 1500 AD, the human race called 'Malkar' for the 1st time started the commercial activities from Kandyan Kingdom up to Eastern Province. This event is orally known by the people from Wellassa region. It is indicated that 'Malkampity' is an oldest village in Sammanthurai. Also, there is a similar Muslim village, namely 'Malkamandeniya' in Akurana (Kandy) area. Based on the names of these villages, there might have a relationship between these villages regarding their origin. It can be inferred that 'Malkars' from 'Malkamandeniya' had come towards Malkampitiy through Wellassa. It is come to know that the Muslims have been living in a few villages of Wellassa for over 400 year (Razick, 2007). They have orally known that there were a group called 'Malkar' came through the Wellassa passage for commercial activities as Muslims. Also, this is an evidence that the existence of the Muslim distribution in this region in 1350 AD times.

Malkampitiya was treated as the authenticated ancient centre of Sammanthurai Village in the Eastern Province. Segu Sikkandar Waliullah and Segu Kalandhar Waliullah had come in order to propagate Islam in Hijri 700 (1324 AD) to this area. These two Saints lived here and engaged in religious propagation and died and buried in the village. These tombs were decayed and were renovated by the local king called 'Malkan'. It was due to the reality of the dream that he had renovated these shrines as indicated in the "Epic of Arab" written by Cadir. But, due to the ethnic conflict in the recent time and civil war (1983-2009), the residents of this village have gone to other villages for safe and security. In 1324 AD, 'Malkars' have visited Sammanthurai and had commercial connections with Kandyan Kingdom. They had made use of Wellassa passage for their travelling.

It could be improved further this statement with following event that during the period of 1980s a religious Saint, who was called 'Sikkander Hasarath', had visited to Wellassa region and carried on religious duties and preaching. He had told about the physical nature of 'Malkars' to his followers and according to the information, the 'Malkars' were with the stature of short appearances. Also, they were very much attached to the religious habit and were dangerous in nature. If any member of their group died, they used to bury that body with all his packed things in that place and arranged stones in a triangular shape to identify the tomb of the

person that he is from the 'Malkars'. The burial holes are very narrow with Shrinkages. These 'Malkars' were the traders who had carried out their trading through Wellassa region before the term of Portuguese rule. These information were conveyed to the local people of Wellassa by Sikkander Hasarath. Sikkander Hasarath was a religious leader served at Falahiya Arabic College, Kattankudy and also served for a period of 05 year (1988-1993) as Katheeb of Kanulwela Jumma Mosque. During the period of last decade he passes away in Galewala, Matale. It is possible to infer that the reason for has to come to Wellassa and served their, due to the commercial region where his ancestors had trading activities in the past.

Besides this, the Odakkarai Alimsah had compiled an Arab Epic, called 'Sikkandar Segu Kaladar Wali Movlidu' and he pointed out in that Epic that he had watched the incidents of the arrival of 'Malkars' to Sri Lanka as told by the local people. But this Arab Epic is unable to be found from anywhere in Sri Lanka. The following information are available about the 'Malkars' in this Epic of Arabic. "Malkars have travelled along Passara passage and after having passed Badalkumbura and Alupotha, Nakkala reached Wellassa and then through Inginiyagala reached Malkampitiya in Sammanthurai". Besides, Segu Kalandar Waliullah and Sikkandar Waliullah are two visitors from India reached Sri Lanka. They could be identified as relatives on blood basis or friendship. Their relatives in majority number lived in Malkampitiya.

Large area of Eastern Province including Batticaloa was under the region of Kandyan Sinhalese King. Because of this, there had been commercial connections from ancient time onward between Kandy and Batticaloa. The forefather of the ancient Moors who lived in Batticaloa had the practice of loading things in bundle and carried them on the backs of bulls for commercial purposes. The Muslims who had bulls and tied in a group were called "Thawalam" in Tamil language. This Thawalam trade system was introduced by the Muslims as well. They have brought bundle of cloths Kithul jiggery, cardamoms, cloves and upcountry beadles to Eravur and sold them to the Muslims and to some Tamil people. Also from Eravur, they had taken bundle of rice, dried fish and coconuts to Kandyan region.

This trading system was in practice till the 2nd World War. The elder people who lived during the period of World War II used to narrate this trading system that was going on from ancient times. The traders those who travelled to Batticaloa from Kandy have passed along the Wellassa route during those days for some reasons such as regular and necessary security pattern and the role of Wellassa as a commercial strategic centre. Professor

Cader points out that “during the period of Medieval age (1500 AD) the Muslims of Sammanthurai and Batticaloa in the Eastern Province had engaged in local commercial activities with the use of route passing Wellassa. This trading system was called “Country Trade”. The main items of this trade are arecanuts, spices, pepper, white onion, paddy, kithul jiggery and onion. These were brought from the local Sinhalese lined on the foot of the Kandyan mountains and supplied the items such as salt, dried fish, coconuts, oil, copper cups, threads, noodle and dressing cloths to these Sinhalese. This as a result, a transport road from Kandy to Batticaloa has come to be used for travellers. This was connected with the “Kandyakattu” routes in the main boundary of Uva region. This passage was called as “Kandy Athar”. It is told by the people that in Kandy ancient days this passage was used for carrying bundle loads in the bulls by the Moors.

The Kandyan Lake, large in space was near this ‘Kandiyankattu’. This lake has come to be known as ‘Senanayaka Lake’. Through, this ‘Kandiyankattu’ point the passage path runs between Kandyan Kingdom and Eastern coastal region through Wellassa. This main road called Chengaladi-Badulla (A4) passing across Bibile running through Pullumale in those early days. It is through the road the Kandy-Batticaloa trade had taken place at the beginning. Also, Dewaraja (1994) in his book titled ‘Muslims of Sri Lanka’ mentions that practice of load bundle trade between the Kandyan Kingdom and Batticaloa and the “Thawalam” trading practices were carried on through Wellassa.

Besides that, Abdul Rahman in the book titled ‘History of Eravur’ has stated that “the Moors lived in Batticaloa region had shifted their residence to live with Muslims in Kandy, Madugoda, Humnashgiriya of Sinhalese areas and lived there; also up and down travelling system was allowed by the Batticaloa Muslims. It is these Batticaloa Muslims who loaded these things to the Kandyan Kings and also loaded the necessary items to the people lived in Kandy up to Red Sea by the Batticaloa Muslims”.

The Muslim traders who travelled from Batticaloa or Sammanthurai have found rivers and mountains along their route and established some villages as mileposts for the travellers. Batticaloa Muslim traders passed from Sammanthurai towards Kandy have established villages along the road. One of these villages is Pangaragama. This village have served as the resting place for the traders travelling long distances in this route. Next, Wellassa approaches after passing Batticaloa, among these Kotabowa Village is one of oldest and ancient village. This village had business connections with

Sainthamaruthu and Sammanthuarai as the Muslims of these villages had conducted trade. Beside, it was the main strategic centre village for the Muslims of upcountry to do trading and to keep contacts. Considering the above information, it is observed that these trading activities were in practice during the medieval age in full and the traders fully involved in are Batticaloa Muslims. It is these Muslim traders who have caused the connection of Kandy-upcountry region with the eastern Harbour Region through the route of villages of Wellassa. Also, Cader says that many of the Muslims lived in Wellassa region, have shifted to the Eastern Province for settlements. In other words, Batticaloa harbour had been an important place for the Kandyan Kings. Because the chieftains were in this position, the Wellassa Muslim population had to shift to coastal region and to start new life with ease and peace. It was welcomed by them.

The commercial connection between Kandy and Eastern Province which carried out through Wellassa villages was a very significant historical event, due to this transport passage system, the ancient Muslim settlement started in Wellassa from the upcountry area was possible. The appearance of Kotabowa, Bakinigahawela, Medagama and Malgasthalawa Muslim villages and come to be located in Wellassa region are due to the trading connections. The Muslims of these villages could travel along the passage to establish connections with each other. The forest interior path between Batticaloa and Kandy through Wellassa had been a path for the Muslims for daily travelling about 50 or 60 were used for carrying the bundle of things and had understood the forest path in their travelling. The ox was taken along the forest path. On the back of the ox two bags of loads were on either side, put on to hang. These travelling had taken place during days and night. The places where during this ox band are stopped for resting and eating have now become Muslim villages. The bulls were trained by the Wellassa Muslim people who were very experts in training these bulls. It is these Wellassa Muslims who have trained the Batticaloa Muslims to do this trading.

Professor Cader identifies the passages running between Kandy and Battialoa used by the traders created commercial connections across the Wellassa region. Kotabowa, is one of the older villages in this region and EAC Hanawathe is located near the Kamulwela villages shown as:

- Sammanthurai to Nadukadu in 10 h
- Nadukadu to Nawalaru in 5 h
- Nawalaru to Pattipola aaru in 6 h
- Pattipola Aru to Kotabowa in 5 h
- Kotabow to Echanawathe in 4 h

- Echanawathe to Siyambala Fence Block in 4 h
- Siyambala Fence Block
 - Pallewatha in 3 h; Pangaragama; Pangaragama
 - KandappattiyAru 4 hp; Kolol; Pimbike
 - Umkar 6 hp; Pattipola aru; Sembalathurai
 - Sembalandthurai 6 hp; Sembalanthurai; Ramkari
 - Thiripala 8 hp; Thiripala; Kandy
 - Hanguranketha; Hanguranketha
 - Kandy; Kandy

These were 03 routes that found central upland and Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. It took about 34 h to reach Siyambala Fence Block (Gravets) area from Sammanthurai through Nadukadu, Navalaru and Pattipola River areas. There are the villages were to be crossed to reach Kotabowa and from there to reach Echanawathe through to reach Siyambala Fence Block. From Siyambala fence block there were three routs leading to Kandy, one is pallewathe, Kandepitiya Aru, Umkar, Siyambala through Tripala, Hunnagiriya through when this route reach to Kandy. This travel needs 30 hours time to reach to Pangaragama there are 2 passages separately running. One path is from Pangaragama to Kandy through Kolol, Pattipola Aru, Sembalanthura, Tripala, Hanguranketha villages. The other route stand from pangaragama through Pimbike, Sembalanthura, Ramkari reach kandy.

Through this passage, Jorispil Bergen is a Dutch, after him, the Holland Army captains Wester Wolt and Villaim Coster visited Kandyan King. During the period of 1620, Ove Geidde a Danish Army captain who visited Batticaloa also gone to Kandy to meet Kandyan King. This passage was used by the Kandyan Kings in 1538, the king who went to enter into an agreement with the Hollanders, had gone to Batticaloa through Wellassa route. Also Ramees Abdullah indicates that there had been a commercial contact between Kandyan Sinhalese and the Eastern region Muslims from the ancient time. The trade in Tobacco was famous in Moneragala region. The Sinhalese in the Wellassa areas and the Muslims in Maruthamunai had good associations. The sarongs weaved and cloths were taken to Wellassa for sale as he says.

The Muslims in Wellassa region had a commercial connection with Pottuvil, Panama regions located in the Eastern region, with the Muslims there. As these regions are part of the harbour region for trade during the Medieval age, so they were famous regions. Black wood tree and rubber were taken from Moneragala to Panama and through harbour they were exported to Foreign countries as stated by Kandayya with his book called 'Mattakalappu Tamilakam'. He explains that this trading system came into practice after the setting up of a regular

path between Moneragala and Pottuvil. Likewise, The Kandy Muslim traders from Kotabowa passed through Bakinigahawela (Vainawely), Medagama, Alupotha route had gone forward to the salt pits near Panama and bought bags of salt from the salt pan there and carried the bags on the bulls to Kandy and sold them to the Kandyan King and the Upcountry Sinhalese to meet their needs. Also, during the medieval period there was a famous centre called Palupathana, a natural salt pan. The Muslims, who came close to Panama for Sault trading, had come to have contact with the people in Pottuvil area. These Panama and Pottuvil regions were under the reign of Sinhala king till 1612. During the period, Muslim traders had come to Uva and Wellassa areas and conducted salt business.

COMMERCIAL PATH-KANDYAN KINGDOM TO SOUTHERN PROVINCE

The history indicates that since ancient time, there had been commercial relations between Kandy and Southern Province. The troops of king Dutugemunu to fight against king Ellalan had gone forward jointly at Mahiyangana through Wellassa route is the information obtainable from the Mahawamsa or the great chronicle of Ceylon in 1912. In other words, since olden days the passage between Central Upcountry and Southern Province were used by the kings. Dutugemunu (167-137 BC) king and his troops had gone through the route from Mahagama to Anuradapura as indicated by Kandayya in his 'Mattakalappu Tamilakam'. Placing Kirinthe Oya in the centre, the village came into eruptive is Magama Village. From this ancient village through Buttalta (a village in Wellassa), Mahiyangana, Makantota, Kachchahatheetha and Polonnaruwa, Dutugemunu and his soldiers reached to Anuradapura to fight against Ellalan. As stated by Kandayya this ancient path located besides the Mahaveli Gange River for a long distance and this path was referred in Mahavamsam as well. This route was very famous in the ancient time and when the Muslims in Sri Lanka became popular in medieval trade, then they could control this route for their trading purposes. This route runs through wellassa and indicates its antiquity.

The Alupotha Village in Wellassa is also ancient one. This village was under the Parakramabahu (1234-1269) who ruled Dambadeniya region. So, it has become the 'Jenna Boomi' (own place) of Prakramabahu as history indicate (Law, 1999). At that time, the route that goes to Anuradapura is Magama Road that passes through Alupotha. Besides, Alupotha people say that another road that goes from Alupotha to Katharagama was used by Muslims traders and other people. Also, a Muslim

called Hajji Marikkar (or Hajji Muhandiram) in the period of 1800s (AD) passed through this route and stayed in Alupotha as related by the ancient people of this village historically. Hajji Muhandiram during the term of British regime had also served as the leader of the Wellassa Madige Institute (Madige is an institute established by the Chieftains of Kandy to transport government goods under its management and supervision). For these administrative supervisions he had gone through this road as news conveyed by the village.

The Muslims living in the Southern part of Sri Lanka during the period of Portuguese reign had engaged in local trading. These Muslims are from Weligama, Devundera and Dikwella areas. They used bulls (Thawalam) to take coastal goods for sale to upcountry regions and had the system of goods exchange, that suits both the values and interests from the point of their demands of their respective villages. From the coastal area, they selected salt, dried fish and other things to interior part of Sri Lanka and from the interior regime they selected battle leaves, rice and perfumery items and arecanuts. The Muslims of Matara and Dikwella regions, during the early period of their rules, Matara District Muslim's trading systems are noted in Portuguese documents called 'Thambus' (Shukri, 1975). For these trading purposes the road from the South to Kandy, running through Katharagama and Alupotha was used.

The Wellassa Muslims say that from Panama region in the Eastern part, from the areas of Southern part, namely Dikwella, Devundara and Weligama, commercial item bundles were carried in the back of the bulls, the salt bags through Wellassa. This salt business had its beginning from the time of their ancestors. There is also evidence that the Muslims of Southern Province had commercial contact with Kandyan Kingdom through Wellassa. Because of this practice, the Muslim families of Dikwella and Weligama regions found in large number in Alupotha, Buttala, Wellawaya and Badalkumbura villages. They say that their ancestors who visited these areas for commercial purposes had started settling permanently in this region. For example, Thawseek Lebbe, Majeed Kaliyar, Hameed Principle and Fassy Doctor had come from Dikwella to Wellassa and lived here for many years and some of them passed away in this area.

There is a village called Madige in Weligama near Matara Town. Madige is an institute established by the Chieftains of Kandy to transport government goods under its management and supervision. It is the responsibility of the Madige Institute to transport government goods and other items of agricultural products with the help of bulls to keep them in the store

houses. Many Muslims had served under Madige management. In Wellassa also there were some of these responsible officers under Madige. In Kanulwela there was a Madige officer (called 'Vidana Appa') in 1920s, who had undertaken this responsibility and discharged its duties. So, the name 'Madige' might have gone to coastal areas such as Madige village located in Weligama from Kandyan Kingdom through Wellassa engaged in Tawalam system of trade.

Today Muslims living in the villages of Wellassa namely in Katabowa and Kanulwela areas are having the habits of speech style, practice and customs of Muslims of Eastern Province. Specially, the Muslims of Kotabowa are identified with the Eastern Muslims living in the villages called Sammanthurai, Irakkamam and Akkaraipattu from the point of speech styles, not only this but, also still connections exist between these regions and Kotabowa. This is because of the fact that Kotabowa is located on the Kandy-Eastern commercial route and also the connection with the Eastern Muslims started increasing in strength and practice. But, the Eastern Province Muslims culture did not influence the Muslims of Alupotha, Bakinigahawela, Medagama, Buttala and Wellawaya villages. In these areas' speech style, habits and practices of the Muslims of Southern Province have well established. This has become possible, because these villages are located on the Kandy-Southern Province commercial route. This too had induced the Muslims to get engaged in commercial activities and has become evidence to show it.

CONCLUSION

In summary, in the regime of Portuguese, the Muslims settled down in Wellassa and gradually they increased their settlements in the periods of Dutch and British. Since, Portuguese time the Wellassa region had been very popular place for 'Thawalam' based trading system. This is because of the location of Wellassa at the centre of the ancient longer trading routes from Kandyan Kingdom to Eastern and Southern Provinces. During the middle ages the Muslims had involved above mentioned trading activities as well. This trading had been carried out through the ancient routes which were flowing across the Wellassa region. Because of this trading activities, there had been took place massive changes in Wellassa as well such as increasing Muslim settlements, establishing Muslim villages and so on. These trading activities had been carried till World War II and this was stopped due to rapid development of modern transportations in British regime in Sri Lanka, particularly in post-independent times. Finally, the researcher hopes that these historical

events will stimulate the Moneragala district Muslims to take good strides toward the episode of their future developments in terms of social and economical aspects.

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