

Deities and Religious Rituals of the Veddas in the Batticaloa Region as Remnants of Ancient Religious Forms: A Comparative Study

Perinpam Sachithanantham*

Department of Comparative Religion & Social Harmony, Eastern
University, Srilanka

Email: sachithananthamp@esn.ac.lk

Abstract

This study examines the persistence and transformation of religious beliefs and ritual practices among the Veddas of the Batticaloa region, Sri Lanka, with particular attention to their concepts of deities and worship practices. The research aims to explore how ancient religious elements, including ancestor worship, spirit beliefs, nature worship, and ritual traditions, continue to exist within the contemporary Vedda community. This qualitative study employs literature review, participant observation, and field-based analysis using a comparative approach. The findings reveal that Vedda religious practices preserve significant elements of ancient religious forms, particularly through the worship of ancestral spirits, nature-related deities, and clan-based rituals. However, these traditions have also experienced transformation due to interaction with surrounding Hindu and Buddhist communities. The study concludes that Vedda religious traditions represent a dynamic continuity of ancient belief systems that adapt while maintaining their distinctive cultural identity.

Keywords: Veddas, Ancestor Worship, Ritual, Deity, Ancient Religion, Nature Worship.

* Eastern University, Sri Lanka Vantharumoolai, Chenkalady.

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji kegigihan dan transformasi keyakinan agama dan praktik ritual di kalangan Weda di wilayah Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, dengan perhatian khusus pada konsep dewa dan praktik pemujaan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana unsur-unsur keagamaan kuno, termasuk pemujaan leluhur, kepercayaan roh, pemujaan alam, dan tradisi ritual, terus ada dalam komunitas Weda kontemporer. Penelitian kualitatif ini menggunakan tinjauan literatur, observasi partisipan, dan analisis berbasis lapangan dengan menggunakan pendekatan komparatif. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa praktik keagamaan Weda melestarikan unsur-unsur penting dari bentuk keagamaan kuno, khususnya melalui pemujaan terhadap roh leluhur, dewa-dewa yang berhubungan dengan alam, dan ritual berbasis klan. Namun tradisi tersebut juga mengalami transformasi akibat interaksi dengan masyarakat Hindu dan Buddha sekitar. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa tradisi keagamaan Weda mewakili kesinambungan dinamis dari sistem kepercayaan kuno yang beradaptasi dengan tetap mempertahankan identitas budaya khas mereka.

Kata Kunci: Weda, Pemujaan Leluhr, Ritual, Dewa, Agama Kuno, Pemujaan Alam.

Introduction

Indigenous religious traditions constitute an important field of study in the sociology and anthropology of religion, because they preserve belief systems and ritual practices that often predate institutionalized religions. Many scholars have argued that early forms of religion were characterized by ancestor worship, spirit beliefs, nature worship, totemism, and magical-religious practices.¹

¹ James George Frazer, *Totemism* (Edinburgh, A. & C. Black, 1887), <http://archive.org/details/totemism01frazgoog>; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion : And Other Essays* (Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1954), <http://archive.org/details/magicsciencereli0000unse>; A. R. (Alfred Reginald) Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society, Essays and Addresses*; (London: Cohen & West, 1952),

Although modernization and religious transformation have altered many indigenous traditions worldwide, some communities continue to preserve elements of these ancient religious forms.

The Veddas, widely recognized as the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, represent one such community. Previous studies have examined various aspects of Vedda society, including their history, livelihood, social organization, language, and cultural traditions.² These studies have significantly contributed to understanding the origins and cultural identity of the Vedda people. However, comparatively less attention has been given to the persistence and transformation of their religious beliefs and ritual practices, particularly among the Veddas living in the Batticaloa region.

The Batticaloa region is known for its rich tradition of local deity worship and ritual practices. Within this cultural setting, the Veddas maintain a variety of religious traditions that include ancestor worship, spirit beliefs, nature-related rituals, and clan-based forms of worship.³ At the same time, continuous interaction with Hindu and Buddhist communities has influenced the development of Vedda religious practices, resulting in processes of adaptation and religious syncretism.⁴ Consequently, it becomes important to examine the extent to which ancient religious elements remain preserved within contemporary Vedda religious life.

This study aims to analyze the concepts of deities and religious rituals among the Veddas of the Batticaloa region and to

<http://archive.org/details/structurefunctio00radc>; PhD Kendall House, "British Social Anthropology 1922-1957," 6 Agustus 2023, <https://boisestate.pressbooks.pub/hoayay/chapter/9-social-anthropology/>.

² S. U. Deraniyagala, *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective* ([Colombo]: Dept. of Archaeological Survey, Govt. of Sri Lanka, 1992), <http://archive.org/details/prehistoryofsri0000dera>.

³ Thankavadivel Ramanan, Selvanayagam Santharoban, dan Muthurajah N Ravikumar, "Identification and Documentation of Cultural Heritage of Batticaloa District of Sri Lanka," 2015.

⁴ Premakumara De Silva dan Asitha G Punchihewa, "Socio-Anthropological Research Project on Vedda Community in Sri Lanka," 2011.

examine their relationship to ancient religious forms discussed in anthropological theories of religion. The study further investigates how traditional Vedda beliefs have been maintained, transformed, or integrated with religious influences from surrounding communities.

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic and comparative perspective to examine the religious beliefs and ritual practices of the Veddas in the Batticaloa region of Sri Lanka. Data were collected through field observations, interviews, and literature analysis of relevant historical and anthropological studies. The collected data were analyzed using a comparative interpretative method to explore the continuity and transformation of Vedda religious traditions in relation to ancient religious forms, including ancestor worship, spirit beliefs, nature worship, and ritual practices. This qualitative framework follows the principles of cultural interpretation in ethnographic research, which emphasizes understanding religious practices within their social and cultural contexts.⁵ By doing so, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the continuity and transformation of indigenous religious traditions in South Asia.

Introduction to the Veddas

The term “Vedda” is derived from the Sanskrit word “Vaidya,” which means “those who hunt with bows and arrows” (Sasi Amarasekara, 2017:17).⁶ Thus, Veddas are people whose traditional occupation is hunting. When examining the history of the Veddas living in Sri Lanka, it is believed that they have existed since ancient times, notably during the era described in the *Ramayana*. They are considered descendants of Ravana’s lineage and are said to have been among the earliest inhabitants of the island during that period. Similarly, the *Mahavamsa* mentions that Veddas were living

⁵ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (SAGE, 2013); James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), <http://archive.org/details/participantobser0000spra>.

⁶ A. R. (Alfred Reginald) Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society, Essays and Addresses*; (London: Cohen & West, 1952), <http://archive.org/details/structurefunctio00radc>.

in Sri Lanka around 540 BCE when Prince Vijaya arrived.⁷ Through these references, the *Mahavamsa* identifies Vijaya and his group as Veddas, thus recognizing the Veddas as one of the island's primordial communities.

Furthermore, Robert Knox, when describing the Veddas living in Sri Lanka, referred to them as "forest-dwelling people" (wild men) and categorized them into two groups: the "wild" and the "tamed." He noted that the Veddas provided kings with animals, honey, wax, and meat as part of their service. Robert Knox defined the people living in the forested regions of Sri Lanka who subsisted primarily through hunting and honey gathering, spoke an Aryan language, and lived in simple huts, as Veddas.⁸

Robert Knox also pointed out that the Veddas had religious beliefs, stating that both men and women among them were devoted to a deity who was regarded as a unique and extraordinary figure. Their worship practices included constructing shrines under trees, conducting rituals, and performing communal dances as offerings to the deity.⁹ This highlights the distinctive nature of Vedda religious worship.

The Veddas are said to have lived in the Vintane region as well as along the northern coastal areas of Batticaloa.¹⁰ The Vintane area was part of the ancient administrative boundary of Batticaloa and is noted as a settlement site of the indigenous Vedda community. The village called Mahavintane near Mahaoya still contains remnants

⁷ D. Sinniah, *The Vedda: The Indigenous People of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Colombo University Press, 2002).

⁸ S. O. Canagaratnam, *Monograph of the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province, Ceylon* (H. R. Cottle, 1921).

⁹ Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon, in the East Indies: Together, with an Account of the Detaining Captivity the Author and Divers Other Englishmen Now Living There, and of the Author's Miraculous Escape. Illustrated with Figures, and a Map of the Island* (London: Printed by Richard Chiswell ..., 1681), http://archive.org/details/gpl_1730637.

¹⁰ Charles Gabriel Seligmann dan Brenda Zara Seligmann, *The Veddas*, Cambridge Library Collection - Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511697203.

of the Veddas who once lived there, particularly in the Magiyangani area. This shows that there was a relationship between the Vedda tribe and the Batticaloa region.

The Veddas living in Sri Lanka have been classified in various ways based on their geographic locations. For example, the Vanniya group includes those living in Damban in the Uva Province and those in the Saparagamuwa region. The Veddas living in the Batticaloa region include the Muhudu Veddas (coastal Veddas).¹¹ Additionally, there are Mountain Veddas (Vintane Veddas), Anuradhapura Veddas (cave Veddas), and Coastal Veddas. Their livelihoods and religious beliefs vary according to the geographic and environmental conditions of their habitats. Though Veddas are generally known as hunters, many also engage in chena cultivation, agriculture, and fishing, especially among the coastal Veddas.

Many studies on the Veddas have been conducted from different perspectives. For example, significant research includes Seligmann's *The Veddas* (1911), K. T. Selvarajah's *Yaarinda Vedda*, Kalinga Tudor Silva's *People of Sri Lanka*, Gnanath Obeyesekere's *Where Have All the Veddas Gone?* and E. Nishanthini's *Vedda Society in Batticaloa*¹² While these studies primarily describe traditional customs of the Vedda communities, the present research aims to explore the aspects of religious beliefs and ritual practices among the Veddas.

The Vedda Community of the Batticaloa Region

The region of Batticaloa extends from the Verugal River in the north to the Kumukkan River in the south¹³ bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the east and the Uva mountain range to the west, covering a vast area. The indigenous people of this region, the Veddas, continue to live here to this day.

¹¹ Dushmanthi Silva dan Upul Sanjeewa Wijepala, "Indigenous Cultural Heritage in Sri Lanka," dalam *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Cultural Heritage and Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2025), 1–7, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-61493-5_206-1.

¹² Seligmann dan Seligmann, *The Veddas*.

¹³ Canagaratnam, *Monograph of the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province, Ceylon*.

Many historical narratives exist about the Veddas living in the Batticaloa region. It is said that they were associated with the worship of Murugan, and that Vedda communities lived in areas where Murugan temples were established. One such story that supports this idea is the myth where Lord Murugan, the Tamil god of the Kurinji (hill) land, married Valli, who was born into the Vedda clan.

Furthermore, the region of Akkaraipattu was once the centre for seven divisions, and the leader of these divisions was known as Puliyan (Puliyan). It is mentioned that on the way to Akkaraipattu lies an island known as Puliyan Theevu (Puliyan's Island).¹⁴ The *Monograph of Batticaloa* also refers to Puliyan Theevu as the place of the Vedda leader Puliyan, indicating that the Veddas were the indigenous people of Batticaloa.¹⁵

Additionally, the place names in Batticaloa containing the words 'Kalu' or 'Kaluvan' might indicate areas where the Kalutheyyo (a deity) was worshipped or where the descendants of Kaluvan once lived, or may have been their original settlements. For example, villages like Kaluvaanchikudi, Kaluthavalai, Kalumunthanveli, and Kaluvankeni can be found in the Batticaloa region.

The Veddas also have their own unique language, religious beliefs, lifestyle, and cultural elements. These features distinguish them from other communities and serve as unique markers of their identity. Veddas live both in mixed and unmixed communities in areas such as: Pattalipuram, Maangeni, Kaayangeni, Panichchangeni, Mathurankulam, Kirimichchai, Uariyangattu, Kathiraveli, Kattumurivu, Amandhanaaveli, Vakara, Punanai East, Kunchankulam, Batticaloa (mouth of the lagoon), Vedda settlement (Kudiyiruppu), Thaalavai, Kaluvankeni, Chiththandi, Kiraan, Santhiveli, Vaalaichchenai, Naasivan Theevu, Eraal Oadai,

¹⁴ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology Vol.1*, 1877, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.22432>.

¹⁵ Canagaratnam, *Monograph of the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province, Ceylon*.

Pondgalkerny, Koankanai, Paalseenei, Thiraimadu, Vaakaneri, Muruththanai, Pazhukaamam, and Kokkatticholai.¹⁶

The religion of the Veddas is nature-based and centers on formless natural forces and the spirits of ancestors. Instead of formal temples, they perform rituals in open spaces. Their main religious belief is that the blessings and guidance of ancestral spirits those who lived and died among them, as well as those from ancient times continue to lead them. They practice ancestor worship as a fundamental part of their spirituality. Along with this, the Veddas believe in spiritualism, i.e., that spirits inhabit nature, and they maintain relationships with these spirits. They believe that certain objects hold special powers and worship them as well. Depending on the region they live in and their means of livelihood, they also adopt beliefs in specific deities. For example, coastal Veddas who engage in fishing also worship various sea related deities. Moreover, the Veddas use their own ritualistic and magical practices (manthirigam) to perform traditional ceremonies.

Vedda rituals are primarily performed in open spaces. This method of outdoor worship closely aligns with Vedic-era traditions where rituals were conducted in large open areas. Vedda rituals do not typically take place in temples or structures enclosed by walls. Even today, while mainstream religious practices have become temple cantered, the Veddas' preference for open air rituals highlights a distinctive aspect of their religious practice.

Ancient Religious Elements in the Vedda Religious System

The religious system of the Veddas in the Batticaloa region represents one of the indigenous traditions that preserves several characteristics commonly associated with ancient forms of religion. Unlike organized religious systems that are structured around sacred texts, institutional authorities, and formal theological doctrines, Vedda religious practices are primarily expressed through relationships between humans, ancestral spirits, natural forces, and local deities. These characteristics reflect early religious patterns that

¹⁶ R. R. (Robert Ranulph) Marett, *The Threshold of Religion* (London, Methuen & co, 1909), <http://archive.org/details/thresholdofrelig00mareuoft>.

anthropologists have identified as animism, ancestor worship, and nature-oriented belief systems.¹⁷

One of the fundamental elements of Vedda religious belief is the existence of spiritual beings that influence human life. The Veddas believe that supernatural forces inhabit the surrounding world, including forests, rivers, mountains, and other natural environments. These spirits are not understood as abstract concepts but as active entities capable of providing protection, causing illness, or affecting human fortune. Such beliefs correspond with Edward B. Tylor's concept of animism, which explains that early religious systems developed from the human perception that spirits exist and interact with the material world.¹⁸ In the Vedda context, spiritual beliefs demonstrate a worldview in which the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds remains closely connected.

Ancestor worship is another central element within the Vedda religious system. The Veddas consider ancestral spirits, known as Yakka, Yakini, or Utthiyagals, as continuing spiritual beings who maintain relationships with living descendants. These ancestral spirits are believed to provide guidance, protection, and influence over community life. The worship of ancestors indicates that death is not perceived as the end of existence but as a transformation into a spiritual presence that remains connected with society. This phenomenon supports the anthropological argument that ancestor worship represents one of the earliest forms of religious expression, where communities maintain social bonds with deceased members through ritual practices.¹⁹

The importance of ancestor worship among the Veddas is also related to social organization and collective identity. Religious practices surrounding ancestral spirits function not only as spiritual activities but also as mechanisms for strengthening kinship relationships. Durkheim argues that religious rituals create collective

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*: An Essay (Princeton University Press, 1992); Frazer, *Totemism*.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*.

¹⁹ Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology Vol.1*; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

consciousness by reinforcing shared values and social solidarity. In the Vedda community, ancestral rituals contribute to maintaining clan identity and preserving cultural memory across generations.²⁰

In addition to ancestor worship, the Vedda religious system demonstrates strong elements of nature worship. Many Vedda deities are associated with natural environments and are believed to possess spiritual power connected with forests, rivers, animals, and other ecological elements. The dependence of traditional Vedda livelihood on hunting, gathering, and natural resources has contributed to the formation of a religious worldview that considers nature as sacred. This relationship reflects the concept of natural religion proposed by Max Müller, who suggested that early religious consciousness emerged from human experiences and interpretations of powerful natural phenomena.²¹

The relationship between religion and nature can also be observed through Vedda ritual practices. Offerings, ceremonies, and worship activities are often conducted in natural spaces or temporary ritual structures rather than permanent religious buildings. Such practices demonstrate that sacredness is not limited to constructed places but can exist within the natural environment. According to Mircea Eliade, traditional societies often experience the natural world as a manifestation of sacred power, where certain places and objects become meaningful because of their connection with the divine.²²

Another characteristic of ancient religious forms found among the Veddas is the presence of symbolic relationships between humans, objects, animals, and spiritual powers. Certain objects related to hunting activities, clan identity, and ritual performances may acquire sacred meanings. These practices resemble elements of totemism and fetishism, where specific symbols or objects become representations of collective identity and spiritual power.²³ In the

²⁰ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

²¹ F. Max (Friedrich Max) Müller, *Natural Religion* (London: Longmans, 1898), <http://archive.org/details/naturalreligion0000mllle>.

²² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959).

²³ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; Frazer, *Totemism*.

Vedda context, such symbols function as cultural markers that connect individuals with their ancestors, environment, and religious traditions.

Therefore, the religious worldview of the Veddas cannot be understood merely as a collection of isolated rituals or supernatural beliefs. Rather, it represents an integrated system where ancestors, spirits, nature, and social relationships are interconnected. The persistence of these elements demonstrates that ancient religious forms continue to survive within contemporary Vedda society, although they have experienced transformation through historical and cultural interactions with surrounding religious communities.

The Concept of Deities and Ancestral Spirits among the Batticaloa Veddas

The concept of deities among the Veddas of the Batticaloa region cannot be separated from their belief in ancestral spirits and supernatural forces. Unlike the concept of deity in institutionalized religions, Vedda deities are often understood through their relationship with ancestors, clans, and natural environments. In this religious worldview, spiritual beings are not considered distant divine entities but active powers that influence human life, provide protection, and maintain the relationship between the community and the sacred world.

One of the central elements of Vedda religious belief is ancestor worship. The Veddas recognize ancestral spirits, commonly referred to as Yakka, Yakini, and Utthiyagals, as spiritual beings who continue to exist after death and maintain a connection with their descendants. These spirits are believed to protect the community, influence human fortune, and respond to ritual offerings. This belief demonstrates that ancestors occupy an important position within Vedda religious life, functioning as intermediaries between humans and the spiritual realm. Such a pattern reflects Herbert Spencer's argument that ancestor worship represents one of the earliest developments of religious consciousness, where deceased ancestors gradually become objects of religious reverence.²⁴

²⁴ Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology* Vol.1.

The relationship between ancestors and religious authority is also reflected in the existence of clan-based deities among the Veddas. Certain groups maintain specific relationships with particular deities, and some spirits are associated with particular lineages or communities. For example, the Maara deity is regarded as an important deity among certain clans, while Kiriya Amma occupies a significant position among other Vedda groups. These clan-based religious relationships indicate that religious belief is closely connected with social organization and collective identity.²⁵

From the perspective of Émile Durkheim, religious symbols and sacred beings often represent the collective identity of a community. In this sense, Vedda deities are not merely supernatural beings but also expressions of social relationships, historical memory, and cultural continuity. The worship of specific deities strengthens the connection between clan members and preserves traditions inherited from previous generations.²⁶

Kiriya Amma represents one of the most important examples of the relationship between deity concepts and ancestral traditions among the Veddas. She is perceived not only as an individual goddess but also as a collective spiritual power associated with female ancestral beings. The existence of multiple forms of Kiriya Amma worship demonstrates that the Vedda understanding of deity is flexible and closely related to social and cultural contexts.²⁷

Furthermore, Vedda deities are closely associated with the natural environment. Coastal Veddas, for instance, maintain beliefs in deities connected with the sea, rivers, and water sources. These beliefs indicate that the sacred world of the Veddas includes both ancestral spirits and natural forces. Such integration between ancestors, deities, and nature reflects the characteristics of indigenous religious systems, where spiritual power is understood as existing throughout the environment.²⁸

²⁵ Canagaratnam, *Monograph of the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province, Ceylon*; Seligmann dan Seligmann, *The Veddas*.

²⁶ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

²⁷ Seligmann dan Seligmann, *The Veddas*.

²⁸ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

Therefore, the concept of deities among the Batticaloa Veddas reflects a religious system in which ancestors, supernatural beings, and natural forces are interconnected. Rather than representing a fixed theological structure, Vedda deity concepts demonstrate a dynamic relationship between spiritual beliefs, social identity, and environmental adaptation.

Ritual Practices as Expressions of Vedda Religious Identity

Religious rituals among the Veddas function as important expressions of their spiritual worldview and cultural identity. Vedda rituals are not only ceremonial activities but also represent communication between humans, ancestral spirits, deities, and the natural environment. Through ritual practices, the community maintains relationships with supernatural forces and preserves collective traditions.

One of the significant Vedda rituals is the Kirikoraha Dance, which is performed as part of worship toward specific deities. This ritual involves symbolic objects, offerings, food preparation, and communal participation. The use of ritual objects and collective performance indicates that the ceremony serves as a medium for interaction between the human community and the spiritual world. According to Bronislaw Malinowski, rituals emerge as cultural mechanisms that help communities deal with uncertainty and strengthen their confidence in facing important aspects of life.²⁹

Another important ritual is Kolamaduwa, a ceremonial practice involving songs, dances, and the invocation of several spiritual beings. The ritual demonstrates that Vedda religious practices are performed collectively and involve the participation of community members. The communal nature of these ceremonies reflects Durkheim's argument that rituals generate social solidarity by creating shared emotional experiences among members of a religious group.³⁰

²⁹ Malinowski Bronislaw, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (The University of Chicago, Illinois, 1948), <http://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.476121>.

³⁰ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Vedda rituals are also closely related to practical aspects of life, such as healing, hunting, childbirth, and protection from misfortune. These rituals show that religion in Vedda society is not separated from everyday activities. Religious practice provides explanations and solutions for social and natural challenges. In this context, ritual functions as a cultural system that organizes human relationships with both visible and invisible realities.³¹

The performance of rituals in forests, temporary structures, or natural environments also reflects the sacred relationship between the Veddas and nature. Unlike religions centered on permanent religious institutions, Vedda rituals often emphasize sacred spaces created through ritual action. This supports Eliade's view that traditional societies construct sacred spaces through symbolic relationships between humans and the transcendent world.³²

Therefore, Vedda rituals represent more than religious ceremonies; they serve as mechanisms for maintaining cultural identity, strengthening social bonds, and preserving inherited traditions. Through ritual performance, the Vedda community continues to reproduce its religious worldview despite social and cultural changes.

Religious Transformation and Syncretism in Contemporary Vedda Society

Although Vedda religious traditions preserve many ancient elements, contemporary Vedda religious life has experienced significant transformation due to continuous interaction with surrounding religious communities. The influence of Hinduism and Buddhism has introduced new religious figures, symbols, and ritual practices into Vedda society. This process demonstrates that indigenous religions are dynamic systems that continuously adapt to historical and social changes.

In the Batticaloa region, some Vedda communities have incorporated deities and ritual practices associated with Hindu

³¹ Priyanka Weerasekara, "Ancestral Traditions and Spiritual Ecology among the Veddas of Sri Lanka," dalam *Indigenous Cultures Research Series*, 2025.

³² Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

traditions, including figures such as Murugan, Sudalai Vairavar, and other regional deities. Similarly, Buddhist cultural influences have contributed to the recognition of figures such as Pathini and Saman within some Vedda communities. These developments show that Vedda religious traditions do not exist in isolation but develop through interaction with broader religious environments.³³

The integration of external religious elements can be understood through the concept of religious syncretism. According to Stewart and Shaw, syncretism refers to the process through which different religious traditions interact and produce new forms of religious expression. In the Vedda case, syncretism does not necessarily mean the disappearance of indigenous traditions but rather the creation of hybrid religious practices that combine inherited beliefs with external influences.³⁴

However, this transformation also creates challenges for the preservation of Vedda religious identity. The increasing adoption of external religious elements may reduce the visibility of traditional deities, rituals, and ancestral practices. Modernization, urbanization, and social integration have contributed to changes in the transmission of Vedda religious knowledge between generations.

Nevertheless, the survival of practices such as ancestor worship, Kiriya Amma worship, and traditional rituals demonstrates that Vedda religious identity remains present. The continuity of these traditions shows that indigenous religions are capable of maintaining cultural foundations while adapting to changing social environments.

Thus, contemporary Vedda religion should not be understood as a disappearing tradition but as a transforming religious system. The interaction between traditional beliefs and external religious influences illustrates the dynamic nature of indigenous spirituality in the modern era.

³³ Marett, *The Threshold of Religion*.

³⁴ Rosalind Shaw dan Charles Stewart, ed., *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 2003), doi:10.4324/9780203451090.

Conclusion

This study has examined the concepts of deities and religious rituals among the Veddas in the Batticaloa region of Sri Lanka as manifestations of the continuity and transformation of ancient religious forms. The findings demonstrate that Vedda religious traditions preserve several characteristics commonly associated with early religious systems, including spirit beliefs, ancestor worship, nature worship, and symbolic relationships between humans, objects, and the sacred world.

The study reveals that the concept of deity among the Veddas differs from the understanding of divine beings in institutionalized religions. Vedda deities are closely connected with ancestral spirits, clan identities, and natural forces. Figures such as Yakka, Yakini, Utthiyagals, and Kiriya Amma illustrate that ancestral beings continue to function as spiritual powers that influence community life and maintain connections between past generations and contemporary society.

Furthermore, Vedda rituals such as Kirikoraha, Kolamaduwa, and other ceremonial practices demonstrate that religious activities serve not only as expressions of belief but also as mechanisms for maintaining social solidarity, cultural memory, and collective identity. Through ritual performance, the Veddas preserve relationships between humans, ancestors, deities, and the natural environment.

However, the study also shows that Vedda religious traditions are not static remains of the past. Interaction with surrounding Hindu and Buddhist communities has resulted in processes of adaptation and religious syncretism. The incorporation of external religious elements does not necessarily indicate the disappearance of indigenous beliefs but reflects the dynamic nature of Vedda spirituality in responding to historical and social changes.

Therefore, this research concludes that the religious system of the Batticaloa Veddas represents a living tradition in which ancient religious elements continue to exist through processes of cultural continuity and transformation. The case of the Veddas demonstrates that indigenous religions should be understood not as isolated

remnants of the past, but as dynamic systems that continuously negotiate identity, environment, and religious change.

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