

# Religious Beliefs and Rituals of the Veddas in Sri Lanka

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Vedda Community is a very significant one in Sri Lanka. According to the genesis myth of the Vedda people, they are descended from Prince Vijaya. There is a very interesting story behind this. The Mahavansa prove the origin of this indigenous group according to the great chronicle of Mahavansa. Kuveni was repudiated by king Vijaya who came from "Pandyas" Country. Because of this repudiation the two children of Kuveni and Vijaya were expelled. So they departed to the region of "Samantha Kuta". They multiplied there and gave birth to the Vedda Community.

As the most significant indigenous groups of Sri Lanka Vedda People have a great history. According to some scholars they are descended from the country's Stone Age. It has been proved through the human morphological characteristics of skeleton remains which were revealed from stone age habitats, Even today they are practicing a hunting and gathering system as their main livelihood, which is considered as the stone age's main livelihood.

Religion of the Vedda people has been formed according to their living atmosphere. Always they faced different kinds of problems in their day to life so their religion was originated based on animism.

## II. DEFINITIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND RITUALS OF THE VEDDAS

The study of religious beliefs and rituals of societies has greatly advanced our understanding of other people's way of thinking. Evans Pritchard's study of Zandewitcheraft shows how beliefs in witchcraft and oracles may have important implications for the political authority system. In his account of ancestral cult and social structure among the Lugbara of Uganda Middleton shows that the status of clan elders depends on how effectively (in the Lugbara view) they can invoke the ancestral ghosts (Beattie 1972 : 74).

Robertson Smith's (1889) account of sacrifice can be read as a direct inspiration or as the forerunner for much subsequent discussion of the relationship between religion and society. He thought of sacrifice as the typical act of worship in the Semitic religion. He stressed the continuity of the rite.

Worship was given specific forms. Religion cannot wholly remain a matter of inward ideas and feelings; people need to express them visibly and audibly in acts of worship. People are born into a particular society and learn the beliefs accepted in it. Robert Smith associated sacrifice with changing political and social circumstances; he noted how the imagery used to identify and interpret the relationship between God and worshippers reflected social experience - that of the pastoralist or the tribesman, the citizen, the supplicant and the experience of a people's success or of their exile. Political change affected religious forms. The growth of the state, the central locus of the temple and priestly specialization led to changes in the sacrificial cult, in concepts of distance from God and his demands; the changes came with the control of the cult by temple priests. Issues of sin and salvations became important with priestly rationalization of the cult, leading to a more coherent formal system and the emergency of new ethical frameworks (Smith, quoted in Lewis 1994 : 570).

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1915) argued that religion was essential to society to preserve its distinctive order and values. The sacred was serious, mandatory, and not to be questioned. The work of Robert Smith was particularly influential in leading Durkheim to this view of the obligatory quality of the sacred. In fact, it led him of view the concepts of the sacred, cleanliness and taboo as ways of defining social identity and social boundaries; to recognize the importance of the religious community and the heightened sense of fellowship created in communal worship and celebration; and to stress that collective values are reinforced by participation in ritual. And he endorsed Smith's conclusion his study of sacrifice, that rites (the actions) were more durable and stable than the ideas and beliefs that people at particular times offered to explain them. (Durkheim, quoted in Lewis 1994 : 571)

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) agreed with Durkheim's postulate that the main role of religion was to celebrate and sustain the norms upon which the integration of society depends. But unlike Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown was concerned with the content of sacred symbols, and particularly with the reasons why one object rather than another was absorbed into rite or woven into myth. From his functional structuralist point of view Radcliffe-Brown considered, however, that man's need for a concrete expression of social solidarity was not sufficient as an explanation of the structure of a people's religious system. Something was needed to tie the particular objects awarded sacred status (or in his terminology, "ritual value") to the particular social interests they presumably served and

reflected. Radcliffe-Brown, resolute empiricist as he was, chose a solution Durkheim had already magisterially demolished : the utilitarian one. The objects selected for religious veneration by a given people were either directly or indirectly connected to factors critical to their collective well-being. Things that had real, that is, practical, "social value" were elevated to having spiritual, or symbolic, "ritual value," thus fusing the social and the social and the natural into one overarching order (Geertz 1968 : 402).

Bloch's (1986) study on rituals also stresses, according to Robert Smith, that there was a basic stability in the core features of the rite. He argues that the persistence of rituals may help to explain long-term cultural continuities. Rituals influence people's perceptions of changing politico-economic circumstances and their reactions to them. But they may, in turn play a part in moulding events. The ambiguity of ritual half statement and half action leaves room for adaption to varying circumstances and allows it to survive little changed in the long run. The nature of the ritual may be revealed only slowly through its interaction with practical aspects of culture and historical events. (Bloch, quoted in Lewis 1994 : 571).

As among other tribals in the world, Vedda religious beliefs and rituals are seen in the context of the purpose of material welfare. In fact, rituals cannot be demarcated by a clear boundary from other kinds of customs. It is manifest in religion and magic (Lewis 1980 : 8). Accordingly, as means of solving problems encountered by the Veddas in their day to day life, religion and magic renders them a significant service. From among a host of very important changes that the Vedda social organization had been subjected to, the minimum of change has taken place in religion. The Vedda religion mainly consists of the cult of the dead and spirits or *yaku* (demon) of a benevolent nature. In addition to demons they believe in some Gods too. The agent who maintains the connection between religion and the followers is the exorcist. This agent who lives among his members, provides them with their needs and desires. The beliefs about demons and Gods could be identified as a major influence directing the social organization.

Relatives who take on the form of demons (*NaeYakku*) after their deaths, help the Veddas in various ways in their life. In order to obtain more and more help from these ancestral spirits, offerings have to be made to them. If, however, the demons are provoked for some reasons, calamity would ensue. The calamities could come in the guise of preventing the people from securing something like food, destruction of the harvest, plagues and destructive weather elements. On the other hand, beliefs resting on ancestral spirits and Gods would bring fertility.

The belief in ancestral spirits is very common among tribals. Ancestral spirits are considered present where there is significant interaction between the living and the dead (Matlock 1995 : 162). Ancestors, like deities, are addressed commonly in prayer, both in African and in Asiatic societies and invoked by name and descent rank (Fortes 1976 : 10 - 11).

For instance, Sanuma Indians of the upper river Auaris valley in the North West of Roraima territory in Northern Brazil is based entirely on the use of assistant spirits

(*HekulaDibi*) to act on the shaman's behalf. Shamanism is used primarily in curing, which involves the destruction or chasing away, by the shaman's *Shekuls*, of those other spirits (which can be of several different types) which have caused or which intend to bring about sickness and death. It can also be used to ensure hunting success (Taylor 1979 : 202). The Khasis, a hill tribe of Meghalaya, also believe in malignant spirits, deity and tree worship. The malignant spirits are worshipped to get rid of their evil influences. This worship is usually followed by a crisis, and there is no fixed time for it (Bhowmik 197 : 144).

The Wola people of the Southern Highland province of Papua New Guinea believe that two kinds of demon spirits inhabit the mountainous forests of their region. They call them *Saem* and *Iybtit*. When people are attacked by these frightening creatures, they are injured or fall sick and may die; their relatives perform rituals to drive the demons away and promote their recovery (Sillitoc 1993 : 220).

Accordingly ancestor worship is part of the religious systems which include beliefs in a supreme being, nature divinities, magic and witchcraft, personifications in the shape of deities of epidemic diseases or cosmic forces, and the experience of good and evil, chance and destiny (Fortes 1976 : 3).

### III. DIFFERENT KINDS OF BELIEFS AND PRACTICES PERTAINING TO VEDDA

As far as Vedda ancestor worship is concerned the most honored *Kande Yakka* (Demon of the mountain), is a chief from among the deceased. He is invoked to endow a person with success in hunting.

Kande damane kanna	gona
Rath Nuga pathanate enna	gona
Issa hita depayata eli bee	gona
Kande deviyo denavada mata	gona
Rath Nuga pathanata enna	gona
Kiri Nuga pathanata	gona
Ang visi hatharak	gona
Kande aluth devi denavada	gona

**Translation:** "Oh! God of the mountain will you help me to hunt the stag with twenty four horns, the one which comes to the sacred red banyan trees." The above verses depict an invocation which calls for the help of the mountain demon for purposes of being favoured with a prey for food. Hunting happens to be the primary means of life in the distant past of the Vedda society. It was by making such invocations to the demons of the mountains that these tribal folk obtained their food provisions. The demon of the mountains is a cruel being. It appears in the form of a God too. While the demon of the mountains supplies food to these people, it does not hesitate to bring upon punishment if some wrong has been done. The brother of the demon of the mountains is known as *Bilindi*. This demon is a powerful being among other powerful demons who are *Kalu Bandara*, *Maha Kohomba Bandara*, *Irugal Bandara*, *Sandu Gal Bandara*, *Mavaragal Panikka*, *Lepat Panikka*, *Rerangala Panikka*, *Indigolla Yakka*, *Maralu Yakka*, *Serang Yakka* and *Dives - Yakka* means 'Demon'.

Within this demon and God worship, provincial influences were seen as not lacking. The indulgence in various

forms of witchcraft and occult practices extracted from Sinhala shamans for the rituals akin to the Uva Bintenna province. For instance the *Hethma* ritual is performed annually by both the Sinhalese and the Veddas in Uva Binthenna. The purpose of this ritual is to gain prosperity and to be free of epidemics. A similar type of ritual called 'Gammaduwa' is performed by the low country Sinhalese for the same purposes. Both the Sinhalese and Vedda shamans perform dances together in this ritual. This is one of the best examples to show the provincial and Sinhalese influences on the Vedda practices. The *Elle*

*Yakka* is someone special to the Vedda folk, particularly in relation to eliminating their fear of plagues and sickness. Though a number of rituals practiced throughout the ages have become obsolete today, the belief in demons and Gods is portrayed through the remaining practices of rituals and the forms of offerings. While there are numerous forms of offerings attached to the purpose concerned, in such instances, it is another demon or God who is invited by the shaman. Some of these are:

Offering	Invited demon or God	Purpose
<i>Nae Yakuma</i> (Ritual for a deceased relative)	The demon of the mountains, demon <i>Bilindi</i> or other deceased relatives demons.	To be favoured with a prey, fertility and protection.
<i>Iethale Netuma</i> (The dance of the arrow. This is no longer practiced)	The demon of the mountains.	Protection for the offspring.
The <i>Anguru Mas Yahana Adukku Bambara</i>	The demon of the mountains, demon <i>Bilindi</i> and other deceased relatives demons.	Offering for prey received
<i>Bambara Yakk Pujawa</i> (Demon <i>Bambura</i> )	Demon <i>Bambura</i>	To be favoured with types of potatoes and for hunting-down pigs.
<i>Dole Yakka Netuma</i> (The dance of <i>Dole</i> demon)	The <i>Dole</i> demon	To be favoured with honey and for alleviation of sickness.
<i>Rahu Yakk Puja</i> (Demon <i>Rahu</i> )	The demon <i>Rahu</i>	To be favoured with honey and for alleviation of sickness.
<i>Wanagatha Yakk Netuma</i> (The <i>Wanagath</i> demon dance)	The <i>Wanagatha</i> demon	To be favoured with a prey and for protection while hunting.
<i>Kiri Amma Pujawa</i> (The <i>Kiri Amma</i> )	The <i>Kiri Amma</i>	Protection for the offspring.
<i>Pena Belima</i> (Light - reading)		To figure out the particular relatives demon who causes the illness to the patient.
<i>Hethma Pujawa and Kirikorha Naetiema</i> (The <i>Hathma</i> and the <i>Kirikoraha</i> dance)	The demon of the mountains and other deceased relatives demons.  The twelve Gods, the <i>Elle</i> demon, the <i>Gale</i> demon, the group of demons, the demon of the mountains, demon <i>Bilindi</i> and other deceased relatives demons.	To be favoured with a prey, fertility, for dispelling the fear of sickness, protection and for alleviation of trouble and calamity.

The *Kapurale* (shaman) has the power and knowledge of invoking the *Yaku*. In the offering ceremony of the dead or *Nae Yaku Natanawa* (the dancing of the *Nae Yaku*), the sorcerer calls upon the spirit of the recently deceased person to come and take the offering. The shaman soon becomes possessed by the *Yaku* of the deceased. The spirit then speaks through the mouth of the shaman in a hoarse and guttural voice that he approves of the offering and the promises to assist this relatives in hunting and in all other important affairs of their daily life. Thereafter the *Yaku* leaves the shaman. Then the offerings made are distributed to all the assembled men, women and children. The associated belief is that the taking of a part of these offerings is important in the sense that it brings health and fortune to the participants.

Both white magic and black magic rituals are prevalent among the Veddas. While human welfare is brought about by white magic rituals, black magic rituals attract the opposite. White magic ritual is used by them in relation to such things as an abundant harvest, protection of the harvest, to be favoured with a prey and for protection. Black magic ritual, which James Frazer has explained as 'contagious magic is more popular', and is outstandingly observed among the Vedda

community. Just as much as the Azande inhabitants, the Veddas believe in witchcraft. Among the black magic practices they engage in, are taking revenge upon another, winning over someone's heart and restricting of delivery after coception. Seligmann and Parker have written at length about the aforementioned beliefs and rituals.

While lofty ideals such as emancipation, *Nirvana* or salvation are not, part of the Vedda religion, its focal motive has been man and his environment. Accordingly, from destruction of harvests to plagues, from favouring them with a prey for food to calamities happiness, it is the Gods and demons who maintain this interrelationship. This reminds one of the idealism in E.B.Taylor's book which speaks of Animism (See Tylor 1871 : vol II). Santhals in India, Ava Chiripa in the Eastern region of Paraguay and many other tribals also believe in animism.

Veddas do not have strong beliefs in cosmology. The Veddas show little interest in nature and accept it as it is. Hence, there are no myths or legends concerning natural phenomena such as the sun and moon, stars, rain, rainbow, animals and birds etc., which from a regular part of mythology in most primitive groups (Meegaskumbura 1990 : 108).

Verrier Elwin has collected a large number of such myths dealing with natural phenomena found in the Mahakosala area of India. Though there is no special kind of ritual as in the case of the religious system of Totem worship, which symbolises purity and is practiced by the Australian aborigines, the belief about 'impurity' exists among the Veddas. In cases of rites of passage (relating to birth, attainment of puberty, death), pollution could make the *Yak-Pettiya* (devil - box) impure. The devil - box is a box in which are deposited the main items used during tribal invocations done in connection with offerings. A *Yak Pela* (devil - hut) erected somewhat away from the houses of the inhabitant, contains with the devil-box in order to protect it from pollution by the inhabitants. Pollution of the devil-box brings about calamities to the inhabitants, and to dispel such calamities, a ritual has to be performed.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Though the Vedda society has already changed, they still live within their system of beliefs. According to John Dart (1990 : 72). even the coastal Vedda who is keeping contact with the Tamils believe in devils. These beliefs are being successfully perpetuated by these folks from the distant past. As such it is observed now religion and magic, which centres upon their rituals and beliefs, play a continuous role within the Vedda community. It is very important to consider the applicability of belief system in Vedda community. Accordingly it can be seen their striving to further maintain their hereditary. But it has become a challenge in the modern social stream.

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