

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF VEDDHA IDENTITY INTO A MODERN MYTH IN SRI LANKA

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### Abstract

This article examines how the ethnic identity of the Veddha community in Sri Lanka has been transformed into a modern myth through dominant practices of representation. Based on Eriksen's understanding of ethnic identity as dynamic and socially constructed and Barthes's theory of modern mythology, the present study argues that Veddha identity is not inherently primitive or static but is actively reshaped through cultural, political, and symbolic processes. Tourism, media, and political discourse continue to portray the Veddha community as timeless forest dwellers belonging to the past, although they are integrated into the modern Sri Lankan society where they have access to formal education, wage labor, and everyday use of modern technologies. The article utilizes qualitative insights from fieldwork and textual analysis to show how political discourse uses Veddha identity as national heritage. This hides the effects of development, conservation, and land dispossession. Similarly, media narratives depoliticize cultural change by framing it as a natural disappearance. Tourism promotes the staged performance and commercialization of specific cultural practices. These processes simplify history, erase power relations, and naturalize inequality. The article concludes that the Veddhas have become a modern myth not because of their lived realities, but because of how they are represented. It highlights the need to recognize them as a living ethnic community with agency, rights, and an ongoing place in contemporary Sri Lankan society.

**Keywords:** Veddaha, Identity, Modern Myth, Tourism, Media.

**Diszcipline:** cultural anthropology

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**Absztrakt****A VEDDHA IDENTITÁS MODERN MÍTOSZÁ ALAKULÁSA SRÍ LANKÁN**

Jelen tanulmány azt vizsgálja, miként alakult át a Srí Lankán élő veddha közösség etnikai identitása modern mítosszá a reprezentáció domináns gyakorlatai révén. A tanulmányban megjelenő vizsgálata Thomas Hylland Eriksen által képviselt, az etnikai identitást dinamikus és társadalmilag konstruált jelenségként értelmező megközelítésre, valamint Roland Barthes modern mitológiáról szóló elméletére támaszkodva amellet érvel, hogy a veddha identitás nem inherensen primitív vagy statikus, hanem kulturális, politikai és szimbolikus folyamatok révén folyamatosan újraformálódik. A turizmus, a média és a politikai diskurzus a veddha közösséget mindmáig a múlt részeként létező erdőlakókként reprezentálja, jóllehet annak tagjai integrálódtak a modern srí lankai társadalomba, így hozzáférnek a formális oktatáshoz, a bér munkához, valamint a modern technológiák mindennapi használatához. A tanulmány terepmunkából származó kvalitatív meglátások és szövegelemzés segítségével mutatja be, hogy miként használja fel a politikai diskurzus a veddha identitást nemzeti örökségként, ezáltal elfedve a fejlesztések, a természetvédelem és a földkiszajátítás következményeit. Hasonlóképpen, a médiában megjelenő narratívák depolitizálják a kulturális változásokat azáltal, hogy azokat természetes eltűnésnek keretezik. A turizmus pedig bizonyos kulturális gyakorlatok megrendezett performativitását és kommercializációját ösztönzi. E folyamatok leegyszerűsítik a történelmet, eltörlik a hatalmi viszonyokat, és természetesként tüntetik fel az egyenlőtlenségeket. A tanulmány arra a következtetésre jut, hogy a veddhák nem a megélt valóságuk következtében váltak modern mítosszá, hanem reprezentációjuk módja révén. Mindez rámutat annak szükségességére, hogy a közösséget élő, cselekvőképes etnikai közösségként ismerjük el, amely jogokkal rendelkezik, és amely a kortárs srí lankai társadalomban továbbra is aktív szerepet tölt be.

**Kulcsszavak:** Veddha, identitás, modern mítosz, turizmus, média.

**Diszciplína:** kulturális antropológia

**Introduction**

Ethnic identity is a crucial concept for understanding how people see themselves and how they are seen by others in society. It refers to a shared sense of belonging that is based on common cultural elements such as history, language, traditions, symbols, and ideas about origin. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen explains that ethnicity is not a biological or fixed concept. Instead, it is a social process that becomes meaningful through relationships between groups (Eriksen, 2010). Ethnic identity develops when an individual perceives themselves as distinct from others and is acknowledged by others as a distinct group. These differences are maintained through social boundaries.

These boundaries may develop over time due to changes in political, economic, and historical conditions. Therefore, ethnic identity should be understood as something dynamic, not permanent or natural, (Eriksen, 2010) further states that an ethnic group does not have to be culturally uniform in all aspects. Shared belief in a common origin and cultural differences are matters. Ethnicity often becomes more visible when groups experience unequal power relations or when their identity is addressed and shaped by institutions such as the state, media, or education systems.

This perspective is particularly beneficial when examining Indigenous communities, because their identities are frequently influenced by both their

personal experiences and the relationships portrayed by outsiders.

Considering the Sri Lankan context, the Veddhas, also known as the Wanniyalaetto, are widely regarded as both the indigenous community of Sri Lanka and an ethnic group (Stegeborn, 2004). They are often characterised by a common ancestry, a distinct cultural legacy, and a strong historical bond to specific landscapes, especially forest areas. Historically, the Veddhas community engaged in hunting and gathering. They had their own belief systems and maintained social practices closely connected to nature (Seligman, 1911). These shared cultural practices, along with a deep sense of belonging and shared identity, show that the Veddhas are more than just a group defined by a particular way of life. They are a people bound together as an ethnic community.

However, the ethnic identity of the Veddhas has never been static. Over the years, their lifestyles have transformed because of colonial rule, government policies, development projects, conservation laws, and increased interaction with the broader Sri Lankan society. Numerous Veddha families currently reside in established communities, enrol their children in educational institutions, participate in paid work and use modern technologies such as Internet, mobile phones. They often communicate in Sinhala or Tamil alongside or in place of their native language. These transformations indicate that Veddha society is integrated into contemporary Sri Lanka and continues to adapt to new conditions.

Despite these ongoing changes, dominant representations of the Veddhas often present a simplified and static image. In popular imagination, the Veddhas are often described as primitive, unchanging or timeless forest dwellers. This gap between everyday life and public representation raises an important question: Why are the Veddhas still imagined as belonging to the past when their daily lives clearly show adaptation and change? To address this

question, the concept of modern mythology is particularly useful.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explains that myth is neither an ancient story nor a deceptive belief. Rather, myth serves as a modern system of communication that gives cultural significance to routine images, words, and actions (Barthes, 1972). According to Barthes, myth operates by transforming a historically and socially constructed concept into something perceived as natural and eternal. Also, Myth eliminates history and politics, making cultural concepts seem normal and unquestionable. Thus, myth does not entirely hide reality, but it simplifies and reshapes it.

Furthermore, Barthes noted that modern myth functions on two levels of meaning. Firstly, an image or object carries a straightforward, literal meaning. Secondly, society actively assigns it a broader cultural meaning. For instance, a photograph of a person is not just a visual record. It can also become a symbol of tradition, purity, or national identity. This added meaning reflects the values and interests of those who produce and circulate these images. As a result, modern myth is closely connected to the concepts of power. Thus, it allows dominant ideas to appear natural while hiding social inequalities and historical processes.

Moreover, applying this concept to ethnic identity helps to explain how certain groups are transformed into symbols instead of being recognized as dynamic, evolving communities. In many societies worldwide, indigenous peoples are often portrayed as rooted in past, closely connected to nature, as being closer to nature, or as the “original” people of the nation. These representations may seem respectful. Yet, they often simplify lived realities and ignore present-day struggles. Hence, myths become powerful cultural tools that shape how ethnic identities are understood and valued. In Sri Lanka, the process of modern myth-making is evident in the way Veddha community is represented.

Tourism resources, media narratives, and political discourse often repeat similar images of the Veddhas. In such sources Veddhas are frequently shown wearing traditional attire, holding bows and arrows, living in forests, and positioned outside modern society. As these images circulate widely and repeatedly, they begin to feel natural and true, even when they no longer reflect everyday realities of Veddha life.

Furthermore, this myth-making process is deeply connected to nationalism, heritage discourse, and tourism. Within national narratives, the Veddhas are often described as the “original people” of Sri Lanka, symbolizing ancient roots and cultural purity (Smith, 1999). In the field of tourism, their identity is exoticized and presented as cultural heritage for visitors (Urry, 2002). Additionally, in the field of education, textbooks tend to portray them as belonging to the past, ignoring their adaptation to the modern realities. Therefore, these representations create a modern myth of the Veddhas as timeless forest people who exist outside history. According to Barthes, this myth conceals the political and social influences that have affected their existence, including land dispossession, displacement, and economic exclusion.

Based on the given background information, the main aim of the present article is to understand how the ethnic identity of the Veddha community has been transformed into a modern myth in Sri Lanka. In accordance with Barthes, myth is viewed not as a falsehood but rather as a cultural process that influences meaning and perception. The article explores how portrayals of the Veddhas serve as myths that streamline history, eliminate political context, and transform a vibrant ethnic identity into a symbolic representation.

The primary research question that directs this article is ‘How has the ethnic identity of the Veddha community been transformed into a modern myth in Sri Lanka?’ The primary objective of this article is to examine the process by which the Veddhas’

ethnic identity is mythologised in modern Sri Lankan society, drawing on Eriksen’s understanding of ethnic identity and Barthes’s theory of modern mythology. Through the integration of these perspectives, the article argues that the Veddhas became modern myths not because of who they are, but because of how they are represented by society.

### Discussion

Tourism plays a significant role in reshaping the ethnic identity of the Veddha community into a modern myth in Sri Lanka. Tourism portrays the Veddhas not as an evolving community but rather as a cultural representation crafted to fulfill the expectations of the tourists. This process can be clearly understood through theories from tourism anthropology, particularly John Urry’s concept of the “tourist gaze,” along with the concepts of exoticization and heritagization.

According to John Urry, tourism involves not just travel but also the perspectives that tourists have on people and locations. When the tourists arrive, they come with expectations as they have looked into the media, guidebooks, and popular imagination. They do not look for everyday reality. Instead, they look for something “different,” “traditional,” and “authentic.” (Urry, 2002). Urry, (2002) refers to this perspective as the *tourist gaze*. It strongly influences how local communities present themselves. He further argues that this gaze is not natural but organized and regulated by professionals such as tour guides, hotel operators, travel agencies, and media producers, who determine what tourists encounter and how these encounters are framed. Consequently, local communities often highlight or perform selected aspects of their culture to meet tourist expectations. In the case of the Veddhas, tourism encourages the performance of a particular identity that aligns with the tourist gaze.

During fieldwork in Dambana, it was clearly observed that many tourists visit that village specifically to see the Veddha people. Tourists’ interests are

focused on aspects such as their physical appearance, rituals, dwellings, and traditional customs. These interests create economic opportunities for the community as many Veddha families sell handicrafts made from natural materials, such as bows, arrows, and ornaments. These items are promoted as “primitive” or “ancient,” reflecting tourists’ expectations that the Veddhas embody a pre-modern way of life. In order to sustain their livelihoods, the community frequently presents itself in ways that align with these tourist expectations.

*Picture 1. Two Veddha men selling handicrafts made from natural materials, ornaments, and honey in Dambana Village, Sri Lanka, 2018. Photograph by Sumuthu Manaranga.*



This is where the concept of exotization becomes significant. Exotization refers to the representation of a group as strange, different, and detached from modern life (Urry, 2002). Within tourism, the Veddhas are frequently portrayed as forest people who are closer to nature and untouched by modern society. While this image is appealing to tourists, it does not reflect everyday realities. In contemporary society in Sri Lanka, many Veddhas reside in permanent villages, wear modern clothing, use mobile phones, and take part in the national economy. However, these modern aspects are frequently con-

cealed from tourists because they conflict with the exotic image that visitors expect to encounter.

A clear example of this process can be found in the staged performance of the ritual known as *kirikoraba*. During fieldwork, it was observed that there is a special space in the village where this ritual is performed for visitors. In these performances, Veddha participants wear leaves on their bodies, remain partially nude on the upper body, and act out the ritual in a dramatic way. Tourists are informed that this represents a traditional Veddha ritual, and they often believe they are observing an authentic cultural practice.

*Picture 2. Veddha shaman preparing for the Kiri Koraha ritual dance during fieldwork in Dambana, Sri Lanka, 2023. Photograph by the author.*



However, in reality, *kirikoraba* has not traditionally been a ritual performed for a public audience. Historically, it was conducted only for special purposes, such as healing illness or seeking prosperity. It is a private ritual, known only within the community. It was never performed on demand. Therefore, the tourist version of the ritual is not a genuine ritual, but rather a performance. This performance exists mainly to satisfy tourist curiosity and generate income.

This ritual performance provides a clear example of heritagization. Heritagization refers to the process of turning living cultural practices into fixed heritage items intended for display. When a ritual is detached from its social and spiritual context and repeatedly staged as a performance, it becomes heritage rather than lived culture (Urry, 2002). In this process, the ritual is simplified, standardized, and made safe for tourist consumption. As a result, Veddha culture is presented as a museum-like exhibit rather than a dynamic and living system of meaning.

Another significant example identified during the fieldwork is the way some hotels in Sri Lanka market wedding packages that include so-called “Veddha traditions.” In these packages, especially for foreign tourists, couples are invited to celebrate their weddings “according to Veddha tradition.” Selected members of the Veddha community are transported to hotels or urban venues to stage symbolic wedding rituals. Although these performances are presented as authentic cultural practices, they are largely constructed for tourist entertainment rather than rooted in everyday cultural life.

In authentic Veddha society, wedding practices adhere to specific customs that are deeply meaningful within family and community life. These practices are closely tied to social relationships, obligations, and cultural values. They are not intended for public display or commercial use. However, in tourist-oriented weddings, these traditions are simplified, shortened, and turned into a visual performance. Their deeper social significance is removed to make them easily accessible and appealing to tourists.

This process can be understood through the theory of cultural commodification. Cultural commodification refers to the conversion of cultural practices, symbols, or identities into marketable products that can be bought and sold (Greenwood, 1989). Within tourism, culture is often repackaged as an experience or attraction. In this case, Veddha wedding traditions are no longer treated as elements

of a living social system, but are transformed into cultural products that generate profit for hotels and the wider tourism industry.

*Picture 3. Wedding ceremony at The Barnhouse, Panadura, Sri Lanka, featuring a Polish couple celebrating with Veddha-inspired traditions, 2026. Photograph by the author.*



Commodification also reshapes power relations within the Veddha community. Tourism encourages the emergence of visible “leaders” or “spokespersons” who maintain close links with tour guides, hotel managers, and tourism authorities. These individuals are often selected to perform rituals, participate in tourist events, and represent the entire community. Although this role can bring economic benefits to them and to certain families, it also concentrates control over cultural representation in the hands of a few.

As a result of tourism and cultural commodification expanding, the public image of the Veddha community becomes selective and simplified. Only those cultural elements that are attractive and profitable for tourists are shown, such as traditional clothing, rituals, and performances. Everyday reali-

ties, such as modern education, wage labour, social change, and political struggles, are often hidden. Through commodification, Veddha ethnic identity is turned into a cultural product. Their traditions are detached from their original social and cultural context and repackaged as purchasable heritage experiences. Consequently, what tourists encounter is not everyday Veddha life, but a carefully staged version that aligns with their expectations of “authentic” Indigenous culture.

This selective form of representation directly contributes to the creation of modern myths. Many tourists leave places such as Dambana with the belief that the Veddhas are still primitive, forest-dwelling people who live exactly as they did centuries ago. This perception is not created by the Veddhas alone, but by the entire tourism system, including tour guides, hotels, brochures, and tourists’ own expectations. As Roland Barthes explains, myth does not completely deny reality. Instead, it simplifies reality and removes history. Similarly, tourism presents a timeless and naturalized image of the Veddhas while hiding the social and economic changes that shape their lives today. Thus, tourism does more than merely display Veddha culture. It actively reshapes it. Exotization renders the Veddhas pre-modern and distinct, while heritagization confines their culture to fixed and repetitive forms. Together, these processes transform Veddha ethnic identity into a modern myth that serves the tourism industry while obscuring the community’s lived and changing realities.

The media also plays an important role in transforming the ethnic identity of the Veddha community into a modern myth in Sri Lanka. Through television programs, newspapers, documentaries, and digital media, the Veddhas are often portrayed not as a dynamic and evolving ethnic group, but as symbols of an ancient past. These representations strongly influence how both tourists and the wider public understand who the Veddhas are and what their culture represents.

Research on the Veddhas of Dambana indicates that the media has become one of the strongest external forces influencing both public perception and the community’s own sense of identity (Senarath, 2023).

Media narratives frequently describe the Veddhas using terms such as “disappearing tribe,” “last forest people,” or “original inhabitants.” While these descriptions create sympathy and curiosity, they reduce the community to a single emotional image. The Veddhas are portrayed as belonging to nature and the past, rather than as contemporary citizens confronting issues such as land disposition, access to education, employment challenges, and political marginalization.

This process can be clearly understood through Roland Barthes’ concept of myth as depoliticized speech. Barthes argues that myth does not lie. Instead, it removes social realities of their historical and political dimensions, making them appear natural, inevitable, and timeless (Barthes, 1972). Media portrayals of the Veddhas seldom address the structural forces behind their cultural transformation, including forest conservation policies, the erosion of hunting rights, forced relocation, and state-led development initiatives. Rather than contextualising these factors, the media frames Veddha culture as “naturally disappearing,” suggesting an inevitable and self-generated process of change (Senarath, 2023)

For example, many documentaries focus on elderly Veddha men recalling forest life and the loss of traditional practices. Although these images appear respectful, they usually fail to explain that the decline of many traditions resulted from the government’s restriction on forest access and criminalisation of hunting (Senarath, 2023). By excluding this political context, media narratives suggest that cultural loss is unavoidable. This reflects what Barthes identifies as depoliticization, where audiences are not encouraged to question the underlying causes of change (Barthes, 1972).

A very strong example of media-driven myth-making is the repeated emphasis on a single ritual dance, kirikoraha. Most television programs and documentaries show only this ritual when representing Veddha dance culture. As a result, many people outside the community, including both tourists and local Sri Lankans, come to believe that the Veddhas possess only one ritual dance and that it defines their entire cultural identity. However, this assumption is inaccurate and oversimplifies the richness and diversity of Veddha cultural life.

In reality, the Veddha community practices a range of rituals, many of which are performed only for specific purposes such as healing, protection, or ensuring prosperity. Some rituals are known exclusively within the community and are not intended for public display. However, media producers tend to highlight only those practices that are visually striking and easily accessible, often without in-depth research. Through the repeated portrayal of kirikoraha alone, the media elevates a single ritual into a symbol representing the entire culture.

This form of selective representation contributes to the creation of modern myth. In Barthes' terms, kirikoraha becomes a second-order sign. It comes to symbolize "primitive tribal culture" as a whole rather than signifying one ritual among many (Barthes, 1972)(Barthes 1972). Through constant repetition, this image appears natural and unquestionable. Therefore, audiences are led to believe that the Veddhas remain primitive and unchanged, despite the complexity and diversity of their contemporary lives.

Similarly, media narratives tend to privilege Damabana as the "authentic" Veddha village, while overlooking other Veddha communities living in different regions. This emphasises a single, fixed image of Veddha identity and conceals internal diversity within the community (Senarath, 2023). As a result, the public is encouraged to imagine all Veddhas as living and behaving in the same way.

Another important effect of the media can be observed among the younger generation. Research

studies show that Veddha youth are actively engaged with modern technologies, such as mobile phones, television, and social media (Senarath, 2023). However, as the media continues to portray Veddhas as strange, primitive, and backward, many young people feel uneasy about openly identifying themselves as Veddha. Hence, some choose to conceal their ethnic identity in schools and public spaces to avoid stigma and negative stereotypes. This demonstrates that media-generated myths influence not only how outsiders view the community, but also how the Veddhas understand and perceive themselves.

In this way, the media transforms the ethnic identity of the Veddhas into a modern myth. The community is represented primarily as a symbol of an ancient past rather than as a group living in contemporary society. As Barthes explains, myth transforms history into nature. Media representations often suggest that the Veddhas are either disappearing or remaining unchanged, while concealing the political, social, and economic forces that continue to shape their lives today.

Similarly, Sri Lankan political discourse has also played a significant role in transforming the ethnic identity of the Veddha community into a modern myth. Political narratives often present the Veddhas as symbols of the nation's ancient heritage rather than as a living ethnic community with present-day rights and challenges. Through state policies, speeches, and development initiatives, the government has contributed to portraying the Veddhas as "primitive," "backwards," or "disappearing," while hiding the political factors that have led to their marginalisation.

One of the key ways in which politics contributes to this myth is through development and conservation policies. After independence, the Sri Lankan government regarded the Veddhas' hunting-and-gathering way of life as a sign of backwardness that required transformation. Large-scale development projects such as the Gal Oya Scheme and the Mahaweli Development Project displaced Veddha com-

munities from their traditional ancestral forest lands and relocated them to the resettlement villages (Stegeborn, 2004). These interventions were promoted by the politicians as symbols of “modernization” and “progress”. However, they failed to recognize the Veddhas’ deep cultural and economic connection to the forest. As a result, the loss of land and livelihood was presented as an inevitable outcome of development rather than the result of deliberate political choices.

At the same time, conservation policies strengthened the myth of the Veddhas as “forest people.” When areas like Maduru Oya were declared national parks, Veddhas were banned from hunting, gathering honey, or entering lands they had inhabited for generations (Stegeborn, 2004). Politically, the forests were redefined as a space reserved exclusively for wildlife, not for human presence. This made the Veddhas appear as people who belong to nature but not to the modern state. Although their traditional livelihoods were criminalized, this form of structural violence was hidden behind the discourse of environmental protection.

Political speeches and national narratives further contribute to myth-making. The Veddhas are often described as the “first people” or “living heritage” of Sri Lanka. While such expressions may appear respectful, they reduce the community to cultural symbols rather than recognizing them as citizens with rights. As Obeyesekere (1990) argues, both colonial and postcolonial narratives have consistently portrayed the Veddhas as primitive and timeless, enabling the state to treat them as historical objects instead of political subjects (Obeyesekere, 1990). This symbolic use of Veddha identity enhances national pride while ignoring everyday realities such as poverty, limited access to education, and ongoing land insecurity.

Drawing on Roland Barthes’ theory, this form of political representation can be understood as myth functioning as depoliticised speech. Myth does not

deny reality. It removes historical and political contexts, making social conditions appear natural and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972). In the case of the Veddhas, political decisions regarding land ownership, development, and conservation are obscured. Their circumstances are explained as the inevitable decline of a “primitive culture.” This myth enables the state to distance itself from responsibility for the outcomes of its policies.

In this way, Sri Lankan politics contributes to the transformation of Veddha ethnic identity into a modern myth. The Veddhas are portrayed either as ancient symbols of the nation’s origin or as a group that must be modernized and absorbed into the dominant society. Both views hide the underlying political processes that have produced their marginalization. By turning history into nature, political discourse makes inequality appear normal and inevitable, reinforcing the modern myth of the Veddhas as a disappearing people rather than a community shaped by state power and policy decisions.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the ethnic identity of the Veddha community in Sri Lanka has been transformed into a modern myth through processes of representation rather than lived reality. Drawing on Eriksen’s concept of ethnic identity as dynamic and Barthes’ theory of modern mythology, it is evident that the Veddhas are not inherently “primitive” or “unchanging”. Instead, they are constructed to appear this way through social, cultural, and political processes.

Tourism, media, and politics each play a key role in this myth-making process. Tourism promotes the selective performance of traditions to satisfy visitor expectations. The media repeatedly circulates simplified images and narratives that portray the Veddhas as disappearing forest dwellers. Political discourse, meanwhile, uses the Veddhas as symbols of national origins while obscuring the consequences

of development policies, land dispossession, and conservation laws. Across these domains, history and political accountability are erased, and Veddha identity is presented as natural, fixed, and timeless.

As Barthes argues, myth transforms history into nature. In the Sri Lankan context, the Veddhas have become a modern myth not because of who they are, but because of how they are represented. This myth hides pressing realities such as land loss, social marginalization, and the identity struggles faced by younger generations. Recognizing and unpacking this process is essential if the Veddha community is to be understood not as a symbol of the past, but as a living ethnic group with rights, agency, and a future within modern Sri Lankan society.

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