



Governing Kinship And The Sacred In Ceded Bellary: Lambadi Marriage And Ritual Authority, 1800–1948

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Abstract

This article examines marriage practices and religious life among the Lambadis in Ceded Bellary between 1800 and 1948, with particular attention to how these institutions sustained community authority during settlement consolidation and colonial administrative expansion. Drawing on district gazetteers, colonial ethnographic writings, census material, and oral narratives from tandas, it argues that marriage regulation and ritual authority were not merely matters of custom, but central mechanisms through which Lambadis organized social order, negotiated gendered authority, and maintained autonomy from external legal and priestly structures. Marriage practices such as clan exogamy, negotiated alliances, bride price, widow remarriage, levirate, and panchayat governed divorce structured kinship boundaries, obligations, and sanctions. Religious life, centered on Mariamma worship, sacrifice, domestic shrines, ancestor propitiation, and festival cycles such as Seethla and Teej, was largely administered through internal ritual specialists. Together, these institutions reveal how tanda based governance endured despite occupational change, colonial classification, and administrative expansion.

Keywords: Lambadi, Banjara, Ceded Bellary, kinship, marriage, ritual, Mariamma, tanda, panchayat, colonial governance

Introduction

The history of the Lambadis in Ceded Bellary has most often been narrated through migration, caravan trade, colonial disruption, and criminalization. These themes are important and cannot be set aside. Yet they do not fully explain how Lambadi society sustained its internal order and continuity in everyday life. Economic change, settlement, and colonial classification certainly shaped the community's historical trajectory, but they do not by themselves account for the ways in which authority was exercised within the tanda, disputes were settled, kinship was regulated, and the sacred was made central to social reproduction. This article shifts attention to those institutional foundations.

Its central argument is that marriage and ritual were not secondary aspects of culture, nor merely private domains of family and belief. They formed the core of community governance. In Ceded Bellary, regulated kinship and ritual authority enabled the Lambadis to maintain social order, define legitimate relationships, reproduce collective identity, and preserve a meaningful measure of autonomy even as colonial administration expanded and occupational patterns changed. Marriage rules organized alliance, compensation, and sanctions. Ritual life governed misfortune, reinforced lineage continuity, and sustained moral authority through internal specialists rather than outside priestly control. Read together, these practices reveal a durable institutional order at the heart of Lambadi social life.

This perspective also addresses a wider historiographical issue. Colonial texts such as district manuals, gazetteers, and ethnographic surveys described the Lambadis in ways that made them administratively visible, but often treated their internal institutions as mere customs. Francis (1904) and Thurston (1909), for example, offer valuable descriptive material, yet their writings remain shaped by the classificatory logic of colonial knowledge. Modern scholarship has moved further. Bhukya (2010) has shown that Lambadi history under state rule was marked not only by marginalization, but also by internal reorganization, reform, and adaptation. Dirks (2001) and Cohn (1980) are also useful here, because they remind us that colonial rule worked through forms of description, classification, and legibility, without necessarily displacing existing community institutions. This article builds on that insight by examining how Lambadi marriage and ritual life continued to function as internal mechanisms of governance.

The discussion proceeds in three parts. The first examines marriage as a form of social organization and tanda governance. The second analyzes ritual life and sacred authority. The third considers how these institutions persisted amid livelihood shifts, settlement consolidation, and colonial administrative expansion.

Historiography and the Problem of Perspective

The study of the Lambadis has long been shaped by the kinds of sources available. Colonial ethnographers and district writers were among the first to provide systematic descriptions of the community. Thurston (1909), in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, described the Lambadis through visible social features such as dress, language, exogamous divisions, ritual practices, and marriage customs. Francis (1904), writing on Bellary, described them as a community living in tandas, organized under hereditary leaders, and increasingly drawn into agriculture and grazing after the weakening of older trade patterns. These writings remain useful because they preserve observations on social forms, authority, and settlement. At the same time, their limitations are clear. They tend to view the Lambadis from outside, often as objects of description rather than as agents of institutional life.

This limitation is not incidental. As Cohn (1980) argues, colonial knowledge was deeply tied to administration. Communities were described in ways that made them intelligible to rule. Dirks (2001) similarly shows that colonialism did not merely observe caste and community, but reworked them into categories of governance. In such writing, Lambadi institutions appear as customs, rituals, or primitive survivals rather than as systems of authority. Yet when read closely, these same sources contain material that points toward the opposite conclusion. Their descriptions of clan exogamy, panchayat adjudication, hereditary leadership, goddess worship, and internal ritual specialists reveal a society with strong internal structures of regulation.

Modern scholarship has been more attentive to this dimension. Bhukya (2010) is especially important because he reconstructs the Lambadis not simply as a nomadic or stigmatized population, but as a historical community shaped by political pressure, transition, and self reorganization. His work shows that Lambadi history cannot be reduced to mobility or victimhood. Rather, it must be understood through the community's own strategies of continuity and adaptation. Deogaonkar (1992) and Singh (1994) also provide useful broader context on the Banjara or Lambadi community, especially in relation to social categorization and regional variation.

The present article extends this line of inquiry by treating marriage and ritual as institutions of governance. It is less concerned with describing Lambadi culture as a set of traits and more concerned with understanding how kinship and the sacred organized social order within tando life.

Sources and Method

This article draws on a mixed source base that includes district gazetteers, ethnographic writings, census linked materials, and oral narratives preserved in tandas. The broader historical materials on the Lambadis make clear that the community's past cannot be reconstructed solely through a continuous written archive from within. Instead, it survives across stories, songs, memory, interviews, folklore, and local knowledge, as well as in colonial descriptions and census records. This scattered archive is not simply a weakness of the source base. It reflects the historical location of the community within larger structures of power and representation.

The oral narrative material is particularly important. The ethno historical chapter you shared emphasizes that the social, economic, cultural, and political history of the Lambadis in Bellary district was reconstructed through interviews with elderly men and women living in selected tandas, supported by observation and written evidence. These narratives were used to trace not only migration and settlement, but also kinship practices, ritual life, community memory, and changing social conditions. Read alongside Francis (1904), Thurston (1909), and related materials, they help recover what formal administrative records alone cannot provide.

This method also requires caution. Colonial records reduce communities to categories, while oral narratives carry the force of memory, interpretation, and retrospective reconstruction. Neither can be treated as transparent truth. Yet when brought together, they allow a fuller reading of Lambadi institutional life. The colonial archive shows how the community was seen and classified. Oral memory helps recover how the community understood its own order.

Marriage as Social Organization and Tanda Governance

Clan exogamy and the structure of alliance

Marriage among the Lambadis was not regarded as a purely personal matter. It was regulated by clear collective norms. One of the most important of these was clan exogamy. Colonial descriptions note that the Lambadis were divided into exogamous groups such as Bhukya, Rathod, Jath, Pawar, Chauhan, Mood, and later Vadiya, and that marriage within one's own division was forbidden (Thurston 1909). Exogamy thus functioned as a rule of social order rather than as an optional preference.

Its significance lies in the way it shaped alliance and community boundaries. By preventing marriage within the same clan, the Lambadis organized kinship through a recognized system of outward alliance. Such rules were not left to private discretion. Their breach required public adjudication and sanction. Exogamy was therefore one of the institutional mechanisms through which the community defined legitimate kinship and authorized collective intervention.

This point becomes stronger when placed within the structure of tanda governance. The tanda was not only a residential unit. It was also the basic social and political unit of authority. The Naik, assisted by figures such as the Karbhari, exercised authority alongside the Tanda Panchayat. Marriage rules were upheld within this institutional structure. Exogamy therefore linked kinship directly to governance.

Negotiated marriage and elder authority

The material indicates that negotiated marriage, often called thalikattu marriage, was the standard and preferred form. The proposal was usually initiated by the bridegroom's family, but the process was mediated by elders and the Naik. A delegation visited the bride's household, and the alliance was discussed in public terms rather than as a private arrangement between two individuals.

This procedure is sociologically important. It shows that marriage was a collective act in which elders carried responsibility for alliance making. Consent was embedded in wider structures of social standing, tanda reputation, and household obligation. Ritualized caution, such as the reluctance to eat in the bride's household before the alliance was fully settled, further shows that negotiation already carried moral and social consequences. Marriage was not only a family event. It was a public contract in formation.

The use of symbolic acts such as the distribution of betel leaves and later shared commensality helped formalize this process. These acts made the alliance visible and recognized within the tanda. Negotiated marriage, then, was not simply a ceremony. It was a mode of governance through which elder authority was institutionalized.

Bride price and public obligation

Bride price, identified in the material as Kararer Pisa, was one of the most important instruments of marital regulation. It should not be treated simply as a payment exchanged between families. Rather, it functioned as a means of converting marriage into a field of enforceable obligation.

Its role becomes especially visible in cases of conflict. If a promise of marriage was broken after payment had been made, repayment and fines could be imposed. If one spouse abandoned the other under circumstances not accepted by the panchayat, bride price became part of the calculation of injury and compensation. In such cases, conjugal relations were translated into public obligations governed by collective judgment.

Bride price thus had a juridical character. It allowed the tanda to quantify breach, assign accountability, and restore order. In that sense, it made marriage legible to internal governance without reducing it to simple economic exchange.

Regulated flexibility in marriage forms

The materials also describe other forms of marriage, including marriage by service, exchange marriage, and elopement. These forms are significant because they reveal that Lambadi social order was not rigid in the sense of allowing only one route to legitimacy. Rather, it possessed mechanisms through which irregular or alternative unions could be brought back within recognized forms.

Marriage by service provided a route for suitors who could not immediately afford bride price. Elopement, too, did not necessarily lead to permanent exclusion. Instead, the Thanda Panchayat could hear the case, impose fines, and regularize the union. This demonstrates that the tanda's authority was not only punitive. It was also integrative. It had the capacity to absorb transgression and convert it into sanctioned order.

Widow remarriage, levirate, and continuity

Widow remarriage was widely practiced and socially recognized. In contrast to upper caste norms that often stigmatized widow remarriage, Lambadi practice allowed it as a practical and legitimate response to loss. Such remarriages were marked by simpler rites and sometimes carried differentiated status, but the institution itself was accepted.

Levirate forms similarly reveal the concern with continuity. By keeping widows and children within recognizable kin structures, these arrangements protected domestic labor, care, and lineage stability. These practices show that marriage was not solely about first alliance. It also governed crisis, succession, and continuity.

Divorce and internal legal authority

Divorce was governed through the Thanda Panchayat. Grounds such as adultery, cruelty, barrenness, neglect, and incompatibility could be brought before the council. Compensation, bride price, and sanctions were determined collectively. The fact that such matters were not expected to be taken to external courts is especially significant. It points to an internal jurisdiction over kinship and domestic order.

Severe cases could result in expulsion. Lesser cases were handled through graded fines, public settlement, and negotiated obligation. Divorce thus reveals the most explicit form of internal legal authority within Lambadi society. Marriage was not only ritualized. It was adjudicated.

Religious Practices and Ritual Authority in the Tanda

Mariamamma and the collective management of misfortune

If marriage regulated alliance and domestic life, ritual governed vulnerability, illness, and collective uncertainty. Mariamma appears throughout the material as the central goddess in the Bellary context, especially in relation to epidemic, disease, and misfortune. Worship often involved animal sacrifice, especially goats or hens, when sickness was understood as divine displeasure or supernatural danger (Thurston 1909).

What matters here is not only belief, but social function. Ritual made misfortune governable. Illness was translated into a shared moral event. Sacrifice became the community's authorized response. In that sense, ritual did not simply express fear. It organized it. It gave form to collective vulnerability and provided a means of response within community authority.

Domestic shrines and ancestor continuity

Domestic sacred practice linked ritual authority directly to kinship. Household gods, clan symbols, and sacred insignia were kept in inner rooms, often near kitchens or household centers. Ancestor propitiation during Diwali or Dawali reaffirmed continuity between living members of the household and prior generations.

This structure is important because it reveals that ritual authority was not external to domestic life. It was part of how lineage continuity was reproduced. Responsibility for sacred objects could be tied to specific household members, thereby linking residence, inheritance of duty, and sacred continuity.

Internal ritual specialists

Religious authority among the Lambadis was largely internal. The bhagat appears as healer and ritual specialist, using herbs, mantras, and sacrifice. The bhatt appears as genealogist, singer, and custodian of lineage memory. These figures were crucial to the regulation of ritual life. The relative absence of dependence on Brahmin priests is especially revealing. It shows that sacred legitimacy did not rely primarily on outside religious specialists.

This internalization of ritual authority is central to the article's argument. The Lambadis did not simply participate in wider religious worlds passively. They preserved their own ritual order through recognized specialists and domestic structures of sacred responsibility.

Festivals and the moral calendar

Festivals such as Seethla and Teej organized social time and ritual labor. Seethla linked cattle, seasonal vulnerability, sacrifice, and communal feasting. Teej gave a central role to girls and young women and tied fertility, agriculture,

and devotion into a repeated cycle of ritual action. These were not just moments of celebration. They were means through which the tanda reproduced shared obligation, gendered roles, and sacred time.

Selective interaction and retained ritual sovereignty

The Lambadis were not isolated from wider regional religious influences. The material suggests selective interaction with Balaji, Guru Nanak related traditions, and some Peer related practices (Leonard 1973). Yet such engagement did not displace the core internal order of Mariamma worship, domestic shrines, and ancestor propitiation. The pattern was therefore one of selective incorporation without surrender of ritual sovereignty.

Settlement Change and Colonial Expansion

Colonial rule altered the wider conditions in which Lambadi society operated. Livelihoods shifted with the decline of caravan trade and the move toward agriculture and labor. District writing and census material increasingly classified and described the Lambadis through new categories (Francis 1904; Guha 1935). Yet these changes did not eliminate internal institutions.

Marriage regulation, panchayat adjudication, domestic sacred structures, and internal ritual specialists remained in place. This continuity is the article's central point. Colonial administration expanded its classificatory reach, but it did not simply replace community governance. Kinship and ritual continued to organize social life from within.

Conclusion

Marriage and ritual were central institutions through which the Lambadis in Ceded Bellary sustained governance and continuity between 1800 and 1948. Marriage regulated alliance, clan boundaries, compensation, widow remarriage, divorce, and reintegration through elders, the Naik, and the Thanda Panchayat. Ritual life, organized around Mariamma worship, sacrifice, domestic shrines, ancestor propitiation, and festival cycles, governed misfortune, sacred time, and collective obligation through internal specialists rather than external priestly control.

Taken together, these institutions formed the practical basis of Lambadi autonomy. They enabled the tanda to manage conflict, preserve continuity, and reproduce authority even amid livelihood change and colonial administrative expansion. The larger significance of this study lies in showing that kinship and the sacred were not residual domains of culture. They were durable infrastructures of governance through which community sovereignty was lived and reproduced.

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