



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## A Comparative Study of Religions

J.N.K. Mugambi

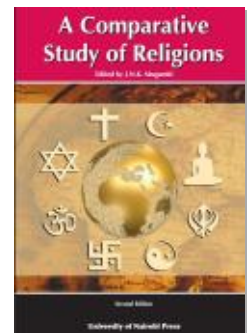
Published by African Books Collective

Mugambi, J.N.K.

A Comparative Study of Religions: Second Edition.

African Books Collective, 2010.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/39862](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39862).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39862>

## Vedic Hinduism

*E.M. Kasiera*

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed the cluster of ideas which can be discerned in the Indus Valley civilizations and which influenced the subsequent Aryan culture. We shall now highlight the period when the Hindu scriptures were developed and study the faith in detail.

### ***Vedic Hinduism***

When scholars speak of “Vedism” they mean the culture which resulted from the mixture of Aryans, Harappans, and other peoples of the Indus and Ganges Valleys. This culture expressed itself in the earliest Indian writings, which are a collection of religious songs, hymns, spells, rituals, and speculations called the vedas. The word Veda, literally means “knowledge” or wisdom. Vedas were initially transmitted orally and they are said to be *shruti*, meaning, “that which has been heard”. In other words, they came by revelation and they represent the expression of eternal truth, the highest intuitive knowledge, made known to the *rishis* (holy persons or seers) of ancient time. *Shruti* implies that the eminent holy person has perceived certain things in peak experiences. Vedic literature, therefore, representing what the *rishis* had seen, was considered the best and holiest presentation of knowledge.

## Vedic Literature

There are four distinct collections of the Vedas. Collectively, the four collections are known as the Samhitas, which means that Samhitas is a synonym for Vedas. The first of these four Vedas is called the Rig-Veda (Riksamhita) dating around 1400 BCE. This is the oldest, largest, and most important. It contains 1028 units, called *suktas*, which are hymns to the gods, magical poems, riddles, and legends among others. It has a total of 10,462 verses which are divided into ten books. Their formulation indicates that they represent the work of priestly leaders, who seem to be an educated class concerned with regulating contact with the gods and maintaining its own social status.

Most hymns of the Rig-Veda serve two purposes: to praise the god being addressed and to ask the god favours or benefits. Another function of the Rig-Veda is to petition for forgiveness of sins, like having wronged a brother, cheated at games, or abused a stranger. This shows a stage of developed moral sense.

The Rig-Veda seems to provide solid evidence of religion which centers on free and responsible choices made for good or evil. One also finds some of the hymns of the Rig-Veda to be philosophical, wondering about the first principle of cause and effect behind the many phenomena of the world.

The second collection of Vedas is the Sama-Veda (Samasamhita) dating between 1400 and 1000 BCE. It contains melodies (Samans) which are largely verses (Mantras) taken from the hymns of the Rig-Veda and set to music. These 1810 verses are meant to be chanted at the *soma* sacrifice. One can speak of the Sama-Veda as essentially a religious song book.

The third collection of the Vedas is the Yajur-Veda (Yajusamhita) dating between 1400 and 1000 BCE. This is a collection of supplementary sacrificial formulae (Yajus) to be used by the priest who is responsible for the manual action.

In other words, the Yaju-Veda is a priestly work of instructions regarding the times and materials for sacrifice, the construction of the fire altar, and formulae for the *soma* sacrifice.

The fourth Veda which dates around 1200 BCE, is the Atharva-Veda (Atharvasamhita). This is a collection of magical formulae (Atharvan) containing prayers for long life and prayers to cure sickness and demonic possession: there are also curses upon demons, sorcerers, enemies, as well as charms to secure love.

It has been said that because the Atharva-Veda is a collection of charms, it was probably more the possession of the laity. It also indicates that the earliest Hindu mind tried to ward off forces of evil and commandeer forces of good.

In addition to the four collections of the Vedas indicated above, there were three other collections which were later assembled and came to be included in what is called Vedic literature. These are Brahmanas, Aranyankas, and Upanishads.

Brahmanas which date between 1000 and 800 BCE, are collections of accepted interpretations by Brahmins (priests). They are theological statements arising from scholastic controversy.

Some of them relate to the stanzas of the Samhitas while others describe and explain the rites, indicating directions for sacrifice. Brahmanas are classified according to the Veda to which they refer and out of which they grew: the Brahmanas connected with the Rig-Veda are intended for the hotri (one who recited the verses of the Rig-Veda); those attached to the Sama-Veda are for the Udgatri (one who sings the songs of the *soma* sacrifice); and those attached to the Yajur-Veda are for the Adhvaryu (one who is responsible for the manual operations of the sacrifice).

The Aranyankas, which date between 800 and 600 BCE, are known as “forest book” or “texts of the forest”. They are so called because they are secret and therefore, kept from the public and read in forests.

The Ananyankas are concerned with the location of the mystical meaning and symbolism of the sacrifice. They emphasize meditation rather than ritual performance.

The Upanishads, in line with the Ananyankas, discuss the symbolism of melodies and words. They further expound the theory of breathing, and move into cosmological theories of the Atuman Brahman theme.

The texts are thought to have begun in the form of short philosophical statements which were communicated from teacher to pupil, whereby the communication was preceded and followed by expository discourses. In time, the discourses assumed a definite shape and, when they were reduced to writing, they resulted in the Upanishads as they are known today.

The Upanishads, dating between 600 and later than 300 BCE suggest that they contain views of a series of teachers. When the texts were finally brought together and arranged, the Upanishads were appended to the Brahmanas. Because they stood at the end of Vedas, they came to be known as Vedenata, where *Veda* means “knowledge” and *Anta* means “end”. The number of Upanishads exceeds two hundred but only ten are the principal ones.

## **Vedic Gods**

The second theme to look at is Vedic gods. Tradition has it that there were 330 million gods. Only a few do, however, stand out as the most important. They are all said to be *devas* (good divinities) as distinguished from *asuras* (evil divinities).

The Vedas cast most devas in human or animal form. The feature of the devas was power. Typically a deva was a male deity associated with a female consort, who represented his energetic force (*Shakti*). Later, Tantrist Hinduism focused on *Shakti*, generally through the practice of ritual sex.

The worship of the many Vedic gods and Shakti has been described as Henotheism, meaning the worship of many gods at the time. This indicates that at the moment of praying or

concentrating on a particular god, the worshipper tends to elevate that god to primacy without denying the existence of the other gods who have their claims to importance.

There are different generations of the Vedic gods. The oldest group consists of the gods of the sky and the earth that the Vedas share with Indo-European religious texts. One example is the Vedic Father Sky, called Dyaus Pitar, who is related to the Greek Zeus and the Roman Jupiter. Dyaus Pitar is the overarching power which fertilizes the receptive earth with rain and rays of the sun. The Vedic earth is the Great Mother, the fertile female. These deities echo in the background of later gods as the oldest.

The second oldest group includes Indra, Mithra, Varuna, Agni and Soma. Indra was the warrior god of the storm endeared to the Aryan conquerors; Mithra was the god of the sun; Varuna was the god of cosmic and moral order; Soma was the god of the exhilarating cultic drink; and Agni was the god of fire, whose importance increased as the sacrifice focused more and more on fire. Most of the deities in this second generation represent earthly and especially heavenly forces. It is likely that the storm, the sun and the sky were all originally joined in Dyaus Pitar, but later they became separate objects of devotion.

The third generation of gods includes Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who are not true Vedic gods but rather developments of Vedic devas on Indian soil. These ones arose after the Aryans arrived in India, which would seem to indicate Dravidian influences on the invading culture. The fourth generation of gods comes to the fore in the Upanishads, comprising abstract deities such as one God, That one, Who and the Father of Creation.

### **Cultic Practice**

A third theme to consider in Vedic Hinduism is the cultic practice. Sacrifice was central to the cult. From the time of Rig-Veda, there seem to have been both private sacrifices and more elaborate sacrifices performed in public. The former were performed by the head of the house around a domestic fire and

the latter were sponsored by a king or some other official. Private sacrifices depended on the Grihya Sutras, a body of texts which were not composed until the post-Vedic period (500–200 BCE). Public sacrifices are the ones which are elaborately outlined in the Brahmanas.

Sacrifices of the Vedic cult took place either in the house of the sacrificer or on altars on a chosen level spot of ground covered with grass for the purpose. The offering consisted in what the men themselves enjoyed eating; milk, ghee and cakes of barley or rice. In that early period, there were also animal sacrifices. In addition, there were human sacrifices which were considered the most efficacious of all.

There were some less complicated sacrifices which required only one priest. In later development, there came to be those sacrifices which required various priests to perform different parts of the sacrifice. The most important priest was the Hotri, whose chief duty, as indicated above, was to recite the stanzas of the Rig-Veda. A second specialized priest was the Udgathi, whose responsibility was to sing those portions of the Sama-Veda which were used during the *soma* sacrifice. A third specialized on manual operation of the sacrifice. He tended the fires, prepared the altar, utilized the utensils and cooked the oblations. In due course, the Adhvaryu came to be the overseer of the cult. He ordered the various performances and was aware of the expiation to be performed in case of error in the sacrifice.

Initially, the sacrifice was the means by which the favour of the gods was sought. In time, and as the sacrifices became more elaborate, the sacrifice became more of a powerful mystery. It came to be understood that, through the sacrifice, the priest recreated the world and men came to believe that the order of nature ultimately rested on the perfect performance of the sacrifice. The result came to be that the gods themselves became dependent on the sacrifice.

By virtue of the fact that the sacrifice depended upon the accuracy of the priestly class, the Brahmins became more powerful than

any earthly king or even any god. Special honoraria in the form of cows, gold, clothes, and horses, among other things, accompanied the sacrifices and were given to the priests.

## **Soma**

One of the chief sacrifices in Vedism is the *soma* sacrifice (*agnishtoma*). This is named in praise of the deity Agni, probably due to the fact that the last hymn used on that day is addressed to Agni. *Soma* is a plant whose juice was prepared for use both as libation to the god (referred to as the heavenly nectar of the gods) and as a beverage for the worshipper. *Soma* juice produced profound effects on its consumers: hallucinations and a sense of glory followed its consumption. The soma experience was regarded as the occasion of sacred significance and holy dynamism.

This sacrifice was carried out each spring. It involved certain preliminary operations such as the consecration of the area and the participants. The *soma* was ceremoniously purchased, altars built and preparations for the sacrifice were made for three days. The sacrifice itself was performed in one day, consisting of three pressings of the *soma*: morning, noon and evening. The noon pressing was the climax of the sacrifice. It included vegetable and animal sacrifices, the drinking of the *soma* juice by the officiant and the distribution of the honoraria. The sacrificer could give up to one thousand cows, all his wealth, or sometimes, even his daughter to be married to one of the priests. Having drunk the invigorating soma, the worshippers saw visions of the gods and experienced sensations of power. They even identified themselves with the gods.

## **Horse Sacrifice**

The second sacrifice and most impressive of the Vedic rituals was the horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*). This was a demonstration of triumph in which a *king* indulged, thereby manifesting his royal authority. The sacrifice itself lasted for three days, but the

preparatory ceremonies took a year or two. After preparatory oblations, a consecrated horse was set at liberty, and left to run at large for a year while further preparatory activities took place. During this time, the king and his army followed the horse, claiming all the territory transversed by the horse as the realm of the king. At the end of the year, the horse returned and was sacrificed by strangulation. Needless to say, the horse sacrifice occasioned considerable political dispute. It was, however, a popular festival by which prosperity was acquired for the kingdom and for the subjects.

### **Domestic Sacrifice**

Apart from these public sacrifices, there were also private or domestic ones. Domestic rites consisted of a series of small sacrifices with simple ceremonies which involved offerings of a vegetable nature, and only rarely involving animals. The head of the house performed these rites and it was his responsibility, along with his family and his pupil to maintain the fire.