



Musical Knowledge and the Vernacular Past in Post-War Sri Lanka

Jim Sykes King's College London

“South Asian kings are clearly interested in vernacular places, but it is the poet who creates them.”

Sheldon Pollock (1998: 60)

This article registers two types of musical past in Sri Lanka that constitute vital problems for the ethnography and historiography of the island today. The first is the persistence of *vernacular* music histories, which demarcate Sri Lankan identities according to *regional* cultural differences.¹ The second type of musical past is a nostalgia for a time before the island's civil war (1983-2009) when several domains of musical practice were multiethnic. Such communal-musical interactions continue to this day, but in attenuated form (I have space here only to discuss the vernacular past, but as we will see, both domains overlap).²

These two domains of the Sri Lankan musical past are not well represented in the musicology of Sri Lanka. With a few notable exceptions, Sri Lankanist musicology has reproduced the historical narratives promoted by Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil ethnonationalisms, which view the island as containing distinct 'ethnic groups' with thoroughly separate cultural histories.³ Following anthropological tradition, musical borrowings from one ethnic group are typically treated as being thoroughly resignified and reworked according to another ethnic group's aesthetics and soteriology. It is not my goal here to argue that such resignifications do not happen or to reduce, say, a Buddhist musical tradition to a Hindu one. Rather, I am concerned with how Sri Lanka's cartography of

culture zones has rendered certain vernacular Sinhala and Tamil culture producers in a subordinate fashion to Sinhala and Tamil 'heartlands' deemed to reside elsewhere, making it difficult to recognise histories of musical relations between Sinhala and Tamil vernacular traditions.

The Sinhala Buddhist heartland is said to be the city and region of Kandy (located in the central 'up country'); the Tamil Hindu heartland is said to be Jaffna (in the far north). In this schemata, the southern 'low country' Sinhala musicians are treated as lesser versions of their up country Sinhala cousins, while eastern Tamil musicians are viewed as lesser versions of their northern Tamil cousins. Meanwhile, the southeast is considered a kind of buffer zone between Tamil and Sinhala cultures, such that Sinhalas in the south and Tamils in the east are generally not thought to have had any significant cultural relations with one another.⁴ Sinhala borrowings from 'Hindu' traditions are uniformly acknowledged to have come from 'India', not from the Sri Lankan Tamils, and Sri Lankan Tamil musicians seldom acknowledge musical influences from the Sinhalas. As Valentine Daniel (1996: 13-43) puts it, in Sri Lanka music is mapped onto a perceived dichotomy between Tamils and Sinhalas, where the former are viewed as caring about 'heritage' (myth as manifested in music and dance) and the latter as caring about 'history' (manifested in Buddhist chronicles, paintings, and ruins).⁵



Figure 1. Sri Lanka (courtesy of geology.com: <http://geology.com/world/sri-lanka-satellite-image.shtml>).

Sheldon Pollock (1998a: 43), in his work on the development of vernacular literary cultures in South Asia in relation to Sanskrit cosmopolitanism, has remarked on the historic absence of scholarship detailing the relations between ‘developments in polity in relation to culture’. He notes that, ‘This is the vexatious legacy of a set of disciplinary practices that for too long rendered the humanities indifferent to the social world, and the social sciences indifferent to the world of the aesthetic and expressive’ (ibid.). The outcome of this division is a bifurcation between studies detailing, say, the development of kingship in South Asia, on the one hand, and the development of vernacular literary cultures, on the other, both of which are not equipped with the conceptual tools to see what sorts of relations these developments have to one another. Although we have a long way to go, I think

we are better equipped today to see these relationships, not just because of Pollock’s contributions, but because of broader developments in conceptions of sovereignty and cultural politics in the academy. For if sovereignty is now viewed as residing not solely in the state but in processes of governmentality that control populations, and if musics are now seen as constitutive (rather than merely reflective) of social relations, then vernacular conceptions of the musical past emerge as having a direct relationship to sovereign power, on account of their importance to ethnonationalist constructions of community and cultural citizenship. If I appear to be defining the relationship between the sovereign and the vernacular artist as one of dominance and resistance, I hasten to add that I see it more as a relationship that involves negotiation, strategy, and ambiguous shifts in power

relations on both sides. Through such maneuvers, music history emerges as inherently plural, as consisting of multiple narratives of musical being and belonging that combine differently depending on the relationship to sovereign power expressed in any given context.

Such ambiguous and shifting relations between culture producers and sovereign power are expressed (and constrained) through overlapping spaces of inclusion and exclusion from the cultural discourses of the nation. At best, this amounts to a feeling of marginality (as described below for low country Sinhala and eastern Tamil artists); at worst, it amounts to a life-threatening situation, if one's vernacular identity is viewed by the state apparatus to embody a direct challenge to the sovereign's cultural narratives. In either case, being a subordinate vernacular culture producer equates to unequal access to resources and fear of the changes to vernacular practices promoted by the homogenising discourses of ethnonationalism. The vernacular past thus obtains a contemporary relevance as an enabling force for defining one's humanity outside the terms of sovereign power, a fact that may account for the continued vitality and revival of vernacular practices in the wake of ethnonationalism.

My goal here is not to romanticise the power of alternative musical pasts in a region that has come to be defined by 'ethnic conflict', but to point out the danger of reifying ethnonationalist ideologies through a musicological discourse that utilises 'ethnicity' as a grounding analytical framework. Since the presence of alternative musical pasts shows us that musicians do not always think of their music history through an ethnic lens, we have good ethnographic and historiographical reasons to promote other frameworks. The rest of this paper will tease out some relationships between music historical narratives, musical practices, representations, and sovereign powers (Sinhala and Tamil)⁶ in contemporary Sri Lanka. To do so, I present case studies of two drummers who embody Sri Lankan vernacular pasts – one a Sinhala from the south, the other a Tamil from the east. Through their stories, I aim to develop a framework for understanding Sri Lankan music history that is attuned not just to the presence of vernacular pasts, but to the ways

these pasts articulate with contemporary formations of sovereignty.

Drummer 1: Herbert Dayasheela

The bulk of my fieldwork has centered on the *yak bera*, a drum used in the major rituals in the south of the island that have a canonic place in Sri Lankanist anthropology (Wirz 1954; Obeyesekere 1984; Tambiah 1976; Kapferer 1983, 1997; Scott 1994). This literature bifurcates Sinhala ritual into two domains: *deva tovils* (rites for deities) and *yak tovils* (rites for demons). The *yak bera*, the most important indigenous musical instrument in southern Sri Lanka, is integral to both types of ritual. In *yak tovils*, drummers accompany dancers to facilitate processes of healing for individuals, in which a demon's (*yakkha's*) malignant glance (*distiya*) is disrupted through a ritual specialist's recitation of appropriate *mantras*. In *deva tovils*, by contrast, drummers accompany dancers in rituals held for the entire community, which rids itself of bad karma and facilitates a proper harvest, typically through making offerings to the goddess Pattini (Obeyesekere 1984). Related to these rituals are many others of varying size, such as rites to bless a new house and a large-scale ritual to cure those suffering from planetary misalignment, called *bali*. All these rituals use the *yak bera*, all are performed by a Sinhala caste of ritualists called the *berava* (the word simply means 'drummer'), and all are viewed as part of the Sinhala Ayurvedic medicinal system, utilising a musical ontology that understands sound as a form of protection (Sykes 2011). The rhythms are not metric, but consist of through-composed phrases of drumming modeled on Sinhala poetic stanzas (*padas*). Thus, drum rhythms are not conceptualised according to the pan-South Asian rhythmic system called *tala*, and are best described as repetitive phrases of 'drum poetry'.⁷

Individuals who wish to learn the low country arts traditionally do so by apprenticing to a *gurunanse*, who teaches drumming, dancing, singing, costume making, and other skills. My *yak bera* *gurunanse* is Herbert Dayasheela, a *kattadirala* (ritual specialist in the *yakkha* cults) who claims to trace his lineage back fourteen generations. His father, K.S. Fernando, a



Figure 2. Herbert Dayasheela changing the drumhead on a *yak bera*.

highly regarded dancer and drummer, was one of the first low country artists to tour abroad (in the 1950s). As with the low caste *paraiyars* in Tamil culture, there continues to be a stigma against the *berava* that has limited their opportunities in contemporary society. Dayasheela himself prefers to say he is *naeketi* (the astrologer caste; Susan Reed (2009) defines this – inappropriately in my view – as a subcaste of the *berava*).

In postcolonial Sri Lanka, up country Kandyan traditions are viewed as having an ‘authentic’ connection to Theravada Buddhism that low country traditions lack. This is because the culture of the coastal regions is assumed to have been ‘diluted’ by four centuries of colonial occupation (by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, from 1505 – 1948). By contrast, the Kandyan Kingdom existed independently until the British annexed it in 1815. Kandy is also home to the *Dalada Maligawa*, the country’s most famous Buddhist temple, which has historic ties to Sinhala

kingship. The most recognised relationship between Sinhala drummers and the sovereign is the marching of *berava* drummers in the Kandy *Esala Perahera*, an annual parade that traditionally reconstituted hierarchical relations between the Buddha and deities, the Sinhala king, and the various castes that made up the population of the Kandyan Kingdom (Duncan 2005; Seneviratne 1978).⁸ The marching of drummers and dancers in the *Esala Perahera* may be thought of as a displaying a *mandala*-like kingship prevalent throughout precolonial Southeast Asia, where power radiates out from the center in concentric circles (Tambiah 1976).

The type of drumming and dance developed in the Kandyan courts and displayed in the *Esala Perahera* is the artistic form presented to the world today as ‘traditional Sri Lankan dance and music’. Though it is historically related to Dayasheela’s low country arts, his practices have been subordinated to Kandyan

traditions in national discourse, and his tradition continues to maintain a vernacular identity in and outside Sri Lanka. This identity originated not just because of Kandy's status as a Buddhist heartland, but because Anglicised elites in the late colonial and early independence era (the decades before and after independence in 1948) stigmatised low country performers on account of their caste status and because *yak toivils* were labeled as 'exorcisms' (Scott 1994). While low country artists have been looked upon more favorably since the mid-1970s, when a new generation of less Anglicised low country politicians achieved political prominence (Kapferer 1997), low country artists remain subordinated to Kandyans in terms of visibility, funding, and presence in universities. For example, low country drummers are not allowed in the Kandy *perahera*, and when foreign dignitaries visit the island, they are greeted by Kandyan drummers and dancers, not those from the low country.

This national discourse that pits up country Kandyan and low country Sinhala traditions against one another overlaps with a discourse among low country and up country performers themselves, which breaks cultural divisions into smaller regional traditions of music and dance called *korales*. The *korales* are precolonial *political* divisions of the island that divided the land for purposes of taxation and services to kings (*rajakariya*). Instead of an up country versus low country dichotomy, *korale* divisions split land into a number of units based on smaller divisions of geography and culture. Though the *korales* no longer exist in a political fashion, they are still used to describe Sinhala music and dance to this day. Obeyesekere (1984:345) remarks about Sinhala civilisation in the precolonial (c. 12th to 16th centuries) period that,

"*Rajakariya*, or the service of labor, was required of every citizen and was a privilege of citizenship. But the people were obviously resentful of corvée labour for nonproductive public works. Part of this resentment was caused by the fact that they had another model of just *rajakariya* services in the kings of old. They also had another conception of kingship expressed in Buddhist text and tradition, especially pertaining to righteous rule and ceremonial behavior toward social superiors."

This means that, even in the days of the political relevance of the *korales*, there were already two models for the relationship between drummers and sovereignty: one based on Buddhist texts and tradition, and one based on a political division in service to the king. Both of these relations, though interrelated (kings were, after all, 'Buddhas-to-be') were capable of being separated, should the this-worldly power of the king appear abusive and unjustified. Both domains are of relevance to understanding low country music historical discourses today.

Though the *korales* as political divisions no longer exist, they are still used when referring to *berava* traditions. For example, for Dayasheela, in day-to-day talk about music, the division between low country *korales* is more important than that between up country and low country traditions. Dayasheela's natal village is Aluthgama, which is located in the Bentara *korale*. Bentara is one of the three major *korales* in the south, the other two being Matara (to the south) and Raigam (to the northwest of Bentara, along the coast). Herbert is a proud exponent of Bentara tradition, which specialises in the Sanni Yakuma, a type of *yak toivil* held to combat eighteen diseases wrought by the eighteen *Sanni* demons (Obeyesekere 1969). About thirty years ago, Dayasheela moved to Colombo to take up a job at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. After some time, he found he missed village life, so he moved an hour south to Wadduwa, and began commuting to Colombo for work. Although Wadduwa and Aluthgama are just a few hours' drive from one another on the Galle road (the main road running from Colombo to Galle in the south of the island) and are thus considered part of the same 'low country' Sinhala culture in national cultural discourse, the towns are located in separate *korales*. Wadduwa is part of the Raigam *korale*, and its performers specialise in *deva toivils*; Aluthgama is part of the Bentara *korale*, and its performers specialise in *yak toivils*. Thus, Dayasheela no longer lives in the *korale* where his art comes from. He maintains a school at his house, where he teaches children the Bentara arts, but he is surrounded by Raigam performers. Sometimes, he performs *deva toivils* with Raigam performers, but he

laments his situation. Once I saw him perform a Sanni Yakuma with Raigam musicians because he did not have enough Bentara musicians to perform with him. He complained that the rhythms were not performed properly and the ritual's efficacy was in question.

In fact, Dayasheela complains that the *deva tovil* traditions are spreading throughout the low country at the expense of the *yak tovil*s of the Bentara and Matara *korales*. The reasons are money and political expediency, as well as changes in belief. The deity rituals are held for the entire community (rather than for a single sick person) and are funded by rich people, politicians, and Buddhist temples. However, most families can't afford to hold a *yak tovil* for their sick relative. Furthermore, many Sinhala now prefer doctors who practice Western medicine, so there is a decline in belief in the healing nature of *yak tovil*. Meanwhile, the *deva tovil*s have emerged as nationalistic cultural displays are patronised by the state (De Silva 2000). Thus, Dayasheela rarely performs *yak tovil*s for patients anymore: he claims to have gone from performing about four a month in the 1980s to about four a year these days. He feels his tradition is dying. This decline is furthered by displays of the low country arts promoted by the government and tourist industry, which move the low country arts to the stage in a way that glosses over *korale* differences and takes their music out of the contexts of astrology and Ayurveda, again favouring the Raigam *korale*.

In sum, the arts scene in southern Sri Lanka has been greatly transformed due to postcolonial patterns of musical migration, economic decline, the spread of Western medicine, and the homogenising tendencies of Sinhala Buddhist ethnonationalism. But, if the *korale* division is the preservation of an outmoded relationship to sovereignty that nevertheless continues to have an impact on the conceptualisation of the low country arts, present day low country performers *do* forego *korale* rivalries to utilise a homogenising discourse of their own when they feel the need to oppose hegemonic Kandyan culture; and they do so via another historical domain, the narratives of historical social relations found in their ritual texts. These texts, sung in *yak tovil*s and *deva tovil*s, do not mark *korale* differences but enable a homogenous 'low country'

identity that can be used to make claims of authenticity and ancientness for low country artists. For example, Dayasheela's *slokas* (ritual stanzas) say that *yak bera* drummers were there when the sacred *bo* tree (the tree under which the Buddha found Enlightenment) was planted at Anuradhapura (in the middle-north of the island, above the up country) in the third century B.C.; they also say that drummers were there at specific sights along the southern coast when gods made their first appearances on the island, including the site of the seventh century shrine to Upulvan at Devinuvara that was famously destroyed by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and at the *devale* (shrine) for (the god) Devol deviyo at Seenigama (near Hikkaduwa). In other words, the ritual texts use music history to enable an anti-Kandyan discourse (not to mention an anti-colonial one).

Dayasheela thus interacts with at least three different music histories of the low country: 1) those encapsulated by Buddhist texts and practices; 2) those that discuss musical differences through *korale* divisions; and 3) an anti-Kandyan discourse that, though it has deep historical roots, has emerged because of Kandy's importance to Sinhala Buddhist ethnonationalism. These relationships simultaneously articulate a subordinate, marginal position for low country artists, and a proud, vernacular tradition subsuming multiple (and otherwise dueling) *korale* groups. Nowhere in any of these discourses, of course, is there any talk about Sinhala musical relations with Sri Lankan minorities (such as the Tamils and Muslims) or the Portuguese, Dutch, or British colonists, each of whom occupied the region for centuries.

Sinniah Maunaguru

Sinniah Maunaguru, a professor at the Eastern University in Tamil-majority Batticaloa (eastern Sri Lanka), has staked his career, if not his life, on the argument that eastern Sri Lanka is a region with a unique culture that differs from the northern Jaffna region and from Tamil Nadu (South India) – both of which are regions known as heartlands of Tamil culture. Furthermore, in lectures, workshops and performances, Maunaguru has made claims for historical

intersections between eastern Tamil and (low country and up country) Sinhala cultural traditions. Maunaguru is an *annaviyar* – a dramatist, actor, and drummer who performs the eastern Tamil version of *kooththu*, a genre of musical theatre related to (but certainly not derivative from) the *terukutu* of Tamil Nadu. With the activist Dharmasiri Bandaranayake (a Sinhala playwright from Colombo), Maunaguru has brought Sinhala musical theatre artists to what was at the time the LTTE-occupied region of Trincomalee (just north of Batticaloa), and eastern *kooththu* performers to Colombo, in the hope that such performances will highlight historical similarities between Sinhala and Tamil musical theatres. For their work, Maunaguru and Bandaranayake have received death threats, and the Sinhala-Tamil musical theatre workshops they conducted in Colombo spawned protests from Sinhala nationalist politicians and their followers.

Batticaloa is the largest Tamil city in eastern Sri Lanka, and the capital of a province of the same name. In discussing the region's music history, Maunaguru talks about a unique eastern musical system split geographically between eastern and western Batticaloa. There are two types of *kooththu* – *vadamodi* and *tenmodi* – that correspond with this geographical bifurcation. While both narrate the Hindu epics the Mahabharata and Ramayana, there are notable differences between them: for example, *tenmodi* is based on stories of the king, while *vadamodi* is not; in *tenmodi*, characters are introduced by others, while in *vadamodi* they introduce themselves; and so on. There are of course many other differences (including music and costume), but here I want to stress how the *kooththu* revival has ignored these local distinctions to present a more or less homogenised east coast Tamil musical identity that emerged from engagements with political developments in the east.

The first stage of the *kooththu* revival occurred in the 1960s, initiated by Maunaguru's teacher at Peradeniya University in Kandy, Professor S. Vithiananthan; this revival should be viewed in relation to the cultural dynamics of the new nation, which was not then at war. Vithiananthan's reformulation of the *kooththu* centered on its 'modernisation', which re-

quired moving the genre from the *kovil* (temple) to the stage, and changing the costumes and language used (Sivathamby 2005). The modernisation was undertaken through the influence of Ediriweera Sarachchandra, a Sinhala playwright who was initiating a similar modernisation of Sinhala drama at the time.⁹ The first *kooththu* revival, then, was not undertaken in response to war or Jaffna-based ethnonationalism but in order to represent Sri Lankan Tamils – as a whole – on the cultural stage of the nation, by a middle class Batticaloan Tamil living in Kandy who had daily interaction with the Sinhalese.

Things changed considerably with the growth of Tamil nationalism and the disenfranchisement of the Tamil population, however. By the early 1980's, the LTTE had appropriated the *kooththu* and were using it for propaganda, since it was considered a good way to reach 'the people'. By 1990, it was not safe to be out at night, and *kooththu*, an art form held at night in Hindu *kovils*, became virtually extinct. My informants in Seelamunai (a village in Batticaloa famous for its *kooththu*) say that the genre was not performed there from 1990 until the ceasefire in 2002.

There are two groups currently reviving the *kooththu*, and both are based at the Eastern University: Professor Maunaguru continues Vithiananthan's project of modernisation, while the Third Eye Group, under the direction of Professor S. Jeyasankar, performs the genre at Hindu *kovils* in the traditional circle in the round, the *vaddakaleri*. Both use the *kooththu* to articulate an eastern Tamil identity in response to prolonged war, Jaffna-based Tamil ethnonationalism, and Sinhala political hegemony. The Third Eye Group has remade the Mahabharata into a story about the Sri Lankan war with students from the Eastern University; Maunaguru's biggest production to date is a remake of the Ramayana that makes Ravana a tragic hero and a cultural figure common to Sinhalese and Tamils (Ravana is also portrayed in the work as the first musician in Sri Lanka and the wellspring of both Sinhala and Tamil musics). The Third Eye Group promotes the lower castes and the right of women to perform. Jeyasankar is critical of Maunaguru's attempts to modernize the *kooththu*; he says about Vithiananthan that, 'He shifted the *kooththu* from an open space



Figure 3. Drummer Sri Taran (left) and Professor Sinniah Maunaguru (right).

–*vaddakalari* (round stage) – to a controlled-space auditorium, constructed by the culture of the colonial power’ (Jeyasankar 2006). The restaging of the Mahabharata, Jeyasankar writes, is about the futility of war, and ‘power and sovereignty, which is what the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is all about’ (ibid.). The point for us is that despite these debates, both Maunaguru and Jeyasankar see the possibility of using the *kooththu* to legitimise an authentic east coast Tamil identity; and both utilise this vernacular eastern Tamil past to imagine a particular type of future they want for their society.

Here it will help to compare the eastern and Jaffna versions of *kooththu*. While the eastern *kooththu* uses the *maththalam* drum and vocalists (who narrate, sing, and dance), in the northern Jaffna region the *kooththu* was transformed some time ago into a type of ‘art song’ rather than ‘musical theatre’: singers stand still reading texts, and the instrumentation is tabla and harmonium. These changes to the Jaffna *kooththu* may have happened because of the influence of the nineteenth century Hindu reformer Aruguma Navalar (Bates 2005); increasingly throughout the war, the

Batticaloan *kooththu* was taken by Jaffnese to be the authentic form of *kooththu*, and attempts were made – from Jaffna – to found authentic Sri Lankan Tamil music and dance on the Batticaloan *kooththu*. Increasingly throughout the war, however, it was felt in Batticaloa that eastern ‘boys’ (soldiers) were dying for northern Jaffnese interests (as Jaffna was the home of the LTTE); increasingly, Batticaloans wished to view themselves as different from Jaffna. In doing so, Batticaloans could focus on their unique matrilineal culture, which they share with eastern Tamil-speaking Muslims (considered to be a different ethnic group), a trait which distinguishes them from the Jaffna Tamils.

Meanwhile, a language of ‘classical’ music derived from Tamil Nadu has infiltrated the Batticaloan *kooththu*. The terms of South Indian ‘classical’ (Carnatic) music – *ragam*, *talam*, *pallavi* – are now used to describe technical aspects of the eastern *kooththu*: the *ragam* is the singing of the words before the drums come in, the *talam* is the singing and the drums, and the *pallavi* is a space for dance involving the chorus. Thus the Carnatic system overlaps an indigenous

system of eastern Tamil musical organisation.¹⁰

Now, Tamil drums in the east have distinct differences from other Tamil drums, while showing similarity with Sinhala drums. The *parai* in eastern Sri Lanka does not look like that used in Tamil Nadu: the Tamil Nadu drum is circular and thin, with one drum head, while the eastern Tamil *parai* is fat and cylindrical with two drum heads, resembling the Sinhala drum called *daula*. The other major drum in the east, the *maththalam* (used in *kooththu*), looks like the drum of that name in Tamil Nadu; but its playing style is quite similar to the Sinhala drums: it is played standing up, with a heavy hitting of the hands against the drum head and the rim. It is not easy to understand the reasons for these similarities, but one reason, I think, is that the Tamil kings of the east used to pay tribute to the kings of Kandy, so the regions were in communication; another could be that both regions received countless immigrants from Kerala over the centuries, with similar cultural habits; a third is that eastern Sri Lanka is quite close to Kataragama, the pilgrimage site attracting Sinhala and Tamils.

As in the Sinhala south, the vernacular tradition of the east is changing because of musical migration and economics. The eastern *parai* is used at Hindu *kovils* honoring regional goddesses; in northern and eastern *kovils* honoring the ‘Sanskritic’ gods (such as Murugan and Pillaiyar), the drum called *thavil* is used. Over the past few decades, the severe stigma faced by the low caste *paraiyars* has led them to stop playing their drums; James Thomson (xxxx) reports drummers burning their drums as far back as the 1970s. When *kovils* in the east need drummers for festivals, they now turn to Jaffna and the hill country, Tamil populations that favour the *thavil* drum and not the eastern *parai*. So, the death of the eastern *parai* signifies the erasure of a musical history that shows cultural similarities between Sinhala and Tamils.

Unsurprisingly, Maunaguru is also trying to revive the eastern *parai*. One day, while watching the Kandy *perahera*, he saw the Sinhala dancers and drummers parading through the streets and thought, “why is there no Tamil *perahera*?” Under deep opposition from faculty and students alike (due to the stigma surrounding the low caste *paraiyars*), and over the course

of a few years, he was able to create a parade for the purposes of celebrating student graduation. The *perahera* was led by student (non-*paraiyar*) drummers playing the *parai*, followed by *maththalam* players; the costumes they wore were from the Batticaloan *kooththu*. This display of eastern Tamil heritage not only presented an open opposition to Jaffna- and Tamil Nadu-based cultural hegemony; it displayed a historical closeness to Sinhala cultural practices that is completely ignored in mainstream discourses on the arts of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

There are several important points to be culled from the stories of Maunaguru and Dayasheela for understanding the persistence of vernacular musical pasts and their changing relationships to sovereign power in contemporary Sri Lanka. One point is that in both cases, no historic musicological ‘text’ ever surfaced to standardise their vernacular traditions, such that musicians today can turn to it to legitimise their claims for tradition: in Dayasheela’s case, there is still rivalry between *korales*; in Maunaguru’s case, there are still variations between *annaviyars* in their renditions of *tenmodi* and *vadamodi kooththu* (interestingly, however, Maunaguru has written a book on the Batticaloan *kooththu* that has begun to play this function). Consolidation of the vernacular tradition is important for survival in the wake of influence from those traditions historically considered ‘other’: Kandyan and Carnatic musics.

Maunaguru’s discourses on music history articulate a cosmopolitanism that contrasts with Dayasheela’s take on music history. While Dayasheela traces his music to a specific Sinhala *korale* that is situated – in a subordinate way – to cultural policies and discourses on Sinhala identity articulated in Colombo and Kandy, Maunaguru is a well-traveled professor whose frames of reference are geographically broader. Maunaguru may come from the isolated province of Batticaloa, but he has lived in Colombo and Kandy, and traveled to Tamil Nadu, North America, and elsewhere; his son is a Ph.D. student in anthropology at Johns Hopkins. Therefore, Maunaguru is

well-situated to compare eastern Tamil cultural practices with those from Jaffna, Tamil Nadu, and the Sinhala regions, and he has the power to represent these in print. Despite this relative security, however, his activism puts him in a double-bind: he at once embodies an 'exception' to the culture of the nation on account of his status as a Sri Lankan Tamil, and he maintains an ambiguous relationship to Tamil ethnonationalism, for whom he embodies a cultural backwater with dubious ties to the movement.

While the Sinhala south rallied against its disenfranchisement by the 1970s, such that it is (somewhat) better represented now in the cultural discourses of the nation than it was in the early independence era, the eastern Tamils did so only in the last decade, when the forces of Col. Karuna (the eastern LTTE commander) left the LTTE in 2004 to join forces with the Government of Sri Lanka, a situation that proved instrumental for the radical decline in the fortunes of the LTTE (it split the organisation in two, allowing the LTTE to be isolated in the north, where they were defeated in 2009). Thus, one can make the claim that the persistence of an eastern Tamil vernacular identity, articulated in no small part by the cultural practices described above, was instrumental in reshaping contemporary Sri Lankan politics – quite a turn around, I might add, in the relationship between drumming and sovereignty.

In sum, the continued attachment to vernacular music histories expressed by Dayasheela and Maunaguru is born of an incompatibility between their personal histories, experiences, and knowledge of their vernacular musical pasts, on the one hand, and the cultural machinations of ethnonationalism, on the other. This incompatibility is a postcolonial condition that hinges on the imagination of the precolonial past and its persistence today in cultural forms with an ambiguous and changing relationship to the cultural space of the nation as defined by sovereign power. Aihwa Ong (2006: 7) notes that,

Citizens who are judged not to have...tradable competence or potential become devalued and thus vulnerable to exclusionary practices...The territoriality of citizenship, that is, the national space of the homeland, has become partially embedded in the territoriality of global capitalism, as well as in spaces mapped

by the interventions of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Such overlapping spaces of exception create conditions of diverse claims for human value that do not fit neatly into a conventional notion of citizenship, or of a universal regime of human rights.

It is our job as scholars, I think, to articulate what such a type of citizenship means for our informants, and for the cultural history of the nation – for these are two domains that greatly affect one another, and the development of music history.

Notes

¹ The four major vernacular traditions of Sri Lanka – up country and low country Sinhala Buddhist traditions, and northern and eastern Tamil Hindu traditions – *do* map onto the standard ethnic division in Sri Lanka between Sinhalas and Tamils, but there are considerable intra-ethnic rivalries between them that I explore below (up country vs. low country, northern vs. eastern).

² Examples of multiethnic performance traditions include, for example, the old musical theatre genre *nurthi* (derived from visiting Parsi theatre troupes in the late nineteenth century) and *sarala gi* (light music popular from the 1930s-1960s), both of which involved Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim musicians singing in Sinhala, the language of the marketplace (see Sykes 2011:473-506). Similar crossovers happened in traditional musics as well: to give one example, Masakazu Tanaka (1997:105) describes Sinhala musicians drumming at a Hindu festival in a Tamil fishing village in the island's northwest; such practices could be found elsewhere on the island (see Sykes 2011) but surely most have stopped due to the ethnic tensions of the past decades.

³ One notable exception to this overly ethnicised musicology is Anne Sheeran's work on the African- and Portuguese-influenced genre called *baila* (Sheeran 1997, 1999).

⁴ Or such is how Sinhala and Tamils are positioned in state-sanctioned and popular discourses on Sri Lankan culture. Anthropologists have documented Sinhala and Tamil interactions in the southeast at the pilgrimage shrine Kataragama (Obeyesekere 1981,

Goonasekera 2006); in the 1950's, Edmund Leach noted a 'hybrid' Sinhala-Tamil village of Panama in the region (Leach 1961; McGilvray 2008). Though recognised anthropologically, such interactions are seldom acknowledged in scholarship on the Sri Lankan arts.

⁵ Thus, the Tamils are branded as musical and the Sinhala unmusical (Sheeran 1997).

⁶ Fieldwork with Tamil musicians described below was done just before the LTTE were defeated in 2009.

⁷ For a musicological analysis of *berava* drumming, see Sykes 2011.

⁸ Surely, this tradition was adopted from the Tamil Hindu temple festival tradition, in which 'ritual shares' are doled out to the various castes in a hierarchical manner, caste relations are publicly reconstituted, and the presiding deity circumambulates the village or urban space on a chariot. Scholars acknowledge the Kandy *perahera* originally honored the town's four guardian deities only, and became an overtly Buddhist ritual with the insertion of the Buddha's tooth relic into the *perahera* by the King Kirthi Sri Rajasingha (1747-1781) (Seneviratne 1978).

⁹ Sarachchandra's genre, called *nadagam*, had developed in the nineteenth century out of borrowings from the Tamil *kooththu* (via Sinhala Christians. See Sykes 2011). Hence, the Sinhala-Tamil musical workshops described above explored the relationship between the Sinhala *nadagam* and the Tamil *kooththu* (Sykes, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Of course, eastern Tamil culture has been host to waves of northern Tamil influences over the years, so the music's organisation surely to some extent reflects prior waves of northern Tamil influence.

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Jim Sykes received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 2011 and is currently Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Music at King's College London. His research, funded by the Fulbright Hayes DDRA, the Mellon Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation and other sources, explores the profound interrelations between sound, personhood and modernity across the eastern Indian Ocean region.
