

# South Asian Drumming Beyond *Tala*: The Problem with “Meter” in Buddhist Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

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“Poetry is hard for most people / because of sound.”

Dorothea Lasky (2014, 4)

*“Tat takata Muni daking / dit takata Devi daking / ton takata Raja daking / nang takata Guru daking / daking! daking! daking! / Raja daruwan daking.”*

*(“tat takata seeing the Buddha<sup>2</sup> / dit takata seeing the Gods / ton takata seeing the King / nang takata seeing the Guru / Regard! Regard! Regard! / Come see us honor the King.”)*

Drum rhythm from a Bera Pōya Hēvīsi ritual in low-country Sri Lanka

“Metre is caught up between the peculiarities of human perception and conception, and the difficulties theorists encounter in disentangling these two modes of knowing.”

Andrew McGraw (2008, 153)

In this essay—the first of two conjoined articles—I draw on classic and recent writings in the anthropology of Theravada Buddhism to challenge the ways that the relationship between music and Theravada Buddhism has been construed in ethnomusicology.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the drumming of Sri Lanka’s Sinhala Buddhist majority (70% of the population), I show in what follows that Sinhala drumming is associated with rituals anthropologists have long considered part of Sri Lanka’s “spirit religion”—local investments in deities and demons (organized in a hierarchy according to their karma) who require offerings for protection and healing. Since the

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1. A long work like this has benefitted from countless conversations with many people over the years. Most of all, I thank my *gurunnāse* (esteemed teacher) Herbert Dayasheela for graciously sharing his tradition with me. Thanks to Eshantha Peiris and Sum Suraweera for research assistance, and Pabalu Wijegoonawardane for help with translations. I have kept diacritics to a minimum; I have emphasized long vowel sounds and (in Sinhala drum rhythms) the dental sounds (e.g., spelled T compared to t), as these describe different strokes in the drum language. Scholars of Indian musics may come across familiar Hindi and Sanskrit words spelled differently in Sinhala or Pali. I have followed the scholarly convention of putting one or the other in parentheses when introducing a word.

2. Obeyesekere (2002, 167) writes that “Muni,” or “silent ones,” is a pejorative term for ritual specialists in the *Rg Veda*, who “wear the wind as their girdle, and who, drunk with their own silence, rise in the wind, and fly in the paths of demigods and birds.” It is also, however, a name for the Buddha, who achieves this state not through the “ecstasy” of spirit possession but through “enstasy,” or inward reflection (i.e., meditation; *ibid.*). “*Muni*: Any individual attaining perfection in self-restraint and insight” (Pio 1988, 186).

3. I should note at the outset that scholars have recently argued against the application of “Theravada Buddhism” as an ascriptive social identity (Skilling et al. 2012), especially over the *longue durée*. The term appears just once in the canonical texts (the Pali canon), and in the commentaries it is used narrowly to refer to an elder monk or monks. The term achieved its current definition only in the twentieth century (Gethin 2012), and Buddhists in South/east Asia rarely self-identify with the term. Nevertheless, “Theravada Buddhism” has some usefulness for music studies for its ability to conjure up a history of sonic relations and similarities between practices and attitudes toward sound in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia, so long as these are situated via locally specific concerns. I nuance the term and the ways that ethnomusicology has situated it in relation to Mahayana Buddhism further below.

early 1960s, anthropologists have tended to define “Sinhala Buddhism” holistically, as combining the tenets of doctrinal Theravada Buddhism and the so-called spirit religion.<sup>4</sup>

As I have described in detail elsewhere (Sykes forthcoming), during the island’s British colonial period (1796–1948), foreign observers tended to view proper Buddhist practice as quiet, associated predominantly with monks in solitary meditation; when they witnessed noisy Sinhala rituals with lots of drumming, they assumed these were “pre-Buddhist” or “Hindu” practices that had been adopted by the Sinhalese. Today, Sinhala Buddhist dance and drumming (particularly the subgenre from the region of Kandy) has become the *sine qua non* of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and thus the idea that Sinhala drumming is not Buddhist has by now been long jettisoned in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, I suggest the historic neglect of Sinhala Buddhist drumming in ethnomusicology may be attributed in part to the holdover of colonial-era assumptions about what constitutes Buddhism and Buddhist music. For example, as I discuss in detail further below, there has been a tendency to equate “Theravada Buddhist music” with what monks do rather than the laity; with only a few exceptions (e.g., Wong 2000), the ethnomusicological literature on Theravada Buddhism has focused exclusively on Buddhist chant. Consequently, there has been a lack of theorization in ethnomusicology on the relationship between music, doctrinal Buddhism, and the “spirit religions” (also known as “spirit cults”; e.g. Holt 2009) in Theravada contexts. Much of what *should* constitute the ethno/musicology of Theravada Buddhism—sounds and musics emanating from the worship of deities, demons, and/or spirits viewed holistically, in relation to Buddhist cosmology, sonic aesthetics, and values—has flown under the radar and been barely recognized in ethnomusicology (especially in relation to doctrinal Buddhism).

In this essay, I address this lack by bringing ethnomusicology firmly into dialogue with the anthropology of Sri Lankan (Sinhala) Buddhism, thereby opening the door to studies of “spirit cults” in diverse Theravada contexts. This means that much of this essay will be review for scholars working in Sri Lankan Studies, to whom I should stress this literature is virtually absent in ethnomusicology. Over the course of this and the conjoining essay, however, I firmly place Sinhala Buddhist drumming in Sri Lankan Studies, and that *is* a new perspective—for the genre is surprisingly absent from the voluminous literature on Sinhala Buddhist ritual (Kapferer’s [1983] 1991 and Reed’s 2010 work notwithstanding; see, e.g., Tambiah 1968; Obeyesekere 1984; Scott 1994). In particular, I believe my material on the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi

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4. The term “spirit religion” now rings as dated, but it is necessary for my purposes here at the outset, both because of its long history in Sri Lankan Studies and for the convenient way it introduces classic discussions on Sinhala Buddhist thought and practice to ethnomusicology. The holistic approach was pursued in a number of texts by the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (e.g., 1963, 1966); in a later book, Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) differentiated the spirit religion from Theravada Buddhism while avoiding to place them in a hierarchy. As Susan Reed (2003, 83) writes, summing up their influential work, “In [Gombrich and Obeyesekere’s] analysis, Theravada Buddhism derives its authority from the teachings of the Buddha as given in the Pali canon and interpreted by its commentators, while the term ‘spirit religion’ is a ‘label of convenience’ for those aspects of religious practice that concern the worship of gods and propitiation of demons. However, carrying forward Obeyesekere’s earlier holistic framework, the spirit religion is viewed as closely linked with doctrinal Buddhism, which also recognizes the existence of gods and malevolent spirits, though it does not condone (or prohibit) their worship or propitiation.” I discuss the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon in detail further below.

ritual (in the second half of the second article) is the first time that ritual has appeared in the Sri Lankan Studies literature; the ritual situates drumming as central to the production of a Sinhala Buddhist aesthetics of sounded speech as power that is described in the classic Sri Lankan Studies literature only via the human voice (e.g., Tambiah 1968), and I show, too, that the ritual (which consists exclusively of drummers with no dancers) is a means for reliving the history of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka. It is intended to “ground” a theory of Theravada Buddhist sounded ritual efficacy by linking the so-called spirit religion with the stories and values of doctrinal Buddhism.

The first two-thirds of this essay, then, addresses the relationship between music and Theravada Buddhism via an introduction to the history, sociology, and aesthetics of Sinhala Buddhist drumming. Then the article introduces the question (long debated by Sri Lankan musicologists and considered at length in my second article) of whether Sinhala Buddhist drumming does or does not operate through a conception of “meter” or “beat cycles” akin to the North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Carnatic) *tala* systems. While each of the two articles can be read as standalone pieces, the argument that I develop (discussed in a moment) stretches across both, and they are intended to be read together.

By “Sinhala Buddhist drumming,” I refer to a number of regional traditions—each with their own drum and ritual repertoire—that used to belong just to a caste of Sinhala Buddhist ritualists called the Beravā. The Beravā are ritual specialists with a wide array of talents: astrology, herbal medicine, and maskmaking; dancing, drumming, and sung poetry (recounting myths about gods and the origins of rituals); the chanting of mantras and the building of complex ritual structures; the making of offerings to the Buddha and deities; and the elimination of illnesses brought on by beings of low karmic standing (*yakku*).<sup>5</sup> The largest of Sri Lanka’s “service castes” (Reed 2002, 249), the Beravā have long suffered from caste discrimination, and some prefer to call themselves *nāketi* (“astrologer”). All-night Sinhala rituals—performed largely though not only by the Beravā—form a cornerstone of the anthropology of ritual (Wirz 1954; Obeyesekere 1969, 1984; Tambiah 1968; Simpson 1984; Kapferer [1983] 1991, 1997; Scott 1994) and have gained recognition in dance studies (Reed 2002, 2010).<sup>6</sup> Collectively, these rituals contain the most highly regarded and historically important

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5. “*Bera*” means “drum” and thus the Beravā are referred to as the “drummer caste,” though as one can see from this list, they are skilled in many activities besides drumming.

6. Not all the rituals discussed in this and the accompanying article are performed solely by the Beravā caste. For example, a *kapurāla* or priest of deity (*deva*) cults who attends an “abode for a deity” (*devalaya*) is typically from the high caste Govigama (farmer) community; on the west coast of Sri Lanka, a *kapurāla* may be from the Karāva (fishermen) and Salāgama (cinnamon peeler) communities (Obeyesekere 1984, 35). Traditionally, the Radala (washermen) caste provided clean white clothes for rituals (*ibid.*). The Oli (another astrologer and dancer) caste used to perform a ritual called *garā yakkuma* (Wirz 1954, 129–30), but this ritual is especially polluting and appears to have declined (Obeyesekere 1984, 174). Members of the Oli caste also play a role in the famous ritual for Vishnu (the *Valiyak Mangalya*) held in Kandy after the conclusion of the annual Āsala Perahera (the country’s most prominent Buddhist procession), which was traditionally a part of their *rajakariya* (service for the king) during the time of the Kandyan Kingdom (1469–1815); according to Holt (2004, 229), the lead *yakdessa* (ritual specialist) claims to be of the Brahmin caste and to have ancestral links to the famed Vishnu shrine (destroyed by the Portuguese) in the south of the island at Devinuvara. All this is to say that large-scale Sinhala rituals may involve a complex

repertoires of Sinhala Buddhist traditional music and dance. Yet to date, Beravā ritual drumming has been documented only in Sinhala-language publications and a few English-language articles and dissertations that remain largely unknown to ethnomusicologists.<sup>7</sup>

In postcolonial Sri Lanka (post-1948), Beravā music and dance was resignified as the island's premier traditional culture and opened up to all castes to learn (Reed 2010).<sup>8</sup> Today, Beravā drumming and dance traditions are generally referred to by the names of their three regional styles (see Figures 1 and 2 below). The up-country (*uda rata*) Kandyan style is associated with the city of Kandy and its environs; the low-country (*pahata rata*) style is located on the southern and southwestern coasts; and the Sabaragamuwa style is located in the region of that name, located in between the up country and low country. Each of these has its own drum, ritual repertoire, and style of dress; each contains a number of sub-regional styles (called *korales*) with their own approaches to the broader regional style that they perform. At an even finer-grained level, one apprentices oneself as a student to a ritualist teacher (*gurunnānse*) and learns the style and repertoire of that teacher's lineage (*paramparavā*) in the school (*kalayatanaya*) that he runs, often out of his home (traditional ritualists are male, but women do run and teach at village dance schools).

While the Kandyan style is the most heavily promoted, all three traditions are ubiquitous in their respective regions, prevalent in all-night rituals, staged dance routines, celebrations honoring foreign dignitaries, processions associated with Buddhist temples, and many other contexts besides. The full ritual repertoire, including rituals for deities (*deva toivils*), planetary deities (*bali*), and demons (*yak toivils*) is widely believed to persist just in the low country, while only one ritual, the Kohomba Kankariya, is associated today with Kandy.<sup>9</sup> I provide a map of the *korales*, descriptions (and photos) of each drum, and an introduction to the ritual repertoire in this article; then, in the second article, I analyze low-country drumming in a *deva toivil*, a *yak toivil*, and a lesser-known ritual called the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, which is important for my purposes because it encapsulates drummers' views on music theory and history.

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hierarchy of organizers and performers belonging to a few different caste and class divisions. Nevertheless, the priest of a "demon" (*yakkha*) cult (*kattadirāla*) is typically a Beravā, as are most dancers and drummers in rituals (including, for instance, in the *valiyak manqalya* that Holt describes).

7. For studies of Sri Lankan music in English that include discussions of ritual drumming, see Kulatillake (1976, 1980, 1991, 1993); Seneviratna (1975, 1979); Seneviratne (1978); Walcott (1978); Kariyawasam (1985); and Sheeran (1998). Technical aspects of the drumming are discussed in English in Suraweera (2009) and Sykes (2011), and in numerous Sinhala sources (Fernando 1987; Malalgoda 1998; Bandara 2000, 2005; Rajapakse 2002; Kottegoda 2003, 2004, 2009; Kumarathunge 2004).

8. Nowadays many Beravā have left their hereditary caste duties, while some hold 9-to-5 jobs and perform rituals on the side. I have seen ritualists stay up all night performing a demanding ritual only to leave by bus early the next morning for their day job, directly after the ritual's completion. De Silva (2000, 40) writes that, "In the Bentota area, many berava people are currently involved in non-ritual activities such as temple painting (*siththara veda*), carpentry (*wadu veda*), masonry (*mesn vada*), mask making (*ves muhunu kapima*), baking (bakery *veda*), working in hotels and garment factories, migration to the middle east (mainly female berava), joining the armed forces or working as unskilled laborers."

9. I challenge this assumption in the text that follows, for I believe it is used to perpetuate a myth that Kandyan dance and drumming is more "Buddhist" and auspicious than low-country dance and drumming (which is famous for *yak toivil* rituals that are somewhat stigmatized) and that this does not adequately reflect the actual distribution of ritual practices (see my section below called "The Up-Country / Low-Country Rivalry").



Figure 1. Sri Lanka and the Bay of Bengal.



Figure 2. Sri Lanka.

My focus here is on the low-country drum (*pahata rata beraya*), also known as the “demon drum” (*yak beraya*) because of its use in *yak tovil* rituals (Kapferer [1983] 1991, 1997; Scott 1994).<sup>10</sup> I studied *yak beraya* with my *gurunnānse* (esteemed teacher) Herbert Dayasheela, an exponent of the Bentara Korale (a low-country regional tradition). Ritualists who identify as astrologers (*nāketi*) like Dayasheela make horoscopes (e.g., for the birth of a child or for marriage), which may be inscribed on copper, rolled up, and worn as a necklace. Dayasheela’s specialization is a large-scale, all-night *yak tovil* called the Sanni Yakuma, whose purpose is to cure eighteen illnesses brought on by the eighteen “Sanni Demons” (*sanni yakku*; I analyze the drumming in this ritual in the second article). Dayasheela recently retired and moved to the outskirts of Sri Lanka’s capital, Colombo, where he keeps a shrine outside his home and continues to perform incantations and small-scale protective and healing rituals for clients. In what follows, I explore the role of drumming of this medicinal and astrology-oriented ritual tradition, whose purpose is to protect villages from natural disasters through offerings to deities (in *deva tovils* and *bali*) and to protect individuals suffering from a number of illnesses brought on by demonic illness (in *yak tovil*).<sup>11</sup>

### SINHALA BUDDHIST DRUMMING AND THE QUESTION OF METER

The core argument that drives both of these conjoined articles is that the this-worldly and that-worldly aspects of Sinhala Buddhism—on the one hand, local rituals propitiating deities and demons to help people in their day-to-day lives in which drumming plays an important role, and on the other, notions of what kinds of sounds are acceptable or unacceptable according to the tenets of doctrinal Buddhism—have influenced the metric ambiguity that lies at the heart of Sinhala Buddhist drumming. I turn now toward unpacking this argument, but bear in mind that it emerges in full over the course of these two long articles.

The major concept in Sinhala drumming is the *padaya* or line of drumming. The word “*padaya*” means “foot”; in Western poetry, several feet may make up a line of poetry, but in Sinhala drumming, a *padaya* means a complete line or phrase of drumming.<sup>12</sup> A *padaya* consists of drum letters (*aksaras*) of long (*guru*) or short (*laghu*) duration organized as drum

10. The drum is most commonly called *yak beraya*, but this name remains somewhat stigmatized because of its association with *yak tovils*. In official writings, the name *pahata rata beraya* (“low-country drum”) is more commonly used. The name of the drum changes, however, depending on the context in which it is used—for example, in a ritual honoring the god Devol Deviyo, it is called *Devol beraya*. For simplicity’s sake, I have stuck to *yak beraya* here because my teacher is a specialist in *yak tovils*; however, I have changed the name of the drum when the term *yak beraya* is wildly inappropriate, such as when I describe the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi ritual, a ritual that celebrates the Buddha’s Enlightenment.

11. For information on the modern history and politics of ritual musics in postcolonial Sri Lanka, see my book (Sykes 2018) and the study of Kandyan dance by Reed (2010).

12. Sri Pada (also known as Adam’s Peak) is a mountain pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka that is sacred to Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians—“Sri Pada” refers to the Buddha’s footprint, which is believed to be at the top of the mountain. As a word that refers to poetic feet, “*pada*” has roots in the Hindu Vedas and early texts for thinking about the relations between music, dance, and theater, i.e., the *Natya Shastra*, but the word is also used in Pali-language Buddhist recitation.

words placed on *mātrās* (beats).<sup>13</sup> *Padas* are typically played in relation to (though oftentimes not *on*) a series of pulse points that match up with *mātrās*. Thus, they may be perceived as containing a certain amount of beats (e.g., 6 or 8)—but note that there is no concept of meter or theorization of beat cycles in Sinhala Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, many *padas* are constructed as through-composed drum speech and are not countable at all, while others are repeated many times in a performance but contain drum strokes that do not match up with subdivisions of beats, incorporate pauses that make beats slightly unequal in length, and sound like a drum “sentence” repeated over and over without being in any countable meter or beat cycle. As a whole, the drumming has a highly speechlike quality that has long baffled Sri Lankan and non-Sri Lankan observers alike: it differs from other South Asian drumming traditions not in that it uses a drum language (something that is very common across South Asia), but that its drum language often operates simply as unmeasured speech and at other times through an ambiguous relationship to an underlying, measured pulse that it seems to strictly avoid or dodge around. It sounds *almost* metered yet uncountable to outsiders.

By saying that Sinhala drumming has no theory of (and an ambiguous relationship to) “meter” and “beat cycles,” I am referring to the terminologies posited by the North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Carnatic) *tala* systems. In India, the Sanskrit word *tala* is derived from the root *tāl* (“being established”) and is linked to “clapping” (Kippen 2000, III). Today, the word remains associated with gestures that count the beat cycles (*tāls*) undergirding Hindustani and Carnatic (Indian classical) musics—in North India, this is done with a clap and wave system; in South India, *tāls* are counted on one’s fingers and legs (Clayton 2000, 61; Nelson 2008). As in the West, *tāls* are often theorized abstractly as numbered and organized “pulse points” set at regular temporal intervals with distinct layers of subdivisions, to which surface-level musical phenomena relate (though scholarship of late has sought to historicize and nuance such “disembodied” understandings of *tala* by arguing that certain *tāls* emerged through dance and were progressively theorized apart from dance; see, e.g., Kippen 2006 and Nelson 2008).<sup>14</sup>

A comparison with the Indian *tala* systems seems *always* to operate when outside observers ask whether Sinhala drumming has meter. In what follows, I show that Sinhala drumming does *not* operate through a conceptualization of stressed and unstressed beats—there are no claps and waves, no gestures tapped on one’s fingers and legs—though in practice, one may hear rhythmic stresses. Nor does Sinhala drum theory (which is multiple and varies by region) contain lists of beat cycles with demarcated subdivisions; rather, the emphasis is on compositions (*padas*) of music and dance (a single *padaya* can govern both a phrase of drumming and a sequence of dance steps). Interestingly, the word *tala* occasionally makes an

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13. *Pada* is the plural; I Anglicize it as “*padas*” in what follows.

14. Other researchers have pointed toward differences in theories of rhythm between South Indian classical and folk music traditions (e.g., Sherinian 2013) and provided evidence of other South Asian drumming traditions in which the relationship between drumming and drum languages are conceptualized outside the normative discourses on *tala* (e.g., Wolf’s [2014] work in Pakistan). I intend for my work here to be viewed in relation to such studies.

appearance in Sinhala tradition to refer to certain kinds of compositions of music and dance (but does *not* refer to meter). Sinhala drummers do not play cadences three times (i.e., the *tihai* in Hindustani music), landing on the “downbeat” (the *sam*), nor (as in Carnatic music) do they utilize complex, syncopated compositions that build tension through playing off the feel of the *tāl* (i.e., *korvai*). In other words, Sinhala drumming does not operate through *tala*—though as I show in my second article, several scholars have argued that despite the radical differences between Indian classical musics and the structure and language governing Sinhala Buddhist drumming, the latter *does* operate through (or through something akin to) *tala*. I take these studies to task in what follows and insist instead that we must consider Sinhala Buddhist drumming as its own system, which I will argue was constructed *intentionally* to avoid *tala* because of the prohibition against certain kinds of music found in Buddhism’s Seventh Precept (explained in the next section). I argue that Sinhala drumming was constructed to avoid *tala* because at the time the genre emerged in its current form (below I suggest this was between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries), to operate through *tala* would have meant to sound musical, and this would have rendered the drumming inappropriate as an offering to the Buddha and deities (who are *bodhisattas*, or Buddhas-to-be).

Bear in mind that this essay, being largely musicological in orientation, provides an argument for *why* Sinhala drumming avoids *tala*, arguing that the reason emanates from Theravada Buddhism; my second essay shows *how* the drumming does this, by analyzing Sinhala drumming in three rituals with very different relations to meter. There, I show that the Buddha and deities receive drumming that is highly speechlike and unmetred, while beings of low karmic standing (*yakku*), derided as bad Buddhists, receive short passages of more easily countable, metered-sounding drumming. Yet, given the speechlike nature of all Sinhala drumming—some words are not capable of falling on what outsiders hear as a subdivision of a beat due to their linguistic properties—even drumming for *yakku* will sound to outsiders as metrically ambiguous. Finally, I also posit in the second article, referencing Ellingson’s (1980) classic work on Tibetan drum speech, that Sinhala Buddhist drumming encapsulates certain old approaches to drum speech that emanate from (or resemble) similar approaches in Indian Buddhism.

The quotation from Andrew McGraw (2008, 153) cited above bears repeating: “Metre is caught up between the peculiarities of human perception and conception, and the difficulties theorists encounter in disentangling these two modes of knowing.” Here I resist operating through my own assumption about what meter “is” and then judging whether Sinhala drumming matches up with it—doing so would imply that Sinhala drummers, ignorant of the Western discourse on meter (which would be masquerading as universal) are approximating metered music but just not aware they are doing so. Rather, my focus is on how Sinhala drummers define their tradition, and I argue their drumming was constructed to resist *tala* for reasons to do with Buddhism. Nevertheless, in discussing *padas* as existing in tension with a series of underlying organized pulse points, conceptions and studies of meter in the West loom large and deserve mention. Studies of Western meter have undergone their own



transformation in recent decades, as scholars have also moved away from a traditional definition (which emerged in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) of meter as “a mode of attending at regular temporal intervals” (Grant 2014, 3) that is something apart from embodied motion, beat, and rhythm (see, e.g., Hasty 1997). Meter has been referred to as a series of organized and measured constraints placed on “pulse points” (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983; Cohn 2016) that form a “background against which the rhythmic surface is perceived” (Clayton 2000, 30).<sup>15</sup> Martin Clayton (2000, 35) writes that “metre is not itself audible, and therefore cannot be construed other than on the evidence of rhythmic sounds and actions; conversely metre tends to direct rhythm, and even to suggest or to generate rhythm.” The result is “a constant interaction between meter and rhythm” that Clayton argues “must continue in the cognitive processing of any metrical music,” something he feels is “as true of Indian music as European.” While we must be careful about applying the word “meter” to non-Western musics, similar abstract, measured pulse points that shape the unfolding of surface-level musical elements (such as melodies) have been found to undergird many Southeast Asian musics, such as Balinese gamelan (where *gongan* signifies “the arrangement of gongs within a melody”; Tenzer 2011, 49).<sup>16</sup> Against this background—and similarities that can be drawn between approaches to meter in India, Bali, and the West—it becomes quite interesting that Sinhala drumming strictly avoids such approaches.

The ancient Indian Sanskrit treatises the *Nāṭya Shāstra*, *Nārādīa Siksā*, and *Dattilam* (composed roughly between 200 BCE to 200 CE) theorize the terms melody (*gīta*), rhythm (*tala*), and text (*pada*), with *svara* describing not just the notes of a scale (as it does today) but pitch organization as a whole (i.e., a precursor to the term *raga*). *Pada* referred to the “durational and accent patterns in the musical text” (Rowell [1992] 2015, 20). Sinhala drumming, I suggest, was structured according to theories of *pada* rather than *tala* in order to model Sinhala drumming after other forms of highly valued, efficacious speech in Sinhala Buddhist society that operate via *padas*, such as Buddhist chant (*pirit*)—though I stress that Sinhala drumming does not copy this or any other form of sacred speech (or their poetic meters) in practice.

I unpack and historicize the possible relations of the Indian *tala* systems to Sinhala drumming over the course of both articles, but suffice it to say here that what Sinhala drumming was striving to avoid was a premodern understanding of *tala* that it nevertheless approximates in practice. Sinhala drumming embodies older understandings of *tala* as

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15. “In psychological terms, rhythm involves the structure of the temporal stimulus, while meter involves our perception and cognition of such stimuli. To paraphrase Gjerdingen (1989), if ‘meter [is] a mode of attending,’ then rhythm is that to which we attend . . . Meter is a perceptually emergent property of a musical sound, that is, an aspect of our engagement with the production and perception of tones in time” (London 2004, 4).

16. McGraw (2008, 139–40) writes that “the beat in Balinese music is phenomenal; all listeners and musicians are always in agreement as to where they beat lies—they can literally point to it [it is found in the “small time-keeping horizontal gong-chime called the *kajar*”]. Similarly, larger metrical structures are also phenomenal and unambiguous in Balinese music.” He notes that “important metrical points exert a kind of ‘gravitational force’ on melodic quality . . . The more important the metric point (the more it coincides with other pulse streams), the more force (change) is exerted upon the melody.”

gestural and linked to bodily movements and *felt* rather than rigidly demarcated and abstract subdivisions of beats, even as it was constructed to avoid the theorization of organized sets of pulse points and gestures embedded in the *tala* systems. Most crucially, the rhythms of Sinhala drumming are generated by the properties of the three regional Sinhala drum languages, as standalone drum words, some of which contain durations between letters (*aksaras*) that remain the same even when the tempo changes. Some drum words must be played “as is” no matter the tempo, and this means that certain drum strokes do not match up with what outsiders would hear as the required subdivision of a beat—and this is a huge reason Sinhala drumming appears metrically ambiguous to outsiders. Very often, passages of Sinhala drumming operate as repeated sentences where no counting of beats is possible. Consider repeating a sentence in English out loud: it might sound as though it is *almost* in a meter, but such sentences would likely not fit directly into a meter without being forced to do so. (For example, try repeating this sentence out loud, over and over, ten times. Did that sound “metered,” or almost so?) It is something like this, I suggest, that operates frequently in Sinhala drumming.

The “Sinhala meter debate” stems mainly from the work of the influential educational reformer W. B. Makulloluwa (1922–1984), who analyzed up-country *talampota* (finger cymbal) patterns and proposed that one can find “meters” in Sinhala drumming marked by the *talampota*, even though they are not theorized as such by drummers (Makulloluwa [1962] 2000). The system he devised (which he called the “*tith*” system, named after one of the cymbal strokes on the *talampota*) was adopted by several scholars (e.g., Sedaraman [1968] 1997; Vijēyvardhana 1994). This “discovery” of Sinhala meter was criticized, however, by Sinhala musicologist C. da S. Kulatillake (1976), who rightly noted that the *talampota* are not used in low-country drumming. Kulatillake suggested (correctly, in my view) that Sinhala drumming is best compared to genres of Sinhala sung poetry and Sanskrit and Pali chant—and he noted that due to doctrinal Buddhist prohibitions on music, the latter was constructed so that it would avoid sounding musical. Yet if Sinhala drumming is modeled on chant and/or poetry rather than music, Kulatillake did not specify whether it mimics or adopts any particular meter or meters from these vocal genres—nor did he address how Sinhala drumming avoids sounding musical. An important point to acknowledge here is that because the Beravā historically guarded their drum phrases (*padās*) from outsiders, it is only since the mid-twentieth century, when non-Beravā started learning the music and dance, that the broader Sinhala community has had regular access to it. Even so, there remains much diversity between regional traditions. This has led to a lack of agreement on music theory that contrasts to the relative uniformity of theories of *raga* and *tala* in North and South India.

Bear in mind that in the up-country Kandyan region, the *talampota* do not demarcate subdivisions of beats the way they do in South India. Though more work needs to be done on this topic, the *talampota* in up-country drumming appear to mark pulse points within which different drum syllables (*aksaras*) are grouped together in wildly contrasting sets of durations, without easily theorized subdivisions. Scholarship has tended to gloss this lack of theorized subdivisions in order to conceptually place up-country drum strokes on distinct beats in a *titha*

(combination of *tith* and *theyi*) in ways that do not accurately match the way they are played. In sum, I believe the *talampota* came into the up country rather late (most likely the eighteenth century) and that the cymbals were superimposed onto a pre-existing drumming tradition that was intentionally constructed—because of the doctrinal Buddhist prohibition against music—as efficacious speech. The *talampota*, it bears emphasizing, are not used to accompany drumming and dancing in rituals in the southern low country.

What initially led me to Sinhala Buddhist drumming was its fascinating sound: as a lifelong Western drumset player with experiences playing North and South Indian percussion, I could barely count the beats I was hearing. I often could not hear a downbeat, drummers seemed to play in a ridiculously sloppy fashion—with near-continuous flams (non-unisons)—yet they always seemed to start and stop with the utmost precision and play with stunning virtuosity. There was clearly a logic to the drumming but not one I could readily discern. I was surprised at how unlike Indian percussion traditions it is. I encourage readers to pause briefly here and turn to my videos of drumming in the ritual context, as well as the demonstrations of advanced drum rhythms (*padas*) by my teacher Herbert Dayasheela (click [here](#) to access the videos, which also appear as examples in the second article). I believe Sinhala Buddhist drumming provides a radically different approach to rhythm and meter for ethnomusicology, one that emerges through a deep engagement with Buddhist philosophy, ethos, and practice. In grounding a Theravada Buddhist aesthetics of sound, performance, and offering in Sri Lanka with Beravā ritual drumming, I also strive to reshape the geography of ethnomusicology's area studies paradigm, opening up a "Bay of Bengal" focus that will allow for future comparisons and connections between Buddhist sonic traditions in Sri Lanka and others in Myanmar/Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

### ON MUSIC AND THERAVADA BUDDHISM

In his classic book *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*, Sri Lanka's preeminent twentieth-century playwright and cultural critic Ediriweera Sarachchandra (1952) explains why he thinks Theravada Buddhism is an unmusical religion:

The solitary existence of the monk was enriched, as far as his material existence was concerned, with all that human skill could achieve in the realm of decorative art and sculpture and mural painting. The self-expression that was denied to him in the fields of music, drama, and to some extent even poetry, he sought to gain in the visual arts. (8)

The reason for this "denial" of music, Sarachchandra explains, is intrinsic to Theravada Buddhism. While all Buddhists are supposed to abide by the Five Precepts (refraining from violence, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicating substances), monks and the laity on some occasions are supposed to follow an extended list of ten precepts that includes the stipulation (the Seventh Precept) that one should refrain from "dancing, singing, music and watching grotesque mime" (Niyamatolika 1971, xii). Consequently, Sarachchandra asserts, Theravada Buddhism has long favored the "narrative arts" (e.g., storytelling and

paintings depicting the Buddha's former lives) over the "performing arts." The former are "useful for conveying religious instruction to the people, as well as [in their] help in evoking religious sentiment such as might induce a man to give up his hankering after worldly pleasures and seek the higher fulfillment" (Sarachchandra 1952, 8).

Embedded in this narrative is a comparison with Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>17</sup> Sarachchandra (1952, 8) defines Theravada as having an "individualistic and non-congregational tendency," while he finds Mahayana more communally oriented and "accommodating." He puts the dichotomy in historical terms: "Mahayana spread from country to country absorbing all the local cults, and making all kinds of concessions to the customs of the people . . . [while] Theravada Buddhism was . . . very slow to make alliances with non-Buddhist practices, and preferred to keep its doctrines uncontaminated, even if that necessarily meant limiting the range of its appeal and popularity" (7).

The anthropology of Buddhism does not bear Sarachchandra's statements out (see, e.g., Gellner 2001; Ortner 1989; Tambiah 1970, 1976; Obeyesekere 1990). The Theravada Buddhism followed by Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist ethnic majority, many anthropologists have shown (e.g., Holt 2004; Obeyesekere 1984), is inherently syncretic, having incorporated religious practices and deities from Tamil Hinduism and even the Mahayana Bodhisatva Avalokiteshvara (as the deity Natha) over the centuries (Holt 1991).<sup>18</sup> Both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism have community- and individual-centered aspects to them: the former are based on community-oriented rituals, the latter on world-renouncers who live secluded lives of austerity and meditation.<sup>19</sup> Also, contrary to Sarachchandra's claim that Theravada Buddhist culture is more *visual*, recent scholarship attests to the importance of recitation for Theravada Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka and Myanmar (e.g., Deegalle 2006; Blackburn 2001; Greene 2004).

I bring up Sarachchandra's statements here because I find them to be the normative view on the relationship between music and Theravada Buddhism. This perspective is reproduced,

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17. Theravada Buddhism, "The Way of the Elders," is considered the oldest form of Buddhism and is associated with Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia). The doctrinal scripture is the *Tipitaka* ("Three Baskets"), written in Pali (a North Indian Prakrit or Sanskrit-derived language, believed to be the closest to what the Buddha spoke in his lifetime), which was committed to writing by the first century BCE. Mahayana Buddhism, "The Great Vehicle," developed due to a schism that originated at the Second Buddhist Council (approximately 334 BCE), is associated largely with Sanskrit texts, and was developed significantly by East Asian Buddhists. A third branch, Vajrayana, developed in medieval India and spread to Tibet and East Asia, and is today predominantly associated with the Himalayan region (Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia). These branches are not absolute, as they have intersected and influenced one another over the centuries.

18. The musicologist C. da S. Kulatillake (1991, 39) reinforces this notion of Theravada austerity but nonetheless notes the importance of Mahayana elements for sustaining Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka when he says that, "Had it not been for [the] accommodation of Mahayanic elements [into Sinhala Buddhism], Buddhism in its pure Theravada ideals could not have stood the intrigues of Hinduism in particular." Ortner (1978) reverses the dichotomy: she sees Theravada Buddhism as a more community-centered religion than the Mahayana Buddhism she finds in the Himalayas.

19. These dynamics (as well as the notion of the king as a *cakkavattin* or wheel-turning monarch) are themes in Stanley Tambiah's (1970, 1976, 1984) classic monographs on Buddhism in Thailand.

either by reference to his work or to other Sri Lankan scholars holding similar beliefs, when foreign scholars writing in a comparative fashion about “Buddhist music” need to define what Theravada Buddhist (or Sri Lankan) music is. There are several factors at play here. In addition to the Seventh Precept, there is an implicit equation of “Buddhist music” with “what monks do with sound” rather than rituals performed by the laity. Then there is an entrenchment of the idea that music has always been less valued by Theravada Buddhists, and is thus less developed than in Mahayana communities. The final factor is the promotion of the idea that Sinhala Buddhist musics are “austere.” The result is an assumption that Theravada Buddhism had negative effects on Sinhala music; I turn now towards considering how these assumptions emerge in the literature.

Consider the language Wolfgang Laade (1993–94) uses in an article that, to my knowledge, is the only study in a Western ethnomusicology journal on the relations between doctrinal Theravada Buddhism and Sinhala music:

To any foreign visitor who has been to India or other Asian countries, the almost total lack of ‘oriental color’ in present-day Sri Lanka is immediately apparent. . . . Extreme forms of behavior are absent from profane and religious life. The latter does not know frenzy, trance, vision, or self-torture. . . . The musical-minded foreigner will with surprise notice the extreme scarcity of musical instruments in the traditional Singhalese [sic] music. While in other Asian countries wind and stringed instruments play a fundamental role, in Sri Lanka strings are totally absent, wind instruments represented only by the small Singhalese shawm, the *horanāva*, which plays only a marginal role. (51)

Laade goes on to say that, “in comparison with other Asian cultures, the traditional Singhalese culture, which is primarily that of the Singhalese peasants, appears to Western eyes plain or even austere.”<sup>20</sup> The reason he gives is the doctrinal stipulation against music: he cites as evidence Sarath Amunugama’s (1980) statement that “[p]ristine Buddhism has discouraged, if not actively condemned, indulgence in the arts. The arts were ‘this worldly’ and hence looked upon as an unnecessary luxury (*laukika*)” (cited in Laade 1993–94, 52). While I don’t wish to describe Sinhala religiosity as “frenzy” or “self-torture,” any casual reader of the anthropology of Sri Lanka will encounter *many* descriptions of ecstatic behavior (such as body-piercing and hook-swinging at the Kataragama pilgrimage shrine) performed by Sinhala Buddhists, as well as elaborate all-night rituals that include *a lot* of music and dance and appear as anything but austere.

In a 1997 dissertation on the Sri Lankan popular music genre *Baila*, Anne Sheeran notes that a discourse on “musical lack” has long circulated among observers of Sinhala music: the Sinhalas are acknowledged as favoring percussion, but this is viewed as a deficiency because of their culture’s lack of indigenous stringed instruments and a concomitant lack of a system of melodic modes as found in neighboring India (*raga*). Rather than look for what Sinhala music

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<sup>20</sup> “Singhalese” is an incorrect spelling; “Sinhala” or “Sinhalase” are the proper terms.

*has*, the emphasis is on what it does not have (as Laade's statement shows). One time early in my research, I asked Sri Lankan scholar Tissa Kariyawasam about the effects of Theravada Buddhism on Sinhala music, and he shrugged and said something like, "but Buddhism is where Sinhala music and dance developed."

In one of the most oft-cited articles conceptualizing "Buddhist music" as a historical phenomenon characterized by three main traditions (Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana), Ian Mabbett (1993–94, 13) makes the mystifying claim that "in Theravada countries . . . music has no liturgical function where the mainstream urban or 'Great Tradition' culture is strong." It is unclear how he defines "liturgical," but it should be stressed that there is a long history of Buddhist temple music services (*tēvāva*) in Sri Lanka performed by an ensemble called *hēvīsi* (two drums and the reed instrument *horanāva*; see below—this is traditionally performed by Beravā). As can be found in my work here and many studies of Sinhala Buddhist ritual (e.g., Kariyawasam 1996; Gombrich [1971] 2012; Reed 2010), drumming is intimately related to Buddhism as it is practiced in everyday life in Sri Lanka—and this includes practices that must be considered "liturgical," such as before and after Buddhist chant (*pirit*).

Mabbett (1993–94) goes on to make another unfounded claim, that Mahayana "represents the infusion into Buddhism of an outlook more consonant with the spirit of submission to a personal object of worship," eschewing the fervent devotion that Sinhala Buddhists have to particular deities, a practice historically related to the *bhakti* devotionalism of South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and ubiquitous not just in Sri Lanka but the *literature about* Sinhala Buddhism (Obeyesekere 1978; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). There is a troubling disparity between the claims made by Laade and Mabbett and the voluminous anthropological studies about Sinhala Buddhists—literature in which ritual practices that are so obviously *not* austere and *are* noisy *and* complex *and* described as having much drumming, dancing, and singing are present on nearly every page (e.g., Obeyesekere 1984; Kapferer [1983] 1991, 1997; Scott 1994).

What is going on here? If Sinhala Buddhist music *does* exist and is not defined by lack or austerity, why were the above authors misled? What *is* Sinhala music, anyway, and what is its relationship with "Theravada Buddhism"? Before exploring those questions, at this juncture I want to make a radical change in tone and acknowledge, for a moment, the ways in which the above authors *are* correct. For it *is* true that doctrinal Theravada Buddhism looks down on music, and this *has* had an impact on Sinhala music history—the issue, I suggest, is to look for how it historically shaped and physically *placed* Sinhala Buddhist engagements with sacred sounds.

As I elaborate further below, at certain moments in Sri Lankan history members of the Buddhist *sangha* (the community of monks) clamped down on monks and kings that were perceived as engaging in or promoting behavior found unbecoming or inappropriate for them. Kings were *cakravartin* (Pali: *cakkavatti*), "wheel-turning" universal monarchs who were *bodhisattvas* (Pali: *bodhisattas*), ranked and bound by the laws of karma (Pali: *kamma*). They

were supposed to abide by the Seventh Precept. At certain times, esoteric ritual practices (such as the recitation of magic spells or *mantras*) and music and dance were thrust out of the courts of Sinhala kings, though this means that at other times, such practices were propitiated by them. Over time, an indigenous Sinhala Buddhist music and dance tradition developed not in the kings' courts but in large-scale, all-night rituals performed by the Beravā. In the latter part of the Kandyan period (1469–1815), Beravā traditions were developed at the Kandyan court (in the hill country city of Kandy in central Sri Lanka) through the addition of a set of dances on Buddhist themes called the *vannams*, which are now a core part of Sri Lanka's national dance tradition, "Kandyan Dance." These developments were made through interactions with visiting South Indian Tamil musicians and dancers, the result of intermarriage with Nayakkar princesses from South India (Reed 2010). But it is important to stress that such developments were made to an already well-established Beravā ritual music and dance tradition, and that the other core component of today's "Kandyan Dance" is comprised of excerpts from a Kandyan Beravā ritual, the Kohomba Kankariya. The Sri Lankan case differs from that of India, where major "classical" traditions were closely entwined with numerous, geographically spread-out court cultures, while castes of drummers (such as the Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu) were stigmatized and largely kept out of this nationalization and classicization process.<sup>21</sup>

Sinhala society was once known to have stringed instruments (*veenas*), and it is likely these instruments *did* decline because of efforts by orthodox Buddhists. The nineteenth-century British colonial doctor and chronicler of Sinhala life John Davy (1821) described the Sinhala *veena* as a one-stringed instrument played by itinerant musicians; this must have died out shortly after he saw it. According to ancient and medieval (circa thirteenth-century) evidence, Sinhala *veenas* were at one time an assortment of harps resembling the *yazh* of ancient Tamil society and Southeast Asian variants like the Burmese *saung*. According to Kulatillake (1991, 67–69), there are fourteen "Sinhala veenas" mentioned in the Pali and later Sinhala sources, up to the literature of the Kotte period (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries). The *Samantapāsādikā Vinaya* (a fifth-century-CE commentary by Buddhaghosa) states that the *veena* is "a despicable instrument that promotes lust and passion" (Kulatillake 1991, 68) and in this capacity it was used as a weapon by Māra to distract the Buddha when he was meditating. Presumably this is why the instrument died out among the Sinhalese, but it is also said that when Māra dropped the instrument and fled, it was picked up by the god Sakka, who gave it to the god Pancasika.

Just because these instruments died out does not mean premodern Sinhala society had no understanding or investment in melody or lacked a sophisticated melodic or vocal aesthetics. Rather, Sinhala society developed an emphasis on sung poetry, complex poetic

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21. The other two regional Beravā traditions—low-country and Sabaragamuwa music and dance—do not have the same association with a court culture, and this may be one reason they are ranked below Kandyan Dance in Sri Lanka's state-driven discourses on the arts. Today's Sinhala Buddhist nationalists privilege a notion of Kandyan Buddhist authenticity centered on the precolonial Kandyan kingdom. Kandyan Dance is central to this nationalist project (Reed 2010; Ambos 2011). My point here is that this association between Kandyan Dance and the Kandyan court makes it is easy to forget that the tradition's origins lie in up-country Beravā ritual.

meters, efficacious ritual speech (such as Pali-language Buddhist chant and *mantras*), and an elaborate drumming tradition that, I will argue, was influenced by them. It is more appropriate, I suggest, to define Sinhala drumming as having arisen as a kind of vocal genre along with other forms of vocal practices clearly demarcated as belonging in a different category than “song” (*gi*). For example, genres of Sinhala sung poetry include “lullabies, reaping songs, fisherman’s songs, boatman’s songs . . . [and] swing songs” (Aravinda 2000, 130). Aravinda notes that the prominent twentieth-century musicologist Devar Surya Sena reclassified these genres as “song” (*gi*), in contrast to their initial categorization as “sung poetry” (*kavi*)—for instance, *jana kavi* became *jana gi*, *gemi kavi* became *gemi gi*—perhaps to grant them more esteem in musicological circles. But Aravinda argues that the Sinhalese traditionally used the word “song” (*gitaya*) specifically for genres with a large pitch range, such as *nadagam* and *prāsasti* (panegyric songs)—both of which have historic associations with Sri Lanka’s Tamil minority—and that the above genres were categorized as *kavi* to distinguish them from “song.”

The *Samantapāsādikā* describes three forms of chanting: Suttas, Jatakas, and Gāthās. *Pirit* (Pali: *paritta*), or Buddhist chant, belongs to the Suttas; Jatakas are tales of the former lives of the Buddha; and Gāthās are versified renditions of the Pali Canon (Weerakkody 2011, 1000). *Gī* (not to be confused with the above term for “song”) is the name of a meter used in low-country (southern coastal) Sinhala rituals as salutations to the Triple Gem<sup>22</sup> and as introductory preludes describing birth stories of gods (*upath kavi*; Kulatillake 1976, 4). *Gī* is sung in a recitative style with lines (*padas*) of unequal length, and Kulatillake (1991, 53) suggests this style may have emerged as an outgrowth of Pali Gāthās. The style demonstrates a small number of pitches but uses complex meters; for example, Kulatillake describes the opening of a *kōlam* (masked drama) in which the *Gī* has *padas* of nine, eleven, nine, and fourteen *mātrās* (beats). Traditionally, the most common Sinhala folk song meter is *śivpada* (“four lines”), which as its name implies contains a four-lined verse structure; the lines usually end in “consonantal assonance” (*eli-vāta*—rhyming with the same consonant/vowel combination; Kulatillake 1991, 53). This simple structure should not be taken to mean singing in this meter is easy; Kulatillake (1991, 54) notes that some *śivpada* contain as many as 30 *mātrās* a line with rhythms within those lines of three, four, or seven beats. Kulatillake suggests the folk song genre *seepada* and the *samudraghosa* meter grew out of *śivpada*. *Seepada* became important for the Sinhala “messenger” (*sandesā*) poems of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and consists of unaccompanied quatrains; *samudraghosa* has “18 *mātrās* and the pause (*yathi*)—falling on the tenth and the subsequent eighth *mātrā*” (Alawathukotuwa 2013, 15).<sup>23</sup> The interrelations between Sinhala drumming and sung poetry in Sinhala rituals deserve more attention; at this juncture I am not arguing that Sinhala drumming is always played *in* these meters, but rather I am setting the stage for an argument I make at length below, that because Sinhala society has

22. The Triple Gem is the Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the community of monks).

23. Medieval Sinhala literary texts discuss rules governing meters for poems, such as *Siyabas lakara* (written in the tenth century), *Elu sandes lakuna* (1270–1293 CE), *Muwadevdawata*, *Sasadavata* and *Kavsilumina* (Ariyapala 1956, 258; Alawathukotuwa 2013, 13; Cumaratunga [1938] 2000).



long favored sung poetry over music, Sinhala drumming is modeled on the former, even if it does not outright or always adopt its meters. Also, Sinhala drums—particularly the low-country *yak beraya* and up-country *gäta beraya*—are highly “tonal” in that they cover a wide pitch range; another reason singing with a large pitch range did not develop in Sinhala rituals may be that it would conflict with drum speech.

Valentine Daniel (1996) notes that the *idea* of a dichotomy between the narrative arts and performing arts has been used in Sri Lanka to mark differences between the island’s Sinhala Buddhist majority and Tamil minority. According to Daniel, Sri Lankans tend to believe that Sinhals invest in history in the form of stories of the Buddha’s past lives and ancient Sinhala kingdoms as depicted in paintings, sculpture, and ruins, while Tamils invest heavily in heritage in the form of music, dance, and theater. This does not mean this dichotomy is *true*—virtually any visitor to Sri Lanka today will see images of traditional Sinhala dancers and drummers on billboards, at hotel performances, and on tourist websites, as well as public presentations of music and dance in processions (*peraheras*), weddings, and staged performances. Rather, Daniel is saying that the *idea* of this dichotomy—rooted in the Seventh Precept—has played an important role in defining Sinhals as “unmusical” and Tamils as “musical.” As mentioned, there is truth to this assertion because of the doctrinal Buddhist stipulation to avoid music, but as I have alluded, attention to song and performance found an outgrowth in complicated meters of sung poetry, drum speech, and dance in rituals. Nevertheless, the idea that the Sinhals are unmusical has deep roots in Sri Lanka; to take one example, Reed (2010, 132) cites a Tamil journalist in the *Morning Star* newspaper in the early 1930s who expressed a “feeling of superiority of Tamils toward the music and dance of the Sinhals” by saying, “That Tamils should dance to the tune of a people who are the most musicless in the world is unthinkable.”

We can thus see a more nuanced picture emerge from apparent contradictions in the literature. While I take issue with the statements like those of Laade (above), I acknowledge that Sinhala Buddhists have long recognized Theravada Buddhism as the oldest, most conservative, and strictest form of Buddhism.<sup>24</sup> Yet in Sri Lanka today, Buddhist monks commonly attend large-scale deity rituals (*madu tovils*) and maintain close proximity to drummers in temple services and at ritual celebrations throughout the year. In order to find a “developed” Sinhala “musical” tradition—the scare quotes around the latter term is to emphasize the point I have stressed in this section, that Sinhala drumming was not originally constructed to sound musical—we have *a lot* of discursive baggage to work through, but this does not mean Sinhala music doesn’t exist or is austere. Rather, it means it was shaped *through*

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24. Theravada Buddhism is viewed as a “conservative and preserving force” (Holt 2009, 13) for the teachings of the Buddha and their encapsulation in the *Tipitaka*. According to the ancient Sinhala chronicle the *Mahavamsa* (updated continuously by monks since the sixth century CE), the son and daughter of the Indian Emperor Asoka brought Buddhism to the ancient Sinhala city of Anuradhapura in the third century BCE, with a sapling of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha found Enlightenment. The city was renowned for its monastic Mahavihara fraternity and Jetavanaramaya Stupa (still the largest brick structure in the world), second in size only to Egypt’s great pyramids at the time it was built. The city flourished as a site for Buddhist learning for centuries until it was sacked by invading South Indian Tamil Chola forces in the tenth century, after which the Sinhala capital moved to Polonnaruwa (c. eleventh to thirteenth centuries CE).

the doctrinal prohibition against music and dance and found its place as sung poetry and efficacious ritual drum speech both inside and outside preeminently Buddhist contexts.<sup>25</sup>

The first task for developing a new framework to register “Sinhala Buddhist music” is to consider what scholars call “the spirit religion,” a phrase that describes an array of practices in Theravada Buddhist societies. Such practices involve the worship of deities and spirits, including placating or guarding against beings such as demons or ghosts thought to cause misfortune and illness. In Sri Lanka, rituals for deities (*madu tovils*, *bali*) and rituals that combat illnesses brought on by beings of low karmic standing (*yak tovils*) are performed largely (though not only) by the Beravā caste. While the Sinhala pantheon finds a place for ghosts and spirits, large-scale Sinhala rituals are devoted to deities, some of whom are of Hindu origin, and demons (*yakku*), who form a class separate from mere ghosts (*pretayo*). Any definition of Theravada Buddhist music, in other words, needs to include a consideration of the sounds of the spirit religions, because this is where key musical instruments and sonic repertoires developed in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist communities. A music history of “spirit religions” in Theravada-dominated societies will include the worship of the *nats* in Myanmar (often humans who met violent deaths) and the worship of *phi* in Thailand and Laos.<sup>26</sup> It is these rituals that are conspicuously absent from Laade’s and Mabbett’s definitions of “Theravada Buddhist music.”

John Holt writes that some Sri Lankan scholars invoke a theoretical framework with highly loaded language (e.g., “magicians,” “plebian religious needs”—the terms are from Malalgoda 1976) to criticize what they regard as “religious practices by Sinhala Buddhists that seem to have no origins in the normative literary traditions of the Theravada Buddhist Pali canon” (2004, 171). Such scholars, Holt writes, would prefer that the laity engage solely in “practices of purity in ethical conduct, diligence in work, and pride in national origins and customs (‘superstitious’ rituals excepted),” and thus they want to exclude the laity from “participation in rites of deity propitiation, merit-gaining, healing, vow-taking, protection, etc.” (Holt 2004, 172). While I have noted that an ideology of austerity has a foothold in orthodox Theravada Buddhism, Holt notes that the denigration of such practices in Sri Lanka is also indebted to a sanitized, Western notion of Buddhism (as a religion defined by silent meditation and the individual’s quest for nirvana), a view that influenced a number of Buddhist lay reformers in Asia throughout the colonial period (e.g., the famous reformer Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka; see Kemper 2015). Such statements echo the denigration of all-night Sinhala rituals (*tovils*) by British colonial missionaries as “devil-dancing” and idolatry that is

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25. Paul Greene (2004, 45) makes a similar argument in a study of Buddhist chant (*paritta*) in two Burmese-American communities, noting that *paritta* chant “steers practitioners away from dangerous or potentially distracting musicalities”: “the Buddha’s concerns about the potentially distracting aspects of musical sound have shaped the metric rhythm of the Pali texts, and also affect the sorts of melodic and rhythmic sounds produced in chanting practices today.” I am suggesting we extend this lens to the ritual musics of the Sinhala Buddhist laity.

26. For example, the annual *nats* festival at Taungbyone just north of Mandalay in Myanmar attracts thousands of people, has become a site for transgender activism and expression (many mediums or *nat kadaw* are transgender), and includes a repertoire of music and dance that begs for ethnomusicological inquiry.

just demonism obscured by a thin Buddhist veneer (Scott 1994; Ambos 2011).<sup>27</sup>

Over the past fifty years, anthropologists studying Sri Lanka have criticized the view that all-night Sinhala rituals (*tovils*) consisting of offerings to deities and demons (*yakku*) involving music and dance are not Buddhist. Driven initially by the writings of Gananath Obeyesekere, such scholarship argues that Sinhala Buddhism is a unified system with two complementary components. One is associated with doctrinal Theravada Buddhism (with its ethical system encapsulated in its canonic texts, and its methods for relief from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) and from suffering (*dukkha*)). The other is defined by rituals aimed at helping one in *this* life, oriented toward worshipping deities and combatting the malignant influence of demons (*yakku*). “At the heart of Obeyesekere’s analysis is the important observation that astrology, deity and demon belief in Sinhala Buddhism are guided by basic Buddhist principles such as karma (Pali: *kamma*), rebirth, suffering (Pali: *dukkha*).” The deities and demons of the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon are ranked in a karmic hierarchy, with karma seen as “a fundamental and inviolable law, which represents the condition of all living beings,” including supernatural ones (De Silva 2000, 19). As I show below, the drummers I worked with place the origin for one of their rituals and its drumming patterns (*padas*) with the gods as a celebration of the Buddha’s Enlightenment, and they locate their drummer ancestors as having been present at key moments in Buddhist history in Sri Lanka.<sup>28</sup> Rituals for deities (*madu tovils*) are often held at a Buddhist temple, so long as it has a shrine (*devalaya*) to the main deity worshipped in the ritual. Sri Lanka’s largest and most famous Buddhist procession, the Äsala Perahera in the city of Kandy associated with the country’s most famous Buddhist temple (the Dalada Maligawa, or Temple of the Tooth, which holds the Buddha’s tooth relic), is performed with hundreds of Kandyan dancers and drummers. Sinhala drumming may not be a part of “doctrinal” Theravada Buddhism, but it is part of what Steven Collins (1998) calls “Buddhism as a civilizational phenomenon.” More to my point, Sinhala drumming is unthinkable without reference to key terms and values of Theravada Buddhism, its cosmology, and its everyday practice in Sri Lanka.

All this is to say that much of the early ethnomusicological literature on “Theravada Buddhism and music” (and attempts to think about Sinhala music in relation to Buddhism) were written by Western scholars without much knowledge about Sri Lanka (or the works of Obeyesekere and others). Consequently, they ended up parroting the views of an earlier generation of Sri Lankan writers who defined Sinhala rituals (*tovils*), for ideological reasons, as being firmly outside Buddhism.<sup>29</sup> Justin McDaniel (2011, 9), writing about Thai Buddhists, says

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27. Gombrich remarks that, “Buddha himself condemned astrology, palmistry, and similar practices, but did not deny their possible validity. Anyway, the Buddha declared them a distraction from the road to salvation” ([1971] 2012, 148–49; see also De Silva 2000, 18).

28. It has long been common to refer to the Buddha’s “Enlightenment,” but in recent years there has been a move to return to an earlier translation that calls it the “Awakening”—a better translation of the term *Bodhi* (the root *budh* means “to awaken”) that connotes a process rather than a specific moment. Nevertheless, I stick to “Enlightenment” here because of the term’s ubiquity in the West.

29. I should mention that more nuanced positions in the literature have emerged to balance out this idea of a solely negative effect of Theravada Buddhism on Sinhala musics. John Ross Carter (1993) has written an insightful

that they “often define themselves by what they do rather than what they believe,” and thus he says that “instead of trying to find what is ‘Buddhist’ about what a particular person holds, chants, and values, I look first to how they do something, how they say they do something, and the material and social contexts they do it in.” I suggest we adopt the same approach when considering Sinhala Buddhist engagements with sacred sounds.

I turn now toward situating Beravā drumming within this holistic conception of Sinhala Buddhism, after which I consider how certain definitions of efficacious and auspicious speech in Sinhala Buddhist thought and practice helped form the structures and uses of Beravā ritual drumming.

### THE RITUAL REPERTOIRE

According to Obeyesekere (1984, 44), traditional Sinhala approaches to illness distinguish between “diseases caused by natural factors, ultimately traceable to the anger (*kōpavīma*) of the three humors,” curable via Ayurveda and Western-trained medicine, and those created by “non-natural agents” for which a ritual specialist is required. The latter form of *dosa* (misfortunes) may include natural disasters, such as drought and famine (and even stresses from daily life), though the category also includes the wrath of a god, illnesses caused by a demon or demons, and the negative influence of planetary alignments.<sup>30</sup> Overall, the purpose of large-scale rituals of music, dance, and sung poetry is “to banish *dosa*, or the misfortunes of the congregation as patients (*aturas*)” (ibid.; or in a ritual aimed at a single individual, the patient or *aturaya*). At the risk of simplification, ritualists are hired either to perform large-scale rituals for deities at a deity shrine (*devalaya*), a kind of preventative medicine that protects the community from calamities like drought and pestilence; to cure a person suffering from an illness believed to be brought on by a being or beings of low karmic standing (*yakku*); or to guard against the negative effects of planetary alignments on an individual. These are the three main divisions of the ritual repertoire. The major all-night rituals generally proceed from around 7 p.m. to 10 a.m. and are split into three periods or “watches”—the evening watch (*sānda samayama*), midnight watch (*māda yama*), and morning watch (*alu yama*). These events require making elaborate altars (including seats, or *yahan*, where deities are invited to come and look upon the ritual), gathering and preparing offerings, and making food for participants.

The first major type of ritual is called *deva tovil* or *madu tovil* (rituals for deities or *deva*—“*madu*” means “shed” and refers to the covering under which the ritual takes place). These were traditionally attached to the agricultural cycle, and held to ward off drought and

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essay that argues that music is deemed doctrinally acceptable in Theravada Buddhism so long as it functions to turn one’s mind toward the Triple Gem. In a recent book, Kevin Trainor (2007, 51) includes music on a list of offerings to the Buddha classified as “worship with material things” (*āmisā-pūjā*) along with flowers, betel, and light in the form of oil lamps. While the Buddha did not make the resolution to become a Buddha “for the sake of garlands, scents, music, and song,” Trainor suggests that such offerings may be acceptable for the laity if they appropriately turn one’s mind toward the Triple Gem.

30. For details on the different kinds of *dosa* and the cures used to eliminate them, see Obeyesekere (1984, 43–48).

pestilence. They may be held at a Buddhist temple if there is an “abode to a god” (*devalaya*) dedicated to the main deity being worshipped in the ritual. *Madu tovils* were also traditionally held to combat chicken pox and smallpox (Kapferer [1983] 1991, 14). The most-performed *madu tovil* in the low-country today is the Devol Maduva for the god Devol Deviyo; another is the Gammaduva for the goddess Pattini (confusingly, even though the Devol Maduva is “for” Devol Deviyo, Pattini is also at the center of that ritual). Pattini is the Sinhala Buddhist version of the Hindu goddess Kannagi from the Tamil poem *Cilappatikāram* (typically thought to have been written in the second century CE, but probably composed a few centuries later; Shulman 2016, 101). Two other examples of *madu tovils*, performed less often, are Pūnā Maduva and Pam Maduva.

The major ritual in the up country, the Kohomba Kankariya—which provides the foundation for the Kandyan dance and drumming tradition—can be considered a *deva tovil*, though it is usually called simply by its name. The ritual worships the local *kohomba* gods but tells the well-known foundational myth of the Sinhala people, as recounted in the *Mahavamsa*, the Sinhala Buddhist chronicle compiled by monks in the sixth century CE and updated periodically ever since. The story states that in the fifth century BCE, the North Indian Prince Vijaya was banished from his kingdom because of “numberless acts of fraud and violence” (Bullis 1999, 31). Landing on Sri Lanka with seven hundred followers, Vijaya is greeted by Upulvanna (Vishnu), who sprinkles water on him and ties a protective thread (*nool*) around his arm. Because of the thread, when Vijaya’s followers are held captive by a demoness (*yakkhini*), he is protected; Vijaya forces the *yakkhini* (named Kuveni) into submission and takes her as his queen. He then routs the local population with Kuveni’s help, and the couple has two children. Looking to better his political fortunes, he leaves Kuveni for a princess from the South Indian city of Madurai. Distraught and banished to the jungle with her children, Kuveni puts a curse on Vijaya and his kingly successors. According to legend, the first Kohomba Kankariya was performed by the Indian healer King Malaya to heal Vijaya’s successor, King Panduvas, when he suffered from Kuveni’s curse (Reed 2002, 248).<sup>31</sup> Noting the vast transformation in up-country dancing once the tradition was brought to the concert stage, Susan Reed (2010, 82) notes that up-country dancers who came of age in the 1920s and 1930s saw the Kohomba Kankariya as the “benchmark for dance performance,” but those who came into their own in the 1950s and 1960s were oriented more toward staged performances, either by choice or necessity. Many younger performers she met during her research did not know how to perform the Kankariya but acknowledged its importance.<sup>32</sup>

So far as the Devol Maduva and Gammaduva are concerned, rituals begin with small-

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31. For more on the Kohomba Kankariya, see Reed (2010). There are many other Sinhala ritual traditions that make reference to Kuveni’s curse. For example, Kapferer (1997, 63) describes the use of a *punava* pot (“leopard” pot, leopard being a form of Kuveni) at the main shrine to Devol Deviyo by those wishing to put a curse on others, and in the major healing rituals (*tovils*), articles said to have protected King Panduvas are put in front of the patient.

32. Traditionally, training for a Kankariya dancer took ten to sixteen years, beginning when he was six or seven (Makulloluwa 1976, 3). The format was similar to the *guru-shishya* relationship in India, requiring the dancer to attend to the *gurunnānse*’s personal needs, accompanying the teacher to rituals, and only being allowed to participate during their sixth year of apprenticeship (Reed 2010, 83).

scale yet important events that set the stage for the main ritual (other *madu tovils* contain similar sections). In the Devol Maduva, this includes planting a pole (*kapa*) cut from an areca nut tree a few weeks before the ritual, which is a promise to carry out the ritual (Suraweera 2009, 36). The beginnings of all rituals include celebratory drum offerings to the Buddha called *magul bera* (a transcription of the version of *magul bera* that I learned appears in the companion essay to this one). The first large-scale sequence in a Devol Maduva and Gammaduva is an ensemble group dance with dancers wearing simple white outfits. Ritualists ask deities for blessings and permission to perform the ritual and invite the gods to watch the ritual from their “seat” (*yahan*) set up for them in the ritual space (this segment is called *yahan dākma*). A major segment that occurs a short time later is the “Dance for the Demons of the Evening Watch” (*sāndā samayama*). This includes a sequence of dances, one of which is *pandam pada* (“torch rhythms”), in which dancers juggle and toss torches to one another. Both the Gammaduva and Devol Maduva contain a segment after midnight in which a male ritual specialist dresses as the goddess Pattini and dances in the ritual space. After a tea break (Maha Té) and more ceremonial drum offerings for the Buddha (*magul bera*), *Telme* (a dance for the Twelve Gods) involves elaborate costumes and vibrant, fast dances (by this point it is around two in the morning). Another prominent deity who appears in the Devol Maduva and Gammaduva is Vāhala (also known as Dadimunda or Dadimunda Vāhala) who stars in a particularly notable section from about 4:30 a.m. through dawn. In this segment, Vāhala dances and takes on the village’s bad karma, which is dispelled by another ritualist through the recitation of mantras away from the audience; the person undertaking the Vāhala role has his eyes obscured by a conical hat and swings torches wildly, running eventually into nearby houses. This event appears to me as the climax of the ritual—imagine a large audience, some of whom stayed up all night and others who joined early in the morning, watching as a blindfolded dancer, swinging torches around, runs out of the ritual space and into nearby homes. He then returns to the ritual space and collapses, attended by ritual specialists. The ritual concludes with lighter songs as the audience leaves in the morning light. Bear in mind that the scenes described above are just some of the sections in the Devol Maduva and Gammaduva rituals; both contain other segments, and the two rituals are not identical.

Consultants informed me that *madu tovils* are held more frequently today than they were in the past, when they were annual rituals attached to the agricultural cycle. In my observation, these rituals are now ubiquitous, held virtually any time of year so long as there is a donor to pay for them. They are highly auspicious, glorious, celebratory events. Sometimes the rituals are “cultural displays” (*sandarshana*) that shade ambiguously between ritual and a display of ethnic nationalism: for example, De Silva (2000, 15) mentions a government-sponsored *sandarshanaya* he saw during the war years in the 1990s that was both a display of patriotism and an efficacious ritual intended to protect soldiers off fighting in the war.

The second major category of ritual is *bali*, a word that means “gift or oblation” (Suraweera 2009, 23). The term refers to large, hand-crafted clay effigies of the nine planetary

deities (*navagraha deviyo*) that receive offerings in the ritual.<sup>33</sup> Each planetary deity has its own color, vehicle, food, and weapon. The purpose of *bali* is to protect a patient (*aturaya*) by warding off negative influences from inauspicious planetary alignments. Today's *bali* ritual is said to have originated in the Kotte Period (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries) when visiting Brahmins brought it from India.<sup>34</sup> Also included in the ritual are altars for deceased ancestors believed to be harassing the living, and they also receive offerings (Kariyawasam 1996, 52). A live rooster is tied up and evil influences from the patient are transferred to the bird, which is presented as an offering to the spirits. Besides the main *bali* ritual (*graha pujāva*), other examples of *bali* are *hat adiya* (which adds a segment based on the first steps taken as a child by Prince Siddhartha Gautama), *mal baliya* (which helps women with childbirth), and *bhahirava pujāva* (which protects one's house and land; Suraweera 2009, 26). *Bali* rituals are immensely elaborate, but they are the quietest of the three categories of ritual—the drumming is considered soothing and played at a quieter volume; drummers sit on mats (while in *madu tovils* they stand up for most of the time).

Finally, the third set of rituals is *yak tovil*, which heal individuals from illnesses caused by beings of low karmic standing (“demons” or *yakku*). In traditional Sinhala thought, *yakku* (*yakkha* is the singular) were banished by the Buddha to an island (Yak Giridipa) but given a “warrant” (*varam*) to cause illness by looking upon a person, an action that infuses the person with the *yakkha*'s essence or “malign energy” (*distiya*; Scott 1994, 280). According to the terms of the *yakkha*'s *varam*, the demon must accept the offerings given to him and remove the *distiya* affecting the patient; whether the *yakkha* does so is due largely to the skill of the ritual specialist. Since demons are a notoriously stubborn bunch, sometimes a cure will be deemed impossible or just partly effective. If successful, the *yak tovil* “binds” the *yakkha*, usually for a number of years, until another ritual is necessary. A large part of the skill of the ritualist is his ability to take the *distiya* of the *yakkha* and “tie” it to an object (even to the ritualist himself), whereupon it is “cut” through the recitation of mantras and the undertaking of actions like the cutting of limes. My *gurunnāse*'s specialty, the Sanni Yakuma, wards off illnesses wrought by the “eighteen Sanni deities” (*dahāta sanni yakku*), one illness for each demon.<sup>35</sup> Which *yakku* emerge as masked dancers in the ritual depends on the illness of the patient, though there are *yakku* outside the eighteen *sannis* who always appear in the ritual, such as Kalu Kumara Yakkha, the “black demon” who causes fever, prevents conception and/or delays childbirth. In

33. De Silva (2000, 30) lists thirty-five kinds of *bali* offerings. A few examples are hand-held clay images of the sun (*ath bali*), flower offerings (*mal bali*), cooked rice (*bat bali*), sand (*vali*), year (*varusa*), month (*masa*), ecliptic (*chakra*), four cardinal points (*hin hathra*), cloth (*kada*), sky (*ahas*), and window (*kulu*).

34. According to one version of the story, the ritual was given a Buddhist appearance by the famed monk Sri Rahula of Totagamuva, who had a performance secretly transcribed and subsequently placed “under the Buddha,” thus appropriating yet curbing the power of the Brahmins (De Silva 2000, 38; Suraweera 2009, 24). Another version places the ritual's beginnings at the time of the city of Vesali (De Silva 2000, 34), when the Buddha sanctioned the chanting of his Dhamma by monks to heal the city from a number of calamities (the famed beginnings of Buddhist protective chants, or *pirit*), a powerful story my *gurunnāse* uses to legitimize the performance of his ritual specialty, the Sanni Yakuma (see below).

35. Obeyesekere (1969, 189) provides a list of the eighteen *sannis* and their illnesses; some examples include obscenities and confused behavior, an excess of phlegm and dysentery, deliriums, rheumatism, difficulty breathing, diarrhea or vomiting, and an excess of heat or bilious diseases.

the companion article to this, I analyze some drumming in the Sanni Yakuma.

All of these rituals involve the recitation of myths as sung poetry (*kavi*) backed by drumming or as plaintives (*kannilav*). The myths, and also the vast majority of songs and comic drama, serve as tools to instruct the audience about the history of the rite being performed, and about the biographies of the demons and deities who make their appearance (or rather, look upon) the ritual. Outside of these large-scale rituals, drummers and dancers perform in many other auspicious events, such as processions (*peraheras*) associated with Buddhist temples held on full-moon nights, temple services (*tēvāva*), and sessions of Buddhist chant (*pirit*)—the latter two occasions are also the domain of the *hēvīsi* ensemble, a group of comparatively lower-skilled musicians different from those who play in the major rituals.<sup>36</sup>

One more ritual deserves special mention, and it falls into a separate category: the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi (“Auspicious Drumming on a Full Moon Night”). This is a rare but important ritual as far as the history, practice, and theory of drumming is concerned. It uses only drummers; there are no dancers or other ritual specialists, the lone exception being a *horanāva* or reed player, who is of minor importance to the ritual. The ritual is an all-night drum competition in which drummers display the breadth of their knowledge. It is an offering of sound (*sabda pujāva*) to the Buddha and deities of the cardinal directions (Guardians of the Four Quarters).<sup>37</sup> The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi is a repository of drum speech in a drum language that differs from the standard regional Sinhala drum languages; some of it is recited *just* verbally, while some is played on the drum but not recited verbally. The ritual recounts the gods’ celebration of the Buddha’s Enlightenment through the performance of the music the gods played that day. The content of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi is recited in miniature in a poem that is taught to beginning drum students by their *gurunnānse*:

*tisdekkak talam – susāTak pamana saudam*  
*visiekkak suralin – gāsū pasalos vandamānam*  
*solosak dākum at – satvisi poDi sural at*  
*hatalis aDa padat – gāsuwē melesin desiyasolosak*<sup>38</sup>

The poem states “what there is” in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi: “twenty-one *talam*, thirty-one *sural*, forty “half-*pada*,” and so on.<sup>39</sup> The poem was recited to me countless times, typically in

36. I consider the instruments that make up a *hēvīsi* ensemble further below.

37. Suraweera (2009, 16) describes a Bera Pōya Hēvīsi he witnessed in the Raigama Korale style (a regional tradition) at the Bellanwilla temple grounds (on the outskirts of Colombo) that was radically different from the version that I saw. The ritual Suraweera witnessed involved playing short extensions (*hatara vaṭṭam* and *hat vaṭṭam*) of the *maḡul bera* for the Buddha, alternating an hour at a time with a *hēvīsi* ensemble. The ritual occurred during the day, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. By contrast, the ritual I witnessed went all night, had totally different music, and was vastly more elaborate.

38. The capital letters refer to sounds in the Sinhala language, i.e., a retroflex rather than a dental sound.

39. Seneviratna (1979, 52) describes these in the following fashion: “32 *Talams* or rhythmic time measures, 64 *Saudam* or varieties of drum beats in salutation to Gods, 21 *Sural* or elaborations, 27 *Poḍi Sural* or rhythmic subdivisions, 15 *Vandamānam* or narratives to be played and sung as offering(s) to Buddha, 16 *Dākum At* or drum beat pieces played in the presence of a God or the King in the form of salutation, 40 *Aḍapada* or forty half beats.”



my first meeting with a drummer, and I found it to be common knowledge for drummers and printed in many Sinhala-language books on drumming. *My gurunnānse* owns a Bera Pōya Hēvīsi text that contains the ritual's stanzas and poems, which locate drummers at key moments in the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and instruct on how to build the drum and make offerings to spirits who inhabit the tree chopped down to make the drum. The text is not just music theory but also a how-to manual for drumming and drum building, and a work of music history about the drum's association with historical events associated with Sri Lankan kings and the coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka (see my accompanying article for excerpts of this text). A performance of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi consists mainly of the playing of the thirty-two *saudam*, twenty-one *talam* (and so on) listed in the poem. While the poem is known by many if not all drummers who have trained with a *gurunnānse*, most drummers do not know all of the ritual's contents described in the poem. The ritual's performance requires drummers to dust off esoteric drum patterns and verbally recited drum speech in a competitive atmosphere where they are expected to show off in front of their peers, and this is surely one reason the ritual is performed rarely today.

### THE SINHALA BUDDHIST PANTHEON

The Sinhala Buddhist pantheon has been described in many sources, but a short summary is necessary here since the above rituals map onto different beings of the pantheon, each of whom are ranked according to their karma. The Buddha is technically not a deity but is “venerated as a living presence, alive in images (*pilimaya*) of him and in his relics (*datu*), and [Sinhala Buddhists] attribute to him supernatural powers” (De Silva 2000, 23). The Buddha has achieved liberation from the cycle of rebirth and is not believed to witness or get involved in human affairs on account of rituals. However, the Buddha does receive offerings in each ritual. The Sinhala Buddhist pantheon mirrors political representation: the Buddha sits above the pantheon in a “presidential position” (Obeyesekere 1963, 144) as he delegated authority to deities in the form of “warrants” (*varam*). The “Four Warrant Gods” (*Satara Varam Deviyo*) include Natha (the next Buddha, the Sinhala form of the Mahayana Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara), whose main shrine is in Kandy; Upulvan (identified with Vishnu), the protector of the whole island (Figure 3); the goddess Pattini (the Sinhala version of the Hindu goddess Kannagi), whose major shrine is at Navagamuva in the Western Province; and Kataragama (the Sinhala version of the Tamil Hindu god Murugan), whose main shrine is in the town of his name, in the southeast.<sup>40</sup> The more offerings a god or goddess receives, the more their store of karma increases, and the closer they get to becoming a Buddha; however,

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40. John Holt (2004, 34) notes about the Four Warrant Gods that they “represent the major currents (Vaisnava, Saiva, Sakta, and Mahayana) of South Indian religion that have been contemporary in India for most of the history of the Theravada Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, at least since the later centuries of the first millennium C.E.” He also notes meeting people in the deep south of the island who described Vishnu, and not Natha, as the next Buddha. According to Obeyesekere, the Four Warrant Gods “derive from the classical Buddhist concept of the guardian Gods of the Four Quarters: namely Dhrtarashtra, Virudha, Virupaksa and Vaisravana” (Obeyesekere 1966, 8–9) who play a prominent role in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.



**Figure 3.** Upulvan (Vishnu) and the Navagraha Devi (Deities of the Nine Planets).

the more karma they accrue, the more they are uninterested in human affairs. Thus, while the Buddha, Natha, and Vishnu receive offerings in the rituals, more attention is given in Sinhala rituals to Pattini and Kataragama.

There are many other gods besides these. Other prominent ones include Sakka (king of the gods), Devol Deviyo (associated with Seenigama, in the low country), the Navagraha Devi (the nine planetary deities; Figure 3), and Saman (the deity of Sri Pada, a famous mountain in Sabaragamuwa). The *bandaras* are deities with smaller, regional sway. Lesser deities may have received warrants from higher deities, and even Upulvan is believed to have received his warrant from Sakka (Holt 2005, 392). Below humans on the karmic ladder are *bhutas* and *pretas* (ghosts), and also *yakku* (“demons”), beings who committed horrible deeds in past lives, are consumed by inappropriate urges, and are the epitome of bad Buddhists. Finally, an ambiguous place in the hierarchy is allotted for “demon-deities” (Kapferer 1997, 32–33), beings thought to have been human or the offspring of a divine-human union. These are *dēvatā*, a word that also refers to tree deities prayed to before chopping down a tree to make a drum. The god of sorcery, Suniyam, is a god who is particularly susceptible to his malevolent aspect, and is considered both a *dēvatā* and a *yakkha* (Scott 1994, 23).

### THE UP-COUNTRY / LOW-COUNTRY RIVALRY

While all three sets of rituals (*madu* or *deva tovils*, *yak tovils*, and *bali*) are still performed in the low country, in the popular imagination, the low country is associated with *yak tovils*. By contrast, it is commonly believed that only *one* ritual is performed in Kandy, the Kohomba

Kankariya. Kandyan drumming is prominently associated with the country's most famous Buddhist temple, the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth, which holds the Buddha's tooth relic), where drumming occurs daily inside the temple and is broadcasted outside on loudspeakers. Drumming and dancing are associated with the temple's annual procession, the Äsala Perahera, in which hundreds of Kandyan dancers and drummers perform as the tooth relic is taken out of the temple and paraded around the city to the shrines (*devalas*) of the Four Warrant Gods (Seneviratne 1978). By extension, Kandyan dance and drumming are intimately associated with the Kandyan Kingdom (c. 1469–1815), the last independent precolonial Sinhala kingdom in which the Äsala Perahera was developed into a grand pageant featuring the tooth relic. It is believed that during the reign of King Narendrasinghe (1707–39), a South Indian musician, Ganäthilankära, worked with a Buddhist monk from the Malwatte chapter in Kandy to develop a set of songs on Buddhist and regnal themes called the *vannams*. Dance steps were added during the reign of King Rajadhi Rajasinghe (1782–98; Reed 2010, 87). Today's staged Kandyan dance tradition (Figure 4) culls from the eighteen *vannams* and includes excerpts from the Kohomba Kankariya.

In the initial postcolonial period, “Kandyan things” (Wickramasinghe 2002) came to have a veneration of Buddhist authenticity that the low country seemed not to have, since Kandy was the last region colonized by the British, while the south was colonized for four hundred years by the Portuguese (c. 1505–1658), Dutch (1640–1796), and British (1796–1815). Thus, Kandyan dance and drumming accrued much prestige and were labeled more authentically Buddhist and auspicious than low-country traditions, the latter seeming “rather corrupted and hybrid due to the absorption of elements from other cultures” (Ambos 2011, 255). While Kandyan



Figure 4. Kandyan dancers.

dance became “the national symbol” (Ambos 2011, 255), “low-country performances [came to] seem inappropriate for [the] national identity project, above all because of their association with the ‘dark side’ of religion.” Today, low-country ritualists feel highly denigrated and subordinated to the Kandyan at nearly every turn. It doesn’t help that at staged performances abroad and hotel performances for tourists, Kandyan drummers often don low-country dress and pick up low-country drums to play in segments representing low-country culture; Kandyan drummers are also now hired to play at weddings in the low country, because their drumming is considered more auspicious—for Kandyan dance and drumming has become synonymous with Buddhism, while low-country dance and drumming has become synonymous with stigmatized *yak tovil* rituals. It is obvious that some Kandyan have used the discourse on the auspiciousness of their traditions and their association with the Dalada Maligawa to gain the upper hand on their low-country rivals.

In light of these circumstances, it is necessary to acknowledge that auspicious rituals for the Buddha and deities, as well as drumming in Buddhist temples and *peraheras*, are also performed in the low country (Figure 5). Furthermore, the ritual repertoire to a great extent is shared across the three regional traditions: it is a misnomer that the Kohomba Kankariya is the only up-country ritual. For example, Vogt (1998) studied *yak tovil*s in the up country, and I have seen footage of Kandyan drummers performing at a *bali* ritual. Contra a common long-running complaint waged against low-country ritualists, *despite* four hundred years of colonialism, low-country drumming has persisted into the twenty-first century in surprisingly consistent ways, in preeminently Buddhist contexts. In fact, the low-country ritual repertoire seems to be changing more *now* in light of the postcolonial emphasis on Kandyan authenticity



Figure 5. Low-country drummers and dancers.

and its emphasis on the Kohomba Kankariya and the entrenched stigma against *yak toivils*. The latter kinds of rituals have decreased in recent decades in the low country in favor of the more auspicious and communally oriented *madu toivils* (Sykes 2018), a situation that surely is also due to the proliferation of Western medicine and that some villagers are now too embarrassed (and/or too poor) to hold large-scale *yak toivils*. *Yak toivils* persist now more as private, household rituals without music and dance, or as cultural performances without patients (De Silva 2000). As I have shown in detail elsewhere (Sykes 2018), my *gurunnānse* Dayasheela is disturbed by this development, for he feels it threatens to end his ritual tradition (he specializes in the Sanni Yakuma, a *yak toivil*). It also means that ritualists who specialize in *madu toivils* have increased business, creating a rivalry *within* the low country between ritualists who specialize in these two different types of ritual. In sum, I suggest that low-country (and Sabaragamuwa) traditions—even the stigmatized *yak toivils*—need to be recognized by the state and in Sri Lankan public culture as “Buddhist” and as just as historically important as Kandyan drumming.

### THE KORALE SYSTEM AND SINHALA BUDDHIST ORGANOLGY

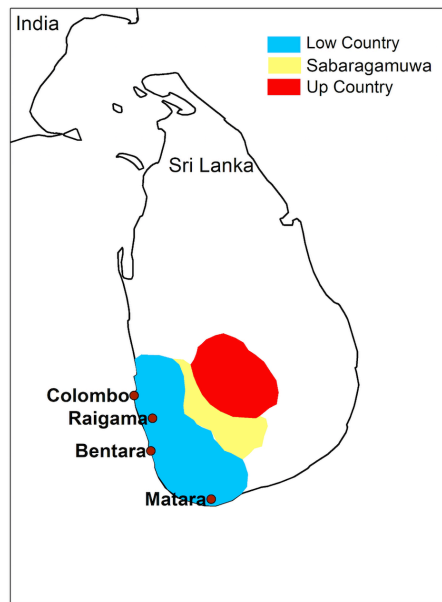
The three regional traditions of music and dance have their own sub-traditions, called *korales* (Figure 6). The word “*korale*” refers to an indigenous political division of regions (registered in Sinhala “boundary books,” or *kadaim pot*) that was adopted by sixteenth-century Portuguese colonizers for purposes of taxation and census.<sup>41</sup> The *korale* structure was recognized by British colonial observers but dissolved into “provinces” in the nineteenth century. Today, the main low-country traditions are Raigama Korale (from Horana, just south of the capital Colombo and a bit inland, to Kalutara, on the western coast), Bentara Korale (south of Kalutara through Ambalangoda), and Matara Korale (south of Ambalangoda through Matara, in the deep south).<sup>42</sup> The main *korales* in the up country are Nuvara (the region and city of Kandy), Hat Korale (Seven Korales, including Dambadeniya), and Hatara Korale (Four Korales, including the northern part of Kegalla district). While Sabaragamuwa is said to be the oldest Sinhala tradition, it remains understudied.

The *korales* specialize in different parts of the ritual repertoire, and contain different music for parts of the repertoire they share. For example, in my experience, Raigama Korale is known for the Devol Maduva, Bentara Korale is known for the Sanni Yakuma, and Matara for the Mahasona Samayama, a *yak toivil* (Kapferer [1983] 1991). The Gammaduva for the goddess Pattini (a *madu toivil*) is associated with Sabaragamuwa. The Kohomba Kankariya is associated with Kandy. Yet each of these regions carries on the tradition of performing auspicious drumming (*magul bera*) for the Buddha at the beginnings of rituals and in many auspicious contexts—though each region has its own version of *magul bera* that is played in its own drum

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41. From the early seventeenth century, the Portuguese kept this information in books called *tombos* (De Queroz 1992; Strathern 2007); the Dutch colonists later adopted the practice.

42. I was trained in the Bentara Korale style, though I have some familiarity with Raigam and a generic passing acquaintance with Kandyan drumming.



**Figure 6.** Regional traditions of Sinhala Buddhist traditional music and dance. Low-country sub-traditions (*korales*) plus Sri Lanka's capital Colombo are given red dots. Map by Girmaye Misgna (modeled on Suraweera 2009, 2). Used with permission.

language, and neighboring *korales* may show variations in how they structure their *magul beras*. In other words, there is one low-country drum language that is shared between the Raigama, Bentara, and Matara Korales in the low country, but ritual lineages (*paramparavā*) may have differences in how they structure their drumming, such as in their performance of *magul bera*.<sup>43</sup>

The Kandyan *gāta beraya* is a barrel-shaped drum with a bulge in the middle that tapers down into two ends covered with different kinds of animal skins. The drum is famous for its high-pitched sound (referred to in the up-country drum language as *jing*), created by the use of monkey or goat skin on that side of the drum. The other side is covered with cow skin. The Kandyan drum is unquestionably the most famous musical instrument in Sri Lanka because of its associations with Kandyan dance and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

The photograph in Figure 7 was taken in Colombo during a ceremony celebrating the first public performance of some young dancers. Notice the drummer in the far back, with his arm outstretched—this gives you a sense of how far back drummers sometimes take their

43. There were many other administrative *korales* besides the ones listed above, but these are the important ones so far as today's division of drummers and dancers are concerned. For example, the Hevagam Korale runs right up to and includes Colombo, including Kelaniya and Kiribathgoda; however, I am unaware of any drumming tradition specifically associated with it. Rather, I am told that in Colombo, the supposed home of the Hevagam Korale, the arts of the Raigama Korale are most prominent (however, as the country's capital, Colombo has long attracted exponents of all the dance and drumming styles, including the Kandyan tradition). More research is needed to determine what kind of importance (if any) the other historic *korales* have for contemporary practice and whether they had their own separate drumming traditions in the past.



Figure 7. *Gāta bera* drummers.

arms before hitting their hands forcefully against the drum, a unique (and painful!) playing style. One can also see flams in action, as the drummers are clearly not hitting the drums in unison.

The low-country *yak beraya* (Figure 8) is a barrel-shaped drum with no bulge in the middle. The drum has an extremely low, booming sound that is achieved through the use of cow intestines as drum skins. While typically called “*yak beraya*,” the drum has many names. Sinhala categorization often groups according to use rather than object: as mentioned above, the drum is called *yak beraya* only when it is used in *yak tovils*, and a common all-around name for it is *pahata rata beraya* (low-country drum). Other names include *Ruhunu beraya* (referring to an ancient name for the low country), *mihingu beraya* (“straight drum”), *gosaka beraya* (“noisy drum”), and *Devol beraya* (when played in the Devol Maduva—I capitalize “Devol” because it is the name of the god Devol Deviyo).<sup>44</sup>

44. The preferred wood for the *yak beraya* is *āhāla* (*Cassia fistula*), *milla* (*Vitex altissima*), *kohomba* (*Azadirachta indica*), *jack* (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) or *kitul* (*Caryota urens*; Suraweera 2009, 50). Suraweera reports that the traditional length for the *yak beraya* and *gāta beraya* are 27 inches, but this may change depending on the size of the player’s hands. When a drum is made, the drum maker measures the length of the drummer’s hand from thumb to pinky (a measurement called a *viyat*), and from the start of the palm to the end of the index finger (a measurement called an *angul*): the standard dimension of a *yak beraya* is one *viyat* for the diameter, and three *viyat* plus three *angul* for the length. The personalized construction of the drum undoubtedly enhances the bond between drummer and drum; Suraweera (2009, 53) states that in the past this relationship was enhanced because the “making of one’s own instrument was considered to be the norm.” To have my *yak beraya* made, I visited a



Figure 8. My *gurunnānse* Herbert Dayasheela holding a *yak beraya*.

The Sabaragamuwa drum, *davula* (Figure 9), is comparatively shorter in length and fatter, played with one stick and one hand. It is likely descended from similarly shaped drums known throughout India as *duhul*, *dolk*, *dolak*, or *dolki*. The tuning of the *davula* is said to mimic the sound of the kirala bird.

While each of these drums is associated with its respective region, a unique ensemble called *hēvīsi* performs in Buddhist temple services (*tēvāva*) throughout the Sinhala-dominated parts of the island. The *hēvīsi* ensemble uses the *davula*, the *horanāva* (reed instrument) and a pair of drums joined together and played with sticks called *tammāttama* (Figure 9)—a word that appears to be the derivation of the English word “tom-toms.”<sup>45</sup> The *davula* is commonly painted red to match the color of Buddhist temples, a practice that dates to the Kandyan Kingdom (Suraweera 2009, 52). Each of the three Beravā regional traditions has its own language, but to my ears, the *hēvīsi* drum language is the same as the Kandyan drum language

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shop in the outskirts of Colombo, a messy workshop with no walls, shells of drums lying everywhere, drumheads left in the sun to dry.

45. Alternatively, “tom-toms” may be derived from a Tamil variation of this drum, *tampattam*. The Sinhala *hēvīsi* ensemble holds an acute similarity to a Hindu drum ensemble performed by Sri Lankan Tamils including the *parai* and *tampattam* (which are virtually identical in shape to the *davula* and *tammāttama*, respectively) and a reed instrument called *sornāli*, which is virtually identical to the *horanāva*. The Sri Lankan Tamil *parai* drum is not identical in shape to the drum of that name in South India: there, the *parai* is a frame drum; in Sri Lanka, it is a fat, barrel-shaped drum played with sticks (like the *davula*). For a discussion of the relations between these ensembles amidst the ethnically fraught context of post-war Sri Lanka, see Sykes (2018).





Figure 9. *Tammättama* and *davula*.

even though it is used by *hēvīsi* ensembles in all three regions—however, more research is needed to verify this.<sup>46</sup>

The *hēvīsi* ensemble plays at sessions of Buddhist chant (*pirit*). It also appears before (and sometimes during an intermission within) large-scale Sinhala rituals (*toivils*). In such contexts, *hēvīsi* drummers alternate with one of the major Sinhala drums (e.g., the *gāta beraya* when performing up-country, the *yak beraya* when performing low-country) at the start of the ritual when it is for deities and held at a Buddhist temple; the drummer and the ensemble take turns making offerings of music to the Buddha in the Buddha’s shrine room (*Buddhage*; this is a time the major drummers will perform *magul bera*). Perhaps the most famous contexts for *hēvīsi* ensembles are temple services (*tēvāva*); processions (*peraheras*) associated with Buddhist temples; and funerals, where the drumming is called *mini bera* (in funerals, drummers put cloth on the drums; only a lower subcaste of Beravā play at funerals).

Sinhala instruments are traditionally classified according to a schema called *panchaturyanāda* (“five-fold sounds”), which can be traced to the *Vansatthappakasini*, a seventh-century-CE commentary on the older Sinhala chronicle the *Mahavamsa* (Alawathukotuwa

46. Other drums are known to Sinhala culture, but they have more obviously foreign origins: the *udekkiya* (a small drum whose pitch is changed by pressing down on strings attached to the drum skin) and *maddalam* (another barrel-shaped drum with a bulge in the middle and tapered ends) are also used by Sri Lanka’s Tamil minority, where they are called *udukkai* and *maththalam*.

2013, 23). This includes five categories: *atata*, *vitata*, *atatavitata*, *ghana*, and *susira*, which have been taken to refer, respectively, to drums with one head, drums with two heads, stringed drums, metallic instruments, and wind-based instruments, though scholars have recently challenged these distinctions. Based on the Sinhala categorizational tendency to define objects by use, better definitions are: drums played by hand (*gāta beraya*, *yak beraya*); drums played with sticks (*tammāttama*); drums played with a hand and a stick (*davula*); metallic instruments; and wind instruments (Alawathukotuwa 2013, 25). Besides the *horanāva* used in the *hēvīsi* ensemble, the last category includes the conch shell (*hak gediya*).

### DRUMMING IN SINHALA BUDDHIST HISTORY

The *korale* division of music and dance traditions likely reflects a medieval crystallization of their styles and repertoire (thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries), a period after Sinhala society “drifted to the southwest” away from the second ancient Sinhala kingdom Polonnaruwa (in the northern-middle region now called the Dry Zone), fragmenting into competing regional kingdoms (De Silva 1981, 81).<sup>47</sup> Because Kandyan dance and drumming traditions are today the most heavily promoted by the state, people are often fooled into thinking they are the most ancient, but Kandy was a later kingdom (1469–1815) that gained in population and prominence only as colonial powers increasingly took over the coasts. Obeyesekere (1984) asserts that the Kandyan Kingdom was initially settled by migrants from Kotte.<sup>48</sup>

As Holt (2004, 57) puts it, from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, Sri Lanka was “awash in Brahmanical and Hindu influence.” The core issue I want to consider in this section is the question of the Hindu influence on Sinhala religion and what influence this may have had, if any, on Sinhala drumming. I also want to suggest that the construction of Sinhala drumming as efficacious speech may have arisen during this period specifically to counter monastic complaints about Hindu influences. Sujatha Meegama (2010, 31) notes that even though Sri Lanka has been in constant contact with South India since the Mesolithic period, the Hindu temples present among the ruins of the medieval kingdom of Polonnaruwa (eleventh through thirteenth centuries) have often been described as “intrusions upon a pre-existing, ‘purely Sinhala civilization.’” She notes that “the art historical discourse surrounding [Hindu temples at Polonnaruwa] ethnicized their architectural elements, inventing the oppositional binaries “Sinhalese” versus “Dravidian” and “Buddhist” versus “Hindu.” She

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47. Some of these medieval kingdoms were Yapahuwa (thirteenth century, west of Polonnaruwa), Gampola (fourteenth century, near Kandy), Kotte (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, west coast), and two kingdoms that split off from Kotte, Sitawaka (sixteenth century, in Sabaragamuwa) and Raigam (sixteenth century, inland from the southwest and southern coasts; not to be confused with the Raigama Korale, which does not line up with it).

48. My low-country *gurunnānse* knows the names of low-country families who provided the first drummers for the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, and while such an assertion will be seen by many as a low-country ritualist trying to assert low-country supremacy over the country’s most famous Buddhist temple, I think there is some truth to the assertion. After all, there was already a long history of guarding the tooth relic by the time it was brought to Kandy, and the drummers who subsequently guarded the tooth relic would have had to come from somewhere.

criticizes the tendency to use modern conceptions of ethnicity, language, and religion back in time in a way that obscures the complex interrelations (sometimes harmonious, other times acrimonious) between Sinhalese and Tamils over the *longue durée*. After all, Buddhism was practiced by Tamils from roughly the fourth to the fourteenth centuries CE, though it was much more prominent in the earlier part of that millennium. Holt (2004, 41) notes that three centuries before the ascendancy of Polonnaruva, the ideology of kingship in India began to move away from Buddhist “to Vaisnava and Saiva orientations,” so the idea of a sharp difference between Sinhalese as Buddhists and Tamils as Hindus may date from that period, ironically allowing us to recognize “mixtures” between these cultures only after they had come to be seen as firmly separate so far as religion is concerned. The ancient Sinhalese chronicle the *Mahavamsa* shows that “royal rhetoric reflecting the presence of Hindu conceptions of kingship does not seem to appear graphically in the text until the Polonnaruva period,” a time just after and including numerous “military invasions and occupations by South Indian imperial armies” (Holt 2004, 37). The chronicle the *Culavamsa* reports that Parakramabahu erected thirteen *devales* (shrines to deities) at Polonnaruva, as well as twenty-four *devales* in the southern Rohana region (38). There were also significant political contacts and marriage alliances between Polonnaruva and the South Indian Pandyan, Cola, and Kalinga dynasties (41). Vikramabahu II (1116–37 CE) supposedly “held the ancient Vedic soma sacrifice ‘performed by the house priest and other *brahmanas* well-versed in the *Vedas* and *Vedangas*’” (*Mahavamsa*, cited in Holt 2004, 37).

According to Holt (2004, 51), the Lankatilaka and Gadaladeniya temples at Gampola (1341–1410 CE) were “the first Buddhist monuments that thoroughly integrate the presence of Hindu deities with the worship of the Buddha,” and many South Indian Hindus settled in the kingdom.<sup>49</sup> In the deep south, a famous shrine was built for Vishnu at Devinuvara, though it was demolished by the Portuguese (today it is the site of a shrine to Upulvan, the Sinhala deity identified with Vishnu). In the post-Polonnaruva period, the Alakeshvaras were a prominent merchant family from Kerala who ruled the southern coastal regions (Kotte) near what is now Colombo from the mid-fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries (Alakeshvara himself lived in the city of Raygam; Holt 2010, 5). They eventually warred with the Tamil Aryacakravarthi Kingdom in Jaffna (1215–1624), defeating the Tamil king, which Holt (2004, 53) takes as evidence of the family’s “thorough identification with Sinhala economic and political interests.” The family seems also to have played a role in spreading the idea that “four guardian deities” protect the island, as they built *devales* for them at the four corners of the fortification wall at Kotte (at the time, the deities were Vibhisana, Saman, Upulvan, and Kataragama). During the time of Bhuvanekabahu (died 1480), Vaisnava Hinduism was important in the courts (47), and in the sixteenth century, King Rajasimha of Sitawaka infamously adopted Saivism. Some of the medieval Sinhala monastic institutions (*pirivenas*) during this period were known to teach Tamil drama (51), and these surely would have included music.

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49. The Hindu temples at Polonnaruva, by contrast, are placed away from Buddhist temples; in the Gampola period, it seems they were placed within Buddhist shrines.

All sources agree that a major backlash to the Sinhala adoption of “Hindu” practices occurred in the late fifteenth century when Vidagama Maitreya, a monk famous for his anti-Brahmanical campaigns (Strathern 2007, 155) and the “eminent monastic leader and royal tutor of Parakramabahu VI” (Holt 2004, 58) extolled the virtues of the Buddha while proclaiming the inferiority of the Brahmanical gods and priesthood (Holt 2004, 58). As Holt puts it, “it is clear that Vidagama’s ruthless and sarcastic condemnation of Brahmanical practice and belief emerged during this period as a result of immense Hindu influence on the royal court and society at large.” According to Bandara (2005), Vidagama relented on his efforts to eliminate rituals (*toivils*) after the public insisted on their performance; he then suggested that if the rituals are to persist among Sinhala Buddhists, they should be reworked so as to gain a “Buddhist” appearance, and thus worship of the Buddha was added to the rituals. It was through this process, Bandara concludes, that the rituals gained at least some sanction by orthodox Buddhists, and they have persisted ever since.

There are several problems with Bandara’s narrative, however. First, similar rituals and related drumming practices surely existed before the later medieval period. While some deities worshipped in Sinhala *toivils* are of Hindu origin, many are not. Deities of Hindu origin were incorporated into the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon but “Hindu” deities do not define the system. The specific *yakku* who occupy the bottom of the Sinhala pantheon, for instance, are not known in Hinduism. Bandara’s story, in other words, propagates the well-known trope I criticized at the beginning of this essay, that Sinhala music and dance arose purely through Hindu influence and were given a Buddhist veneer. Also, there are records of drumming in *peraheras* as early as the seventh century when Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Fa-Hien (Fa Xian) saw one during his trip to the island (Fa-Hien 1965). There are long lists of drums in the early medieval Sinhala sources that to my knowledge are not known in India. The thirteenth-century *Thupavamsa* recounts the story of the relic shrine built in Anuradhapura by King Dutugāmunu, circa second century BCE, and also imagines what drums would have been present in India at Buddha’s Enlightenment. The drums mentioned include *gāta bera*, *panā bera*, *mihingu bera*, *maha bera*, *loho bera*, *tappu*, *tappara*, *virandam*, *tantiri*, *tammāttama*, *nīsāna*, *ranaranga ghosā*, *dākki* (large hourglass drum), *udākki* (small hour-glass drum), *maddala*, *davura*, and *saksinnam* (Trainor 2007, 113). Bear in mind that “*gāta bera*” means “auspicious drum” and “*mihingu bera*” means “straight drum,” and thus do not necessarily refer to today’s *gāta beraya* and *yak beraya* (“*mihingu beraya*” is sometimes used for the latter). Also mentioned are instruments associated with Tamils, such as *mridangam*, *maddalam*, *thappu* and *nagaswara* (Ariyapala 1956), though this does not mean Sinhala played these instruments, just that the author of the *Thupavamsa* imagines they were played in India at the time of the Buddha. The thirteenth-century *Pujavaliya* contains a similar list but includes the *horanāva* (the reed instrument used today in Buddhist temples) and *kulal* (flute). The fifteenth-century *Saddharmālamkāraya* mentions numerous instruments no longer in use today, though bear in mind that because Sinhala categorization works by use rather than object, some of these terms may refer to the same object used in different ways: *mihingu bera*, *gāta bera*, *panā bera*, *paṭaḥa*, *loho bera*, *talappara*, *vīrandam*, *tammātṭa*, *nīsāna*, *rodu bera*, *ekās bera* (one-sided drum), *dūdu bera*,

*dāduru bera*, *ḍavura*, *koṭumbara*, *deṇḍima* (Ariyapala 1956, 57, 99, 106, 130). To take an example of how this renaming might work, Panibharata believes that “*panā bera*” once referred to any drumming for the king or elites, while Kulatillake assumes the term refers to an *udākki* drum; I suggest that the *udākki* could have been used as a *panā bera* (Ramanayake 1986, 4). This kind of renaming is still in operation today; the drums used in the *hēvīsi* ensemble (*davula* and *tammāttama*), for example, are called “*mini bera*” when they are used in funerals.

While I am skeptical of reducing Sinhala drums to a narrative on a generic medieval “Hindu influence,” I do think that Bandara’s general assertion that the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries are when today’s ritual repertoires and regional divisions of music and dance traditions formed is basically correct. Obeyesekere (1984) notes that the Sinhala language used in the Gammaduva has affinities with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Sinhala poetry (Obeyesekere 1984). As mentioned, Kandy was sparsely populated before that time, and the *korale* ritualist divisions roughly map onto political divisions present when the Portuguese arrived. While this will be a controversial statement to some Sinhala purists, it seems likely that the *gāta beraya* emerged in Polonnaruwa out of encounters between the Tamil *mridangam* and/or *maththalam* drums—for the *gāta beraya* is reminiscent of the latter in shape, though it uses monkey skin on one side—and the drum then moved south with Sinhala society to Gampola and so on, eventually developing into its current form in Kandy. As for the *yak beraya*, some scholars suggest that the masks used in low-country rituals bear a striking resemblance to masks used in Malaysia and Indonesia. Kulatillake (1976, 5) writes that

there was a seeping of Javanese cultural elements into the courts of the Kotte Kings, particularly during the reign of Parakramabahu VI, who enjoyed healthy alliances with Malaysian royalty. The institution of the Bandāra Gods and the ritual of Kohomba Kankariya from which the Kandyan style of dancing is supposed to have originated provide reasonable indications of the influence of these Malaysian cultural elements, particularly in the field of dancing. . . . Masked dancing associated with the cult of deceased spirits and such instruments like the *devol* or the *ruhunu bera* [another name for the low-country drum] and the tambourine *rabāna* are supposed to be Malaysian imports.

It is possible it was this cultural incursion (circa fifteenth century) that brought the *yak beraya* and other low-country ritual elements to Sri Lanka, for the drum is notably absent from medieval treatises and sculptures of musicians. Bandara (2005) claims the earliest reference to a *yak beraya* is the eighteenth-century painting in the Shailabimbarama Viharaya in Dodanduwa (near Hikkaduwa, southwest coast).<sup>50</sup> The drum also appears in Kandyan-era

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50. To my mind, these murals actually confuse the matter. Not only are they painted in a style associated with Kandyan paintings of the same period, but the paintings that depict drummers generally show them playing *davula* accompanied by *horanāva*; a few instances show a drum clearly shaped like a *maddala* (the word for the Sinhala version of the Tamil drum *maththalam*). In surveying the paintings, there are just a few drums that closely resemble the low-country drum, but those do not depict the drum as being as long the drum is today; at times it is hard to tell if the drum being depicted is the low-country drum or the *davula*.

paintings in the Mulkirigala Raja Maha Vihara in the south, near Tangalle (Ramanayake 1986, 14). While a “straight drum” (*mihingu beraya*) is depicted on a pillar at the Brazen Palace, Anuradhapura, that drum is smaller than today’s *yak beraya*; Ramanayake (1986, 6) mistakes it for a *maddalaya* (the Sinhala term for *maththalam*), believing that name to be a synonym for *mihingu bera*, which is wrong, since *maddalaya* is not a straight drum—it bulges in the middle and has tapered ends. Another possibility is that the drum depicted in Anuradhapura is a *patawa*, an ancient drum (no longer used) that is almost exactly straight across (there is a slight bulge), though shorter in length than the *yak beraya*, which was supposedly used for female temple dances (*digge nātum*).<sup>51</sup>

Low-country rituals, though, bear a striking resemblance to Theyyam rituals from Kerala, and Obeyesekere (1984) makes a strong case that worship of Pattini came to Sri Lanka from Kerala precisely during the late medieval period. The *yak beraya* certainly resembles the *chenda* drum used widely throughout Kerala, but the *yak beraya* is tuned much lower, turned horizontally, and played with hands rather than sticks. It more closely resembles *kendang* drums used variously throughout Indonesian traditions and in Malaysia, but again is tuned lower and is hit much harder. In sum, I assume Sinhala drumming has always maintained a distance from and yet developed through encounters with these neighboring traditions, though this is not intended to take away Sinhala ingenuity—these drums are uniquely Sinhalese.

Of course, the Beravā have their own origin tales that place the beginnings of their drumming and rituals with gods and in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. For the drummers I worked with, the rhythms (*padas*) they play in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi are what the gods played on the day the Buddha found Enlightenment; these stanzas of drum speech were given to Pulastaya (the grandfather of Ravana, evil king of Lanka in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*), who gave them to the Vāddas (Sri Lanka’s indigenous population), who in turn gave them to the Beravā. In the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, drummers give the gods’ drum speech back to the gods, in a ritual that celebrates and relives the day of the Buddha’s Enlightenment (see the accompanying essay). For this reason, some Sinhala ritual drummers told me that their drumming is Vādda drumming (a small population of Vāddas still exists, largely in jungles stretching from Dambana in the hill country to the northeast just short of Trincomalee).<sup>52</sup> It is also intimately linked to Ravana, who is now viewed by many Sinhalese as a historical king and culture hero. Drummers also say they were present when the sacred Bō tree (under which the Buddha found Enlightenment) was brought to the ancient city of Anuradhapura, which indeed is recounted in the aforementioned thirteenth-century *Thupavamsa* (“Story of the Relic Shrine”).

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51. Kandyan drummer Panibharata reportedly once said that the *patawa* looked similar to the *gāta beraya* but had larger drum heads and was made of calf skin (Ramanayake 1986, 6).

52. Sri Lankan music entered modern anthropology (and by extension, ethnomusicology) in C. G. and Brenda Z. Seligmans’ famous 1911 monograph on the Vāddas. The book’s chapter on music was written by Charles S. Myers, the psychologist and comparative musicologist, based on phonograph recordings. He describes the songs as “probably simpler in structure than any other native songs hitherto studied” (Seligman and Seligman 1911, 341). See Sykes (2018) on the possible relations between Vādda, Sinhala, and Tamil music in Sri Lanka.

Dayasheela states that his ritual specialty, the Sanni Yakuma, is sanctioned by the Buddha, as recounted in a well-known story that circulates orally among ritualists but is found in the *Tipitaka*. He says his ancestors were present at the moment when the Buddha sanctioned the recitation of his teachings (the Dhamma) as a form of protection to cure the city of Vesali. In this well-known Buddhist tale, the city of Vesali begged the Buddha for help because they were suffering from “three fears”: pestilence, drought, and demons. The Buddha told his devotee, Ananda, to go to Vesali and recite the Ratana Sutta, and when he did so, the city was cured.<sup>53</sup> The story is still used to explain the origins of Theravada Buddhist chant (*pirit*, literally “protection”), that is, the chanting of the Buddha’s Dhamma by Buddhist monks for purposes of protecting houses, objects, and peoples. According to Dayasheela, the demons afflicting Vesali were none other than the eighteen Sanni demons (*sanni yakku*)—and the Sanni Yakuma ritual recounts that narrative in detail, with drumming and dancing. While *pirit* is the most auspicious use of sound as protection in Sinhala Buddhist society and it combats all three “fears” (pestilence, drought, and demons), my teacher’s Sanni Yakuma combats demons (*yakku*). Other Sinhala rituals combat the other two fears and have their own origin tales (see Suraweera 2009).

#### DRUMMER STAMINA, SECRECY, AND THE “UNMUSICALITY” OF BUDDHIST CHANT

Large-scale Sinhala rituals are feats of human endurance: over the course of an entire night (depending on the ritual), drummers stand up, holding a *very* heavy drum, striking it with their arms outstretched, hitting their hands forcefully against the drum skin and rim (a “rim shot”). *Gāta beraya* and *yak beraya* drummers do not use sticks; nor do they use plectra on their fingertips or put paste on the middle of the drumhead, which is used to soften the tone in many South Asian drumming traditions. Nor do drummers hold their hands close to the drum and emphasize subtle playing with their fingertips, as do (for instance) *tabla* drummers. Rather, most Sinhala Buddhist drumming involves forcefully smacking one’s hands against the drumhead and rim, resulting in enormous permanent callouses on one’s palms—when I first played in a ritual, my hands were enormously swollen after about fifteen minutes.<sup>54</sup> This has led some foreign observers, particularly (in my experience) Indian musicians, to view Sinhala drumming as “crude.” Sinhala drumming retains what might be called “outdoor, ritual aesthetics” even when it is performed inside with dancers on a concert stage. The genre is surely related to comparable ritual theater traditions from South India, such as the Tamil *Terukkuttu*, the Keralan *Theyyam*, and the Keralan *Kathakali* traditions. In its ritual contexts, performed for fifteen or so hours virtually nonstop throughout the night, with constant forceful, bare-handed rimshots, Sinhala ritual drumming is a truly remarkable feat of physical endurance.

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53. The Ratana Sutta is found in the Khuddakapatha, a collection of discourses in the Khuddaka Nikaya, the last of the five Nikayas that make up the Sutta Pitaka. “Ratana” means “jewel” and refers here to the “Triple Gem.”

54. Sinhala drum traditions *also* lend themselves to nuanced, quiet, and subtle phrasings, particularly when accompanying sung poetry.

Dayasheela told me on many occasions that the palm leaf manuscripts he inherited from his father state not to teach the tradition to foreigners. The lengths ritualists go to guard their *padas* is the stuff of legend: I ran across one story (which may be an urban legend) about how a drummer murdered another because he was jealous of how much the other knew. I mention ritualist secrecy here because it is vital to recognize it as a major factor for the genre's historical development, lack of recognition around the world, and the genre's metric ambiguity—the topic I lead up to now and address in full in the accompanying essay. Sinhala ritual drummers are told not only to avoid giving drum rhythms to foreigners and Sinhalese from the higher castes, but to avoid giving them to other ritualist lineages. There is also a tradition called *guru musti*, the tendency for a *gurunnānse* to intentionally mislead a student.

Because of the need for each lineage or *paramparavā* to guard their ritual knowledge, no publicly accessible theoretical treatise ever circulated (like the *Nāṭya Shāstra* did in India) that could function as an accessible source for all drummers to reference. As Sheeran (1998, 957) puts it, “the systems in use among drummer families are so diverse . . . that each could probably constitute its own system” (see also Kulatillake 1980, 35). Ritualist secrecy also contributed to a dearth of scholarly research on Sinhala drumming up through the early postcolonial period. Studies that did emerge were often written by Sri Lankans and foreigners without much access to the tradition.<sup>55</sup>

The earlier lack of access to drum rhythms meant, though, that certain commonalities between Beravā ritualists from different *korales* in their theorizations and approaches to drumming went rather unnoticed by earlier scholars. Nowadays, drum rhythms (*padas*) are largely available to the public because there are many published books on the genre, most written in Sinhala (some by ritualist authors, including my *gurunnānse's* father; Fernando 1987). These sources demonstrate a surprising continuity in approaches, terminology, and structures between ritual lineages and styles. Thus, today we can feel more confident about theorizing and explaining the drumming in a holistic fashion, even though differences remain between the regional drum languages, their ritual repertoires, and the ways that drumming unfolds in sections of rituals in each of the three regional traditions and *korales*.

There are numerous ways drummers construct their *padas* depending on the sections of ritual in which they occur. To take a few examples, in the low-country tradition, there is a common concluding section to rhythms called *irratiya* in which the space between drum words is halved (i.e., the tempo doubles). Conversely, there is a sequence called *bara* (“heavy”) in which the space between drum words greatly expands (somewhat like an *irama* change in Javanese gamelan); there are long passages of seemingly through-composed drumming that match dance steps; and there are *padas* that are short and countable in duple or triple time, like the “walking rhythms” (*gaman pada*) that accompany dancers as they walk quickly in

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55. In a dissertation completed in 1978, ethnomusicologist Ronald Walcott states that he originally set out to study the up-country Kandyan drum (the *gāta beraya*) and its use in the ritual the Kohomba Kankariya, but because of *guru musti*, he felt forced to change course and wound up studying the *singing* in the ritual, which was more accessible to outsiders.



circles in interludes between dance sequences (I consider these in detail in the next article).

According to Sedaraman (1966, 120), a Telugu treatise, the *Nruthya Mālākhyāva*, and a nineteenth-century Sinhala treatise, *Vādankusaya*, describe how Kandyan drumming is based on Sanskrit rules for organizing syllables. I suggest it is more appropriate to describe the influence of the *gana-chanda* system developed in Pali recitation that grew out of it. Sanskrit Vedic literature shows many examples of *akshara-chandas*, “syllabic meters” in which the number of syllables makes up the meter; the system of *gana-chandas* (Figure 10) involves arranging clusters (*gana*) of syllables into groups of short/light (*laghu*) and long/heavy (*guru*) properties in groups of three, clusters labeled auspicious or inauspicious (laghu = L, guru = G).

Each long syllable is two *mātrās*; a short syllable is one. Inauspicious clusters are in “odd” combinations of beats: for example, “amphibrach” is five *mātrās* with pulses on beats 1, 2, and 4. Kulatillake explains how the *gana-chandas* were developed “by the Pali theologians to deviate from the Sanskrit metres” (Kulatillake 1976, 3):

The Pali poets of the Magadha tradition [Magadha was the ancient Indian kingdom where the Buddha lived for much of his life] were not in sympathy with the Sanskrit metres of the [Hindu] Vedas where the metres were reckoned on the number of askara or syllables in each pada [poetic line]. Instead they employed the gana metres, ganachandas or the cluster formation of syllables in which only those clusters or gana giving a total of 4 mātrās were used. But in arranging the clusters or gana in a pada these poets were careful not to allow it to bring forth a musical rhythm. A continuous repetition of 4 will positively result in a musical rhythm. To avoid this the Magadha poets inserted a single lagu or guru syllable in the body of the pada, thus disturbing the regular flow of a quadruple rhythm. The padas too were made unequal in length. (Kulatillake 1976, 2)

The system allowed for the building of clusters of nested *gana-chandas* that, as a whole, would be auspicious or inauspicious. For example, Kulatillake (1976, 4) describes Māllnee, an auspicious *gana* meter with five clusters, the first two tribrach (⊙), the middle one molassus (⊙), and the final two bacchic (⊙).

Could processes like this be at work in Sinhala ritual drumming? At first glance, no—many of its rhythms are in seemingly quadruple (and triple) arrangements of *mātrās* or beats; I found no cases of extra-long and short syllables being intentionally stuck into (say) a sixteen-beat *pada* to eliminate the possibility of the drumming sounding musical. Nor did I hear about clusters of auspicious or inauspicious *aksaras* being played. Nevertheless, I suggest the idea that Buddhism frowns upon music and that people must find creative ways to produce auspicious arrangements of syllables that do not sound musical did influence Beravā ritual drumming. Bear in mind that a belief in the auspiciousness of syllable ordering was strong enough in the early 1960s in Sri Lanka that prominent Buddhist monks and government officials at the time blamed the country’s burgeoning political problems on the order of syllables at the beginning of the country’s newly adopted national anthem, and they had the

Greek Name	Arrangement	Sinhala Name	Prospects	Divinities	Value in Mātrās
Tribrach	GGG	☉	Good	Bhumi	6
Molassus	LLL	☽	Good	Dēva	3
Bacchic	GLL	☾	Good	Chandra	4
Dactyl	LGG	☾	Good	Jala	5
Cretic	LGL	☾	Bad	Ravi	4
Amphibrach	GLG	☾	Bad	Agni	5
Anti-bacchic	LLG	☾	Bad	Vāyu	4
Anapest	GGL	☽	Bad	Ākāsa	5

**Figure 10.** The *gana-chandas*, adopted from Kulatillake (1976, 3). Each L (often written like a “smile”) is a short/light syllable (*laghu*); each G (often written like a “dash”) is a long/heavy syllable (*guru*).<sup>56</sup>

anthem’s lyrics changed for that reason (see Sykes 2018). It seems unlikely drummers would not take such orderings into consideration, given not only the importance of sound but also the direction drummers face and the time they play, such as when they are hired to play inside a new homeowner’s house to drum in the direction of Yāma (the god of death) to protect the home. This idea that the efficacy of sound is unlocked when the correct sounds are produced at the right time, in the right direction, the correct amount of times, is the driving force behind Theravada Buddhist chant (*pirit*). Monks chant verses an auspicious amount of times (e.g., 10,800), the longer the better because doing so generates more protective power that is channeled into an object touched by a string (*pirit nul*) that the monks hold while chanting. Though I have been unable to prove it, I suggest certain passages of drumming are repeated an auspicious amount of times with auspicious clusters of words to unlock ritual efficacy at certain points in ritual; it is precisely this kind of information that drummers would withhold from me.<sup>57</sup>

The point I want to drive home here, though, is that because the genre was made without reference to *tala*, and because of the prevalence of investment in properly ordered syllables and amounts of repetition in other Sinhala vocal genres, it is probably more appropriate to theorize Sinhala drumming in terms of long and short syllables, rather than beat cycles. To foreshadow where I go with this in my next article, consider this simple rhythm, which is the second half of a *padaya* for the demoness Suniyam Yaksani in the Sanni Yakuma ritual,

56. Note that Kulatillake matches the *gana-chandas* with ancient Greek meters.

57. It bears emphasizing, though, that I have been unable to find any consistent numerology surfacing in videos I have recorded of the drumming.

transcribed here with a number of beats by my *gurunnānse*'s father K. S. Fernando (1987, 36). Note that the numbers he affixes are surely not the order a Westerner would write:

1	2	3	4	1	2	3
<i>de</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>ku</i>	<i>dong</i>

To Western ears, this pattern would sound like a simple 4/4: the “*t*” after “*ga*” represents the cessation of “*ga*” and would register to Western ears as silent; we would also hear a rest after “*dong*,” thus making the pattern eight rather than seven beats long. In Western terms, the rhythm sounds like eighth notes with drum strokes on beats 1, the “and” of beats 1 and 2 (*ga* and *ga*), beat 3 (*ta*), the “and” of 3 (*ku*) and beat 4 (*dong*), plus an eighth-note rest. But—and this is my core point here—in Sinhala tradition it is more appropriate to theorize this as *laghu—guru—laghu—laghu—laghu—guru* (a short beat, a long beat, followed by three shorts and one long). When looking at the above chart, one can see that LGL and LLG are inauspicious *gana* clusters—fitting for the lowly *yakkha* receiving this drumming. Thus, we have an example of a seemingly “regular” (to Western ears) pattern of drumming that combines inauspicious clusters of syllables. I think what has happened above is that Fernando has taken a foreign approach he thinks his readers will understand—the assigning of beats to form a cycle—to a genre that was originally felt as syllables of long and short duration but not *counted* as such. Given the efficacy and secrecy surrounding the tradition, I suspect drummers were not vocal to me about such clusters since they do not want to risk calamity by having an improper or inauspicious offering made to a god.

### SINHALA DRUMMING AND THE DISCOURSE ON TALA

The standard ways of defining *tala* in South Asia are found in embryonic form in the *Sāmaveda* and subsequent ancient music theoretical treatises written in Sanskrit, for example, the *Nāṭya Shāstra*, the *Nārādīa Siksā*, and the *Dattilam* (composed roughly between 200 BCE to 200 CE). These treatises are prescriptive rather than descriptive; they provide instructions for ritual music (*ghandārva*) and incidental music (*gāna*). The former was a formulaic and composed prelude to a theatrical performance, the latter was background music, entrance music, and interludes for the play itself (Rowell [1992] 2015, 20). The category of melody (*gita*) was divided into melody (*gita*), rhythm (*tala*), and text (*pada*), with *svara* describing not just the notes of a scale (as it does today) but pitch organization as a whole (i.e., a precursor to the term *raga*). Note the word *pada* here. *Pada* refers to the “durational and accent patterns in the musical text” (Rowell [1992] 2015, 20). Another important category was *vādya* (instrumental music), which included a sub-categorization of instruments into a four-fold division similar to the Sinhala Buddhist organology mentioned above (which is probably derived from it). Finally, another important category (one that remains vitally important today) was *nrīta* (movement), encompassing “pure dance,” “expressive dance” (i.e., pantomime), and drama.

While the *Sāmaveda* presented rules and the aims of chanting—it is “the Rigveda set to music” (Staal 2009, 4–5)—the *Nārādīa Siksā* describes the ancient secular music (*gāna*) and its

six *grāma ragas*. Bharata Muni's *Nāṭya Shāstra*, of course, is the most esteemed ancient text for the Indian arts, providing “the mythical origin of drama, theater design and construction, dedication rituals, play writing, acting, declamation, dancing, music, poetry, casting, costume, makeup, and emotion . . . [with] six (or in some editions, seven) chapters on music,” including “instruments, the system of pitch, rhythm and meter, musical form, songs, singing, and drumming” (Rowell [1992] 2015, 23). Both the *Nāṭya Shāstra* and the *Dattilam* discuss the eighteen *jatis* (modes or mode classes) as well as the hand gestures that mark time, including claps, waves, and finger counts (27, 39). Scholars have found the roots of the modern *tala/talam* systems in these texts, and generally assumed that in ancient India, they had pan-Indian prevalence. Note, at this juncture, that Sri Lanka—historically a part of the broader “Indian” sphere of influence—fits ambiguously into this narrative: do we think of it as a part of this ancient Indian music theoretical tradition, or was it totally separate or at a distance from it?

Now, consider two major outcomes for thinking about ancient Sanskrit treatises as the root for the Indian musics (broadly speaking) that came after. First, as Rowell's description of the *Nāṭya Shāstra* above shows, music was rigorously tied up with many other elements in ancient India (e.g., drama), even though it was theorized as its own domain. But this does not mean that *every* genre that is today described as “music” in South Asia was constructed according to the *music*-centric theories found in embryonic form in the ancient treatises. The argument I am making here is that while the drumming of Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist community draws on aspects of this ancient music theoretical tradition (after all, the island was on the receiving end of Indian aesthetic ideas over the centuries), it nevertheless operates through a system that is at once unique to Sri Lanka and that draws on *different* components of this older heritage. Namely, it centers on the durational and aspect patterns of texts (*padas*) rather than *tala*. I think what has happened in the present day is that a *musical* discourse is being applied to a genre that was originally defined—that *had* to be defined for doctrinal Buddhist reasons—as efficacious speech. I point readers now towards my second article, where I analyze the working of *padas* in moments of ritual to substantiate this claim.

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