

# THE ROLE OF MUSIC AND ALLIED ARTS IN PUBLIC WRITINGS ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY: “PEOPLE OF SRI LANKA”

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## Abstract

The Sri Lankan Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue, and Official Languages published the work “People of Sri Lanka” in 2017. In this comprehensive publication, 21 invited Sri Lankan scholars introduced 19 different people’s groups to public readers in English, mainly targeted at a growing number of foreign visitors in need of understanding the cultural diversity Sri Lanka has to offer.

This paper will observe the presentation of these different groups of people, the role music and allied arts play in this context. Considering the non-scholarly design of the publication, a discussion of the role of music and allied arts has to be supplemented through additional analyses based on sources mentioned by the 21 participating scholars and their fragmented application of available knowledge.

In result, this paper might help improve the way facts about groups of people, the way of grouping people, and the way of presenting these groupings are displayed to the world beyond South Asia. This fieldwork and literature guided investigation should also lead to suggestions for ethical principles in teaching and presenting of culturally different music practices within Sri Lanka, thus adding an example for other case studies.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, Ethnography, Music, Arts, Academic description

## INTRODUCTION

Compilations of texts in order to convey political and cultural messages may be addressed to visitors yet being always important to the population within a community (Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2018; Rollins & Grooms, 2019; Starke, Heckler & Mackey, 2018; Heckler, 2019). ‘Public writing’ refers in this context to the production of an administratively ordered and distributed collection of texts about a given topic of seemingly public interest.<sup>1</sup> The Introduction to the book written by the Pathmanathan and Malani Endagama states right on page 1 a few interesting things regarding this book which was praised as “the first ever national effort in search of Sri Lankan ethnic groups and their diversity” by the Secretary of the Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages, Ranjith Uyangoda. a selected group of scholars worked out the many chapters of the book. They represent the part of knowledge that seems honoured, and proven enough that it may be sufficient to express national belongings and, at the same time, longings of how to be seen by the outer world.

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<sup>1</sup> The main reasons behind this book project are still not very clear. Most probably, there was some funding available that had to be spent within a certain time frame. I am not commenting on these circumstances in this article but may take this as an opportunity to show the recklessness of drafting projects in order to comply to often uninformed rules of funding bodies.

When I first mentioned that I am interested in reviewing this work under the aspect of analysing, which role music may play in the description being compiled, I was at times reminded that this is not representative or up to the standard of knowledge about music of different people and that this work is merely to satisfy the unknowing visitors. I have to oppose. This is exactly not the case. It is the knowledge accessible to many people within Sri Lanka, not only the few scholars or administrators, who were invited to write. The mentioning of music, dance or related issues seems to be not be important enough to be described up to the level of knowledge or, which would be even worse, it appears as if that those scholars who wrote would not have been sufficiently informed in order to describe music or music related arts adequately.

Both possibilities might have some truth inside yet it is not my goal to judge administrative proceedings.

I merely want to point out what role music and allied arts play in text compilation of such a politically high rank. The publication starts with messages from the former President and the Prime Minister. Maithripala Sirisena says:

“A country can reach its true potential, when its masses set themselves to accomplish a collective dream. The reality that some may not comprehend is that a country, where its citizens try remain in division and disregard their neighbours, will itself be an isolated land.” This is part of the message written by the President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, on page iii. This very short and expressive text can be, well, analysed in detail, yet again, this is not the goal of this paper.

## THE STRUCTURE

People of Sri Lanka can be considered as a compilation of texts that were available at a certain point in history, written by authorities in the field of anthropology, religious studies, cultural studies, or local ethnography, coming with different micro-organisations, which were well-preserved and left rather untouched by any editor. Therefore, they are of different length and in different academic styles of using proving methods such as references to earlier or other writings.

An overview about scholars/writers and their affiliations shows the believe that group identities are subject to biased views, an assumption that is highly questionable in modern academia. In other words, the emphasized academic degree contradicts on the one hand the result and is, on the other hand, a continuation of the book's goal to bring out the distinct contributions of every important group of people in Sri Lanka, such as the contribution to Sri Lankan dentistry by the Chinese community. Degrees awarded outside Sri Lanka follow another interesting ranking scheme that might be subject to further studies. However, the underlying pattern is not so far from this people-collection. Some writers are just shown as competent due to their leadership of or membership in groups. Nevertheless, the title of the chapter and the person together with the mentioned affiliation will stick to all the living people who are possibly just now on the way to develop another view on internal relationships within the country.

<b>The Sinhala Community</b> <u>Prof. Malani Endagama</u> Professor Emeritus in History, University of Sri Jayawardenepura.	<i>Southern University of Sri Lanka and Visiting Research Fellow, International Center for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka Colombo.</i>	<i>Senior Member of Bharatha Community.</i>
<b>The Sri Lankan Tamil Community</b> <u>Prof. S. Pathmanathan</u> Professor Emeritus in History, University of Peradeniya, Chancellor – University of Jaffna	<b>The Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. Stephen Labrooy</u> President of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon.	<b>The Kafris Of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Dr. Sarath Ananda</u> , Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka.
<b>The Muslim Community (Moors)</b> <u>Prof. Dennis B. McGilvray</u> professor emeritus, the Department of Anthropology in University of Colorado at Boulder, USA.	<b>The Portuguese Burgers in Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. Earl Barthelot</u> Senior Member of Portuguese Burger Community.	<b>The Dawoodi Bohras of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. Yusuf Mamujee</u> Senior Member of Sri Lankan Dawoodi Bohra Community.
<b>The Tamil Community of Recent Indian Origins</b> <u>Prof. M.S. Mookiah</u> Former Professor of Geography, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya.	<b>The Chinese Community of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. Thoun Chishu Jemson</u> , Vice President /Chief Coordinator of Chinese Lanka Traditional Dental Technicians Association.	<b>The Vedda Community of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Prof. Yasanjali Devika Jayatileke</u> , Lecturer in Anthropology, University of Sri Jayawardenepura.
<b>The Tamil Community of Recent Indian Origins</b> <u>Prof. M.S. Mookiah</u> Former Professor of Geography, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya.	<b>The Memos of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. Asiff Hussein &amp; Mr. Hameed H. A. Karim</u> , Senior Members of Memon Community.	<b>The Sindh's in Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. Narain Chathulani</u> Past President and Trustee of the Sindh Association of Sri Lanka.
<b>Sri Lankan Malayalam Community</b> <u>Mr. R.G Chanassery</u> , The Assistant Secretary of General Administration of the Sree Narayana Guru Malavalee Society of Sri Lanka.	<b>The Coast Veddas (Verdas) of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Prof. Kalinga Tudor Silva</u> , Director Research, International Center for Ethnic Studies, Professor Emeritus Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya.	<b>The Sri Lankan Gypsy Community</b> <u>Ms. Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka</u> , Reading PhD (Mass communication).
<b>The Malays of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Dr B. A. Hussainmiya</u> Visiting Professor,	<b>Bharatha Community of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Mr. J.V.C. Croos</u>	<b>Assisted in Providing information:</b> <u>Mr. Dharmadasange Nimal</u> , The Secretary to the All Island Gypsy's Cultural Association (2015).
		<b>The Parsis of Sri Lanka</b> <u>Prof. Kalinga Tudor Silva</u> , Director Research, International Center for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka, Colombo. Professor Emeritus Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya.

**Figure 1: Authors of the different chapters in the book (People of Sri Lanka. 2017).**

<b>Prof. S. Pathmanathan</b> <i>Professor Emeritus in History, University of Peradeniya, Chancellor – University of Jaffna</i>	<b>Dr B. A. Hussainmiya</b> <i>Visiting Professor, Southern University of Sri Lanka and Visiting Research Fellow, International Center for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka Colombo</i>
<b>Prof. Malani Endagama</b> <i>Professor Emeritus in History, University of Sri Jayawardenepura</i>	<b>Mr. Vajira Narampanawa</b> <i>Secretary (Secretary at the time of compilation of this book) Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages</i>
<b>Prof. Kalinga Tudor Silva</b> <i>Director Research, International Center for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka, Colombo. Professor Emeritus Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya.</i>	

**Figure 2: The editorial board (People of Sri Lanka. 2017).**

This diversity may give a hint about the large editorial tolerance we can find and that each of the scholars has been given a maximum of freedom in using academic tools including the way how they structure the entries. Seen from this perspective, the structural hierarchy may not surprise. The Sinhala community must have been given the largest space with 44 pages, richly illustrated. Next to it are the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Tamil Community of Recent Indian Origins, followed by the Dutch Burghers, the Bharata, and the Vedda communities. Interestingly, the division into different people does not follow an overarching order system with a clear invariable measurement. The people introduced were put in their usual denomination of which the division between Sri Lankan Tamils, the Tamil Community of Recent Indian Origins, and the Bharatha Community may be a single exception. Nevertheless, another number of people may also be regarded as deriving from India. They are not divided in different historically grown groups though there might be cases. Administrative denominations should possibly not guide an academically demanding writer. Other groupings are divided according to geographic settlements such as the Vedda, or divided according to religious practice such as the Moors that come under the Muslim community.

Then, there is a number of Immigrant Communities such as Portuguese, Chinese, Malay, or Sindhi. These immigrated communities are only briefly described. There might be a better description to be found outside Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the life of these people in Sri Lanka may differ tremendously from other places. In order to find a representative number of people living in Sri Lanka, coming to 19 varieties, there were at least 3 different order criteria applied, which is a first problem in this overview that can cause further misunderstandings.<sup>2</sup>

## THE MENTIONING OF MUSIC AND ALLIED ARTS

Among the 19 groups that were big and politically influential enough to be described, musical activities were mentioned only 9 times. They are missing among the Muslim Community, the Sri Lankan Malayalams, the Chinese, the Memons, the Dawoodi Bohras, the Coast Veddass, the other Veddass, the Sindhis, the Parsis, and the Sri Lanka Bharata Community. The missing of any mention does not mean that there is no specific music to be observed or no tradition to be transmitted. It merely shows the importance of mentioning music or allied arts as an important part of community life at all. It might only be important if there is an attraction attached that can be exploited as a market value, or any obvious behaviour that may serve as an identity marker. Yet, this element of reasoning is not present in the description of the Sinhala majority.

The few words about music and allied arts are reduced to the following:

“Most popular and commonly used are the drums of different styles, like geta beraya, yak beraya, Dawula, Tammattama, Udekkiya, Rabana, Tablawa, flutes or horanewa, cymbals, Often, some of them had been peculiar to certain areas or families or traditions only. Getabere is mainly up-country whereas the yak bere is low-country and Dawula is Sabaragamuwa while the Murdhangaya is associated with the Tamil Hindus.” (on page 33).

Although it is not the topic to point towards shortcomings in terminology, the way how relatively careless spellings and the use of terms deriving from performing arts are handled is telling. The term Geta beraya comes also as Getabere, yak beraya as yak bere, some are capitalized, some not. Attributes to musical instruments are identified as geographical areas as if these instruments have no history, no changes, no specific repertoire, no players, no life. It looks like a plate at the cage of a zoo animal. Only the name (and different spellings) and the area of distribution are given. In recent times, many efforts were undertaken to improve drum constructions (Meddegoda, 2017), to learn in larger groups, to add drumming to educational events. All these specific changes are cut off as if they have no value to any community. If there is anything associated, then it is hardly explained. Also, cross-community events are completely excluded since the emphasis of the book is diversity. Unfortunately, this approach leads to dividing thoughts. Just recently, a fresh publication of Sykes is dedicated to issues arising from this information gap (Sykes, 2019). The following overview shows the headline under which these different people are coming, how many pages their description consumes, whether music is mentioned and generally as what. The shades indicate the quality of references from dark grey (insufficient) to white (traceable). The term ‘not serious’ means sources that are anecdotic or do not provide provable facts.

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<sup>2</sup> If historical measurements do not play a role in some cases, then it might be ok although the division of Tamils or Moors, or Kaffirs may change. But if it plays a role, then Sinhala people might be also early immigrants, which could influence the way of how ownership of land and resources can be seen.

## OVERVIEW AND EXAMPLES

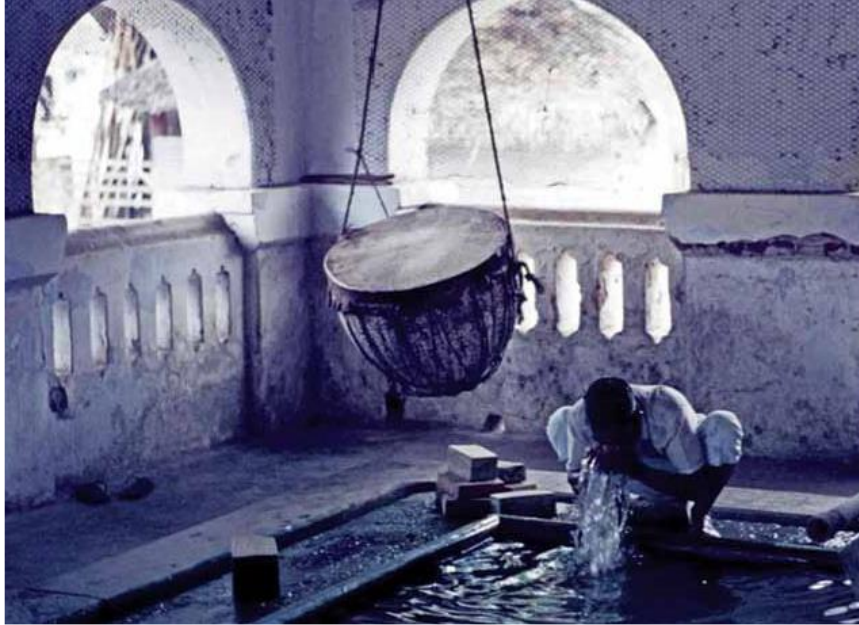
Community	Pages from to	Number of pages	Music is mentioned	as	Referencing/proving facts
1. The Sinhala Community	11- 54	44	x	regional marker	insufficient
2. The Sri Lankan Tamil Community	55-81	27	x	habits	traceable
3. The Muslim Community (Moors)	83-98	16			insufficient
4. The Tamil Community of Recent Indian Origins	99-128	30	x	attraction	insufficient
5. The Colombo Chettis	129-139	11	x	habits	insufficient
6. Sri Lankan Malayalam Community	141-154	14			insufficient
7. The Malays of Sri Lanka	155-172	18	x	habits	traceable
8. The Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka	173-196	24	x	individual achievements	not serious
9. The Portugeese Burgers of Sri Lanka	197-212	16	x	habits	insufficient
10. The Chinese Community of Sri Lanka	213-224	13			insufficient
11. The Memons of Sri Lanka	225-235	11			insufficient
12. The Coast Veddass (Verdas) of Sri Lanka	237-245	9			traceable
13. Sri Lanka Bharatha Community	247-269	23			insufficient, unserious
14. The Kafiris of Sri Lanka (typo, Kaffirs are meant)	271-282	12	x	entertaining business	traceable, some not serious
15. The Dawoodi Bohras of Sri Lanka	283-300	18			insufficient
16. The Vedda Community of Sri Lanka	301-323	23			traceable
17. The Sindhi Community of Sri Lanka	325-329	5			insufficient
18. The Sri Lankan Gypsy Community	331-355	5	x	entertaining business	traceable, some not serious
19. The Parsis of Sri Lanka	357-364	8			traceable

**Figure 3: Overview about selected criteria** (The chapters are put as they are named by the editors).

Analysing the language used in this context, despite inconsistencies in spelling and referencing, there are some positive and some negative terms and textual embedding that show the general mood of referring to music and allied arts. To give an example: in the chapter about the Muslim Community that does not mention music or singing (chapter 3) one can find the word “eye-catching” attributed to the Moorish Bawas, street performers, who do self-harm presentations that “attract crowds of eager spectators” (on page 88). The attraction is visible, hence should be explained. Also, another presentation picture is taken from that chapter, proving that music and allied arts play an important role as visual identity markers, although not mentioned in the description and possibly not being aware of its importance. The large kettle drum depicted proves that drumming is not alone a matter of the Sinhalese culture,

although it may have had a connection to it that drums of this size and shape are near to ritual places.

The Sri Lankan Kaffirs, described in a chapter that suffers most from bad referencing, are described as lacking any musical knowledge, but being capable of singing and dancing and owning musical instruments. This is taken as a sign of prospective usefulness. Two pictures of them without any caption show drummers and a singer.



**Figure 4: Photo of Akk Sinnapalli drum – 1971** (on page 101, no author mentioned).

Among positive terms those terms that are descriptive and those that are praising towards one's own use are linguistic specifications of polite and impolite denominations of groups of people that can contribute to an understanding of introducing an official status given to each group in order to clarify relationships and rights. Yet, the private use and the role of music and allied arts is still affected by rather negative terms. Another largely Muslim minority is the Sri Lankan Malays. The mention of music in this group is relatively surprising.

In an unusual positive embedding is written the following:

“...cultural past times helped to inject good communal spirit especially in cantonments where the military Malays wanted to escape a life of drudgery. They turned out their own musical instruments such as the Gamelan, violins, drums, etc., to be used in their song, music and dance performances. The sophisticated and artistic women excelled at dancing – ‘Tari Payong’ (Umbrella dance), ‘Tari Chinta Sayang’ (Dance of love), ‘Ronggeng’ (Dance to the lilt of Portuguese Kafringga) ..., which were all performed to the accompaniment of the ‘gamelan’, ‘rabana’, violin and cymbals. In its heyday, the Slave Island suburb became well known for its entertainment potential where members of other communities flocked to see music and dancing festivals conducted by the community on special occasions.” (on page 160).

Again visible is the careless use of spellings, but the entire intonation attributes a civilizing effect of music and allied arts to this community, which is in another place anecdotally described “As Saybahn Samat, a Malay journalist once cynically remarked that the Malays ‘chose tavern or heaven’ indicating that they can be religiously lax or in the opposite adopt highly spiritualistic mode of living” (on page 171). This shows a rather low value of music within the society at large as it is associated with entertainment in taverns.

Nevertheless, it is of interest that musical instruments (the gamelan orchestra, the biola, and the gendang) come in the first place indicating that the author may have had the Javanese

Malays in mind and which underlines the instruments' visual effect as an identity marker for a group that is internally more differentiated than described in this work.

It seems also less surprising that the Sri Lankan Gypsies are enjoying the mentioning of music and dance. A picture shows at least two frame drums named as "equipment used by Gypsy Community" (on page 335). However, they are also referred to as tribe based on "respect to the leadership, unity, a system of law and order, mental bond, a certain extent of division of labour in their livelihoods" (on page 331). On page 333, music is positively mentioned yet also declared as part of their livelihood and everyday activities. It has the same rank as circus acts with snakes and monkeys and is not more suspicious than palm reading, which is only executed by the female group members. These remarks stand as if there were no changes over the centuries and all history is a large romantic movie. The author is going to put music and dance in the first place as a traditional business giving the entire groups a stamp on the forehead of being responsible for this kind of entertainment.

### SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

I do not condemn the way of writing although I find a large diversity in academic styles from using the academic plural to the neutral approach in passive voice, well conducted in-text referencing and precise data on historical events but also lax mentions on ancient or past times and revival efforts in present days or the quotation of websites without authors and access dates. What all these diverse approaches show is an unawareness of music and allied arts in their visual significance for their descriptions and, at the same time. They demonstrate the ambivalent dealing with music as an entertainment rather than an omnipresent phenomenon that crosses divisions of people. The strong focus on the naming for groups of people has a dividing strength that is partly supported by literature, although not explicitly said but connected to chants and songs. In this matter, a number of tools appeared that cannot be only addressed to an alien audience. Some descriptions read like definitions and classifications to be taught and remembered among the educated majority within the country since the authors have given the common average thoughts a quasi-academic voice supported by a governmental institution. Being aware of this explosive mixture, insofar, there is hope that the book might not always find a way into local libraries or that reading big books is not fashionable anymore. The last point is already made obsolete through putting the book online. However, the country's recent younger generation, mainly beginners in their field of work, may have to rewrite, compare, and correct many of the views released, which include the given structural schemes. Sykes' (2019) work will barely be read, although it is a good beginning, since purchase price, approach, and context do not fully match local needs.

The writings in "People of Sri Lanka" were, as it is mentioned in the introduction, supervised by the former Secretary of the Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages, Vajira Narampanawa. This supervision, of which I am not in doubt about regarding its seriousness, must have been a rather less effective exercise of his office. If there was no more space for the performing arts than for food, no problem. A problem is, nevertheless, that those few mentions will stay as a normative idea and will play a role in the way how musicians, dancers, and all creative people see themselves: enshrined in and labelled with boxes under some names, living in between ancient times and present-day practice and being doomed to serve nostalgia for powerful fantasies (compare the article of Saman Panapitiya here, AEMR, 6: 51-59). It might be the task of actual arts research to open these boxes and observe the many changes and creative potentials coming with allowing for more than a governmental circular about "People of Sri Lanka".

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