On the Sonic Materialization of Buddhist History: Drum Speech in Southern Sri Lanka

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WHILE this article can be read on its own, it is intended to be read in tandem with my accompanying article "South Asian Drumming beyond *Tala*: The Problem with Meter in Buddhist Sri Lanka." There, I introduced the drumming traditions of Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist majority (70% of the population); their pantheon of gods and demons; their ritual repertoire; and some core concepts governing the three regional Sinhala drumming styles (such as the term *padaya* or phrase of drumming). That article merely introduced the topic I consider here at length: the vexed issue of whether Sinhala drumming operates through the traditional systems for rhythm and meter known in North and South India as *tala*. Of ancient derivation, *tala* remains associated today with gestures that count beat cycles (*tāls*) undergirding North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Carnatic) musics. In North India, this is done with a clap and wave system; in South India, by counting on one's fingers and legs (Clayton 2000, 61; Nelson 2008). Each *tāl* has a designated number of beats, equal subdivisions, and rhythmic stresses. In the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions alike, music is rarely unmetered (i.e., lacking in *tāl*); the beginning of a Hindustani classical music recital— the section called *alap*—is unique simply because it is performed without *tāl*.

As I show below, outside observers have long noted metric ambiguity in Sinhala Buddhist drumming; but they are far from agreed on how to understand it. The genre often sounds *almost* countable in (say) six- or eight-beat cycles, but several drum strokes in any given *padaya* will not fall on equal subdivisions of those beats. Some rhythms appear to go on just a bit past the perceived barline (or end a bit short), while other rhythms have slight pauses in the middle that are not easily countable. As I show below, several scholars have analyzed Sinhala Buddhist drumming through the North or South Indian *tala* systems, arguing that despite appearances to the contrary, the genre is structured through *tala*. But such observers seldom (if ever) are from the drummer caste (the Beravā) that drums in Sinhala Buddhist rituals. The Beravā do not operate through a language of beat cycles, and (as I discuss below) the word *tala* appears rarely in their tradition, referring (variously in different regional traditions) to assorted compositions of dancing and drumming.

In the previous article, I argued that discourses on the acceptability and inacceptability of sounds as offerings to the Buddha and deities facilitated the structuring of Beravā ritual drumming as sacred speech rather than music, i.e., that it was constructed to avoid *tala* on purpose. Noting a difference articulated in ancient Sanskrit treatises between melody (*gita*), rhythm (*tala*), and the durational and accent patterns of texts (*pada*; see Rowell [1992] 2015, 20), I argued that Sinhala drumming was constructed via a theory of *padas* so that it would be acceptable as an offering to the Buddha and deities in rituals. Thus I argued that Beravā

drumming needs to be understood on its own terms, in relation to efficacious genres of Sinhala speech (such as Buddhist chant or *pirit*) in which a theory of *padas* is also used and much attention is given to the ordering of syllables and their place and direction of enunciation—actions that produce magical, protective power. I noted that Sinhala rhythms are constructed as *padas* (the plural) consisting of drum letters (*aksaras*) arranged as drum words that often do not match up with a beat or underlying pulse even when a beat cycle sounds present. However, I stopped short of detailing precisely *how* Sinhala drumming is constructed at the level of *padas* and how the drumming unfolds in rituals. Nor did I have space to consider the literature that strives (incorrectly, in my view), to analyze Sinhala Buddhist drumming via North or South Indian *tāls*.

In this article, I analyze the low-country (southern coastal) Sinhala Buddhist drum language; I describe how the low-country drum (typically called *yak beraya*)[1] is played; and I analyze low-country drumming in several low-country rituals. *Contra* scholars who claim Sinhala Buddhist drumming can be understood via a discourse on *tala*, I argue that the genre operates via pulse points and beats (*mātrās*) but without a theory of beat cycles, rhythmic stresses, or the matching of drum strokes to equal subdivisions of beats. Rather, Sinhala Buddhist drumming is best thought of as repeated sentences (*padas*) whose rhythms emerge from the properties of the drum language rather than an abstract beat cycle they are slotted into. Depending on who the drum rhythms are offered to (i.e., the Buddha, deities or demons), they are organized on a continuum from thoroughly unmetered speech that dodges around a pulse to short, repeated phrases that adhere closely to pulse points. But *padas* are never "metered" in the various meanings of that term one finds in the West and India because many drum words do not match subdivisions of beats that non-Sri Lankans hear when listening to the drumming. Sinhala drum words are "felt" (or rather, pronounced) rather than counted.[2]

I proceed as follows. After describing the low-country Sinhala drum language, the beginning exercises on the low-country drum, and a through-composed drum composition for the Buddha (*magul bera*) that all students learn, the bulk of the article analyzes drumming in three low-country rituals. The first is the Sanni Yakuma, a ritual that heals illnesses brought on by eighteen *sanni* demons (*sanni yakku*). Second, I examine the Devol Maduva, a ritual for the god Devol Deviyo (in which the Goddess Pattini plays a prominent role) that is held to "protect the community from misfortune as well as from a variety of communicable diseases such as measles, chicken pox and small pox" (Kapferer [1983] 1991, 14). Finally, I analyze the

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1. I also noted in the accompanying article that while the low-country drum is typically called *yak beraya*, technically speaking it should be called that only when performed in rituals propitiating beings of low karmic standing called *yakku*. I use *yak beraya* here because that is the name the drum is most commonly known by, though I use other terms (like *pahata rata beraya* or "low-country drum") when appropriate.

2. Please see the prior article for a discussion of the three regional genres of Sinhala traditional music and dance (which each have their own drum language), as well as discussions of definitions of meter in the West and India. Suffice it to say here that my aim is not to provide an abstract definition of meter—assuming that meter exists "in nature" rather than being culturally constructed—and to judge whether Sinhala Buddhist drumming matches up with it. Rather, I am interested in discussing the genre on its own terms, which (as a genre of premodern origin) was not organized via Western notions of meter.

Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, a ritual that encapsulates the heights of the low-country drum tradition and contains drum poetry the gods recited on the occasion of the Buddha's Enlightenment. While the Sanni Yakuma and Devol Maduva use the same drum language found in all low-country rituals, the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi uses a distinct drum language found nowhere else in the ritual repertoire.

These three rituals embody three different approaches to drum speech that cumulatively allow us to understand how drum *padas* relate to Buddhism and the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon. The Sanni Yakuma contains drumming for demons (*yakku*) as well as repetitive patterns that support dancers in interludes of flashy, acrobatic dancing—passages that more closely approximate "beat cycles" and "meters" in the normative Indian and Western conceptions of those terms. Rhythms often mimic the gait of the particular *yakkha* (the singular of *yakku*) they accompany. As the epitome of bad Buddhists, what *yakku* receive resembles crude *music* rather than esteemed, efficacious, and auspicious sacred *speech*. In my analysis of the Devol Maduva ritual, I show that deities like the goddess Pattini receive short stanzas of drum speech that are highly valued and uncountable, but these *padas* may be surrounded by passages of more easily countable drumming that also accompanies acrobatic dancing.

The third and final analysis, of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, explores its speechlike qualities (it is akin to drum *recitative*). The drumming alternates between verbally recited drum speech, drum words played on a drum (with no hint of a pulse), and sung poetry in a mixture of Sinhala, Sanskrit, Pali, and a Tamil-sounding drum language. Some drum strokes in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi have referential meaning, i.e., they are somewhat akin to West African talking drum traditions (for example, the words "Muni"—a name for the Buddha—or "*guru*" are played on the drum). No dancers are present in the ritual and it is best thought of as a drum competition, where drummers challenge one another to show off the breadth of their knowledge. As I noted in my accompanying article, Buddhist monks, the Sinhala Buddhist laity, and kings (in premodern Sri Lanka) were supposed to avoid partaking in music and dance due to the Seventh Precept; as the drum speech the gods recited and played to celebrate the Buddha's Enlightenment, the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi is constructed as sacred speech rather than music.

What emerges from these analyses is a historical argument about the history of meter, rhythm, and drum languages in South Asia. Long ago, Ter Ellingson (1980) proposed that while most scholars assume South Asian drum syllables are mnemonic in that they are named after sounds played on the drum, in ancient India—particularly during the first millennium when Buddhism was at its height—some drum languages arose *before* they were played on the drum. Ellingson proposes that some drumming in South Asia consisted of the playing of efficacious phrases (such as *mantras*) on the drum—that such speech *preceded* its application to the drum. Examining a fourteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist manuscript that includes drum speech he claims is from India and was already several centuries old by that point, Ellingson proposes that drumming in India may first have been the playing of efficacious speech before

that system was subsumed by the mnemonic one, or that some such systems arose but faded. While drumming in the Sanni Yakuma and Devolu Maduva use a "mnemonic" system, drumming in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi does not—it is the recitation of sacred speech on a drum, with drum syllables that for the most part do not sound like the drum they are played on. Given that Ellingson's evidence is from Buddhist India and mine is from Buddhist Sri Lanka, there may be some relationship between this approach to drum languages and Buddhism. More research will have to determine the age of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, but it is the modern version—or survival—of South Asian Buddhist approaches to rhythm, meter, and drum languages that are quite old.

<div align="center"><i>A</i>KSARA: THE LETTERS OF THE LANGUAGE</div>

The low-country drum language (*bera basāva*) has four main syllables or letters (*bijaksara*, "seed letters"; see Figure 1) that are combined into "womb letters" (*garbhaksara*),[3] which in turn are strung together to form lines of drum music (I prefer the word "poetry") called *padas*.[4] One drumhead on the low-country drum is called the *hai tattuva*, the other is the *sural* ("drum roll") *tattuva*.[5] The pitches of the drum change during a ritual due to Sri Lanka's warm climate and high humidity and because drummers constantly strike the drum throughout the night. However, while the pitch of each drum head changes over the course of a ritual, the intervallic relation between the two drum heads remains constant: *tat-dit-ton-nang* proceeds from a middle-pitched slap and higher-pitched choke to a low, open tone and a high-pitched ring. This is a move from staccato–staccato to ring–ring, and from a middle-low pitch and high pitch to the lowest pitch and second-highest pitch.

The *bijaksara* are not indigenous to the low country. Rather, they derive from Kandyan and/or Tamil *mridangam* traditions (the basic strokes in the latter are "*tha dhi thom nam*"). According to my drum teacher (*gurunnānse*) Herbert Dayasheela, the *yak beraya* used to have its own *bijaksaras*—*ga, di, gun, da* (which are the same drum strokes as *tat, dit, ton*, *nang*), but the northern terms were imported into the low country and imposed on the older tradition. It is also possible Dayasheela has it backwards and the unique low-country syllables developed out of the imported terms. Whichever it may be, it is essential to grasp this difference between indigenous and imported *bijaksara* because the imported terms are used mainly for the main strokes and basic exercises (*harambas*) and are generally not found in ritual music (except for

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3. *Bija* and *garbha* are Sanskrit terms. It is interesting to note that the womb letters are conceived of as coming after the seed letters.

4. The word "*padaya*" is also the Sinhala word for a foot of poetry. Note that the language discussed here is the standard low-country drum language used for all rituals except for the aforementioned Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.

5. I learned to play the *hai tattuva* with my left hand and the *sural tattuva* with my right hand, but in my experience, drummers typically flip the drum around and do the opposite. I am not sure why my *gurunnānse* taught me this way; presumably it is what came naturally to me. In what follows, when I say I played a drum stroke with my left hand, I mean that I played it on the *hai tattuva*; but bear in mind that many drummers would play the same stroke with their right hand, with the drum flipped around so that the *hai tattuva* is on the right.

Tat: a smacking of the *hai tattuva* (for me, the left drumhead) with an open hand, forcefully against the skin and rim of the drum, producing a high-pitched, loud, staccato sound.

Dit: a pushing in and choking of the *sural tattuva* (for me, the right drumhead). This is a "pitch-friendly" stroke: *dit* is a low, open tone in which the drummer quickly pushes in the drumhead after it is struck, creating a fast change in pitch from low to midrange.

Ton: the striking of the *hai tattuva* (for me, the left drumhead) to make a low, open ringing tone with the left hand.

Nang: a light, quieter, high-pitched sound on the *sural tattuva* (for me, the right drumhead) produced by hitting the drum near the edge of the rim.

Figure 1. The *bijaksara*.

dit). The basic strokes played in rituals are (or are derived from) *ga-di-gun-da.*[6] Dancers also learn the *bijaksara*, except for them the words are dance steps: *tat* is the foot placed firmly on the ground; *dit* is the foot up on the toes; *ton* is the foot off the ground; *nang* is the foot up on the toes (see Bentarage 2000, 293; Suraweera 2009).

Before describing how the *bijaksara* combine into drum words, it is necessary to discuss a drum stroke that, while not listed as a *bijaskasara*, is fundamental to *yak beraya* performance. This is the striking of the *sural tattuva* two times in quick succession, first with the pinky, ring, and middle fingers, then with the pointer finger and thumb. The stroke is often called *kaTa* (the "a" in each is pronounced like the "u" in "cup"); other times it is spelled *kiTi.* This is one of the hardest drum techniques to master.[7] Suraweera (2009, 71) calls it the "flick-thumb technique," but I prefer to call it a hand swivel. The drum roll (*surala*) simply is the hitting of the *bijaksara* "*ton*" plus *kaTa* very fast, over and over (the drum roll is spelled *rrrring*, and also called *surala.* If the drum roll ends in a choked drum stroke, it is spelled *rrrrim*).[8]

Suraweera (2009, 93) specifies some transformations that each of the *bijaksara* go through as their spelling changes in different drum words (see Figure 2). Reasons for an *aksara* being respelled include: a translation from the "official" *bijaksara* list into the indigenous one; a ringing versus a choked sound; a slight pause in pronunciation (e.g., the difference between it sounding, say, like two eighth notes or a dotted-quarter and a sixteenth—though such

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6. To further confuse matters, in the ritual music, "*nang*" (which in the indigenous low-country *bijaksara* system is called "*da*") is often respelled as "*ta*." This means that the drum strokes "*ga ta*" in low-country rituals are the same drum strokes as "*tat nang*" spelled in the official *bijaksara*—the *ta* in the former and *tat* in the latter are different strokes on different sides of the drum.

7. The capitalized "T" represents a retroflex "t" in Sinhala; it should not be thought of as an accent. It is a different letter than the 't' in the drum word *gata*, for instance.

8. These multiple r's represent a drawn-out roll, the length of which changes depending on the context. The Kandyan drum language is different from the low-country one (and outside the bounds of this article), but it also uses the hand swivel. To give you a sense of its flavor, particularly its unique syllable *jing*—which is not found in the low country—here is an excerpt from an up-country *magul bera* (drumming for the Buddha): *Kundak gajjing kiTa takaTa, jikaTa takaTa kujing, kundak gajjing kiTa takaTa jikiTa takaTa kujing.* In this sentence, *kiTa* is the hand swivel alone; *takaTa* is the first *bijaksara* (*ta*) plus the hand swivel. The other words in this drum sentence (*padaya*) are not found in the low-country drum language.

Tat: (can become) gat, tat, ta, ga, dä, ka, da, ta, ki

Dit: (can become) di, dit, ti, tit

Ton: (can become) gum, gu, di

Nang: (can become) ta, tat, tang, hing, de, nda, ndam, ta, ka

Figure 2. Basic *aksaras* produced from the four main strokes, from Suraweera (2009, 77).

pauses are not theorized as subdivisions in this way); or the respelling of an *aksara* so that it is easier to pronounce when combined with another *aksara*. To take these examples in turn: *tat* is sometimes spelled *gat*, but it is the exact same stroke on the drum (*tat* is the official *bijaksara*; *gat* is a respelling of *ga*, from the indigenous list). In my experience, the addition of a *t* means the stroke is choked (i.e., a staccato smack), while without the *t* it is allowed to ring (e.g., *ga* vs. *gat*). Sometimes the addition of a *t* signifies a short pause: to my ears, *gattang* sounds closer to a dotted-quarter note plus a sixteenth note rather than two eighth notes; by contrast, *gata* is the same two strokes sounding more like two eighth notes. However, *nang* is a nasalized sound that is achieved by playing close to the rim of the drum; in my experience, *ta* sounds more like a loud smack but *tang* is the same as the nasalized *nang*. *Digudang* includes the drum stroke *dit*—a choked drum sound—shortened to *di* so that it can be easily connected with *gudang*— but it is still a choked drum sound. *Gudang* is *gu* (a respelling of the *bijaksara* "*ton*" in the indigenous drum language) plus *nang* respelled as *dang* (presumably because it combines more easily with "*digu*"). *Nang, nda*, and *ndam* are always attached to an *aksara* rather than beginning a drum word, e.g., *gundang* (i.e., the *bijaksara ton + nang*). A word that appears frequently in what follows, *dong* (sometimes spelled *dom*), is the striking of both sides of the drum simultaneously—the lower open-sounding *ton* and the higher-pitched *nang*.

Let's compare Figure 2 to the list of drum letter combinations from Bandara (2005, 72–73) in Figure 3. While Bandara studied in the Raigama Korale (as did Suraweera), some of the words on his list are not found in Suraweera's (2009) study, nor are they found in the Bentara Korale tradition that I studied; that is to say, the *gharbaksara* are where differences between *korales* (sub-regional traditions of Sinhala music and dance) emerge most clearly.[9] His list, though, does include another drum word that was important to my studies: *ri*. It is helpful to think of *ri* this way: while *dita* sounds to Western ears like two eighth notes (*bijaksara: dit + nang*), *diri* is *three* strokes on the drum (*dit* plus the *kaTa* hand swivel, which respelled as *ri*).[10] To Western ears, *diri* sounds like three thirty-second notes. It thus takes up one *mātrā* (beat), the same amount of time as *dita* (which is two strokes on the drum). The word *tarikiTa* is *tari* (the same three-thirty-second note combination as is in *diri*, but starting with the *bijaksara* "*tat*") plus the *kaTa* hand swivel (respelled as *kiTa*). This means that *tarikiTa* involves two

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9. For a discussion of *korales*, see the article that accompanies this one.

10. In the videos accompanying this article (see Video Examples 7a to 9b), one can see that *ri* is not completely the same as the *kaTa* hand swivel: my teacher plays *ri* more like a movement with the whole palm from the edge of the drum to the middle of the drum. Nevertheless, I suggest *ri* is conceptualized as a faster version of *kaTa*.

Tat: taka, tari, tadi, taku, tahura, tarita, taringu, tarikita, tadikita, taharda

Dit: dita, diri, diku, dikaTa, diringu, dinguda, ditagata, diritaka, dingudang

Ton: gunda, tonga, gun, gundang, gudita, gunda, guditaka, gundagata, tongkiTa

Nang: nata, taka, nangta, takaTa, nangki, nangkaTa, nanguda, nangata

Figure 3. The *gharbaksara*: Combinations of the *bijaksara* into drum words in the Raigama Korale tradition that Bandara (2005) studied.[11]

hand swivels, the first very fast (involving a total of three thirty-second notes) and the second much slower (approximating two eighth notes). Put together, *tarikiTa* is two *mātrās* in length. *Taharda*, meanwhile, begins with the same three fast strokes as *tari* (but respelled as *tahar*) plus *da* (the fourth indigenous *bijaksara*). There is a slight pause between *tahar* and *da* that one does not hear in *tarikiTa,* because *da* is one stroke, while *kiTa* is two.

Suraweera (2009, 93) remarks that "this seemingly complex relationship between *aksara* and technique is not explicitly addressed in the tradition, and as a result, it remains a significant challenge faced by the novice who approaches the learning of the *yak beraya*." This is an understatement! In fact, I have found no agreement among Sinhala sources on the contents of the *gharbaksara*. Words on Bandara's (2005, 72–73) list I never came across include *nangki* and *nanguda*; in the Bentara tradition that I studied, *taka* on his list (Figure 3) is spelled *gata*. This may reflect the fact that the Raigam Korale style that Bandara studied is geographically closer to Sabaragamuwa and its drum language may include loan words from that regional tradition.

While a proper understanding of the drum language can be attained only by studying with a *gurunnānse*, all hope is not lost, provided the scholar or autodidact bears in mind one important point: the key to pronouncing and playing a *padaya* is that it simply is not possible to greatly slow down or speed up some drum words without changing them into other drum words or making them meaningless (an error). This is the core aspect of Sinhala drumming that makes it impossible to split drum words apart (as they would be if they were split into even subdivisions in the Indian systems of beat cycles) and which makes translating them from one Western time signature to another impossible. A good example is *takaTa* (*ta* ringing out + the *ka-Ta* hand swivel). Played at a slow and intermediate pace (so that it sounds like triplets), the word is *takaTa*. If the same three strokes are played just once very fast, the drum word is the aforementioned *tari* (as I said above, *ri* is two strokes, not one—it is *ka* and *Ta* played very fast). The words *takaTa* and *tari* are the same exact strokes played on the drum but are spelled differently because their strokes have different temporal durations—they have different amounts of space in between their *aksaras*. One time I tried slowing *tari* down so that

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11. Any "a" sound that is not in first position (such as the second "a" in *tarita*), is pronounced differently from the first "a." The first "a" is pronounced like the "o" in "hot"; the second and any after are pronounced like the "u" in "cup."

it eventually became *takaTa* and asked my teacher Herbert Dayasheela if there was a moment when it switched from one to the other. This idea was nonsensical to him: they are different drum words. *Even though* they are the same strokes on the drum, they receive different names depending on how they are pronounced, and this pronunciation has to do with the temporal duration of the individual drum strokes.

This means that certain drum patterns must always sound the same regardless of what tempo they are played at. No matter how fast one plays a *padaya*, the spaces in between the syllables that make up these sorts of drum words must remain the same in order for them to be "legible." For example, one can play a *padaya* at a slow or fast tempo, but if it includes *tari*, that word will sound *exactly the same* no matter what tempo it is played at (it will always sound, to Western ears, like three notes played extremely fast); while the durations before and after the word would be extended if the tempo slowed down, the spaces in between the *aksaras* that make up *tari* will always maintain the same temporal relationship. *For, to substantially increase or decrease the amount of space in between a drum word's syllables could turn it into another drum word* (e.g., if slowed down, it would turn *tari* into *takaTa*). Drummers, then, may conceptually play *tari* on "a beat," but the drum word itself will not be split apart into subdivisions of that beat.

Despite the confusing plethora of drum strokes and combinations, these transformations of the drum language are not that confusing to low-country drummers. The subtleties make sense in the logic of the language, and they are learned cumulatively through the slow process of studying with a *gurunnānse*.

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EXERCISES: *HARAMBAS*

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Drummers practice the *bijaksara* and *garbhaksara* through exercises called *harambas*.[12] The basic *harambas* of the Bentara Korale are as follows (see also [Video Examples 1a to 5b](#)) and begin with an introductory salutation (*namaskara harambaya*)[13]:

> *namaskara harambaya*: *tat tat dit dit / tat-tat dit-dit tat / tahirin diri kiTi /guhiti gadirikita / ta*[14]
>
> 1. *tat dit ton nang*
> 2. *tat tat dit dit ton ton nang nang*

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12. I think the word "*haramba*" is a corruption of the Tamil word "to begin," "*aramba*." However, it is familiar to Sinhala speakers (it is also used to refer, for instance, to military exercises).

13. Note that I adopt the Sinhala convention of applying slashes to mark the end of phrases, but these should not be taken to signify a meter. As the reader will notice in what follows, the words that happen between the slashes are not rigorously counted nor always played on distinct subdivisions, such as "*tahirin diri kiTi*." In the *namaskara harambaya*, for instance, the slash after "*tat-tat dit-dit tat*" signifies a slight pause, something similar to when singers take a small breath before singing.

14. Here, the hand swivel (*kaTa*) is respelled *kiTi* (for reasons unbeknownst to me). In what follows, words next to each other are evenly spaced; those played closer together (i.e., two strokes making up a single *mātrā*) are connected with a hyphen (-), e.g., *tat-tat*. To hear how it is played, please consult the videos in which my teacher plays these patterns.

3. *tat kiTi dit kiTi* (*kiTi* = hand swivel)
   ton kiTi nang kiTi
4. *tat tat kiTi / dit dit kiTi*
   ton ton kiTi / nang nang kiTi
5. *kiTitaka kiTigunda* (*kiTitaka* = hand swivel + the *bijaksara tat* and *nang*; *kiTigunda* = hand swivel + *bijaksara ton* and *nang*)
6. *tat kiTitaka / dit kiTitaka / ton kiTitaka / nang kitiTaka*
7. *tat tat kiTitaka / dit dit kiTitaka / ton ton kiTitaka / nang nang kitiTaka*
8. *Tat kiTi taka dit kiTi taka dit / dit kiTi taka dit kiTi taka dit / ton kiTi taka dit kiTi taka dit / nang kiTi taka dit kiTi taka dit*
9. *kiTi kiTitaka dit / kiTitaka dit*
10. *tat tat kiTitaka / guhiti gadirikiTa / dit dit kiTitaka / guhiti gadirikiTa / ton ton kiTitaka / guhiti gadirikiTa / nang nang kiTitaka / guhiti gadirikiTa* (*guhiti gadirikiTa = gu* [*bijaksara ton*] + *kiTi* [respelled *kaTa*] + *ga* [*bijaksara tat*] + *diri* + *kiTa* [hand swivel]).
11. *kiTi tak kiTi taka / guhiti gadirikiTa*
12. *kiTi kiTi kiTitaka / guhiti gadirikiTa*
13. *guhiti gadirikiTa / gahiti gadirikiTa*
14. *rrrrim* (or *surala*, drum roll)

The following are extra *harambas* I learned that are not on the main list above:

15. *kiTi tak kiTi taka / guhiti gadirikiTa*
    kiTi kiTi kiTitaka / guhiti gadirikiTa
16. *guhiti gadirikiTa / gahiti gadirikiTa*
    guhiti gadirikiTa / tat dit ton nang
17. *guhiti gadirikiTa / gahiti gadirikiTa tat dit ton nang guhiti gadirikiTa / gahiti gadirikiTa degadit ton nang*

Each *harambaya* familiarizes the student with a different stroke and combinations of strokes. Although the *harambas* appear easy, they are difficult for a beginning drummer. It took me months to work through these, as my *gurunnānse* would generally assign a new one each week. Some of the above list may seem to approximate meter (for example, number 1 is four straightforward, evenly spaced drum strokes), but it is important to realize that playing *harambas* as a numbered list (even these specific exercises) is probably a modern invention and that, in the past, drummers learned *harambas* and the drum language in part through learning dance steps. And here we can see how the drumming emerged in its first instance through felt gestures rather than rigorously counted beats. In an unpublished paper, Judith Becker (n.d.) provides an example of a low-country dance *harambaya* she learned (see Figure 4); while these are numbered, note that the drum roll *"rrrrr"* is elongated and timed with the dancer rather than counted.

#11. *ekolaha* ["eleven"]. First time start on right foot, facing left, turning right. Second time start on left foot, facing right, turning left.

1.	gum	(face left) step left, stamp right foot
2.	–	
3.	rrrrr	rapid steps on full foot, indeterminate rhythm and tempo
4.	rrrrr	
5.	rim	right foot brush, stamp down, indeterminate rhythm and tempo
6.	–	
7.	dahing	right foot stamp, then left foot
8.	–	
9.	re	right foot turned way to right
10.	ga	stamp right foot in place
11.	di	left foot turned way to left
12.	te	stamp left foot in place
13.	gun	stamp right foot emphatically
14.	de	left foot placed in front of right foot
15.	gat	cross right foot over left foot
16.	–	
17.	dahing	lift left foot, then put left foot down
18.	–	

Figure 4. Judith Becker's example of a dance *harambaya*.[15]

As I learned the *harambas* I was also introduced to some basic *padas* (drum phrases), whose rhythms can be found on the accompanying videos. These include: (1) *degat gatakudung*; (2) *Gun gundang gadigata / dahing gattang gadi gata;* (3) *Regum gundang gat / degat gatakudung;* (4) *Gun degata / gat ta gun*; (5) *gundagat gata*. See Video Examples 6a to 6c for examples of how to play elaborations, or *alankāras*, of these *padas*. These latter patterns are the closest *yak beraya* drumming gets to "metered-sounding" patterns: they are likely patterns a drummer would play while playing a pop song, and they accompany certain lighter moments of ritual when folk songs are sung.[16] But their apparently metered structure is illusory: there is no discourse on meter surrounding these rhythms, which are not highly valued by drummers (and they may very well be modern inventions).

After I had finally passed through the *harambas*, Dayasheela presented me with another set that works on the hand swivel (here spelled *ri*). These are the *tari harambas* (see also Video Examples 7a to 9b):

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15. She says that "*ekolaha* consists of two phrases, each ending with the cadential *dahing,* a stroke/step with a strong accent on the second syllable, i.e., *hing*. The empty beat after *dahing* is a syntactic marker of a phrase or sentence."

16. Sinhala traditional drums are rarely used in pop music but occasionally may be played (such as in rock or hip-hop songs) to reference traditional culture and at times call forth Sinhala Buddhist history and nationalism (see Sykes 2018).

1. *tat tari dit tari / ton tari nang tari*
2. *tat tat tari / dit dit tari / ton ton tari / nang nang tari*
3. *tat tari dit kum / tari dit kum / dit tari dit kum / tari dit kum / ton tari dit kum / tari dit kum / nang tari dit kum / tari dit kum*
4. *tat tari dit kum / tari dit kum / tat tari tattari tari / tari dit kum*
   dit tari dit kum / tari dit kum / dit tari tattari tari / tari dit kum
   ton tari dit kum / tari dit kum / ton tari tattari tari / tari dit kum
   nang tari dit kum / tari dit kum / nang tari tattari tari / tari dit kum
5. *tat tari dit kum / tari dit kum / tat tari tattari tari / tarikundirikita taka dit kum / dit tari dit kum / tari dit kum / dit tari tattari tari / tarikundirikita taka dit kum / ton tari dit kum / tari dit kum / ton tari tattari tari / tarikundirikita taka dit kum /nang tari dit kum / tari dit kum / nang tari tattari tari / tarikundirikita taka dit kum*
6. *tari tari gata / guhiti gadirikiTa degata tari tari gata / regata gun* (this is a good example of how the saying of a *pada* can differ from how it sounds; "*re*" can be thought of as a very quick mini-drum roll that here is a pickup note to "*gata*").

The following are other *tari harambas* I learned that are not on the main list above:

7. *guhiti gadiri kita / tari Ta*
   guhiti gadiri kita / tari Ta
   guhiti gadirikiTa / gahiti gadirikiTa
   degadit gata dung
8. *tat tari dit tari / tat tari dittari tari*
   tarikundirikiTa gata gunda / tari dit kum
   dit tari tat tari / dit tari tat tari tari
   tarikundirikita gata gunda / diri dit kum
   ton tari nang tari / ton tari nang tari tari
   tarikundirikiTa gata gunda / ton dit kum
   nang tari ton tari / nang tari ton tari tari
   tarikundirikiTa gata gunda / nang dit kun

One drummer remarked that nowadays, since people typically work during the day, they cannot spend the whole day dancing and drumming with a *gurunnānse* as in the past; therefore, the *harambas* have become useful.

MAGUL BERA

After the *harambas*, students learn their first "composition," a through-composed piece of solo drumming for the Buddha called *magul bera*. The *magul bera* is arguably the most important composition a drummer will ever learn; it is played on many occasions, such as to inaugurate special events and to begin rituals. It is one of a very small number of drum compositions in the tradition that consist only of drums, with no dancing or singing. To outsiders, the *magul bera* may feel free of any sense of pulse; however, when I asked, my *gurunnānse* clapped out a pulse to demonstrate that it is possible to play a beat

isochronously—but to do this would be considered unartful. The *magul bera* is a through-composed composition and, to be played properly, the drumming must not be played too rigidly on this imaginary, clappable beat. The *magul bera* allows for poetic interpretation; there is no repetition, save for a few phrases that are sentence-like and best conceived as being free of meter. With practice, drummers memorize the drum *aksaras* (syllables) and play the composition as recited drum poetry. In the low country, the composition contains three sections or *vattama* ("circles"; Kulatillake 1976, 41), though in the composition that I learned, these sections do not repeat.

Due to the length of the *magul bera* (it typically lasts 3 to 5 minutes), its unmetered nature, and what seemed to me at first to be *no* similarities between one and another drummer's *magul beras*, I initially assumed the *magul bera* is improvised. This turned out to be false: the *magul bera* is handed down from a *gurunnānse* and memorized. However, skilled drummers may take liberties by adding artistic flourishes. Each *korale* has its own version, but in practice, there are variations within *korales*. It is more apt to say that each *gurunnānse* has his own version of his *korale*'s *magul bera*. Suraweera (2009), who studied in Raigam Korale just up the road from my teacher's Bentara Korale, learned *almost* the same music I did; while some parts are exactly the same, at other points the drumming he learned veers in another direction.[17] However, our versions share key structural similarities, as they both have three sections, begin with a slow *dahing dit* that speeds up, and the sections end with *tat tat gum* ("*gum*" is both hands playing the drum together, including the *bijaksara ton* and *nang*).[18] The *magul bera* that I learned goes as follows (see also [Video Examples 10 to 13b](#))[19]:

> **Palamu Vattama** (first section)
> {*dahing dit*} / / / / / {*dahing*} / / / / / (both start slow and speed up)
>
> *rrrrrrring dahingta gata gugu dita gata gugu dang, gata gu dang dahing*
> {*din din dahing*} / / / / / (speeds up)
> {*din gata gati gata gudang dahing*} / / / / /
> *din gati gata gudang*
> {*gati gata gunda*} / / / / (speeds up)
> <u>*gata gugu dita gata gugu dang, gata gu dang, dahing dahing tat gum*</u>
>
> **Daeveni Vattama** (second section)
> {*rrrrregata gatang gati gata gat degata gata du du dung*} / / /
> *regata gundang dahing*
> *dahingta gatdirikita gatdirikita gatang*

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17. One could undertake a study of *magul beras* like a study of English folk songs, for it is an oral tradition passed down by numerous people, generating significant regional variations, yet instantly recognizable for those who know what it sounds like.

18. In the up country, two of the three *vattama* are preceded by "preludes" known as *deva padaya* and *guru padaya*; as these names imply, the first are offerings to the deities and the second to one's teachers.

19. Here, each "/" represents a repetition of the previous drum words put in brackets { }. Each "rrrr" represents a drum roll.

degata gundirikita gundirikita gundang
dahingta gatdirikita gatdirikita gatang
degata gundirikita gundirikita gundang
{rrrrundang gundang dahing} / /
rrrrundang gundang {gati gata gunda} / / / / / / (speeds up)
gata gugu dita gata gugu dang, gata gu dang, dahing dahing tat gum

Tunveni Vattama (third section)
{rrrrring gata gugu dang, gat diriga gat gat gu dum rrrung gu gata gugu dang gat diriga gat gat gu dum} / /
rrrrring gata gugu dang gati gata gu gu dam
gata gugu dang, gunda gugu dang, gugu dang
ga ta dit ta gat dita gata gati gata guhadi gadiri kita
rrrrrrrrdung ta guhi guhi guhi gatang degata
diri diri diri gatang
dun ta guhi guhi guhi gatang degata
diri diri diri gatang
{gunda gunda gunda gata gata gata gata gata} / / (speeds up)
gata dita gata gunda gata dahing
gu gunda gunda gundata gundat
gata gugu dita gata gugu dang, gata gu dang, dahing dahing tat gum

It is worth dwelling on this drum poetry for a moment. First, there are some phrases that recur in most of the low-country *magul beras* I have encountered: some (such as the first *dahing dit*) are played multiple times in a row, start slow, and speed up.[20] This can be considered an introduction. Second, each of the three sections begins with a drum roll (if we count the opening *dahing dit* as an intro to the first section). Third, each *vattama* begins with an opening phrase repeated a few times before going into the "body" of the section. Fourth, there is a penultimate line that repeats and speeds up. And fifth, each of the sections ends with the same cadential phrase (underlined above). It is notable, too, that each *vattama* is longer than the one that precedes it. Most of the drumming is loud and except for a few pauses (marked with commas), the drum words run into each other.[21] Suraweera (2009, 150) saw footage of a *magul bera* recorded in 1994 that included *ten* drummers, an extraordinary number considering how in his fieldwork in the Raigama Korale, he commonly noted two or three drummers playing *magul bera* together. By contrast, I typically saw just one drummer playing it in the rituals I saw in Raigama Korale.

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20. I found similar cases in East Asian drumming traditions, such as in the Korean genre *samul nori,* where drummers may begin with widely spaced notes that speed up into a roll.
21. While *magul bera* is auspicious, one should not think it is the most complex and difficult drum music—far from it. While it takes skill to play (and playing it well is an art in itself), *magul bera* is something drummers learn at the beginning of their studies.

YAK BERA PADAS: THE ARTFUL REPETITION OF DRUM SENTENCES

The foundation of *yak beraya* drumming in rituals is the *padaya*, a short phrase repeated while a ritual sequence occurs. While many *padas* are simple, such as those used in trance sequences (e.g., *gunda gati gata*) and rhythms that support sung poetry (*kavi*), others are long and complex. This list of *pada* types is adapted from and builds on Suraweera's (2009, 68):

- *Namaskara pada:* worshipping the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, as well as the drum. Often played before one starts practicing.
- *Magul bera:* auspicious drumming for the Buddha.
- *Ārambhaka pada:* introductory rhythms.
- *Sarala pada*: "light rhythms," performed with vocal recitations and dance.
- *Gaman mātrā*: "walking rhythms," or *vattam pada* ("circle rhythms"), played while dancers walk quickly in circles.
- *Vändum at*: rhythms played while saluting the deities.
- *Yahan däkma*: "looking at the seats of the gods," rhythms played to seek blessings from the gods played in front of the seat (*yahan*) where they watch the ritual.
- *Dummala pada, pideni pada, kotal pada*: rhythms played for the cleansing of ritual objects and the ritual space.
- *Pandam pada:* "torch rhythms," played while dancers play with torches. Sometimes these involve elaborate choreography, with dancers moving in a circle and hitting one another's torches as they dance.
- *Saudama* or *adauva*: in these sections, a salutation verse is uttered that matches exactly the *pada* played by the drummer. Traditionally, this is when performers receive donations from the audience.
- Patterns associated with specific segments of rituals. This includes segments named after specific *yakku*, e.g., in the *sanni yakuma*; in the Devol Maduva, it involves rhythms for the goddess Pattini and god Devol, as well as named sections like *sända samayama* and *telme*. Some such sections are among the most highly revered and complex drumming in the repertoire.
- *Puja bera*: solo drumming for deities played at the end of a ritual.

Other kinds of *padas* are possible: for example, *sural padaya* (a *padaya* that utilizes a lot of drum rolls or *sural*), *padaya pirima* (a *padaya* that begins a particular section), and *padaya avasānaya* (a *padaya* that concludes a particular section). Ritual sequences will have certain kinds of *padas* within them.

In my experience, the drumming and dancing in a standard sequence of ritual music and dance generally proceeds through the following sections in the low country:

- *Antādiya*: Drummers match the dancers in an opening prelude.
- *Bera pada*: The main *padas* (sometimes called *bera mātrās*) are played and repeated

over and over.

- *Alankāra*: As a *padaya* repeats, drummers add stock or improvised elaborations (*alankāra*).
- *Irratiya*: The section concludes with a fast, through-composed sequence in which the drum music and dance steps are one and the same. My *gurunnānse* describes *irratiya* as meaning "half," which I take to mean that the space between the drum words is halved, creating a fast, dramatic ending to a section of ritual.[22]

Keep in mind that "*padaya*" is a general word for a phrase of drum music: each *antādiya* has its *padas*, each *irratiya* has its *padas*, and so on, and the generic term for rhythms in each part of a ritual is *bera padas* (or *bera mātrās*). While the basic structure is *antādiya–bera pāda–irratiya*, this can be extended in practice and is often transformed. Common additions to this structure include drumming for *kavi* (sung poetry) that occur before the main sequence of dance and drumming. Elaborations (*alankāra*) on *padas* are frequently played.

BARA: THE ELASTICITY OF TIME

A type of drumming and dancing considered among the most beautiful sections of Sinhala ritual drumming is called *bara* ("heavy"; sometimes this is interpreted as a "slow" tempo). A *bara* sequence happens frequently in rituals. Although in certain sequences of drumming, such as when supporting a *kaviya* (sung poem), drummers play rhythms that can approximately be fit into a beat cycle, in *bara*, no such translation into a beat cycle is possible. *Bara* is a through-composed section in which the time—the space between the drum words—is greatly spread out. For readers familiar with Javanese gamelan, the *bara* section is similar to *irama* change (a change in rhythmic density), where the main pulse (here, the *aksaras* in the *padaya*) is greatly expanded as elaborating notes fill up the space. There is one important difference, though: in *bara*, drummers and dancers challenge one another to perform the next *aksara* (letter). This gives *bara* an elasticity in musical time not found in Javanese gamelan, though theoretically, the spaces are conceived as roughly four times as slow as a typical *padaya* (that is, each *aksara* is played on what would be the first *aksara* of a typical *padaya*). *Bara* sequences allow for artistry and competitive flair.

Below is a *bara* rhythm that pops up later in the same section of the Sanni Yakuma described below (the *Licchavi Naetum*); my *gurunnānse's* father (who transcribed the rhythm this way in his book) has notated the section *as though* it is in a seven-beat cycle (a bar of three, followed by a bar of four). Also, he has written dashes to signify pauses of undetermined length—dancers and drummers look at one another and decide when to move on to the next *aksara*.

ri - - / ri - - - / ri - - / ri - m -

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22. Sometimes, the *antādiya* (prelude) is repeated after the *irratiya* (in the up country, the concluding section is called *kastiram*).

> ga t - / - - - - / da hi ng / - - - -
> ga t - / - - - - / da hi ng / - - - -
> ga - - / - - - - / di - - / - - - -
> ga - - / da - - - / ga t - / - - - -
> da hi ng / - - - - / gu ng - / ri - - -
> ri - - m / ga ti ga ti / ga t ta / ga ti ga ta
> ga t ta / ga t - - / da hi ng / ga t - -
> ring ga ta / ga ta ga ta / do ng taga / ta ng ga ta
> gu di ta ka / de gu da ku / do ng - / ga ti ga ta

In practice, this sounds nothing like a seven-beat rhythm. The three opening *ri* strokes are a long drum roll, which corresponds to a fast movement of the dancers' feet up and down as dancers move backwards and eventually in place. During this moment, drummers and dancers look at one another and sometimes smile devilishly; eventually, one of them (in my experience, it is typically the dancer) decides when to end the drum roll and stomps on the ground, dancing the concluding *rim*.[23] The next word is then played (*gat*) followed by a pause, and then the next (*dahing*). In each case, dancers and drummers look at one another and anticipate when the next word will be played, in order to play/dance each *padaya* simultaneously.[24] Examples of *bara* appear in [Video Examples 14a and 15](.).

The space between each word in a *bara* sequence is not empty; they are filled with quiet notes (called *kannilam*), which allow drummers and dancers to feel out when the next *aksara* should be played. *Kannilam* strokes on the *yak beraya* are usually a light hitting against the edge of the drum, near the rim (similar to *nang*, though softer), and are done quickly and at random (not at all in unison with other drummers). A *bara* sequence is thus a rich, loud section of drumming involving all drummers hitting one loud drum stroke matched by the dancers, followed by a plethora of tiny, quiet *kannilam* strokes performed by the drummers (not in unison), followed by another loud drum stroke played by the drummers and matched again by the dancers. In *bara* sequences, the famous low-country drum rolls (*ring* or *rim*) are held out to great and often humorous effect. Drummers and dancers rely on one another, and a give and take between them is a part of the artistic practice.

Although *bara* sequences are not played to a strict pulse, they do demonstrate the existence of a pulse in standard Sinhala drumming: the pulse is expanded, stretched out. As noted above, the concluding phrase, *irratiya*, is considered to be "halved." This is the closest low-country ritual drumming gets to consciously counting out beats or being aware of a regimented, temporal spacing of *mātrās*. I suggest what the relationship between a normative pulse, the halving of *irratiya*, and the extended timing of *bara* points to is *not* an awareness of

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23. The drum word *ring* is the drum roll ending in a rung-out tone, while *rim* is the drum roll ending in a choked tone.
24. Suraweera (2009, 16) puts the "crotchet beat of *bara* patterns" at "40 beats per minute," but he notes that "the irregular nature of the beats in *bara* patterns makes these transcriptions extremely difficult to be notated accurately."

three different tempos but a concept of rhythmic density—stretching or shrinking like a balloon—that is quite similar to that of Javanese gamelan but not (to my knowledge) so common in South Asian musics where the concept of tempo (*laya*) is prominent.[25]

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THE SANNI YAKUMA

</div>

I now turn toward analyzing *padas* in the Sanni Yakuma, Dayasheela's ritual specialization, though it is necessary first to give a brief summary of the ritual's structure. In Dayasheela's father's writings on the ritual (Fernando 1987), the Sanni Yakuma[26] is listed as having the following sections[27]:

1. Offerings to the Triple Gem and the Gods / Cleansing of the Ritual Space (*puja vidi raTāva*, *mal yahan kavi*)
2. Summoning the Demons (*bhuta karna vidi*)
3. Screen Poem (*kaDaturaa kavi*)
4. Dance of the Evening Watch (*Sända Samayama*)
5. The Masked Demons: Kalu Yakkha, Riri Yakkha, Suniyam Yakkha, Abhimaana Yakkha
6. The dance of Maru Yakkha, one of the eighteen Sanni Yakku
7. Liccevi Dance (*kumara pelapāliya*)
8. The Twelve Pelapaaliyas (*delos pāli nätum*)
9. Mahasona Samayama, also called *avatara bälima*
10. Dance of the Sanni Demons (*sanni nätum*)
11. Closing songs for the Gods (*deviyanTa ping dime kavi*)

Like all major rituals, the Sanni Yakuma is split into three periods or "watches"—the evening watch (*sända samayama*), midnight watch (*māda yama*), and morning watch (*alu*

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25. Of course, there are *many* differences between Sinhala drumming and Javanese gamelan, particularly the fact that the Sinhala genre consists of all drums and thus lacks the hierarchy of instruments found in the gamelan. Nevertheless, I think the similarity in approach to density is striking, which I have not found in other South Asian musics.

26. I have provided a short description of the myth behind the Sanni Yakuma in the introductory article ("South Asian Drumming Beyond *Tala*") that proceeds this one. I remind the reader here that it is intended to cure illnesses brought on by eighteen demons called Sanni Yakku. See Sykes (2011, 383–84) for a longer description of the myth.

27. This list is similar to Halverson's (1971), who studied with Fernando (my *gurunnānse's* father). This Bentara structure is a bit different from the proceedings described for the same ritual farther south by Obeyesekere (1969) and Wirz (1954). The Bentara ritual is strikingly similar to the Mahasona Samayama (ritual for the demon Mahasona) performed in Matara, as described by Larsen (1998). One should take the structure as more "ideal" than "real": Halverson (1971) notes that the Bentara version of the Sanni Yakuma he saw included no "Dance of the Sanni Demons," except for the appearance of Maru Yakkha at the end of the ritual, just before the final offerings to the gods. This is how the ritual appeared to me as well (on Fernando's list, Maru Yakkha is placed at number 6). Thus, the Bentara Sanni Yakuma represents a "Sanniyakuma without the *sanni-yakku*" (Halverson 1971, 335), but this is not how the ritual is considered in theory.

yama). Fernando's (1987) book lists rhythms for all eighteen *sanni yakku*, even though a ritual will not have all eighteen *sanni* appear as masked dancers. The purpose of the ritual is to combat eighteen different illnesses. Since a sick person will not normally have all eighteen illnesses at once, in a performance of the ritual where *sanni* appear, the ones that emerge as masked dancers will be the ones that have been determined to be harming the patient.[28]

Ritual Preparations and Layout

Kapferer ([1983] 1991, 181–82) provides a summary of the lead up to large-scale *yak tovils*, which I draw on here.[29] The preparation can take days and involves many members of a household. The *adura* (chief ritualist) gives the head of the household a list of materials, which will be collected in the days before the ritual. Among them are banana tree trunks and coconut palm leaves that the *adura* and his assistants sculpt into the ritual structures and offering baskets for the deities and demons. Meanwhile, the house and the yard are cleaned up and prepared for the ritual.[30] The morning of the event, the *adura* and members of his troupe arrive at the house to build the ritual structures (some members arrive just before the start of the ritual, however). Meanwhile, the *adura's* assistant (*madu puraya*) cooks the food offerings to be given to the ghosts and demons, while the members of the household prepare food for the audience.

The main structure in a *yak tovil* is the "palace of the demons" (*yak vidiya*), located opposite where the patient is seated (Kapferer [1983] 1991, 182).[31] The orienting structure of *madu tovils* (the rituals for deities) are typically taller and grander, with a pyramidal shape (or tryptic shape with a pyramid sticking up from the middle) and glorious paintings of gods and goddesses. By contrast, the *yak vidiya* for a Sanni Yakuma is a simple a hut with panels (*torana*)

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28. Halverson suggests that the general lack of *sanni* demons in the present-day ritual demonstrates the existence of "an older, traditional rite antecedent to the present-day Alutgama version"; it is notable that in Matara, by contrast, about six or seven *sannis* reportedly appear in the ritual (Wirz 1954; Obeyesekere 1969). Here is how I explain this discrepancy: Kapferer ([1983] 1991) describes the Sanni Yakuma as often being followed during the day by the ritual called Iramudun Samayama, while Wirz (1954, 48) mentions the ritual being followed by a daytime counter-sorcery ritual, the Suniyama. Perhaps this was the case in Bentara also, and so the *sanni* episode would run throughout the morning. Nowadays, however, with the standardization of the 9-to-5 work week, the Sanni Yakuma is not typically linked anymore with these daytime rituals as people have to leave for day jobs. Thus, the ritual is now made to end more or less just after sunrise (meaning there is hardly any "morning watch" anymore) and the dances of the *sanni* demons are habitually cut out.

[29] Please see my accompanying essay for a discussion of the Sinhala Buddhist ritual repertoire, in which *yak tovils* are a particular type.

30. The cleared space in front of the house, when surrounded and enclosed by ritual structures during the ritual, is called the *sima midula*—it is where the bulk of the ritual takes place. Kapferer ([1983] 1991, 181–82) remarks that, "Once the ghosts and demons enter this ritually bounded space, they are understood to be confined or bounded (*sima*) by it, a property of the power of the ritual structures which encircle the perimeter of the performance area."

31. *Vidiya* means "street" (Wirz 1954, 48; Kapferer [1983] 1991, 182); Halverson (1971, 336) thinks of it as a "street" between "the demon world and ritual world, a passageway." In the Suniyama ritual, the *vidiya* becomes a veritable street, as the patient travels physically to seven points, until he is put inside the *atamagala,* the *yak vidiya* in a Suniyama (Kapferer 1997). Nothing like this happens in the Sanni Yakuma, although the *yak vidiya* still orients the ritual action.

made out of banana tree trunks and coconut leaves.

During the ritual, the *yakku* emerge from behind the *torana* and eventually are chased back into it. Offerings to the *sanni yakku* are located within the *yak vidiya* on a *sanniya kuduva*, which Wirz (1954, 48) describes as "a high square stand of palm-leaves and banana-stems, which is erected so that it can revolve on a rice-pounder into the earth." Wirz mentions that offerings for the *yakkha* Kalu Kumara are put to the side of the *yak vidiya* on a separate stand. He also describes three chairs of offerings that sit in the middle of the ritual space: the first two are for Suniya Yakka and Kalu Kumara, while the third contains mostly flowers and betel leaves (*mal-betel putuva*). In my experience, such offering stands are put to the side of the *yak vidiya* and are not in the middle of the ritual space.[32] Offering baskets (*tattuva*) or plates are made of coconut leaves and their shape changes depending on which *yakkha* the offerings are for (see Wirz [1954] for a description of each shape). The Sanni Yakuma may also contain a *mal yahanava*, an offering stand decorated with coconut leaves and containing four oil lamps and flowers (*mal*), coconut flowers (*pol-mal*), and grains of rice. Lastly, there is the *preta pidenna tattuva*, a stand of offerings for ghosts (*preta*). Although the offering stands are central to the performance of a *yak tovil*, they are usually of secondary visibility to the audience, compared to the singing, dancing, drumming, recitation of myths, and comic drama, with the *yak vidiya* forming the backdrop for the action.

The Evening Watch (*Sända Samayama*)

After initial preparations and minor ritual sequences, the ritual proper begins around 8 or 9 in the evening.[33] The ritual begins with the worshipping of the Triple Gem and the four warrant gods (*hatara varam deviyo*), with offerings of dance and drumming. Halverson (1971, 337) remarks that the dancer marks out a "quadrated circle, the traditional mandala," which is to say, he sketches a mandala with his feet (Dayasheela never mentioned this to me, but it sounds plausible).

Obeyesekere (1969, 178) remarks that the evening watch functions to demarcate and bound a special area, "through rites of consecration and purification . . . within a larger profane environment." The *adura* and dancers inhale resin and enact elaborate dancing with torches (*pandam pada*); the ritual space becomes "purified with fumes of resin and incense; the priests shed their lay clothes, wear 'vestments' (priestly clothes) and purify their inner being by inhaling resin, 'eating' the flames of torches, and 'burning' their bodies with them" (178). This happens to be a time for great drumming, as drummers play while torches are thrown in

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32. Halverson's (1971, 336) description accords most closely with my own. Scott's (1994, 70) map of the ritual space puts as many as seven offering stands in the middle of the ritual space, in the rite called Irumudun Samayama. I infer that the placement of the stands in this way may be more characteristic in Matara.

33. Obeyesekere (1969, 178) remarks that the rites of the evening watch are "practically identical for all major healing rituals," but there are significant differences between the Matara and Bentara performances of the evening watch. Scott (1994, 71), for example, asserts that the Consecration of the Suniyam Stand (*Suniya Vidiya Kapakirima*) "is the opening sequence of all major *tovils* I witnessed," but this is not how the Sanni Yakuma begins.

the air. The main section of the evening watch (*sända samayama*) contains some of the most elaborate drumming and dancing. Fernando (1987, 14–26) provides the drum rhythms in his book[34]:

> ### *Sända Samayama*
> Singers begin with nonsense syllables (*dena, dena,* etc.), as drummers play
> *gundang dahingta, gattang dahingta*
> *gudang gatang degatang gattang / / / / /*
> (This increases in intensity, as dancers run in circles around the ritual space.)
>
> **Introductory steps** (*antādiya*)
> *gatdahing, gattang gattang gattang ga - - - - dahing*
>
> **1. First Rhythm** (*padaya*)
> *gunditagata gund - - - dahing*
> *di – ta – gaa – ta*
> *gadditagata gat dahingta – gung*
> *ringgatagaa – ta gadigatagaa – ta*
> *dongtaka degudaka dahing ditagata*
> *gunditagatagung dahing ditagata*
> *gudditagatagat dahingtagung*
> *regatagatagata gundagatagundagata*
> *dongtaku degundaka dahing*
>
> **2. Second *Padaya***
> The second rhythm (*padaya*) begins with this introduction (*arambhaka padaya*), played very fast:
>
> *dahing dong dong dong gaa tang*
> *gattagata gatigatang, gattagata gatigatang*
> *gatigatang gudigudang gatang gudang gattang gatang*
>
> *dong – tak – ring - - gatagata gatigatang*
> *dong gat – dahing –*
> *gata gung ringata gatigata gatitaga tang*
> *gudaguda gatitaga tangtaku dongguda guditaku dong*
>
> ***baraTa nätima*** (*bara* sequence)
> 1   2   3   4
> *ga - - - / ta - - - / - gung - - - / gung - - -*

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34. Note that when Fernando writes multiple slashes in a row (e.g., / / / /) it signifies the number of repeats of the drumming line; a dash (e.g., -) indicates either that the previous drum stroke should ring out (e.g., *gung* -) or a pause (e.g., - - - -). Here and in subsequent quotations from Fernando (1987), the original formatting is reproduced as closely as possible.

riringata / gaa - - - / ta - - - / gatigata
gaa - - - / - ta - - - / dongtaka / degudaka
dahing - - / ditagata - - / gu — da - / gu — da —
gadditagata / gatdahingta / gung - - - / ringata
gatagata / guditaka / degudaku / dong

Conclusion (*irratiya*)
ringat / dingat / dingat / dahingtagatagaditaku — deng
/ ringat / dingat / dingata
dahing - - / ringatang gaditagatang / gaditagatang / gudiguda
guditaku / dong / /   /

3. Third *Padaya*
ringa ti gata / gundagadagat / tangatigata / donggataguda
gudagatigata / gunda gunda gat / dahinggatigata / gung - - - - -

4. Fourth *Padaya* (Fernando writes in these numbers himself.)
1   2   3   1   2   3   1   2   3   1   2   3
gudigatangta gatigataguda

gudigatangta / gudagatang / gatigatangta / gatigatang
gatigatang / gudigudang / gattagunda / gaddittat
guhinigadirikiTa / gudatat / dahing / gung

(This appears to be a *bara* sequence, but is not notated as such.)
gat   - - / ta - - / gat - - / tang - -
dong - - / ga t ta m / gu n da m / ga t ta m
gaditaka   / de - gu / da — ku - / dong - -
gu — da - / gu — da - /   /

Conclusion (*irratiya*)
gaddit / tattaka / dongtaga / ditagat
rimgata / gatagata / gugudaga / daditagat
gugudam / gattaka / dongtaga / ditagat
domdom / ditagata / dongtaga / ditagat
donggadi / ttaguda / tatdit / tongtam
takkaDa dohokaDa / digudangta - - / digu   / dam

Yahan Däkma
The seats of the gods (*yahan*) are honored by being "looked at" (*däkma*). *Padas* are played while facing each *yahan*.

gudigatangta, gudigatang — gatigatangta gatigatang
gatigatang gudi gudang gattagunda gaddittat

guhitigadirikiTa gudagat dahing – gudita guda gattagata

dahing / dahing / dahing / dahing/ dahing
regata / gunda / gunda/ gunda / dahing

First Rhythms (*padaya pirima*; Fernando himself marks these blank spaces between dashes.)[35]

rrrim / dahing / rrrim / dahing /   /
runda / gunda gunda gat / /
rundagunda / gatta / gunda / gaddit / tat
guhitigadirikiTa / gundagat / dahing / gung - /
ringataka / degatagat / dahinggataka / dongtagunda /   /
gundagataka / degatagat / dahinggataka / dong /   /
ringgatang / dahinggat / tanggattang / guditagung /   /

padaya: *dingtagatang / digatagat / tanggatat/   /   /*

antādiya
gat - - / dahing - - / gat - - / dahing –
gattang / gattang / gattang - / ga - -
- - - / dahing - /   /   /

baraTa Nätum
rrrrriiiiii - - / rrrriiiii - - / rrrim - / gat
ga - / ta - / ka - / dahing
gata / ga – / di - / ta –
ka - / dong / -   / -

irratiya
dingudat / dingudant / dingudaka / dondong
takkaDa / / kiTa / takkaTagundang / gahitigatanggata / gahitigatang
ringgatang / dahinggat / tanggatang /   /

Conclusion (*avasānaya*)
dongtagat / degatagat / dahinggatang / gaditagung ///
dongtagunda / gaditagunda / guditagunda / gatitagunda
dengtagunda / gaditagunda / gattagat / tanggatang
dong - /   /   /   /

gadirikiTagudirikiTa gattanggattang dong ///

regattangga tagattanggu dagattangga tagat – dong //

---

35. I have notated these exactly as Fernando does in his book; one can tell he is rather fluid with how he notates rests, sometimes putting them as dashes, other times as multiple slashes with space in between.

regattangga tagat dong //
regat dong // regadirikiTagattang gatangdong ///
dong dong dong

dongtagatta gatigatagat regatagatta gatigatagat
dongtagatang regatagatang regaditagata gudagattang
guhihigadirikiTa gudagat dahing gung –

Next there is dialogue between ritual specialists, after which drummers play *däkum at* and *vandamānams* (sections of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi ritual, see below), and then, while ritual specialists dance with torches (*pandam pada*), they play *gattagu danguda* | / / / / / / /). From here, the *pandam pada* section continues with two full rhythmic sections (*pada*), including another *bara* and concluding *irratiya*, and the entire *Sända Samayama* concludes with a long sung poem (*kavi*; see).

I have not attempted to organize the above *padas* into a beat cycle but have retained their language-like structure by reproducing them simply as words (for a consideration of how to match written *padas* with played *padas*, see below). Here, I want simply to show how many *padas* there are to memorize—the above is just one small section of a twelve- to fifteen-hour ritual, and a ritualist will know several such rituals. Some of the rhythms are easy to hear off the page: *dongtagatta gatigatagat regatagatta gatigatagat* has something of a 6/8 feel. The first word, *dongtagatta*, has drum strokes approximating beats 1, 3, 4, and 6, a rhythm emanating from the pronounciation of the word. The second, *gatigatagat*, would include strokes on beats 1 through 5, with the clipped *"t"* serving as a rest on the final beat. Other words are less reconcilable with a metric structure. For example, in the section toward the end that is written without bar lines, Fernando writes the following drum word: *regadirikiTagattang*. A drummer would know how to play this stroke pattern by knowing how to play its constituent words: *re* is a mini drum roll and may be extended briefly for effect; *gadirikiTa* is a word that is in the *harambas* (*gat* plus *diri* plus *kiTa*); and *gattang* is also a common word. Sometimes, longer words like this occur in sections written with "bar lines," but in such cases, they must be pronounced correctly within the allotted time, rather than being matched to subdivisions of a "beat" or a pulse. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that the grouping implied by the presence of the "barlines" here does not indicate a metric structure—it's more akin to punctuation, grouping together and separating certain drum words. In practice, much transitional material connects the main *padas*, which are also repeated. For example, the *Sända Samayama* begins with a rhythm played while dancers walk in a circle, getting ready for the following dance (such phrases are often called "walking rhythms," *gaman pada*), which could then transition into the through-composed introduction (*antādiya*). In this way, a single sequence of music could be extended to take up an hour or more.

A crucial component of the evening watch is the moment when the demons are summoned with a pitch pipe (*vas danda*). The *vas danda* emits a shrill sound and is not considered a musical instrument. After the ritual specialist has blown into it and the demons

are considered manifest in the ritual space, a patient may go into trance and come out into the ritual space to dance (Halverson 1971), although I never witnessed this phenomenon.[36]

The Midnight Watch (*Mäda Yama*)

Next comes the midnight watch (*mäda yama*), where the *yakku* emerge from the *vidiya* to dance in the ritual space and interact with the *adura*, where he or she is mocked by the audience. In the Sanni Yakuma, this begins with four *yakku*, Kalu Yakkha ("Black Demon"; see Figure 5), Riri Yakkha ("Blood Demon"), Abhimana Yakkha, and Suniyam Yaksani ("Sorcery Demon"; see Video Examples 17a to 20). In each case, the *yakkha* comes out from the *vidiya*, dances around the ritual space (usually in a comic fashion) and engages in comic dialogue with the *adura*.[37] Each demon has its own music. However, the music does not become more

Figure 5. Kalu Yakkha.

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36. Before that time, the patient has been seated behind a screen (*kadaturāva*).

37. The literature has focused especially on such dialogue. I refer the reader to Kapferer ([1983] 1991) and Scott (1994).

"demonic" (if we take that word to mean "scary" or "tense"); rather, the rhythms mimic the gait of the demons and the comical side of their characters. The rhythms are significantly shorter and, I contend, more metered-sounding than the music for the gods provided above (e.g., the rhythms in the *yahan däkma*). For example, Suniyam Yaksani emerges in three female avatars: first as a young and alluring girl, then as a pregnant woman, and finally, as a mother nursing an infant. The rhythm played while she is pregnant has a lurching quality to it and the *yakkha* limps under the weight of her belly to the beat (Fernando 1987, 36—note that Fernando adds the numbers appearing below):

1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
tang	gati	tak	dong	gat	gat	tang	gati	taku	dong	-	-

By contrast, the rhythm played when she is an alluring girl is steadier and a rhythm commonly found in the *yak beraya* repertoire:

1	2	3	1	2	3	4
degu	n	gu	da	t	ga	t
1	2	3	4	1	2	3
de	ga	t	ga	ta	ku	dong

Bear in mind that the letters *n* and *t* are the cessation of the drum strokes before them (involving pressing in and dampening the drum head or choking it after a loud smack), not drum strokes themselves. The word *degun* here involves two strokes played quickly (akin to eighth notes—the *n* is not sounded); by contrast, the word *gat* is one drum stroke, with the *t* signifying the cessation of the sound. Notice that Fernando has written the first section as 3+4, and the second as 4+3: as I have stressed throughout, the application of numbers here is placed onto the *pada* after the fact; the numbers are not integral to the formation of the rhythm or how it is played. I assume that Fernando chose to notate where he felt the accents in the rhythm to fall: in the first line, this would be on "*da*"; in the second line, on "*ta*." To unaccustomed ears, however, this rhythm would sound like a simple 4/4 (see Figure 6). Each of the demonic sections has simple drumming, repeating the *padaya* over and over while the ritualist sings. Following this, the ritual specialist interrogates the *yakkha*. The third and final section has a concluding *irratiya*.

One such moment deserves special mention, which Wirz (1954, 55) calls the "cheating death" sequence: Maru Yakkha (one of the *sanni yakku*) makes an appearance as the ritual specialist lies on the ground, covered by a mat (see Video Example 21). Halverson (1971, 339)

degun gu dat gat de gat ga ta ku dong

Figure 6. Notation in 4/4 of Suniyam Yaksani dancing as a young girl.

describes this scene as follows:

> The exorcist lies on a mat constantly reciting mantras and wafting incense as a blood offering is prepared on his belly. He pretends to be dying and calls upon the demon of death, Maru-yaka, to take him away. At last the offering is removed, he shrouds himself completely and lies very still simulating death. In the most economical version, the act concludes here, but usually Maru-yaka now enters from the *vidiya* with much premonitory rumbling, the first unambiguous representation of the demonic.[38]

The dance of Maru Yakkha contains much more poetry, with two main *padas* backing up the singing (here is one of them):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
ring	*gati*	*gata*	*guda*	*guda*	*gat*	*tang*	*gati*	*taka*	*dong*	*gata*	*guda*

This phrasing will not so easily sound in "duple time": the opening *ring* is a drum roll that may stretch out the pulse somewhat; *gat* and *tang* (beats 6 and 7) are always thought of as one word, *gattang*, and *tang* will never fall squarely on the pulse it is assigned to (in this case, beat 7); rather, the *tang* in *gattang* here anticipates the pulse it is assigned to when written out. In fact, a major reason why *padas* often do not aurally match up with the *mātrās* they are assigned to is because word combinations like *gattang* and *dahing* are conceived of as falling on two evenly spaced *mātrās* but the second *aksara* is anticipated and does not fall on the beat.

In sum, this sort of rhythm is easy to play and in a more countable rhythm than the rhythms for gods shown below; which is to say, this is music of and for buffoons, played in the "comic drama" sequence of a Sanni Yakuma in which the demons are laughed at by the audience and mocked by the ritual specialist. My hypothesis, following Scott (1994), is that the *yakku* are lured in by the presumption that they are receiving the same beautiful drum speech that the gods receive, only to receive the "music" of buffoons once they arrive in the ritual space. This drumming is easy to speed up and down: during these sequences, the *adura* carries resin (*dummala*) to scare off the demon with flames, should he get too close. When the demon starts chasing the *adura*, the rhythm picks up pace, as the *adura* shoots flames at him.

What follows this section of the ritual is a telling of the Lichchavi myth (the story of Vesali described in my accompanying article), which includes long dances (*Lichchavi Nätum, Kumara Pelapāliya*; see [Video Examples 22a to 22c](#)). The drumming here is perhaps as complex and beautiful as the drumming in the *Sända Samayama*. The first *padaya* proceeds from sung nonsense syllables (*tanama*) and a sung poem (*kavi*) to an *irratiya*, an *alankāra nätum* ("ornamental dance"), a *bara* sequence, and an *antādiya* ("opening steps," here played as a

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38. In Obeyesekere's (1969, 178) version, it is Riri Yakkha who comes out for this sequence, and the mat with the *adura* is dumped into a bush (e.g., the cemetery), signifying a "life for a life" (the *adura*'s for the patient's); in the Bentara version, the *adura* is taken inside the *vidiya*.

conclusion). It proceeds through three *padas* in total—the third is notable for its inclusion of two *sural padas* featuring drum rolls (*sural*). Here is one of the *sural padas* (again, *re* signifies a short drum roll and may be slightly enlongated; Fernando 1987, 56–57):

> *re gu da / gat ta / re gu da / gat ta*
> *re gu da / gat ta / re gu da / gaa - -*

What follows next is a short *antādiya* (*re ga ta / tat - / dit - / de mi -*) and two *sural padas* that are longer compositions. Here is one of them (Fernando 1987, 56–57; note that he writes the blank spaces into his transcription):

> *tatguguda / gaditakadong / tattigatang / gaditatadong*
>   */*   */ dik dik tong /*
> *tattarikiTa / gaditatadong / tatat didit / totongtatam*
> *degadirikiTa*
> *gattadahing / degatadahing / dodondong / donggaditta*
> *gatagudagata / guhitigadirikiTa / tatdittat / digatang – reguda*
> *taa - - - / degata /*   */*

    During rituals, *padas* may be repeated many times. During the repetitions, drummers may stop and rest for a moment, tune, and, in some cases, break up into subgroups trading off performing the same *padaya*. I found this to be the case particularly in *madu tovils* (the "deity" rituals)*,* since those rituals tend to have more drummers. It is during these moments of alternation between drummers that one can hear rather large differences in how individual drummers pronounce a *padaya*. For example, on many occasions, I have listened to a group of drummers play a *padaya*, instinctively hearing it to be in duple meter, only to have the drummers fizzle out and then hear another drummer or drummers pick it up and repeat the rhythm in what to me sounded like a totally different meter (e.g., triple meter). However, in my experience, when *padas* speed up, as dancers move faster and faster in circles and begin doing exciting and flashy flips in the ritual space, drummers make an effort to play in unison.

    Next comes the dances of the *dolaha pelapālis* ("twelve *pelapālis*").[39] Obeyesekere (1969, 188) suggests these are the *sanni* demons "in various guises or apparitions," dressed up in "royal clothes as befits the royal ancestry" of the *sanni yakku*.[40] Although there are twelve demons, only six typically appear in the Sanni Yakuma. They are named after the objects associated with them (e.g., *pandam pāliya* is the "spectacle of the torches," "where the gods are honored and the patient blessed with torches," *muguru pāliya* is the "spectacle of the sticks" or a stick dance; 188). The drumming and dancing for this section is just as simple as before: the rhythms are more evenly situated in a beat cycle, and each includes a sung poem. Here is

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39. *"Dolaha"* means "twelve," *"pāliya"* means "act or spectacle," and *"pela"* means "string, row, or series" (Obeyesekere 1969, 187).
40. This may account for the lack of *sanni yakku* in the Bentara version of the ritual.

some music for Pandam Pāliya ("Torch Pāliya"; Fernando 1987, 58):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
ga	*t*	*ga*	*ta*	*gu*	*n*	-	-	*ri*	*ng*	*ga*	*ta*
ga	*ti*	*ga*	*ta*	*ga*	*ti*	*ta*	*ga*	*ta*	*ng*	-	-

The *t* on beat 2 and the *n* on beat 6 are the cessation of the strokes just before it and felt as rests. *Ri* is a short drum roll; *ng* is the ringing out (end) of the preceding drum roll. For an example of dancing with torches, see [Video Example 23](#). As I hear it, though Fernando has written this in a twelve-beat pattern, the large space between *gu* (beat 5) and *ri* (beat 9) functions to make *ri* sound like a pickup note to its concluding *ng* (beat 10).

The following example is interesting for the way the drum words overlap at the end and beginning of the *padaya* (the last *gat* is a "pick up note" for the first *tang*, the latter being a word that is not typically played on its own and here would anticipate, rather than fall on, beat 1; when on its own, the stroke is spelled *nang*)[41]:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
tang	*gati*	*taku*	*dong*	*gata*	*gat*	*tang*	*gati*	*taku*	*dong*	-	*gat*

While in the Matara version, the ritual proceeds through the *dahāta pelapāliya* (the masked procession of some of the eighteen *sanni* demons), the Bentara version climaxes in an amazing spectacle of trance. In the hour or so before dawn, a single dancer dances the *Mahason Samayama*, the "Dance of the Great Cemetery Demon" (Mahasona Yakka). Halverson (1971, 341) says that

> it remains an electrifying episode even after many viewings. A dancer in black, unmasked but with black circles painted under his eyes, wearing a conical bamboo hat and long bamboo "hair," emerges from the *vidiya*, calf bells and anklets jangling to the stamping rhythm of his feet and the powerful beat of the drums.[42]

In a study of the longer ritual dedicated to Mahasona Yakkha (called "Mahasona Samayama"), Larsen (1998, 155) describes this section (also called the *avatara bälima*, or "looking at the avatar") as follows:

> This is the time when the *adura* gets the power to see *Mahasona*'s *avatara* (manifestation) which is kept unseen for the average person present. *Avatara bälima* is an act which opens up for various interpretations, but for now, I only suggest that this act's principle is that the *adura*'s [body] is a kind of "*disti* container," [which collects] *Mahasona's disti*, and . . . takes it to *porale* (the graveyard) and

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41. This example is for the sixth *pāli*, Kolas Pāliya.

42. In the versions I witnessed, the dancer has a straw hat rather than a conical hat. I saw a conical hat worn during a similar sequence (Vāhala) in the Devol Maduva.

"binds" it to this place.[43]

This is the *gurukama*, the "work of the *guru*" (Scott 1994): the *adura*'s job is to take the *disti* manifesting itself inside the patient and "tie" it to other objects or the ritualist.[44] The drumming is utterly simple yet powerful in its sternness, gravity, and repetition. This section, and the similar trance sequence in *deva tovils* (the Gammaduva and Devol Maduva rituals) when a dancer dances as the god Dadimunda (Vāhala) and takes on the villagers' bad karma to expel it, are the most repetitive-sounding drumming in the whole *yak beraya* repertoire (Figure 7). It is only during this section that the rhythms sound like the repetitive drumming of comparable all-night rituals with trance, such as Sufi rituals in North Africa, or the duple-over-triple feel of some African drumming traditions (perhaps because of its repetitive simplicity and deafening volume, this section is one of the most appealing to foreigners; see

Figure 7. A dancer in trance during the *avatara bälima* sequence.

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43. As remarked in my accompanying article, *disti* is the malignant eyesight of the *yakku* that is believed to cause illness in the patient.

44. Larsen (1998, 157) notes that after the *disti* has been transferred, the *adura* cuts two limes over the forehead of the patient (who remains in "trance," *avesa*), and charms his "wand" (*gaha*) by uttering *mantras*, following which he leaves it by the patient to protect her from the return of Mahasona's *disti*.

Video Example 24). In this section, the repetitive sections of *yak beraya* drumming as a whole are played for an hour and a half, or longer. I stress that, for Dayasheela, such drumming is the least cherished in all the repertoire, largely for its utter simplicity.[45] Nevertheless, the *avatara bälima* (and the corresponding Vāhala sequence in *madu tovils*) are sights to behold, as they occur as night turns into day, and the demonic presence is finally dissipated through the cutting of the demon's *disti*. The *avatara bälima* contains seven rhythms (Fernando 1987, 71–72; see Video Examples 25a to 26):

1. *Mantra Padaya*:   *guda gunda gattang gattang*
                                          gata gatta gattang gattang
2. Second *Padaya*:   *gattang degata gudiguda degata*
   - *Alankāra* (ornaments):
        regatta degata gaddittat gutigadirikiTagudagat dahing
   - *Dummala Padaya* (while flames are being thrown):
   i. *yahan däkma* (played facing the *yahan* or seats of the gods):
        guditagudagaditagat guditaguda gattagung //
        guditaguda gattagung // gattagung gundagung
        gattagunda gattittak geditaguda dahing
   Then: *dahing dahing dahing dahing*
        rudaguda gatta gattagaddittak guhi; gadi; gudagatdahing
   ii. *gundindahing gatdindahing gudgataguda gundindahing ///*
        donggatta gatigatagat degatagatta gatigatagung ///
        rudagudagatta gattagaddittak guhi: gudi: guda gat dahing - - -
2. Third *Padaya*:   *ringgatigata gatigatangta gatigataguda gudigatang*
   - *irratiya*: *gattagung degatagung regaditaguda dahing*
                        dahing - - - - - - - - - -
3. Fourth *Padaya*:   *regatagataku donggatagata gahitigatang*
                                          gataku dongga tagung
   - *Avasānaya* (concluding part):
        rundagudagat degatdahing gatigatagat degatdong ////
        dahing - - - - - - - - - -
4. Fifth *Padaya*:   *ringdahing, gaditaga, dahingdahing, gudagata gudagata*
                                          gatitaka degudaku dong - - ////
                                          gudingdang gattagu didang
   - *Antadiya*: *gattang gundang degatang degaditagata*
                        guditaka degudaku dong
                        (regaditaguda gattagaditaguda gattagaditaguda gattagaditagat) ///[46]
5. Sixth *Padaya*:   *gatta guguda gatita guguda*

> *gatagu dagat degat dong*
> *dongdong dongtagatang gadditagata gatigata gundang*
> *degudaka dahing*

6. Seventh *Padaya*: *gatta gunda gunda gatang*
> *gatta guguda gunda gatang*
> *ringtagatang dahingtagung*
> *dongtadongta dongtagatang*

Finally, there are three more patterns:

- *Namaskaara Padaya*: *gaddirikiTa gundirikiTa gattang gating dong ///*
- *PurālayaTa Yana Padaya*:
    gunda gudanggung dinggatagattang gattagatanggat dinggatagattang
- *Avasānaya*:
    dongtagatanggat dongtagatang dongtagadingata gatigatagudaguda ta - -

Toward the end, the incarnation of Mahasona runs out of the ritual space and into the patient's house, spouting fire in the rooms. Halverson (1971, 341) mentions that, after this moment, the patient is brought to a cemetery and made to eat the rice for the demon, after which the demon is excoriated and told to leave the patient alone. However, as most of the Sanni Yakumas I witnessed did not have a patient, I never saw this part of the ritual.[47]

Readers familiar with Matara tradition will be confused about the break up of the three "watches" presented here. For example, in Larsen's (1998) rendition of the *Mahasona Samayama* in Matara, which has evident similarities to the rite I describe here, the morning watch starts after the *avatara bälima* (at 4:20 a.m.) with the presentation of the *pelapāliyas*, followed by the eighteen *sanni* demons (*dahāta sanniya*). However, in the Bentara versions I witnessed, the *pelapāliyas* come *before* the *avatara bälima*—the latter may happen as late as 6 a.m.—and continue through daybreak. The "morning watch," as I witnessed it, thus includes only the concluding songs for deities (*deviyanTa ping dime kavi*) and skips over the presentation of the eighteen *sannis*. Fernando's (1987, 72–95) book does include photographs and rhythms for each of the eighteen *sannis*, whose rhythms are straightforward and proceed simply, as with the other *yakku* rhythms provided above. For example, the rhythm for *bihiri sanniya* (disease of the ear) is *gu gunda gu gunda dahing / gattang ditagata*. The rhythm for *buta sanniya* ("nonsensical talk of *valbuta*"; Obeyesekere 1969, 189) is *dongta gataku donggu ditaku*. The rhythm for *demala sanniya* ("performs pranks and utters nonsense that sounds like Tamil"; ibid.) is *dong – ta – gat degata guditaku*.

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47. One of the highlights of my video footage is when a ritualist, in trance as Dadimunda, runs out of the ritual space with torches in the Vāhala section of a Devol Maduva. See the end of Video Example 24.

IS IT METERED?

The laborious and not entirely successful process of assigning numbered beats to *padas* that Fernando (1987) undertakes above should sufficiently demonstrate that *yak beraya* drumming does not so easily take to "meter," even in its more metered-sounding moments—any cursory attention to the videos that accompany this article will demonstrate that many of the drum strokes written above on a numbered "beat" are not played on the beats they are assigned (such as the *tang* in *gattang*, mentioned above). It seems to me that "meter" is more of a judgment—an analytic lens retroactively applied to rhythms that had developed through oral transmission as repetitive drum sentences (*padas*) performed in relation to pulse points or *mātrās* but without reference to a concept of "meter." Drummers keep the pulse points in mind but words like *dahing* and *gatdirikiTa,* conceptualized as starting on a *mātrā*, do not necessarily end on the *mātrā* assigned to their latter *aksaras*. I suggest that *padas* were composed as *padas*; however, some *padas* inadvertently sound as though they have a "regular" beat cycle of 12 or 16 beats, and it is only the less highly esteemed *padas* for *yakku* (and moments of trance like the *avatara bälima*) that are easily counted that way. For other *padas*, it is often inappropriate to place them in a strict beat cycle.

Consider an article by Jayasena Kottegoda (2004, 96) in which the author provides examples of Hindustani *bols* (drum syllables) in *rupak taal* (a seven-beat cycle) and examples of *padas* from the three regional Sinhala drumming traditions, and concludes that the *padas* are in *rupak taal*. His analysis raises the following problem: while some Sinhala drum patterns can be heard as having a certain number of beats, why compare Sinhala drumming to North Indian beat cycles when North India is farther away than South India and historically distinct from Sinhala drumming?

Other scholars have viewed *bera padas* through the lens of Carnatic (South Indian) *talams*. The most influential strategy here is the *thith* system promoted by W. B. Makulloluwa ([1976] 2000; Kulatillake 1976, 35–39). In the *thith* system, the *talam* is marked by the playing of small cymbals (*talampota*): "*thith* denotes the closed beat where the two cymbal plates are kept in the same position when struck without taking them apart," while "*theyi* is the open beat where the cymbal plates are struck in a sliding position allowing the sound to vibrate further" (Kulatillake 1976, 37). *Thith* marks smaller metrical units while *theyi* marks larger ones. By mapping *thith* and *theyi* onto *padas*, Makulloluwa was able to name various *thithas* (combinations of *thith* and *theyi*) for Sinhala drum music. On the surface, *thithas* may seem a perfectly acceptable way to understand Sinhala drumming, since it appears to capture the long and short durations of *mātrās* (and combinations of *mātrās*). This would appear to be supported by a contemporary practice in which dance teachers may play the *talampota* to guide their students in rehearsal and sometimes in staged dance performances. The possibility that *thithas* are an acceptable heuristic would seem to imply that there *is* a metric framework undergirding Sinhala drum music. I can imagine some dance teachers reading my work here and suggesting I have not heard the *talams* that lie underneath the *padas*, obscured from my ear by the artistry of the musicians who play off of them.

Let me address this point by saying that, to me, the use of the *talampota* calls into existence various "Sinhala meters" more than it locates a system of beat cycles existing in Sinhala drum music. This can be seen by the great confusion surrounding the categorization of *thithas*: the question of whether they are abstract or related to the rhythms of a specific instrument and the question of whether they are "additive" or "divisive" in nature. Kulatillake (1976) notes the lack of uniformity on these issues by *thith* theorists: J. C. Malagamma lists seven *thithas*, while J. E. Sedaraman ([1968] 1997) reduces this by one and substitutes a different name for one of them.[48] Several theorists suggest there are five meters, but there is no agreement on what they are.[49] None of these theories use the "clap" and "wave" system, or any of the methods used in India to mark stressed and unstressed beats—this function is presumably supplied by the *talampota*. The lack of a theorization of stressed and unstressed beats by ritualists and Sinhala scholars should be enough to suggest that an underlying system of stressed and unstressed beats is not native to Sinhala drumming.[50]

The *thith* system has been promoted by scholars familiar with Kandyan rather than low-country drumming. While it may reflect how certain parts of Kandyan dance are performed, I believe this system of using finger cymbals is probably a later (eighteenth-century) innovation that arrived from South India and was mapped onto older forms of dance that did not use *talampota*.[51] In my view, the *tith* theories do not explain Kandyan drumming before the period of South Indian influence on the eighteenth-century Kandyan court, which probably correlates with the adoption of *talampota*. Most importantly for my purposes here, the finger cymbals are not used in any low-country rituals—I have never encountered *talampota* in any of my lessons or in rituals in the low country. Kulatilake (1976, 37) agrees: "the low country tradition associated with the . . . *yak beraya* totally discards the *thith* system." But this is surely backwards: the *thith* system was not discarded by low-country drummers—it was never adopted. Applying a beat cycle to low-country drumming obscures the proper pronunciation of the drum language; it is not the beat or *mātrā* that is the problem but the idea of matching *aksaras* to *subdivisions* of beats, which would disrupt the proper pronunciation of some drum words. This may explain why even in the up country, *tithas* do not necessarily contain equal

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48. Malagama's list of *thithas* is as follows: 1. *Ada thitha*. 2. *Tala thitha*. 3. *Purna thitha*. 4. *Mulantha thitha*. 5. *Mulantha madya thitha*. 6. *Kandilam thitha*. 7. *Kanda tala thitha*. Sedaraman has replaced *Purna thitha* with *Dirga thitha* and combined numbers 6 and 7 into one *thitha* (Kulatilake 1976, 38). It is worth noting that these lists were developed in discussions of up-country dance.

49. For example, one lists their names as: 1. *Madya*. 2. *Tala*. 3. *Ada-madya*. 4. *Ada-tala*. 5. *Madya-tala* (this list reveals a confusion between the concepts "tempo" and "meter": "*Madya*" ("middle") would seem to describe tempo, while number 2 seems to describe "the" *tala* that is then divided in different ways ("*Ada-madya*" means "half-middle," "*Ada-tala*" means "half-*tala*," while "*Madya-tala*" means "middle-*tala*"). Another divides the *thitha* meters according to their beats: 2, 2+4, 2+2+4, 2+2+2+4, and 2+2+2+2+8, while another lists them as 3, 4, 2+3, 2+4, and 3+4 (see Kulatillake 1976, 35–39).

50. Kulatillake (1976, 39) sums up this confusion accurately by saying that, "due to the lack of constant usage or of analytical documentation, the art (of understanding *thitha*) has fallen into a confused state."

51. For example, the footage I have seen of the up-country Kohomba Kankariya ritual does not show the use of *talampota* throughout most of the ritual.

subdivisions, but rather the quantization of various numbers of drum *aksaras* into *tith-theyi* combinations.

Scholars have also been confused about the use of the word *tala* among Sinhala drummers. Here again Kulatillake (1976, 35–36) is our best guide and the only skeptical voice in the discussion. He discusses two scholars who describe a concept called *panchatala* ("five *talas*") differently. Mahawelatenna Bandara's early (1908) discussion of Kandyan music names the *pancha-talas* as corresponding to five drum syllables (four of which are the *bijaksharas*): *tat, dit, tit, ton,* and *nan*, which are then elaborated into *atataya, vitataya, vitatataya, ghanaya* and *sushiraya* (the fivefold sounds, or *panchaturyanāda;* see my accompanying article). It is unclear what these drum syllables have to do with *tala*. Kulatillake (1976) is right, in my view, that "however erroneous this analysis may appear it relates a certain concept of *panchatala* that existed in the past."[52] He then cites Sarath Wijewardana as providing a discussion of *panchatala* that differs radically from Bandara's:

1. **Brahma-tala**: All musical material that originates from the head—i.e., Gāthās and Slokas. These refer to the earliest singing material. (The posture of the head.)
2. **Bheri-tala**: material associated with the two sides of the drum—i.e., drum music. (The posture of the fore [sic] legs in Mandiya position spread in the shape of a drum.)
3. **Hastha-tala**—clapping. (The posture of the hands.)
4. **Khumbha-tala**—playing of clay drums. (Another posture of the two legs with heels together but spread apart at the knees, thus giving the formation for a standing pot.)
5. **Bhumi-tala**—dance stepping. (The posture of the feet.)

In this example, *tala* acts to separate singing, dancing, clapping, and drumming into different categories of performance.[53] Kulatillake (ibid.) himself provides two definitions of *tala* saying that "on many occasions the term *tala* has been applied to mean shape or movement of a musical piece, *maybe even a melody*" (italics mine)![54]

We must add one more example to this list: the use of "*tala*" in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi (a ritual considered below). There, we will see that the word "*tala*" refers to a set of compositions (thirty-two Thālams). Dayasheela's list of the thirty-two Thālams in the ritual includes the *panchatala* picked out by Bandara in his 1908 article. Instead of referring to five drum syllables,

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52. *Panchatala* is also a composition in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi (see below).

53. This list strikes me as demonstrating the *newness* of the word *tala* in Sinhala musical contexts and the ritualists' attempts to incorporate it into their system. Perhaps after *tala* had been rejected by earlier generations of drummers, this system became an attempt at accommodating the foreign word. *Tala* could not be applied to Sinhala beat cycles (for they do not exist), so it was applied to describe different aspects of Beravā performance. As Sinhala drumming was never rigidly separated from singing and dancing, it made sense to apply *"tala"* to these modalities at once. Alternatively, this use of *tala* could relate to an older system of unified dance and drumming that was also found in India and that subsequently died out in the subcontinent.

54. In Kulatillake's first example, "*tala*" refers to five types of musical instruments. In his second, it divides dancing, singing, drumming, and clapping into different categories of performance and, according to his own reckoning, it sometimes refers to musical development and melody.

Dayasheela describes *panchatala* as including a poem followed by *padas*. The poem reads:

> I will keep the Buddha on the crown of my head.
> I will keep the Dhamma on my forehead.
> I will place the Sangha in my whole human body.
> Now I will worship the triple gem with honor.

This is hardly a typical *talam* of Carnatic music![55] As I describe further below in my analysis of the Thālams in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, the *padas* that follow this poem were supposedly played by the god Isivara at the moment the Buddha found Enlightenment, and it is at that moment the *panchaturyanāda* (the fivefold instruments) entered the world.[56]

A LISTENING GUIDE: MATCHING UP THE DRUM LANGUAGE WITH *PADAS* IN PERFORMANCE

To sum up where we are at this point: I proposed in the accompanying essay that due to the Seventh Precept, which prohibits Buddhists from sensuously enjoying "music," Beravā drumming was constructed as sacred speech that operates free of *tala* (the system of beat cycles associated with Indian musics). Here, I have suggested that as a result of this prohibition, Sinhala rhythms were constructed to emerge from the pronunciation of drum words rather than from an overarching system of beat cycles with subdivisions into which drum strokes are slotted. I have argued that the drum language does emphasize long and short syllables conceived as *mātrās* but that the properties of the drum language lead to a fluidity in how drum strokes match up with *mātrās*—thus lending a seeming metric ambiguity to outsiders.

In this section, I turn towards the crux of my thesis: Beravā drumming is entirely speechlike, uncounted, unmeasured, and thus not metered (though there may be a pulse) when drumming is offered to the Buddha (in the composition called *magul bera*) and in some cherished *padas* for deities, while (as we saw in the last section) *padas* for demons and those played when a ritualist is in trance are more easily translated into a language of beat cycles and thus considered crude by ritualists. To be clear, I am asserting that ritualists' assertions of crudeness align with the emergence of clearly heard beat cycles, because the latter comes close to signifying meter (i.e., *tala*). Alternatively, *padas* that are the most highly cherished sound the most like freeform speech (though there may be a pulse)—and this claim is born out especially in the final section of this essay, when I turn toward the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, the ritual in which drummers play the drum patterns that the gods played to celebrate the Buddha's Enlightenment. It is not I who is asserting that shorter, metered-sounding rhythms are crude: my teacher Dayasheela is very adamant that the rhythms for *yakku* as well as the easier rhythms for trance are less valued by ritualists. He laments, though, that such easier

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55. For a comparable example of a South Asian music genre that uses pan-South Asian terms in a non-standard way, see Guillebaud's (2008) work on the Pulluvan in Kerala.
56. Thus, Bandara was right to think *panchatala* refers to the *panchaturyanāda*, the fivefold instruments.

rhythms are often more valued by the listening public because they sound more similar to the repetitive drum patterns found in global popular musics.

In this section, I provide recordings and transcriptions of rhythms to support this thesis. Note, however, that in practice, a direct mapping of "unmetered → metered" onto "Buddha/deities → demons" is simplistic. While I contend that the *magul bera* for the Buddha is an unmetered drum recitation, passages surrounding *padas* for deities can often be counted in an 8-beat or 16-beat cycle—though my teacher Dayasheela never counted them this way to me (he simply taught me the *padas*). There are also sections of rituals where dancers move quickly in circles while drummers keep time (*gaman mātrā*). These moments of "filler" drumming are often clearly in six beats, though not typically theorized this way.[57] Finally, remember that *yakku* are cajoled to look on the ritual space by being fooled into thinking they are being treated like gods; while I suggest their rhythms are simpler and more metered-sounding than those for deities, the line of demarcation is not always easy to discern. What follows in this section, then, is my attempt to tease out this idealized relationship between the Buddha/deities and "unmetered" drumming and *yakku*/trance and "metered" drumming, but I acknowledge the situation may sometimes be murky in practice.

To begin, listen to two examples of Dayasheela reciting *padas* over recordings of drumming, paying attention to the "fills" (*alankāra*) and flams that surround the actual *padas* being played (Audio Examples 1 and 2). The first is derived from the Devol Maduva while the second is from the "*vas danda*" (calling of the demons) sequence in the Sanni Yakuma. These recordings give a sense of the "sloppiness" of drummers as they play flams and multiple elaborations around the basic *padas*.[58] To take this latter point to its extreme, here is an example of a *padaya* that is *extremely* difficult to hear because of the many overlapping elaborations played by drummers in the recording (see Video Example 27). My research assistant, Pabalu Wijegoonawardane, describes the scene:

> Looking at the drumming and poems (*Kavi*) they chant, this clip is from a *Mal Asna* section. *Mal Asna* is a place made with "Gokkola" (premature coconut leaves) and other natural decorative for resembling the abode of a particular god or a deity. There are four main gods that have been invited and are being worshiped in this ceremony: Vishnu, Paththini, Natha, and Katharagama. Each god owns a *Mal Asna* in the ceremonial ground. The *Kavi* and dancing is all about pleasing them and enticing them to descend from the other world to earth.

Notating the grooves exactly is impossible. In the first instance, the groove is an

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57. Dayasheela asserts that such moments have increased in modern times as ritualists have become more interested in entertaining an audience, and he decries the overuse of such flashy drumming.
58. It is often impossible, even for an advanced drummer, to simply listen to a ritual and know what *padas* the drummers are playing, particularly when those drummers are not from his (drummers in ritual are always male) *paramparavā*. Because of the secrecy of drummer *paramparavās* and Korale differences, two *padas* played by different *paramparavās* may sound identical but have different linguistic spellings. Beravā drumming also utilizes "flams" (near-unisons), and drummers often play different elaborations (*alankāra*) on top of one another.

improvisation that happens spontaneously, coupled with dancing and singing. Additionally, since each of the 6 drummers adds his own *alankāra* [elaborations] with a variety of tempos, finding one single groove to write is not fair to the drum orchestra.

For your study's sake, here is a very basic groove they play and I hope that when you follow it, you will be better [able] to hear the *alankāras* (from 0:00:54). The example is a full circle of 16 beats. Considering the stresses imparted by the drummers, we can infer a following division of the 16-beat cycle:

1x2x3 1x2x3/ 1x2/ 1x2x3/ 1x2x3 /1x2 = 16

Wijegoonawardane notates the *pada* as follows:

"*Ring gatha gadi gatha gadida gathan gatha ghum*
Gatha ruguda gudan gath thahura gudan gath dhong"

1	2	3 /	4	5	6 /	7	8
Ri	*ng*	*ga*	*tha*	*ga*	*di*	*ga*	*tha*
Ga	*di*	*da*	*ga*	*tha*	*n*	*ga*	*tha*
Ghum				*Ga*	*-*	*tha*	*-*
Ru	*gu*	*da*	*gu*	*da*	*n*	*gath*	*-*
Tha	*hu*	*ra*	*gu*	*da*	*n*	*gath*	*-*
dhong							

In this recording, one hears the low-sounding *dong* frequently at the start of the pattern instead of the higher-pitched *ring*, although I suspect some drummers may be playing the latter simultaneously. It is easiest to hear this by focusing on the pause in the middle after "*gum*." In practice, some drummers sound as though they are not playing *gata* after this, but playing a drum roll leading into the second half of the *pada*. Few listeners may be able to hear this: Wijegoonawardane was born and raised on this drumming and, as he says, it is impossible to notate clearly.

PADA FOR RIRI YAKKHA: AN EXAMPLE OF "METERED-SOUNDING" DRUMMING

Let us turn now to a transcription of drumming for Riri Yakkha (a demon), an example of a *padaya* that is clearly in a six-beat cycle. Even here, the beat may sound elusive to Western (and Indian) ears. In the video, my teacher taps his foot at moments that do *not* always match up to where I hear the rhythmic stress of the pattern (on beats one, three, and five). An example of a drum stroke that complicates this easily countable rhythm is *dahing*—it sounds to me like two sixteenth notes with a pause after it. In my view, this pause is felt rather than counted, thereby slightly stretching the count. Notice how the end of the first stanza is also the

beginning of the second one. As the passage proceeds, it eventually slides into a duple rhythm and concludes with long drum words that are then shortened, heightening dramatic tension as it concludes.

Moments when my teacher taps his foot are in bold; "x" marks what I believe to be the rhythmic stresses, placed on beats one, three, and five. Single *aksara* like "*re*" are given one beat with a slight pause (if this drumming were conceived as being in 6/8, *re* would equal an eighth note followed by an eighth-note rest. By contrast, words with two *aksaras* written close together, like "gati," sound like sixteenth notes, and there is no pause after them [*gatigata* thus sounds like four sixteenth notes]). Please read the following while watching [Video Example 18a](#).

> *Re ga ta* / *de ga ta* / *ga*ti gata *gu*ndang *de*ga*ta*ng /
> x   x   x   / x   x   x
>
> *Re ga ta* / *de gun da* / *dahing* (pause) *gattang ditaga*ta /
> x   x / x   / x   x   x
>
> *re ga ta* / *de ga ta* / gati *ga*ta gun*da*ng *de*ga*ta*ng
> x   x   x   / x   x   x
>
> *Re ga ta* / *de gun da* / *dahing* (pause) *gatta*ng gattaku
> x   x / x   / x   x   x
>
> *dom* de gat **tang** gattaku   (x4)
> x   x   x
>
> *dom* ta gat ta ku / *dom* gundat ta ku /
> x   x   x   x
>
> *dom* de gat ta ku /*dom* gundat . . . . / regatagundagundaga*t* / regatagundagundagat
> x   x   x   x   x   x
>
> gundagunda gat / gundagunda gatta   / gunda gat dita /
> x   x   x
>
> gundagahirikita gunda gat / dahing
> (indecipherable)   x

Next is an example of drumming that is simpler and clearly metered; this is one of the easiest passages in the entire repertoire, from the aforementioned *avatara bälima* where a ritualist is in trance (see [Video Example 26](#) and the transcription below by Pabalu Wijegoonawardane)[59]:

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59. This rhythm differs slightly from the version of it provided by Dayasheela's father (given above).

"*gug gunda gatha, gath gatha gathaaa*" or "*gudi gunda gatha gathi gatha gatha*"

1	2	3 /	4	5	6
gu	*g*	*gun*	*da*	*ga*	*tha*
ga	*th*	*ga*	*tha*	*ga*	*tha*
gu	*di*	*gun*	*da*	*ga*	*tha*
ga	*thi*	*ga*	*tha*	*ga*	*tha*

Now consider the passage from a Devol Maduva in Video Example 28; it contains the end of the opening *Sända Samayama* and transitions into *padas* for the goddess Pattini, followed by *irratiya*. Some moments of this passage are easy to count, but less so as the passage progresses; Pattini's three *padas* (especially her first one) resist being counted. The section also contains through-composed cadential formulas and some connecting words between *padas* that resist being counted.

The beginning is heard in a six-beat rhythm; "x" signifies a strong beat on beats 1 and 4. Note how the sense of a "beat cycle" or meter wavers and comes in and out as the passage progresses.[60]

du gudung gunda | gata gatang gata
x   x   x   x

du gata gugunda | gata gatang
x   x   x   x

du gata gugunda | gata gatang gata
x   x   x   x

gati dega deguduga dang
x   x   x

dung gatang ga dahing di ku
x   x   x

dung taka tang ga dahing di ku
x   x   x

dung gatang ga dahing di ku
x   x   x

---

60. There are some drum words in this piece that I did not learn, and which appear to contradict the rules of transformation found in the list of syllables on the *gharbaksara* given above; examples include *du*, *dega*, and *teka*. My aim here has been to transcribe Dayasheela's verbal utterances the best I can; it is possible some words are slightly different from what I have transcribed or are more advanced than on the list of *gharbaksara* I received.

dung taka tang ga dahing di ku
x   x   x

dung taka tang gata gadigata gugunda
x   x   x   x

gunda gatang gata gadigata gugunda
x   x   x   x

dom takudung gatagaditagundi ta
x   x   x   x

dom rrrregata gadita gundita
x   x   x   x

dom
x   x

gum   dahing
x   x   x   x

dahing ta   gum   rrrrr
x   x   x   x

regata gatigata gundigunda gatigata
x   x   x   x

gum   dahing
x   x   x   x

dahing ta   gum   rrrrr
x   x   x   x

regata gatigata gundigunda gatigata
x   x   x   x

gundangta gata gatangta gum
x   x   x   x

rrrregata gatigata gundigunda gatigata
   x   x   x   x

gundangta gatangta gatangta gum
x   x   x   x

*dongta gunda gundigata gunda gundigata gundang gata gun
dahing*[61]

*gati gata gata / gati gata gata / gati gata gatang / gataga dahing
gati gata gunda / gundi gata gunda / gundi gata gunda / gatagu dahing
gati gata gata / gati gata gata / gati gata gatang / gataga dahing*[62]

*gundang gata gu dahing / gati gata gatang gata gat dahing
rrrregata gata gun / du gata ga ta / gaditeka dikundeku dahing /
gatigata
gundang gata gu dahing / gati gata gatang gata gat dahingta gum
rrregata gata gun / du gata ga ta / gaditeka dikundeku dahing / dahingta gum*

rrrrrrrrrim! *gaditeka dikundeku dom*[63]

First *pada*, Pattini[64]
gadim dim dim (x3)

*gatakudom dom dom tagatigatagundang
gatigatagugudagatigatagatakudum dum*

Dayasheela says, "This *surala*."[65]
guhadigadirikiTa / gata gata   (x3)
gataku dom[66]

Dayasheela says, "This is long."[67]
guhadigadirikiTa gata gata   (x3)
gata ku dom

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61. Dayasheela may have made an error with the word *dongta*, as indicated by his hesitation in the video; this *padaya* is somewhat ambiguously timed, so I have not notated it in a meter.
62. This section strikes me as having a "gestural" meter that emerges from the dancing, which the drummer matches, rather than from counting out a number of beats. See the following section for a discussion.
63. Note that the word *dahing* often comes at the end of phrases; towards the end we find the same words that occur at the end of sections of the *magul bera* that I learned (see below—*dahing dahingta gum*). We then have a dramatic drum roll (the *ring* that is stretched out and accented) followed by a repetition of the ending passage, this time ending in *dom*.
64. I suggest that in this auspicious first offering to Pattini, the goddess is not given "music" but a through-composed drum poem that lacks meter. I have written this passage in virtue of its syllables being categorized as light (*laghu,* one *mātrā*) or heavy (*guru,* two *mātrās*): *laghu* syllables run into the next syllable; *guru* syllables are granted a space after them, signifying a rest.
65. "*Surala*" usually refers to a drum roll; however, according to Suraweera (2009, 113), "*surala*" may also refer to a "longer pattern . . . which consists of technical rhythms and dance steps. Performing a *surala* is generally considered an opportunity for an individual drummer to show his skills."
66. While I am unsure that he is saying "*guhadigadirikita*," he is clearly reciting a long drum word and then adding *gata gata* rather than counting the long word as having a certain number of "beats."
67. This section is similar (but not identical) to the "Pattini *pada* 1 – *surala*" documented by Suraweera (2009, 142) in his thesis. Again, I am unsure that Dayasheela is saying "*guhadigadirikita*"; it is either that word or something close to it.

guhadigadirikiTa gata gata   (x2)
gata ku dom

guhadigadirikiTa gata gata   (x2)
gata ku dom

gat (this may be an error on Dayasheela's part)
guhadigadirikiTa gataku dom (x2)
gataku dom gundaku dom
dom tat dom takadit tat
takaraka undagat iram (indecipherable)

Second rhythm
gunda gata gunda gata | gat | dahing
gadi gata |
gunda gata gunda gata | gat | dahing

dom takugundagatagat dit dahing gum
rrrregatat degundeku dom[68]

[A pause, as Dayasheela remembers the *pada*]

Irratiya
regun dang gata gudi tagu dang gata gunda gu gudita gata gata
dom gata gadi gatang gudi gatang | gadi gatang dom gata gahadigadirikiTa (?) *gadiku dom*

Dayasheela says, "Third one."
gundita gun di dahing
gadita ga din dahing
tat dit ton nang
gundita gun din dahing[69]

rrrrregata gata gata gudi gaditeka degundeku dom

Irratiya (Note: I did not learn the words for the first three lines of this, and the end of it is hard to decipher. This is merely a guess.)
gundita dahuragat
gadita dahuragat

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68. The start of this rhythm hints at the "gestural" timing I consider in more detail in the next section. We see "*dahing*" as an exclamation (or period) ending the drum sentence, with "*gadi gata*" as intermediary words that connect two lines of the drum poem. Then the section concludes with a through-composed line I have written as *laghu | guru* (emphasizing the space after long or *guru* letters), and the cadential figure "*rrrregatat degundeku dom.*"
69. This third *padaya* for Pattini seems to have more of a recognizable "beat" or rhythm, but I suggest this is structured as a respectful honoring, as signified by the four main drum strokes (*tat dit ton nang*). See below in the music for the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi for an explanation of how these drum strokes emerge in moments of honoring the Buddha, one's teachers, and the gods.

> *gundita dahuragata*
> *gu gun ditang gat taga ditagata*
> *gu gun ditang gat rim iram*

In contrast to the drumming in *avatara bälima*, there are moments of poise and rest in this music; in the video, Dayasheela gracefully moves his arms and dances as he recites the *padas*. Certain words (such as *dim*) are emphasized and followed with a pause. I suggest that by the end of the very long first section of this (before the official first *pada* for Pattini), the drumming begins veering away from a "meter" (in scare quotes because technically speaking, none of it is theorized as being in a meter), though it retains a gestural feel guided by the dance. The actual Pattini *padas* appear to be through-composed and better understood as strings of long (*guru*) and short (*laghu*) syllables rather than being in a beat cycle; they also contain cadential formulae, particularly the drum word *dahing*, which I suggest functions as a kind of exclamation point at the end of some phrases. The last Pattini *pada* contains "*tat dit ton nang*" (the basic four syllables), a respectful salutation to the goddess (see below for how this works in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi). On the whole, I suggest this can be heard as drum poetry that veers from "metered" passages (note the scare quotes), to moments of gestural or felt drumming (timed with the dance), to moments of clearly "unmetered" drumming that end with cadential formulae.

For another example at the extreme end of the spectrum (i.e., unmetered), consider my transcription of the *magul bera* for the Buddha above on page 12 ([Video Example 11b](#)).

I turn now toward placing *bera padas* in two larger histories in South Asia: one a history of "gestural" rather than strictly counted and metronomic rhythms that emerged through dance genres, the other a history of Indian Buddhist drum speech.

Connecting Beravā Drumming with the History of Tala and Indian Buddhist Musics

James Kippen (2006) proposes a fascinating theory for the historical development of stressed and unstressed beats for *tāls* in North India that deserves broader consideration and is relevant to my efforts here. Kippen notes that *pakhāvaj tāls*—the rhythmic structures played on the *pakhāvaj* drum, associated with the *dhrupad* genre that was prominent in North Indian temples and courts from the medieval to early modern periods—are "additive or quantitative (duration based)" while *tabla tāls* are "divisive or qualitative (stress based) in nature" (Kippen 2006, 81). References to "*tabl*" are common before the eighteenth century, but "it is unclear whether these implied anything other than a small kettledrum" (9). Evidence for the *tabla* (the set of drums ubiquitous in North India today) does not predate the mid-eighteenth century (ibid.). It appears that the drums emerged and spread as accompanying instruments for female dancers (what the British termed "nautch," a corruption of *nāc,* or "dance"), troupes consisting of "professional minstrels from *Dhādhī* communities from the regions to the west

and northwest of Delhi" (10).[70] The *tabla* appears to have spread rapidly because it could reproduce the techniques and repertoire not just of the *pakhāvaj,* but also of two other drums that were prevalent at the time: the *naqqara* (kettledrums played with sticks) and *dholak* (a small barrel drum).

Drawing on the work of Rebecca Stewart (1974), Kippen argues that many of the longer *tāls* (e.g., 16-count *tāls*) in Hindustani music can be broken down into smaller groups of beats (e.g., eight or four), "depending on speed of articulation and perception of the beat" (2006, 82). Thus, they are somewhat akin to what in the West are called "compound metrical structures" (ibid.). By contrast, *tāls* with arrangements of 2 + 3 or 3 + 4 beats may have derived from dance rhythms, and Kippen suggests they "might better be thought of more informally as an iambic lilt," possibly emerging from dance steps. These folk metres (somewhat like the *cāpu talas* of South India, also derived from folk songs) were doubled—for example, the 2 + 3 + 2 + 3 of *jhaptāl.* This is our first clue: perhaps the ends of such patterns were not counted precisely but felt (along with the dancers) as "an iambic lilt." I posit this is what is happening in the section before the first "Pattini *pada*" analyzed in the last section.

As quoted by Kippen (2006, 83), Stewart describes "the accentual hierarchy of a four-part metric structure as 1-4-2-3" with 1 signifying the most stress and 4 the least in the measure. The argument Kippen makes (drawing on Sharma 1992) is that the North Indian term for an unstressed beat or "*khali* . . . was dependent on sounded gestures, and only became independent with the advent of *tāls* displaying two distinct halves. . . . *Khali* [lies] in opposition to *sam* [beat 1], thus representing relaxation versus tension by means of a secondary accent that launches an expectation of the *sam*" (Kippen 2006, 83). Kippen's point is that for *pakhāvaj tāls,* the "wave" in Hindustani theory means something different than it does for the *tabla*: it means "extending the length of an agogic stress" rather than signifying "an 'empty' metric stress" or "contrastive lightness" as it does with the *tabla.* Another hint of its relative newness is that *khali* is "one of the very few Arabic terms in an otherwise Sanskrit-based music theory lexicon," and Kippen suggests the term was subsequently taken from the *tabla* and applied to the *pakhāvaj,* noting there is the "possibility that the *khāli* principle is not an indigenous Indian one" (2006, 84).

This is important for my purposes because Kippen suggests that the *pakhāvaj*'s additive system "appears indebted to rules of Sanskrit prosody that define the syllable as either long/heavy (*guru*) or short/light (*laghu*). The *guru* is counted as two *mātrās,* the *laghu* as one" (2006, 81). Of course, I have argued throughout that this way of counting forms the foundation for Sinhala drumming. Kippen wonders if "there was a change from the *paran* [*pakhāvaj* composition] to the *thekā* [rhythmic grooves on the *tabla*] that occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century," a transformation that would signify "a gradual melding of primarily gesture-based with groove-based methods of keeping time" (2006, 89). What I am arguing here

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70. The "major function" of this "community of bards" was "to sing war songs, heroic ballads, praise their patrons and recite genealogies" (Kippen 2006, 87).

is that the theory of stressed and unstressed beats that is so integral to North Indian *tāls* (and their *thekas*) is a modern phenomenon that was never transferred to Sinhala drumming.

What about the Carnatic system of *talams,* which is geographically in between North India and Sri Lanka? In his *Solkattu Manual*, David Nelson (2008, 2) describes "meter" as a useful translation for *tala*, since "each [*tāl*] is cyclic and regular, and each can exist within a range of tempi." However, not only can *tāls* be much longer than Western meters (such as twenty-nine beats long), but a *tala* "lacks the internal accent structure that characterizes meters in Western music"; in Carnatic music, "rhythmic accents . . . are generated by musical *phrases* and the processes applied to them" (italics mine). Nelson goes on to say that "the earliest writings *about* Indian music, beginning with the Natyāsāstra, describe *talas* as sets of hand gestures. From the thirteenth century on, *talas* seem to have been cyclic" (6; italics in original). Judging from the repertoire of Carnatic music "and the pedagogical exercises teachers use to prepare students to learn them . . . we can gather . . . that *talas* have been used as regular, cyclic meters since at least the sixteenth century."

In the accompanying article, I argued that the Sinhala Buddhist ritual repertoire probably dates from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Not only is there no discourse on *tāl* applied to the music, but there is no discourse on cyclicity (even though *padas* are frequently repeated) and no discourse on stressed and unstressed beats. What we do find, besides the use of the terms *guru* and *laghu*, are pauses in the drumming that are felt in what might be termed a "gestural" way—agogic stresses coordinated with dance steps. Sinhala drummers might have needed to avoid sounding musical, but our contemporary idea of musicality as expressed through rhythms (defined as grooves with combinations of stressed and unstressed beats) did not yet exist when Sinhala drumming was developed.

In a 1980 paper on Tibetan drum syllables, Ter Ellingson emphasized the oft-forgotten fact that during the fifteen hundred or so years while the classical Indian music theorists were producing treatises "inextricably linked with the cultural and ideological premises and lifestyles of the Hindu religion . . . during this same era, India was a multicultural, multireligious, and multimusical civilization" (433). He notes that "the Indian musical tradition that most strongly influenced musical developments in other parts of Asia was not the Hindu tradition of the classical theorists, but rather the music of Indian Buddhism." However, very few sources survive that could help us understand the history and structure of Indian Buddhist musics. Ellingson's paper analyzes the drum syllables of a fourteenth-century Tibetan dance manual believed to have come from India several centuries earlier. He uses that material—which includes drumming as the aural manifestation of *mantras* and the depiction of *mandalas,* played to the four cardinal directions—to argue that while scholars have often thought that Indian drum syllables are mnemonic (mimicking the sounds of the drum), in ancient India, the relationship may have been reversed: drum sounds may have been the "voicing" of verbal formulas such as *māntrās*. For example, Ellingson convincingly argues this was the case with old royal proclamations (e.g., the announcing of war by playing "war drums"), noting that Tibetan historians describe "an anti-Buddhist persecution in India

said to have arisen from a misinterpretation of syllables played on the *gandi* [a wooden idiophone]" (1980, 449). Ellingson suggests we look for "syllable-tone-rhythm transformations" in drum languages rather than assuming the sequence always went from "rhythms" (i.e., performance) manifesting "tones" that culminated in a verbal syllable that represents the tone. In discussing the possible historical development of drum languages in India, he states, "If we ignore the relationship between drumbeats and mantra formulas, the result may be a complete misunderstanding of the evolution of Indian rhythm" (1980, 447).

The final section of this paper supports Ellingson's thesis. I investigate the drumming in a ritual that, while extremely rare today, encompasses the history and theory of low-country Sinhala Buddhist drumming, as explained by my *gurunnānse* Dayasheela. Believed to consist of the drum speech and poetic stanzas recited by the gods when the Buddha found Enlightenment, the drumming in the ritual (called Bera Pōya Hēvīsi) includes some words with referential meaning (e.g., playing "Buddha" on the drum), and it segues subtly between the verbal recitation of a drum language found only in the ritual, sung poetry in Sinhala, Sanskrit, and Pali, and actual playing of drum poetry on the drum. In the ritual, drummers voice the drum speech they have memorized, drum speech that did not arise mnemonically. As Ellingson (1980) remarked, this may point to an ancient Indian (Buddhist?) way of conceiving drum syllables that predated the mnemonic system (or grew out of it), then declining across South Asia because of the way *tala* developed in non-Buddhist (largely Hindu) communities. I encourage us to look for these kinds of drum syllables across ancient South Asian drumming traditions: one possible avenue of inquiry is the South Indian *parai* frame drum as the "announcing drum"—a drum that also appears to operate through a different rhythmic system than the standard Carnatic *tala* system (Sherinian 2013). In addition to this, however, researchers might also question whether South Asian Buddhism in particular invested in drum syllables as the aural reproduction of an initial verbal formulation. Ellingson convincingly shows this may have arisen due to the influence of Tantric Buddhism; but I also question whether (or in what contexts) it arose because of the Seventh Precept's stipulation to avoid sounding musical.

The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi

"It was then, at the Cāpāla Shrine, that the Blessed One, mindful and fully aware, relinquished the will to live. When he did so, there was a great earthquake, fearful and hair-raising, and the drums of heaven resounded."

<div align="right">Bhikkhu Nanamoli (2003, 303)</div>

"Language is like a wish-conferring cow that gives what is desirable to those who can use it in the proper manner, but for others it will only impart bovine qualities."

<div align="right">*Siyabaslakara*, a tenth-century Sinhala text (cited by Hallisey 2003, 701)</div>

My initial goal for fieldwork was to learn drumming played in the standard rituals (*tovils*). But after months of studying *yak beraya*, I realized I was encountering "*guru musti*" (the

tendency for *gurunnānses* to withhold information from students): I was being held at bay from learning anything but basic exercises (*harambas*) and the commonly played drum composition for the Buddha (*magul bera*). When Dayasheela insisted our lessons shift to the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi—a ritual I had barely heard of let alone seen—I was skeptical. I feared this was more *guru musti*, a calculated attempt to draw my attention from the commonly played (though rigorously guarded) ritual music to an obscure ritual with little relevance for today's drummers. Dayasheela said he had seen the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi only once, some fifty years ago, when his father performed in one. Furthermore, upon beginning my study of the ritual, I quickly surmised that the drum words used in it are unlike those found in the standard rituals.

The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, it turns out, is a ritual with no dancers and many drummers—it is a drum competition. No rewards are given; the competition here is to see who has the most knowledge of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. The rarity of the ritual, I learned, is due in large part to the potent mix of emotions that is evoked by the fact that the ritual requires showing off one's knowledge in front of one's peers, including competitiveness, professional jealousy, and fear of being humiliated. The event requires at least thirteen *yak bera* drummers of high skill, plus five *hēvīsi* musicians; the organizer, in an attempt to find the best drummers, may search far and wide in the *korale*, gathering drummers from disparate villages. Some may have never played together or even met. Some may have big egos and differences in style (a combustible combination). A degree of mistrust is inevitable, since each drummer will be afraid of betraying his local tradition by giving away its secrets; yet each must do so, since displaying the depth of one's knowledge is the point of the ritual. In the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, over the course of a night (from roughly 7 p.m. to 8 or 9 a.m.), drummers proceed through each section described in the poem on the repertoire (see my accompanying article), demonstrating in full view of everyone how much of the repertoire (described in the poem) he knows. Drummers also choose esoteric drum sentences (*padas*) from the repertoire that the poem describes and challenge one another to play them. Even drummers from the same *gurukula* will face ritual politics, as a younger drummer would not want to upstage their elders but would not want to face public humiliation. All this means that an invitation to perform in a Bera Pōya Hēvīsi creates temptation and fear—an urge to show off mixed with a fear of being upstaged, giving away secrets, and angering one's elders. Such a complex emotional engagement has a bearing on the infrequency of the ritual's performance, which in turn increases the likelihood that drummers will not know how to play the music on the rare chance they are called upon to do so. The ritual also requires expensive preparations, including food for spectators. This requires raising funds, as drummers usually won't be able to self-finance the meals. Unlike the more commonly performed rituals, the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi has little "purpose" that would justify asking villagers to cover the expense. It does not so much target drought, pestilence, or personal illness, as it is a giant "drum-off." Because of this, in lean economic times, villagers are unlikely to subsidize what may seem to be a fifteen-hour drum solo with little value for the community.

Yet this characterization of the ritual as relatively frivolous—even if it explains the rarity

of its performance—is insufficient for explaining the significance of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. The event *is* an efficacious ritual. "Bera Pōya Hēvīsi" means "auspicious drumming on a full moon night"; in the ritual, drumming is offered (*sabda pujāva*) to the Buddha and the Guardians of the Four Quarters (with other deities receiving some offerings) in the hopes that the deities will be pleased and continue to protect the community. It is held at a Buddhist temple with a monk blessing the proceedings and includes three offerings of music from a *hēvisi* ensemble, two offerings of drumming for the Buddha (*magul bera*) in the temple's shrine room facing a statue of the Buddha, and musical offerings to deities seated on "thrones" (*yahans*) in the ritual space. The ritual I witnessed also included *yahans* made *for* each drum played in the ritual, and thus each drum received offerings and was worshipped at the start of the ritual as though it were a god itself. Drumming in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi may be aimed at connoisseurs, but this is not music performed solely for amusement: drummers must perform the *padas* correctly, and the ritual must proceed through all its sections and conclude in the morning.

I was able to learn the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi only by promising Dayasheela I would help fund the ritual. I received a grant from my university to do so, and the planned ritual would be the first Bentara Korale Bera Pōya Hēvīsi in over fifty years. As one might guess from my detailed account of why the ritual is seldom performed, our revival was doomed from the start; it was like asking students to sit for an exam on basic material they were assumed to have learned years ago but never did, and to share the results publicly. I don't think *any* of the drummers who actually came wanted to be there, save for three people: Dayasheela, the seventy-something ritual artist W. Edin, and a surprisingly skilled young drummer who turned up for the occasion.

Despite the laughable failure (details of which I discuss in a moment), the event turned out to be great for my research. Hosting the event demonstrated for me the theoretical centrality of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi in the low-country drumming tradition. When Dayasheela decided to teach me the ritual he was not deploying *guru musti* but thinking about how best to represent his tradition to the public. His insistence on my studying the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi was due to the fact that the ritual lays out the foundation for the history and theory of *yak beraya* performance. Unlike the standard rituals, in which drummers accompany singers and dancers and are rarely the sole focus, drummers are the only performers in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. Without having to take on the role of accompanist and fulfill ritual functions like helping summon demons or support a dancer in trance, drummers in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi have free reign to focus on their art and its history—and when they do, it is in large part through poetry *about* drumming. In the Bera Pōya Hēvisi, drummers express what they *strive* for in their art, what they wish for it to achieve, and yet they are also constrained by the musical structures that tell them what this ideal drum performance must be. The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, then, provides an idealized framework for *yak beraya* drumming that appears (in part) in the more common Sinhala rituals.

Roll Call: The Politics of a Musical Revival

In the months leading up to our Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, Dayasheela became overwhelmingly nervous about how the occasion would unfold. To prepare, Dayasheela sent invitations by mail to drummers throughout Bentara Korale. He insisted I hire a television crew to film the event, and I found interest in YA TV (Young Asia TV), a major broadcaster. Also at his behest, I sent out an email announcement to expatriates in Colombo, inviting them to attend; I received a stream of inquiries leading up to the event from foreigners asking if they could attend "the all-night drum circle." Dayasheela publicized the event among villagers in his then-home of Wadduwa (where the ritual was held, in Raigama Korale), and his friends in Colombo and his native Bentara Korale. As the event grew closer, Dayasheela followed up on drummers he had not heard back from, which involved getting in touch with friends he had not seen in years. Despite email and mobile phones, Dayasheela still needed to make house calls. This was an arduous process but one that captured the fun and importance of the revival. For example, one day I accompanied him on his attempt to find a drummer, a four-hour journey to a drummer's hilltop home in a remote area. The drummer was not home, so Dayasheela begged the drummer's wife to urge him to attend the ritual.

The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi was supposed to begin with a blessing by a monk (*bhikkhu*) who would chant *pirit*, followed by the initial offering by *hēvīsi* musicians. Then the ritual proper would begin and run all night, from about 9 p.m. to dawn, with thirteen drummers running through each of the sections outlined in the drum poem without breaks. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, and neither, I think, did Dayasheela.

The day of the performance was frantic and stressful. Dayasheela and Edin directed the building of the ritual space (Figure 8). The focus of activities centered on constructing four *yahans* (seats of the gods) dedicated to the "Gods of the Four Quarters": Drutarashta, Virudha, Virupaksha, and Vaisravana. These would be the focus of almost all the musical offerings in the ritual (Figures 9 and 10).

One interlocutor told me that the Gods of the Four Quarters are featured in the ritual because they have a "special relationship with music," as described in a text in the Pali Canon, the *Adanatya Sutta*. In that *Sutta*, the Gods of the Four Quarters go to the Buddha with a list of punishments for people who disobey the precepts, asking him to "please teach this to your followers." The *Sutta* describes the kinds of music, dance, and singing these deities are *allowed* to enjoy, because (as my informant put it), "according to the Buddhist philosophy, these deities had done merits. They had performed so much good, that they could play music for happiness: a good result because of good things." My interlocutor went on to say that the four kings of deities (e.g., the Gods of the Four Quarters) and Sakra (who is in charge of the heavens and kings) always protect the Buddha's followers. Kings are like diplomats, "representatives of the heavens"; therefore, they are the ones who attend the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi: "Normally, presidents don't go to each and every country, but diplomats go, representing the state." The main offerings in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi are for the Buddha, but the kings (the Gods

Figure 8. W. Edin, eminent master of ritual arts in the Bentara Korale, preparing for a Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.

of the Four Quarters) are there to watch on his behalf (and they receive offerings as well).[71]

By late afternoon, a problem could not be ignored: several drummers had not shown up. Out of an expected thirteen *yak beraya* drummers, only five were there by 5 p.m. Dayasheela, increasingly anxious, reminded me that it is common for drummers to arrive late due to work obligations, and their not wanting to help set up. As the clock ticked, though, he became agitated. Finally, there was a mixture of good and bad news: a few more drummers had shown up, bringing our total to eight; however, *five* drummers were boycotting the ritual. The event had become politicized, an occasion to exercise old rivalries. While I was never able to figure out precisely what happened, some of it was due to my organizing the event: a rumor had gone around that the event was not a "real" Bera Pōya Hēvīsi because it was organized by a foreigner. However, Dayasheela told me this was an excuse. The real reason, he assured me, was that a drummer from Ambalangoda, a former student of his who had quit studying with

71. Ellingson (1980) provides an example of Tibetan Buddhist drumming where sixteen beats are split into groups of four, devised as "an aural depiction of the foursquare geometric orientation of the Tantric Buddhist mandala." The similarity here is striking.

Figure 9. W. Edin constructing a *yahan* (seat of a god).

him years ago on bad terms, had not been invited to play in the ritual. Out of jealousy over the good fortune of his former teacher to hold the event, he contacted the other Ambalangoda drummers, threatened them, and spread the lie that the event would not be a "real" Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. Of course, blaming it on me was also an easy way for drummers to get out of performing.

Additionally, severe rain set in after just a few hours of drumming, all but killing the event (the expatriate community was largely gone after the rain, which occurred just before midnight). The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi did go on as planned, but due to the lack of drummers, what should have been four groups was whittled down to two (with four drummers each). Because of the advanced age of Edin (who led the event with Dayasheela), in the middle of the night, the *hēvīsi* drummers had to kill time for a couple hours while Edin and Dayasheela slept. The event had an "absent audience" (Blackburn 1996) not unlike the Rāma stories told through shadow puppetry in Kerala that Blackburn describes in his well-known book, though one could say the drummers were playing for one another.

Figure 10. Dayasheela (left) constructing the smaller *yahans*, each of which will house a *yak beraya* at the beginning of the ritual.

As I expected, the music of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi turned out to be so esoteric that some of the drummers who showed up seemed to have little idea what was going on. The audience for the first part of the event (who were mostly Sri Lankans) seemed bored and confused: where were the dancers? Where were the elaborate costumes and torches? Where were the songs and stories? The entire ritual consisted just of drummers moving from one *yahan* to another, reciting stanzas of partly incomprehensible poetry (drawing on old Sinhala, Sanskrit, and Pali), uttering a drum sentence or two in a mixture of low-country, up-country, and Tamil drum languages with some Sanskrit and Pali words thrown in, followed by the playing of these drum sentences on the drum. As far as I could tell, only two drummers could keep up with Edin and Dayasheela; the others seemed nearly as lost as I was. As the night progressed, the ritual devolved into what was essentially a performance by the two old men, Dayasheela and Edin—smiling, laughing, playfully taunting one another, reveling in being the center of attention—uttering *padas* that were at times incomprehensible to everyone but themselves. On one occasion, Dayasheela uttered a drum paragraph that was so long, it was followed by an awkward silence in which no one took up his challenge to play it themselves, after which laughter broke out among the drummers, creating much needed comic relief! Dayasheela, loving this victory in the drum battle, repeated the *padaya* several *aksaras* at a time, slowly, and one drummer after another followed his lead and played the *aksaras* on the drum.

Although the revival of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi could not have been more of a disaster—drummers didn't show up, the audience was bored and then absent, most of the drummers didn't know what to do—it proved to be an enormous success for my research. The ritual's revival laid bare the ideal aesthetic system that lies behind Sinhala Buddhist drumming. This system treats drumming as sacred speech that resembles—and, in ideal cases, becomes—sung poetry. The full realization of this sent shivers down my spine, for what appeared to me in the ritual, especially in those moments of private drum conversation between Edin and Dayasheela, was the height of the low-country drumming tradition, its most respected music by its revered masters. Esoteric drum poetry flowed by with heightened speech-like qualities, operating *as* poetry without any hint of a beat cycle or repetition. It became obvious to me that the most beautiful and cherished *padas* in low-country ritual drumming are those that are not only the most language-like but also the least known. The revelation of these passages in the ritual context—a public hearing of a private language, shown to the gods, and composed by the gods, in honor of the Buddha—bestows honor, awe, and reverence on all who come in contact with it. These qualities are bequeathed to those who demonstrate their mastery of the ritual, those who listen to it, and those who study it, including the reader of this article.

For those novice expatriates, though, who saw just a segment of the ritual, what they saw in the ritual space were two old men, Dayasheela and Edin, speaking to one another in an incomprehensible tongue, interspersed with drum strokes that must have seemed random and to have few rhythmic qualities. As the audience grew bored and left when rain began, I realized I was witnessing something special. I was not the only one who thought so; at one point, a gifted young drummer (the only one capable of keeping up with the old masters) turned to me and exclaimed in plain American English, "*This is awesome.*"[72]

Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, Or, The Explication of the Poem on the Repertoire

Dayasheela provided me with the following hand-written notes on the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi:

1. Bringing the Buddhist monks into the Buddhist shrine room.
2. Observing Pansil (the five precepts)
3. 1 – Playing of <u>*Yāma Hewisi*</u>
4. 1 – *Shlokaya* (Sanskrit couplet)
5. 1 – *Sannaya*
   The words that came from the mouth of the holy God Bhrahma and decorated by the God son Yama Kula and by the birth of Prince Kanda was born the celebration of *Abhi-Vrud-Nidhi-Sudhi* and came to playing of *Aathatha-Vithatha-Vithathāthaya-Ghanaya-Suyiraya*, into this world.[73]
6. Playing of *Brahma Thālaya*

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72. Sadly, I never learned who this drummer was. I was too caught up performing myself in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi and documenting the ritual.
73. This describes the playing of the "fivefold sounds" (*panchaturyanāda*); see my accompanying article for a description.

> *Brahma Thālaya* that was born from rice, betel and *hunu*, presiding over the drumming of the Magul Bera.

7. Playing of *Magul Bera*
8. *Magul Bera* (thath-dith-thong-nang) – *Dakina Ath Sathara* (4)
9. *Magul Bera – Thunvattama – **Dakina Ath Dahasaya*** (16)[74]
10. *Vadum Ath Pasalosa* (15)[75]
11. *Thath-dith-thong-nang – Sathara vattam sural* and *saththa sathara*
12. ***Thāla This Deka*** (32)
13. <u>2 – *Yāma Hewisi*</u>
14. *2 – Aramba Shlokaya – Budu*
15. A couple from the ***Savudam Sata sathara*** (64)
16. ***Sural*** (21)
17. ***Vandamānams*** (16)
18. ***Sakvithi Podi Sural*** (27)
19. ***Sathalis Anda Pada*** (40)
20. *Deviyanta Pala Deema*
21. *Ping Beraya Vādanaya*
22. <u>3 – conclusion after the playing of *Yāma Hewisi*</u>

(I have highlighted the contents of the drum poem in bold; for a discussion of the drum poem, see my accompanying article.)[76]

In Dayasheela's notes that follow this list, he begins his description of the ritual with the ritual of chopping down a tree to make a *yak beraya*:

> First the tree is surrounded by the four corners and flowers, incense, betel and a lamp are offered to the God who is believed to be living in the tree. With thoughts of the Triple Gem in mind, permission is acquired from the tree god to cut the tree by asking him to take leave of the tree. A Pun Kalasa is offered to the Goddess of the Earth in order to ask for her permission, and then the tree is cut according to the auspicious time with the beating of drums (*magul bera*).

Then one undertakes the "rituals observed after the beating of drums" (*magul bera*). He lists these as:

- Worshipping the Triple Gem
- The white cloth prepared for the drum is draped on a chair and cleaned with milk,

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74. Numbers 8 and 9 mention "magul bera," but this does not mean the magul bera from number 7 (which is the standard *magul bera*) is repeated; I think in these cases Dayaseela is simply calling the drumming in these sections "*magul bera*" (i.e., auspicious drumming).

75. The fifteen "Vadum Ath Pasalosa" are not included in the 216 components mentioned in the poem on the repertoire (see my accompanying article), and I have been unable to locate any information on them.

76. Dayaseela did not provide any information on several sections on this list: Sathara vattam sural and saththa sathara (number 12), Aramba Shlokaya – Budu Magula (number 15), Deviyanta Pala Deema (number 21), and Ping Beraya Vādanaya (number 22). However, I discuss my experience of this section in my conclusion to this article.

water and sandalwood.

- These, too, are done at an auspicious time.
- Once these are observed, the drum will be suitable to be used in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.

This is followed by the recitation of a poem (*kaviya*)[77]:

> Let's go to the performing ground after worshipping the Triple Gem and tying the drum.
> That day, the king Mahasammata divided the castes and named their occupations.[78]
> We accept them with all due respect for their castes.
> The god Sakvithi created a drum for this world to play during the Buddha's Enlightenment.
> Start drumming after a sacrifice of six days, with a chair made of milk water and sandalwood.

This poem is extraordinary as it situates today's Bera Pōya Hēvīsi ("start drumming after a sacrifice of six days") in direct relation to two of the most important moments in Sinhala Buddhist history: the Buddha's Enlightenment and the rule of King Mahasammata, the primordial "first king." The moment of the Enlightenment is not described, but the god Sakvithi is acknowledged to have built a drum just for the occasion. The final stanza describes the necessity of including a chair of ritual offerings along with drumming in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.

Next, Dayasheela provides a longer version of the poem on the Bera Pōya Hēvisi repertoire. In this version, the 216 items in the poem on the repertoire (here called the *shāstras*) are described as having been played for the Buddha on the day of his Enlightenment:

> First I worship the Lord Buddha, second the Dhamma, third the noble Sangha.
> May the educated listen to our words, which we learned from our ancestors.
> Tell me, who revealed the *shāstras* in the ceremony for the Lord Buddha's Enlightenment?
> In the middle of this performing ground, dear friend, tell me how many *Talas* are there in the *shāstras*?
> 32 *talas*, 64 *saudam*, 21 *sural*, 16 *vandamānam*
> 16 *däkum ath*, 27 *podi sural*, 40 *ada pada*, and the total is 216.
> Now, kindly bless us with good fortune, since there is no error in the number of *shāstras* just described.
> Now, let us play the beautiful 5 sounds (*panchaturyanāda*)
> after worshipping the noble Sangha and the god Kataragama.
> With good merits, with pleased hearts, and with compassion,

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77. The following texts by Dayasheela were translated by Pabalu Wijegoonawardane.
78. King Maha Sammatha is the primordial "first king" of the Sinhalas, as described in the ancient chronicle the *Mahavamsa* (See Kapferer 1997).

let's worship again.
Now, listen to the playing that came to this world
from Lord Brahma and Dhanvanthari Lakshmi.

Dayasheela then wrote this in English:

This session of drumming was done by the Bamunu tribe in the ancient historical city of Anuradhapura, when the Sri Maha Bodiya (the sacred Bō tree) was brought as a tribute.

The following are two lines sung at the end of this drumming session as a tribute to the Buddha:
Thadina digu digu thaka – diditha guda guda dong thaka
Diditha dith nang thaka – mesey muninduta namaskaareka[79]

This longer version of the poem on the content of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi does triple duty: it worships the Triple Gem (the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha); it provides an additional salutation to the Buddha; and it lays down the gauntlet to all those who would assert that 216 is not the correct number of items in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. However, the strength of the poem lies in the origin stories it provides for the ritual. The poem states that the *shāstras* were played on the day the Buddha found Enlightenment: the poem asks "who showed" the *shāstras* that day (thus affirming that they were, in fact, shown), and it concludes by answering the question, asserting that the *shāstras* came from Lord Brahma and the goddess Lakshmi. If this places the origins of Sinhala Buddhist drumming in the realm of the gods and in India (for that is where the Buddha attained Enlightenment), Dayasheela's notes provide an origin story of a different sort, describing the ritual's beginnings in Sri Lanka: the *shāstras* were first played in Sri Lanka directly after the establishment of Buddhism on the island, when the seeds from the tree under which the Buddha found Enlightenment were planted in the city of Anuradhapura, giving rise to the sacred tree known as Sri Maha Bodhi. It was not Sinhala drummers who met the sacred tree, though, but drummers from "the Bamunu tribe" (I presume this refers to the ancient "priest" caste of the Sinhalese, an equivalent to Brahmins), who played the *shāstras* (Bera Pōya Hēvīsi). Another story Dayasheela told me is that it was Pulastya, the grandfather of Ravana, who gave the drum knowledge to the Väddas (Sri Lanka's indigenous peoples), who gave it to the Beravā (see Sykes 2018). Pulastya is one of the ten "Pranjapatis" (mind-born sons) of Brahma—the god who first showed the *shāstras* (with Lakshmi).

Magul Bera for the Buddha

After meeting with the *bhikkhu* in the shrine room, and after the *hēvīsi* drummers' *Yāma Hewisi* (number 3 on the list above), all drummers, including myself, lined up and stood in silence as my *gurunnānse* uttered the *slokas* that begins the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi (number 4 on the

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79. The first three parts of this stanza are recognizable as being in the low-country *bera basāva* (drum language); the fourth part, however, includes the word *namaskāreka* ("a salutation") and *muni* ("Buddha").

ritual's order of sections listed above; Figure 11). Much to my dismay, I took center stage more quickly than I had expected. After the *Brahma thālaya* (described below) came the *magul bera*, which I had been assigned to perform. My *magul bera* was to be followed by my presentation of memorized material I had learned for the occasion, "thath-dith-thong-nang – Dakina Ath Sathara" (taken together, these are numbers 8 and 9 on the list of the ritual's sections).

When I played *magul bera* in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, I moved from the ritual space outdoors on the grounds of the Buddhist temple to the inside of the *Buddhage* (house of the Buddha, or shrine room). I faced a massive Buddha statue and felt alone with it, as the room was tiny and could fit only myself and the five *hēvisi* musicians, who stood behind me just inside the doorway (while spectators peered in from outside). As I concluded my performance of each of the three sections (*vattams*) of the *magul bera*, the *hēvisi* musicians anticipated my final notes and entered deafeningly right before I finished. They blared intensely behind me, the high-pitched shrill of the reed instrument (*horanäva*) mixing with the loud and low hitting of the stick against the *davula*, and the busy notes of the higher-pitched *tammättama* (the double-drum played with sticks; see my accompanying article for a photo). All of these sounds reverberated around the shrine room.[80]

Figure 11. Dayasheela (second from left) utters *slokas* before the start of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi (author on the far left). Photo by Lindsay Aveilhe.

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80. Bear in mind that when I say loud, I mean very loud: after years of playing in loud rock bands, I have seldom encountered a louder noise than what I encountered at that moment.

Judith Becker (n.d.) provides a poem on the origins of *magul bera* (culled from a translation provided by Ranjini Obeyesekere 1991); Dayasheela also provided me a version of the poem:

Magul Bera Kavi: Story of the creation of the festive drum (*magul bera*)

From the seats of the Ghandarvas (heavenly musicians)
engendered by Brahma
all-prosperous, unconquerable, nine-limbed,
and the words *svasti siddam*
the eighty-four thousand arts were born.
How did that happen?

When our blessed, Enlightened,
All-Knowing, Noble Lord Buddha overcame Mara
and victorious
was preaching the 84,000 sections of the Doctrine,
seated on the Vajrasana[1]
that appeared eighteen *riyan* tall
from that hallowed earth,
as stated in the *veda*s
he called the Ghandarvas
living in the ten thousand universes of gods,
Brahmas and Bahiravas[2]
and taught them this art.

That art was as follows:
krakata tat tei takarin tannam podum tatarin teyi.[81]
Striking a pure note with this music he caused
thirty-three million
to worship and pay obeisance.

Thereafter, our Thathagata,
Teacher of the Three Worlds,
All Knowing, Enlightened Buddha,
asked the Ghandarva gods,
"Who is lord of that music you beat tied to (your waist)?
Who is lord of the drum strings?
Who is lord of the wooden anklets?
Who is lord of the sounds?

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81. This drum language is *not* the standard drum language used by low-country drummers. It is similar, however, to some of the language used in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. Some of these syllables, such as '*teyi*,' are prominent in Kandyan and Tamil drumming traditions.

Who is lord of the soft bracelets?
Who is lord of the musical notes?

First of all, who is the tree deity of the music?"
Thus he asked.

Then the Ghandarva deities responded:
"The goddess Lakshmi is lord of the music we play.
The god Kundala is lord of the left drum head.
The god Krishna is lord of the right drum head.
The god Kamaraksha is lord of the drum strings.
Sakra is lord of the sound.
The earth goddess is lord of the musical notes.
The god Randhi is lord of the anklets and bracelets.
The chief of all is the god Mudra on the Udayagiri mountain.

The body[3] is of *kohomba* (margosa)
the body is of *varaka* (a variety of the *jak* tree)
the body is of *gosanthakaya mosanthakaya*[4]
the length is thirty-four inches
the circumference is nineteen inches
the left hand is eleven inches
the right hand is ten inches.
With these stated measurements
know that the instrument is protected.

I pay obeisance to instrumental music.
May all dangers be overcome by this protection.
I pay obeisance to the musical notes.
I pay obeisance to the golden mantra.
I know its protective powers."

Having said these words of these three mantras
they went to the Divyagara mountain.
Thereafter,
the Gandharva gods began to play the festive drums (*magul bera*) beginning first with the
Brahma rhythm.

Becker's footnotes follow:
1. *vajrasana* = unshakeable seat. Here it refers to the seat under the Bodhi tree where
   the Buddha atained Enlightenment.
2. Creatures of the nether-world.
3. Refers to the body of the instrument, here the drum.
4. Must refer to some variety of tree. The dictionary gives *go* as a variety of tree.

Here it is none other than the Buddha himself who is said to have taught "the art" of reciting the drum language to the Gandharvas (minor deities and celestial musicians). The "Brahma rhythm" that the gods are described as playing is, I presume, the *Brahma thālaya* that begins the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. The *magul bera*, then, is a means through which drummers locate themselves at the moment when the Buddha overcame Mara (the demon who tried to tempt the Buddha—a key moment in Buddhist history). Rather than Brahma performing his own *padaya*, it is the Gandharvas who offer a *padaya* to him in his honor. The poem claims the drum is protected through its having the proper measurements. Just as in the performance of Sinhala *tovils* where the recitation and reenactment of myths facilitate a return to the original moment of the myth and thus renew its generative force, when drummers play *magul bera* they are in a sense returning to the moment in the above poem when the first drum was built and blessed through *mantras* and proper construction.

After I played *magul bera*, we proceeded to the ritual space and the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi truly began. Now in the ritual space (the grounds of the Buddhist temple), constructed as an empty rectangle surrounded on each side by four *yahans* (seats of the gods) dedicated to the Gods of the Four Quarters, with many *yahans* in between for individual *yak beras*, Dayasheela turned to me and asked me to recite and play *"Däkum Ath."* I recited verbally and then played the following stanzas on the drum:

Thath-Dith-Thong-Nang (*Dakina Ath Sathara*, "Four *Dakina Aths*")

PART ONE
tat takata kriton dikunda
tat takata dahing daking
krata dong muni daking

dit takata kriton dikunda
dit takata dahing daking
krata dong devi daking

tun takata kriton dikunda
tun takata dahing daking
krata dong raja daking

nang takata kriton dikunda
nang takata dahing daking
krita dong guru daking

tat dahing muni daking
dit dahing devi daking
tun dahing raja daking
nang dahing guru daking

daking daking daking
raja daruwon daking
takararom bit nam biti kiti taka
takarom om tat tam
tat dahing muni daking

PART TWO
tat dit tat takata
tat dahing muni daking
dit tat dit takata
dit dahing devi daking
tun tat tun takata
tun dahing raja daking
nang tat nang takata
nang dahing guru daking

tat dahing muni daking
dit dahing devi daking
tun dahing raja daking
nang dahing guru daking

PART THREE
tat dit tat takata
takarom bit
tat dahing muni daking
dit tat dit takata
takarom bit
dit dahing muni daking

ton nang ton takata
takarom bit
ton dahing muni daking

nang ton nang taka
takarom bit
nang dahing muni daking

PART FOUR
tat dit tat takata
takarom bit nam biti kiti taka
tat dahing tat dahing
tat dit tun nang dahing
tat dahing muni daking

dit tat dit takata
takarom bit nam biti kiti taka
dit dahing dit dahing
tat dit tun nang dahing
dit dahing guru daking

tun dit tun takata
takarom bit nam biti kiti taka
tun dahing tun dahing
tat dit tun nang dahing
tun dahing raja daking

nang tat nang takata
takarom bit nam biti kiti taka
nang dahing nang dahing
tat dit tun nang dahing
nang dahing guru daking

In this example, the drum language occasionally takes on literal meaning: *muni* (Buddha), *devi* (gods), *raja* (king), *guru* (teacher) are all revered here, or rather, are *looked at* ("*däkum*," "*dakina*").[82] The words are played on the drum, onomatopoetically. My solo performance complete, I happily blended into the background for the remainder of the all-night ritual.

The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi and Buddhist History

I now turn to excerpts from the body of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi. In the writings Dayasheela gave me, he provides small excerpts of each section, saying that anyone interested in learning more should come to him. What follows, then, is not comprehensive but meant to demonstrate the capacity of low-country drumming in the ritual to provide links between drummers and key moments in Buddhist history.

The first section mentioned in the poem on the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi repertoire, the thirty-two Thālams, are introduced with the following sentences:

I will keep the Buddha on the crown of my head
I will keep the Dhamma on my forehead
I will place Sangha in my whole human body
I will worship the Triple Gem with honor now

This is followed by a repetition of the poem on the repertoire, and ends with:

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82. This strikes me as being similar to receiving the *darsan* in Hinduism, where the devotee sees the god and the god sees the devotee.

Now play the thirty-two *thālams* that were played the day the Buddha found
Enlightenment, when all the Devas and Brahmas came to listen to his Dhamma.

Gandharva made a three-mile long drum.
The drum had seven sections that were played by the god.
From that day, the *panchaturya* happened in this world.
Listen to the *pancha talaya* that Isivara played in the beginning.

The poem tells us that on the day of the Buddha's Enlightenment, the *panchaturyanāda* (the
fivefold division of musical instruments) was born, and all thirty-two *Thālams* were played.
The god Isivara was the first to play the first *thālama* listed in the *shāstras* (the *pancha thālam*).
If many or all of the Thālams were played by the gods (for example, did Vishnu himself
originate and perform the *Vishnu thālama* mentioned in the list below?), then one can
understand the holiness and secrecy surrounding the *shāstras*: this is the gods' music, played
to honor the newly Enlightened Buddha. This may explain why Dayasheela provided me with
mostly poetry for this section, and only a few drum rhythms.[83] Below is the text that
Dayasheela provided me for number 2 on the list of 32 Thālams.

> *Naaga Mini Thālama*
> People here, now listen and do not get mad.
> Give me *sural* and *pada* in peace, or I will get angry.
> Do not go over your limit, just play what you know.
> If you know it, play the *naaga mini thālama*.

The poem invites us to play the *naaga mini thālama* ("*naaga*" means "snake") if we know it, but
instructs us to remain silent if we do not. Indeed, when I performed in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi I
could only play what I know, and this *thālama* does not fall into that category; therefore, I
cannot tell you what drumming follows these words (and Dayasheela didn't tell me, either).
Thankfully, Dayasheela did provide me drum music for some of the Thālams. Number 4, the
naaga thālama reads as follows:

> The Buddha came close to achieving Enlightenement,
> but Prince Vasavarti came and disturbed his effort.
> That day, the *raga thālam* 216 was played.
> If you play the *naaga thālama* now, you will feel it as a snakebite.
>
> *Krishata naa grashata thakunda kunda tharikita gathath kithath kitha domikita*
> *Thakkita thari domikita thari dikkita thari krathkita thari dong dong thaa*

Although the first *thālama* says the Thālams were first played when the Buddha found

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83. To be clear, the stanzas I list here are read out loud (in Sinhala, including some very old words that baffled my
translator). Following this, drum rhythms are played. However, on several occasions, certain passages in the
drum language are read out loud and *then* played on the drum. I have tried to make this clear in what follows.

Enlightenment, this poem appears to imply that the music had previously helped drive off Vasavarti,[84] during which the *naaga thālama* struck him like a snakebite. If so, this is an example of drummers *combating* desire so that the Buddha may attain Enlightenment—a far cry from drumming as sensuous music that is unacceptable for Buddhists. The two sentences that follow this are drum music. Although most of this is in the standard drum language, I have never come across the phrase *krishata naa grashata* anywhere else, and it may have some hidden meaning.

Dayasheela gave me two different versions of *thālama* number 3, which in his rendition gets no poetic introduction and consists only of drum poetry:

> *Ek Ath Thālama,* version 1:
> *Thath thadikkung tharikita dikkung jeng jegath jegathuru gurulath gurulath tha*

> *Ek Ath Thālama,* version 2:
> *Thith thith thei krathaka dikunda thakunda peramaalang*
> *Krathaka thaththa theiyaththei thaththaka thaa*

The first example contains the word *jeng* and its combination with other words (*jegath, jegathuru*); this is drum language typically used for the *tammātama* drum, and not the low-country drum.[85] It is also notable that the phrase includes the word "guru."

The second example is markedly different, and it is difficult to see how these can be two versions of the same thing. The phrase *thith thith thei* is used in Kandyan and Tamil musics. Such drum words are scattered throughout the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, but to my knowledge are never used in standard low-country Sinhala rituals. I am not sure why they are here, but I will make one suggestion: as the ritual is supposed to have emerged from the gods in India, perhaps such words are supposed to give the ritual a veneer of Indianness, lending credence to drummers' claims that the ritual goes all the way back to when the Buddha found Enlightenment.[86]

The *Savudam* compositions begin with the following poem:

The Buddha attained Enlightenment by defeating Mara;
Pansilu and other gods came to the ceremony that day.

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84. Vasavarti is another name for Mara (the demon who attempted to lure the Buddha away from Enlightenment). He also appears in the Suniyama, an anti-sorcery rite described by Kapferer (2002, 112), who notes that in that ritual the "great sorcerer or Vasavarti Maraya, the Great World Poisoner" destroys "the outer presentation of the palace, which symbolically is the destruction of the grounds for the proliferation of sorcery." In doing so, Vasavarti destroys himself, "against the edifice of desire" (ibid.).
85. For those familiar with Kandyan drumming, this should not be confused with *jing*, a word which in that tradition describes the high-pitched sound of striking one's hand against the *gäta beraya's* smaller of two drum heads. In *hēvīsi* drumming, *jeng* refers to the combination of *thong* and *nang* on the *tamättama* and *davula* drums, and I am unclear as to what it refers to for the low-country drum.
86. I think that Tamil drum words have gained a heightened status due to their integration with up-country drumming in the courts of the Kandyan kings (see my accompanying article).

Saramba maaruda sural guti and *vandamaanam* were played.
Gadamba played the *Brahma Savudama* for the very first time.

Then the *Brahma Savudama*—the very same music that the god Godamba played the day the Buddha found Enligthenment—is recited and played as follows:

Brahma Savudama
Thath dith thong nang anaahaka dikkitha thong thaka thakkitha dong
Satharavan athi ata athin dili rana hasing nagi chathuraadhipathi
Brahma Savudama namami methanadi Brang nambathey Brahma Savudam thading thong
Thaka thei

By now the reader should be gaining familiarity with what is standard in the low-country drum language and what is not. In the first line, all words are standard except for "*anaahaka*," the meaning of which is unknown to me. The stanza then breaks into more or less "pure poetry" before concluding with "*thading thong / thaka thei*," of which "*thading thong*" is standard, while "*thaka thei*" is, as mentioned, Kandyan- and/or Tamil-sounding drum words. Bear in mind this is supposed to be read out loud during the ritual and then played on the drum.

If the *Thālams* combine a stanza of poetry with a stanza of drumming, the *Savudams* are a hybrid creation, where drumming becomes filled with poetry and alternates with poetic stanzas.[87] The title of each *Savudama* is mentioned in the last line of the poem that precedes it:

5. *Vishnu Savudama*[88]
Thakata thari thari pulvarang jina makuta jala thala gagana kundala
Jehra thath jekra thath thaka thadimi thaththa didith dith thong thong nang nang
Kukun daththaa Vishny Eeshvara Devi thaththaa

Why and for what did you practice, sleepless?
Is it to defeat me in dancing until your spine gets fractured?
Is it to heat up your whole body?
Shall I dance the *kanda kumara saudama* now?

6. *Kanda Kumara Savudama*
Thath tho thaka they nithara niseyvina nertha geetha kara mayura pitin
Ilasatha nara bas alu kara thrisula udaara Kanda kumara muhunu sangava
Namkara pinisa natanaa mey savudam Kanda Kumara Savudam

The god, though smart, was angry about a pile of gold;

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87. Savudams are common in the standard rituals, and it is customary for the audience to give money to the dancer who performs one. Dayasheela's list includes sixty-four Savudams, but he provided me poetry and selected drumming for only the first eight of them.
88. The italicized language is recited and played on the drum, while the poetic stanzas are simply recited.

The Buddha preached a compassionate Dhamma to him.
God, give me intelligence day by day.
Now I will dance the *Ganapathi saudama*.

7. Ganapati Savudama

Ganapathi ganendra vadana gaigari thanojaa panipathi
Paadam javali vyagra paada dinaka dinakaraa korti prakaasari divya vega
Puri navasa divya vesa purinivaasa thaam thath thei thaadinnam thath thaa
Pradiminthaka thath thei sari sarimaa rigarimaa papabamamaa rigirigamaa
Thaththa theyku dith dinik kukkuda jaamm

Can you see small boats in the ocean where ships are sailing?
It is your idiocy of coming to fight with me about the *shāstra*!
If you don't leave soon, you will face a shameful moment.
Now, play the *Pattini Saudama*!

8. Pattini Savudama

thath dith thong nam thaala udaaraya kimanika savudam devi hruda
paadaya chandrawathi ge indra neela gatha kimanika suruluvaney
thakanam jehe kitha vinaka vinodara gaththu ey raththrang salmba athey
sethsiri dewnaa paththini saranaa adithura pandipura jehenuka thaththhari
thahathaka jeng jeng Paththini Sura Savudam natami mama Paththini Sura Savudam

Numbers 7 and 8 are a humorous challenge to those with enough hubris to stay in a Bera Pōya Hēvīsi: notice how long these last two drum paragraphs are, especially since most of the language is not in the standard drum language. It combines the names of gods (Indra, Pattini, *devi*), the name for a poetic verse in Pali or Sansrkit (*gāthā*), and numerous music theoretical terms (*thaala, savudam, paadaya*).[89] Interspersed with these words are words from the drum language: *that dith thong nam* (the first four syllables, the *bijakshara*), *thaththari,* and *jeng*. In sum, this can be considered a "drum *mantra*."

How do drummers know how to play the words with literal meaning? Does each word have a definite corresponding stroke on the drum? My *gurunnānse* says "yes," but in practice, I found signficant flexibility in matching non-standard drum words to drum strokes. When learning words with literal meaning, such as "Muni" ("Buddha") and "Guru" ("Teacher"), I would copy my *gurunnānse* and he generally would say I was playing the words correctly.[90] In the end, I understood what is important is that the drummer memorizes the entire passage, and then transposes it onto the drum, replicating the sounds of the words the best he can.

Next in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi are the twenty-one *Surals*. In everyday drummer parlance,

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89. There are many words here that are unrecognizable to me, which reveals the limits of my knowledge of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.
90. This experience was different from learning the standard drum strokes, where much time was spent showing me precisely how to hit the drum in the right way.

"*sural*" refers to a drum roll: "practicing your *surala*" means, "practicing your drum roll (*ring*)." In the Bera Pōya Hēvisi, however, "*sural*" refers to twenty-one drum compositions. Here are some examples:

> 1. *Dakshina Surala*:
> Our Lord Buddha was in *Deuram vehera* preaching Dhamma;
> The *naaga bamba* (Brahma) god heard some of it.
> That day, the gods received great merit by listening to the Dhamma.
> Play the 21 *surals* that were played that day to the Lord Buddha.
>
> The poet will come to a debate with anger, and you will be confused.
> Looking at the way he dances, the Rat will like a debate.
> The king of the rodents won the debate;
> Now, play the *sural* he played to honor the Buddha.
>
> *Dakshina sugathath diringa diringa thaku romi dirigath thakukkutem*
> *Prajen thakata thath thari kita diththaka tharikita dongkita domgatha*
> *Dong kita tharikita thaa*

Here we have a composition in the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi that arose not on the day the Buddha found Enlightenment, but on a day that he preached the Dhamma in a Buddhist temple (*vihara*). For Buddhists, the rat is not an ugly creature, but is said to be the first animal to open himself up to the Dhamma. Animals seem to have a prominent place in the *surals*:

> 2. *Theywadi Surala*
> Do not get angry with me brother.
> The fox covered with the lion's skin faced troubles.
> You definitely will be confused now.
> *Theyvadi sural* is played for the Lord Buddha.
>
> *Kreeng thaththaa kreeng thaththaa keeng tharikita domikita tharidik*
> *Domikita thakkada dikkada kiththak tharidik krudangkada thara*
> *Thakkada thari thakkada kith thingkada thari thongkada kiththak*
> *Gung dang tharidikkita gudangthaa*

Next come the sixteen *Vandamānams*, which are played in front of a *vihara geya* (shrine room) for the Buddha and gods. Since each *Vandamānam* is named after a god, I assume that (like the *Thālams*) the gods were the first to have played them.[91]

> 1.   *Magul Bera Vādanaya*
> 2.   *Soorya Vandamānama*
> 3.   *Shukra Surapathi Vandamānama*

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91. I stress that this is conjecture. However, it would explain why, like the Thālams, little of this music was given to me—it is the gods' music.

4.   *Sahanpathi Sura Vandamānama*
5.   *Vishnu Sura Raja Vandamānama*
6.   *Isivara Vandamānama*
7.   *Shriraaja (Raajendra) Vandamānama*
8.   *Katharagama Devi Vandamānama*
9.   *Sumana deviraja Vandamānama*
10. *Vibheeshana Devi Vandamānama*
11. *Asura Vandamānama*
12. *Naatha Deviraja Vandamānama*
13. *(illegible) Deviraja Vandamānama*
14. *Krathesvara Deviraja Vandamānama*
15. *Ganapathi Vandamānama*
16. *Brahma Vandamānama*

The *Vandamānams* seem even further removed from the standard drum language, and even more like poetry with hidden meanings:

3. *Shukra Surapathi Vandamāna*
The Buddha wanted to give the world salvation.
He offered Sri Lanka to the god Shakra.
The god Pansilu came with a drum and all sura people
Play *Shukra Surapathi Vandamānama* in the Agni direction.

shrigana sundara sarana sivunkara kranaka jeng thari kada kada
jeng thari thakkram dikkram dimitha divaakara thaka thath dika thath tharing
suthang muni namo namo pada vindum sak sura muni pada vandaami

This contains a direction to face a certain way while playing the *padaya.* The fourth *Vandamānam* is a Jataka tale:

4. *Sahanpathi Sura Vandamānama*
Before the Buddha attained Enlightenment,
He was reborn as the Prince Sama, to help feed his blind parents.[92]
The god Gadamba came to the ceremony celebrating Enlightenment with a drum.
Now, play the Sahanpathi Sura Vandamaanama in the Yāma direction.[93]

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92. The Sama Jataka tells the story of a boy and girl from different families, who in a former life were the son and daughter of a doctor who intentionally blinded a patient refusing to pay for his services. To pay a penance for this crime, in a later life the boy and girl are forced to be married and live out their lives as ascetics, until they are blinded by a snake. The story focuses on their child, Sama (the Buddha in a previous life), and the deeds he did for his blind parents. It concludes with Sama's being killed by the King (who is out hunting), and with the King's grieving for his crimes, the restoration of the life of Sama and the eyesight of his parents.
93. The Yāma direction is where Death resides (Yāma is the Lord of Death). One interlocutor told me that when people buy a new house, drummers may be hired to drum facing the Yāma direction, an act that purifies and protects the house.

vandey muninduta vandey mahabambu – thaka dika thoga nam vandaami
vandey gadambaya vandey yamadiga – vanditha vanditha vandaami

Now for the sixteen *Däkum Aths*: in my *gurunnānse*'s writings, he traces them to the *bali* ritual. According to Bentara tradition, a section of *bali* called "Grahapura" involves drawing pictures of the gods of the four cardinal directions (Agni, Yāma, Niritha, Eesaana) and placing them in the four corners of the Bō Tree at the temple where the rite is held. *Däkum Aths*, he says, are "drum beats played with the belief of seeing the Buddha." Dayasheela says, "the specialty of this is that it is sung and played as a poem": the poetic text and the drum text are one and the same, with two lines of text recited and played at a time.

Dakina Ath – Introductory Poem
The god Pansilu went to Buddha with a drum.
He played 16 *Dakinath* for Buddha.
So, friend, if you know them,
let's play them now.

After asking blessings from Buddha, gods, gurus, and parents,
I will tell the *thāla* as it was in old days, by our gurus.
Gadamba took the drum on the day of Enlightenment.
I will play the *Sathara Dakinatha* (four *Dakina Aths*) now.

thadina digu digu thaka
didina guda guda dong thaka
didina dith thong thaka
mesey muninduta namaskaareka

What follows in Dayasheela's notes are the same *Däkum Aths* that I performed toward the beginning of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi.

The last two categories of drum compositions are the twenty-seven *Podi Sural* (little *surals*) and forty *Ada Padas* (half *padas*, so-called because the end of the poetry and the beginning of the drumming overlap). Here are three *Podi Surals* (starting with number 2):

2. *Gadamba Dewrada Brahma Surala*
While all the gods were gathered,
The god Shakra took out a conch shell and played the 32 Thaalas.
Since the gods had gathered to see dancing,
The god Gadamba played the *Brahma Thaalaya* to worship the Buddha.

kreega haneer nerji ginna nertha geetha suralinam
sarpa rakba radu vaama mandaleeka sobanam
chanda maaru rukba miththa thaala visuka paviththam
ranga brahma theyja surala munindu raja vanditham

3. *Saman Deva Sumana Surala*

The whole world became lit from seven colors,
the compassion and the comfort of nirvana.
All the gods have gathered to worship the Buddha.
The god Gadamba played the *Saman Deva Sumana Surala*.

shrena kreeta mudula makuta raksha aayu vandanam
srna theja carna naama sarva sumana raajinam
tharka dheera kitaku jehethu kahala raaga suralitham
namitha surala sumana deva munindu raaja vandinam

4. *Irudeviyo Surala*

While brightening the world with power,
the whole world suddenly became filled with light.
To worship our Buddha, all the gods were getting ready.
The powerful sun god worshipped the *Surala* from the direction of Indra.

sundaa jaala soma prema sursiya deva raajinam
varna brahnga kreeta krishna thaala nertha laksha nam
thakka tharingu jengu jenaka dikku diringu preegudam
isuu digedi gasuu surala munindu raaja vandinam

Finally, below are two *Ada Padas*. Note the difference in their names (they are named after drum rhythms and not gods), and notice that their last lines of poetry turn into drumming:

1. *that thari dong Ada Padaya*

By carrying his mother on his shoulder, the Buddha swam,
and took the initiation to become Enlightened,
the god Pansilu played the drum towards the Bodhi tree.
Friend, this is *that thari dong Ada Padaya*.

thath thari dong tharin thaththa thariku thaththa thaka thari thaka
thathath thathath thaa thari dong thathath thithith thath

2. *Dith dimithari Ada Pada*

The Buddha took the second initiation:
He defeated the Vasasath Mara.
This dance was played by Gadamba at the foot of the Bodhi tree.
Now I'll play the *Dith dimi thari Ada Pada* for a second time.

dith dimi thari dirimi tharimi diku diku thaka tharingu thaa
thariku diriku dith dimi thari dikum dithari dith[94]

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94. Dayasheela notes that "an important point should be stressed. However, these ada pada are sung, the beat is

The End of the Ritual: Edin's *Ping Beraya Vādanaya*

The Bera Pōya Hēvīsi progressed through the night. Long after my role in the spotlight, long after the rains had ceased and the audience left, and the bulk of the *shāstras* were recited and played, an eerie quiet fell over the ritual space. We still had some hours to go before morning and everyone was tired. Edin went to rest, along with the other older drummers (including Dayasheela). The drummers who remained were trying to fill up the time and were eventually replaced by the *hēvīsi* drummers. These comparatively unskilled musicians played repetitive drumming, not a traditional part of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, for a couple of hours (probably 2:30 to 4:30 a.m.).[95]

Eventually, even the *hēvīsi* drummers moved to the front of the shrine room to fall asleep on the stoop. The music never stopped, though: it degenerated into a simple game of passing the *padas* around, one drummer after another waking up just enough to play a rhythm quietly, keeping the ritual going until its conclusion at daybreak. There were no spectators left. The air was balmy and still, the lights were out, all was pitch black and quiet. Around me were sleeping drummers, and even the television crew, hired with explicit instructions to film the event from start to finish, slept on the ground. As the last drummer trailed off to sleep while gently playing his drum, I picked up a drum myself and continued the rhythm for about twenty minutes. I was not sure what would happen if I stopped.

Finally, just before dawn, the great ritual master W. Edin awoke in the shrine room (he had been sleeping in front of the enormous Buddha statue which fills the hall). I was surprised to see him, a man in his mid-70s, awake with what seemed to be boundless energy, a fiery gleam in his eye, and immense purpose. He called me into the shrine room, inside and at a bit of a distance from the sleeping drummers. Sitting upright on a mat in front of the enormous Buddha statue and without wasting time, he pulled his drum in front of himself and faced me directly, staring me in the eyes with a devious smile on his face. He then sang and played the drum at a *deafening* volume, staring directly in my eyes for the duration of his performance, which must have lasted some forty-five minutes. I was amazed that no one else woke up to watch. What I was witnessing was the *Ping Bera Vādanaya* (number 24 on the table of contents), the concluding section of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi (this occurs just before the final *hēvīsi*, which is more exit music than part of the ritual). The *Ping Bera Vādanaya*, I found out later, is a song cycle that praises deities, especially the Four Warrant Gods. Unlike any other part of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, the *Ping Bera Vādanaya* resembles folk songs, with clear-cut,

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always three *mātrās*. The fact that all forty Ada Pada are played according to three *mātrās* is a special characteristic in the Southern dance tradition." Indeed, if one recites the stanzas of drum poetry (particularly number 3, which begins with "*thong thari diri*"), then a three-beat cycle is evident. However, the appearance of a beat cycle here should be enough to highlight the general lack of it elsewhere in the ritual.

95. I have never seen *hēvīsi* drummers take center stage like that in any other Sinhala ritual. I am assuming that some of the *shāstras* were cut short, and that they came on after number 20 on my table of contents above, the Sathalis Anda Pada (the last of the *shāstras*). They performed because not all the invited drummers showed up, so there weren't enough drummers to alternate throughout the night in groups.

identifiable melodies. The songs are joyous.

Standard rituals conclude with a number of light songs like the *Ping Bera*, played in the early morning light, as the audience goes home and the ritual specialists pack up. Such songs express relief at the conclusion of an all-night ritual, are light in mood, and praise the gods. However, I sensed that Edin's *Ping Bera* was different. First of all, it occurred just *before* daybreak; second, no one was packing up and leaving; and unlike the light and casual songs I have seen conclude other rituals, Edin's *Ping Bera* was played with a captivating tenacity that was uplifting and fierce.

It occurred to me that if Edin's *Ping Bera* were songs performed only in the context of the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi, and if the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi truly had not been held for over fifty years, then what I heard from Edin that morning was a gift from decades past, for my ears only. During this private concert—which was surely among the most memorable experiences of my life— W. Edin, one of Sri Lanka's true masters of the ritual arts, sang for forty-five minutes to me and me alone, save for the Buddha statue in the room with us and the numerous gods he summoned through his songs (none of the sleeping drummers awoke to watch). Edin sang gracefully, beautifully, and with a raucous energy, and he played *yak beraya* like a man half his age. I knew his devious smile was meant to convey to me that he, too, knew I was witnessing something special—a once-in-a-lifetime event in the moments before sunrise. I was moved by how, despite all of my e-mailed invitations, the myriad journeys Dayasheela took to locate drummers, and the presence only a few hours before of the entire village, expats, a film crew, and eighteen drummers, I was the only one there to hear him.

CONCLUSION

The debate about whether Sinhala drumming has meter will surely not be put to rest by my efforts here. However, I hope I have made the case that while Sinhala drummers do not have an explicit theory of meter, they orient their drumming around pulse points that are sometimes made explicit (e.g., when drumming for *yakku*), other times obscured (e.g., the *magul bera* for the Buddha), and other times completely absent (e.g., the Bera Pōya Hēvīsi). The study of South Asian Buddhist approaches to meter, rhythm, dance, text, and ritual is still in its infancy; I can only hope that my work here opens the door to more such studies, while continuing a dialogue started by Ellingson (and continued more recently by Wolf 2014) about the flexibility and occasional historic absence of *tala* in South Asia.

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