Vocal Models and Musical Rhythm in Central Sri Lanka

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IN the island-nation of Sri Lanka, the dawning of the traditional new year is signaled by the astrological movement of the sun from the zodiacal position of *mīna* (Pisces) to *mēsha* (Aries). Known as *alut avurudda* by people of the Sinhalese ethnicity, this calendrical event is typically marked in homes by ritual cleaning and cooking done at auspicious times determined by astrological calculations.[1] In the days following *alut avurudda*, people participate in public celebrations that include a variety of traditional games and other communal activities. One such activity is the performance of pieces known as *raban pada*, presented by two or three people who sit or kneel around a large frame drum named *baṃku rabāna*. A *raban pada* performance begins with the performers reciting a verse in Sinhala, such as the following:

> *uḍa pala* ***gat-tat vaṭ-ṭak-kā***
> *bima pala* ***gat-tat vaṭ-ṭak-kā***
> *uḍa pala* ***gat-tat*** *bima pala* ***gat-tat***
> ***puṃ****chi* ***puṃ****chi geḍi* ***vaṭ-ṭak-kā*** [2]

Then, the performers play on the drum the abstracted rhythmic pattern of the syllable onsets of the recited words, typically using resonant drum strokes played with their bare hands.[3] The longer syllables are bolded in the text above, and the rhythmic pattern of the recitation (and subsequent drumming) is transcribed in Figure 1—with the shorter syllables represented as sixteenth notes and the longer durations represented by eighth and

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[1] *Alut avurudda* is based on the vernal equinox, and typically takes place on the 13th or 14th of April (according to the Gregorian calendar). This traditional New Year is also celebrated by Tamils in Sri Lanka—as *puthandu*—and by other ethnic groups in South and Southeast Asia.

[2] Translation:

> Whether the squash grows above
> Whether the squash grows below
> Whether it grows above or whether it grows below
> Small, small squash

[3] Some experienced players may replicate some of the closed syllables of the verse by using their elbows to create dampened drum strokes. Drum strokes are not standardized, possibly because frame-drumming is performed on special occasions, rather than as a regular or occupational activity.

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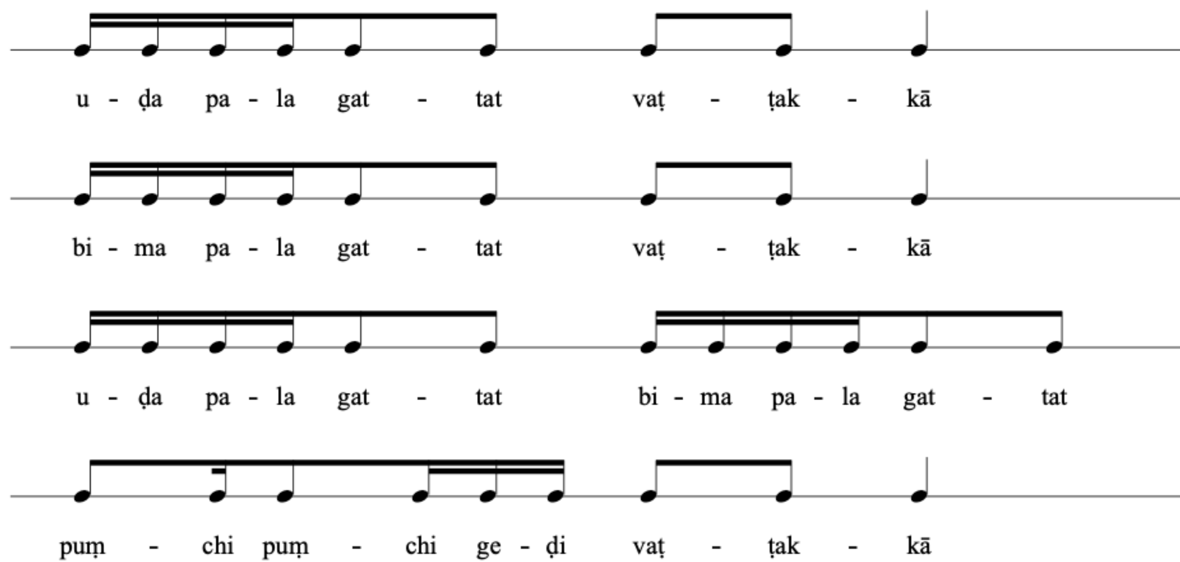

Figure 1. Rhythmic pattern of the syllable onsets of a *raban pada* verse.

quarter notes. The following video shows a performance of this *raban pada* piece:[4] https://youtu.be/ki65G96FRzY?t=279.

Raban pada is today performed internationally as a cultural marker of Sinhalese ethnicity; however, it was previously a form of functional music. In the early twentieth century (and likely going back centuries) *raban pada* was played by women in rural Sri Lanka in Sinhala-speaking agricultural villages, signaling calendrical events such as *alut avurudda* (which coincided with the end of the rice harvesting season), marking life-cycle occasions such as a girl's first menstruation and the consummation of a marriage with a virgin bride, and at Christian church ceremonies (Kulatillake 1984, 31). While only a few people in the immediate vicinity of the performance space would have heard the recited words, others in the surrounding village would have heard the loud drumming; I hypothesize that these people in the distance would likely have recognized the words of the verse indexed by the syllabic rhythmic pattern of the drumming and associated it with the socially significant event taking place. Even today, many Sri Lankan listeners will recognize the syllabic rhythmic pattern shown in Figure 1, for example as quoted in this 2019 performance of the song "Jazz Theory" by the rock band Stigmata: https://youtu.be/Zu9ZE9ehOV8?t=65.

[4] The performers in the video are anonymous. Other video recordings of this well-known piece can be found readily on the internet, under the title *uda pala gaththath vattaka*.

While the use of drumming to communicate verbal phrases has been well studied in the context of Africa,[5] recent research has drawn more attention to the ways in which rhythmic-melodic patterning in South Asian instrumental musics relate to verbal or vocal models (e.g., Wolf 2014, Sykes 2018).[6] In this article, I contribute to the discourse about vocal models and musical rhythm in South Asia by analyzing three musical piece-types from Sri Lanka (besides *raban pada*) that are associated with Buddhist performance traditions in the central mountainous region commonly known as the "up-country." Through these examples I examine how drumming has been employed as efficacious speech to invoke supernatural intervention, and how non-lexical vocables can model syllable patterns for texted poetry; I also draw attention toward similar cultural phenomena from across the broader geographic region, suggesting hitherto unsuspected historical relationships between communities.

DRUMMING AS SURROGATE SPEECH

Similar to the women's frame-drumming tradition (*raban pada*) described above, the obscure Sri Lankan Buddhist ritual *Pōya Hēvisiya* contains repertoire with the drumming of syllabic rhythm patterns implied by poetry. In the *Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual, which is performed on a full-moon night, drumming is described as a *shabda pūjāva*—an "offering of sound"—that is presented to the Buddha and the deities. This video shows an excerpt from one such ritual piece named "Sugata Tālama," as performed with *gäṭa beraya* drums in a related ritual known as *Bera Pōya Hēvisiya* by Sinhala-speaking male musicians of hereditary lineage.[7] In

[5] As Tang (2008, 85–86) notes, "Within sub-Saharan Africa, rich talking drum traditions have been found amongst the Ashanti, Dagomba, and Ewe of Ghana (Rattray 1922; Nketia 1963, 1976a, 1976b; Chernoff 1979; Locke 1980, 1990; Yankah 1985; Agawu 1995, 2003); the Banda-Linda of the Central African Republic (Arom and Cloarec-Heiss 1976); the Yoruba of Nigeria (Euba 1990); and the Lokele of the former Belgian Congo (Ong 1977; Carrington [1949] 1976). Much of the literature on these cultures discusses specific examples of drum phrases that imitate speech and are meant to convey meaning through close sonic representation of verbal texts."

[6] In a related article, Wolf offers a typology of the various kinds of correspondence between drum strokes and verbal syllables in South Asia, based on how the texts and musical rhythms are related and on how the rhythms are perceived as containing verbal messages (2015, 454–455).

[7] In the *Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual, these pieces are performed using *dawula* and *tammäṭṭama* drums. The *Bera Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual uses *gäṭa beraya* (or *yak beraya*) drums in addition to the *dawula* and *tammäṭṭama*.
This video is from a *Bera Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual held in Urapola, Sri Lanka, on 8th June 2017. The performance here is led by the ritualist Lakshman Polgolla.

*su-ga-**tā**-bhi-**dhā-naṃ trai-lō**-kya **shrēsh-ṭham***
*ra-ja-**rā**-ja **tat dit** dru-ḍha **vī**-ḍa **ton naṃ***
tak jek** ki-**naṃ** ta-ka-ṭa **jeṃ** ta-ri-ma-**tah** ki-**naṃ
dē-vā**-ti-**dē-vam van-dā**-mi **bud-dham

Figure 2. Second verse of "Sugata Tālama."[8]

this example, the syllabic rhythmic pattern of each line of verse (Figure 2) is immediately imitated on the drums.[9]

A performance of "Sugata Tālama" begins with the musicians singing an unaccompanied stanza in Sinhala describing the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment.[10] This is followed by the above-quoted stanza (Figure 2) sung straight through without drumming; this stanza contains non-lexical drum syllables (*tat*, *dit*, *ton*, *naṃ*, *tak*, *jek*, *takaṭa*) as well as foreign words in Sanskrit (lines 1 and 4) and Telugu (*raja rāja*, *druḍha vīḍa*). Next, the musicians perform the excerpt shown in the above-linked video; here the second stanza is sung again, but now one line at a time, alternating with drumming of the same syllabic rhythmic pattern.[11] In performance, the long syllables inherent in the text (bolded in Figure 2) are sung for longer durations that the short syllables; this produces a pattern of long and

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[8] Translation:

The one called "Sugata," the highest in the three worlds
Stronger than the king of kings, [tat dit toṃ naṃ
tak jek kinaṃ takaṭa jeṃ tarimatah kinaṃ]
The god surpassing the gods, I worship the Buddha

[9] The *gäṭa beraya* is a double-conical-shaped barrel drum that is played horizontally with bare hands (Figure 2).

[10] Verse:

satata sata veta patala kulunäti me apa diyanā buduwa väḍa hiňda
anata vesgat dasamarun saha maraňganan giya pärada vili väňda
sirita vilasaṭa etana pat sura senaga turugos paturuwā nada
sugata tālama palamu gäsuwē edā gaňdamḃaya muniňdu pā väňda

Translation:

Displaying kindness toward all living beings in all directions, our Buddha arrived here having become a Buddha
The ten demons and demonesses in various disguises were defeated and put to shame
As customary, the celestial crowd that arrived there spread the sound of fanfare
That day, "Sugata Tālama" was played first by the heavenly musicians prostrating at the feet of the Buddha

[11] My video recording begins mid-way through the third syllable.

Figure 3. *Gäṭa beraya* drummers performing at a *Bera Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual in Mavanella, Sri Lanka. Photo by Pabalu Wijegoonawardane.

short durations that can be replicated on the *gäṭa beraya* drums (shown in Figure 3).[12] This alternation between singing and drumming is transcribed in Figure 4, based on the version taught to me by hereditary drummer Muddanave Sunil.[13]

My modified staff notation uses open note-heads to indicate undamped drum strokes, and drum strokes are only represented using note values shorter than a half note. Note-heads above the staff-line represent strokes played on the higher-pitched *gäṭa beraya* drumhead while note-heads below the staff-line are played on the lower-pitched drumhead. Vertical placement on the staff indicates the relative salient pitches of the inharmonic drum strokes. Cup-shaped note-heads facing up and down respectively indicate strokes played with an upward and downward rotation of the wrist.

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[12] In other words, in the performance of this piece, as with the text-music relationships in South and West Asian musics analyzed by Wolf, "the sets of relations between long and short syllables are more or less kept constant, even though the precise lengths of those syllables as performed vocally or instrumentally do not consistently maintain a proportion of 2:1" (Wolf 2014, 19).

[13] I have used this version to clarify some of the discrepancies in the video recording.

Figure 4. The second stanza of "Sugata Tālama," sung and drummed.

In addition to indexing the abstract rhythmic pattern of the long and short syllables, this drumming also features icons, in that some of the drum strokes also imitate the timbres of the phonemes of the words. For example, as evident in Figure 4, in some instances the deep vowel *u* is interpreted on the drums as an undamped low-pitched stroke (shown with blue note-heads in the vocal and drummed parts);[14] the line-ending nasal-consonants *m*, *n*, and *ṃ* are reproduced as an undamped high-pitched stroke (shown in red); and the consonant *r* is played as a short drum roll (shown in green).[15]

Most of the words in this stanza are Sanskrit, a liturgical language that carried much political and literary prestige in South and Southeast Asia even centuries after it ceased to be a spoken language for everyday communication (Pollock 1996). In Sri Lanka, Sanskrit prosody "provided the norms and models for most poetry in Sinhala from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries" (Hallisey 2003, 696), and the study of Sanskrit has historically been a part of monastic education (Blackburn 2001). As Kulatillake noted in 1976 (4–5), in Sri Lanka,

> Sanskrit verses of *Bhaktisatbakaya*[,] a compilation of the Kotte period (1400–1521)[,] are still being used by the Buddhist priests who chant them in their sermons [. . .] The verses of *Bhaktisathakaya* are written in praise of Buddha. [. . .] The singing of Sanskrit verses is widely found in folk rituals too, especially in *Bali*, *Suniyam* and *Devolmaḍu* ceremonies. Most of these verses are eulogies to divinities and are composed in [Sri] Lanka by Buddhist priests. [. . .] The ritual performers regard it as a mark of competency to sing these panegyrics, *Dēva Sthrothra*[,] in Sanskrit.

Given the adulating nature of the Sanskrit words in "Sugata Tālama," and considering that the drumming produces an amplified, surrogate reiteration of this sacred text (or at least of its inherent timing pattern), it is not surprising that the performance of such pieces constitutes an act of worship—in the form of an "offering of sound."[16]

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[14] "Undamped" refers to a resonant drum stroke whose sound is allowed to decay.

[15] For broader context, as Wolf notes regarding non-lexical drum syllables, "in South Asia the systems of mnemonics range widely from generalized patterns representing the sounds of whole ensembles, to sets of syllables that can refer to more than one sequence of strokes on a particular of timbre" (2014, 20).

[16] For a detailed discussion of "drum speech" in Sri Lanka, more details on the *Bera Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual, and alternative perspectives on some of the arguments made here, see Sykes 2018.

As argued by Ter Ellingson, some Buddhists in fourteenth-century Tibet also played sacred texts on their drums, possibly continuing an older tradition that originated with Buddhist practices in India. The evidence for this comes from the dance manual "Sham pa ta'i Gar dpe Shin tu legs pa gcig" (1337–38)[17] by Bu ston, which exhorts readers to beat the drum in accord with the mantra and provides instructions for interpreting the mantra syllables on a drum (Ellingson 1980, 443). In light of this, it is worth considering how the drumming of textual rhythmic patterns in Sinhalese Buddhist rituals might be connected to historical Buddhist practices from across the broader South Asian region. At the same time, we should take care not to be overly reductive: to attribute this emphasis on verbal sounds purely to Buddhist worldviews is to ignore the presence of speech surrogate drumming in South Asian Muslim and Hindu traditions as well as the many social and aesthetic hierarchies in South Asia that continue to privilege vocality.[18]

For example, in the Hindustani music tradition of North India and Pakistan, which is not connected to Buddhism, *pakhawaj* and *tabla* drummers today perform a piece-type known as *bol paran*. Similar to the Sri Lankan piece "Sugata Tālama," a performance of *bol paran* is based on a recited poem about a deity, which includes Sanskrit words as well as drum syllables; the sounds of these words are simultaneously (or subsequently) approximated on the drum. There is, however, little evidence that *bol paran* compositions are rooted in ancient traditions (Kippen 2008, quoted in Francom 2021, 26). Given that drawing direct links between Sinhalese Buddhist and North Indian cultural traditions can be fraught with ethnonationalist political implications, I include the following *bol paran* about the Hindu deity Ganesh—"Ganesh Paran," performed by Pandit Omkar Gulvady—simply as an

[17] "Sham pa ta Dance Book: A Very Good One."

[18] As Wolf cautions, "vococentrism is overdetermined in South Asia. Many different hierarchies favoring the voice and vocalists continue to figure prominently in South Asian culture and society, and they cannot all be accounted for. This point is important to bear in mind as we encounter instances of instruments conveying text or instrumental sound in different settings; explaining the process in a Muslim context solely in terms of an "Islamic emphasis on the word," for instance, would be vastly reductive, given the complex interplay of populations in South Asia for millennia" (2014, 13).

example of how the concept of drummed poetry is shared across the South Asian region:[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6wVsF4KceA.

Drumming Auspicious Syllable Patterns

In the context of Sinhalese Buddhist cosmological worldviews, there is a belief that groupings of three syllables can bring about good or bad consequences; these groupings are known by the term *gana*. This belief, which is found in South Indian Hindu astrological traditions and documented in texts dating back to the thirteenth century, links all the possible three-fold combinations of short and long syllables to the influential powers of the natural elements and the planetary deities.[20] Such syllabic combinations are most commonly taken into consideration by astrologers when suggesting names for babies and when composing poetry to be sung for blessing or cursing (*set kavi* or *vas kavi*).

Table 1 shows all the possible tripartite combinations of long and short syllables, along

[19] This *bol paran* uses the following text, which include Sanskrit words and drum vocables:

dhagitiṭa kiṭatiṭa katiṭa nagina dhā
sivasankara suta umānudnā
siddipradāyaka sīgra jāni
kattiṭa gaṭatiṭa katiṭa nagina dhā
titagatha gadigina
lumbōdara vignēswara
ganēsa ganapati jagat raksakā
āditvam pranayamadhā pranayamadhā pranayamadhā
āditvam pranayamadhā pranayamadhā pranayamadhā
āditvam pranayamadhā pranayamadhā pranayamadhā

[20] While these tri-syllabic groupings have been defined and named in sources as early as the Sanskrit prosodic treatise *Pingala Sūtra* (c. third/second century BCE), probably as mnemonics for constructing poetic meters, these early references do not include positive or negative connotations (Wadhwani 1995, 444). These principles of auspicious and inauspicious tri-syllabic-groupings (*gana*) are prescribed in the thirteenth century Sinhala poetry treatises *Sidat Sangarā* and *Elu Sañdäs Lakuna*. They also appear in medieval sources from the Indian mainland—e.g., in the twelfth-century Tantric Buddhist text *Tantrapaddhati* from Kerala (ibid., 446), in several Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Telugu texts from the Andhra region from the fourteenth century onwards (Sarasvati 1963, 98, Shulman 2010, 269–271), and in Chapter 12 (vv. 57–62) of the thirteenth-century Sanskrit music treatise *Saṅgīta-ratnākara*. Today, these principles are taken into consideration by practitioners of *jyotish* astrology in Sri Lanka and India, in both Buddhist and Hindu contexts.

Name	Syllabic Grouping	Ensuring Effects	Associated Natural Element	Associated planetary deity
ma	– – – long-long-long	*diya* (victory)	*mahī* (earth)	*budha* (Mercury)
na	. . . short-short-short	*oda* (power/might)	*dēva* (divine)	*brhaspati/dēva-guru* (Jupiter)
ba	– . . long-short-short	*set* (prosperity/blessing)	*chandra* (moon)	*chandra* (Moon)
ya	. – – short-long-long	*ā* (longevity)	*jala* (water)	*shukra* (Venus)
ja	. – . short-long-short	*leḍa* (disease)	*ravi* (sun)	*ravi* (Sun)
ra	– . – long-short-long	*dalasō* (grave grief)	*agni* (fire)	*kētu* (descending lunar node)
sa	. . – short-short-long	*mara* (death)	*vāyu* (air)	*shani* (Saturn)
ta	– – . long-long-short	*väsanā* (calamity)	*ākāsha* (sky)	*rāhu* (ascending lunar node)

Table 1. Tri-syllabic combinations and their associated effects, natural elements, and planetary deities.

with the effects they are said to cause,[21] and the elements of nature[22] and planetary deities[23] they are associated with. While the symbol ‿ is typically used to indicate unaccented syllables in European poetic scansion, Sri Lankan analysts use it to refer to longer syllables (e.g., Kulatillake 1976); to avoid confusion, I instead use symbols inspired by Morse code: dashes [–] for long syllables and dots [.] for short syllables. The first four groupings are

[21] These effects are described in Chapter 11 of the thirteenth-century Sinhala poetry treatise *Sidat Sangarā*.

[22] These associated elements of nature are described in Weliwitiye Sorata's twentieth-century commentary on verse 6 of the thirteenth-century Sinhala poetry treatise *Elu Sańdäs Lakuna*.

[23] The associated planetary deities are listed in Seneviratne (2012 [1949], 62–63).

considered auspicious and the latter four inauspicious.[24] For example, the tri-syllabic grouping "short-long-long" [. _ _] is associated with water and invokes the benevolent influence of the planet Venus, while the grouping "long-short-long" [_ . _] is associated with fire and invokes the malevolent influence of the descending lunar mode. In the context of poetry for blessing or cursing (*set kavi* or *vas kavi*), the first tri-syllabic cluster is said to affect the person listening to the poem, the second tri-syllabic cluster affects the person reciting the poem, and the third tri-syllabic cluster affects the poem's author.

Many Sinhalese hereditary drummers whom I interviewed told me that their drumming vocabulary is also based on this system of tri-syllabic groupings, but they were unable to explain to me exactly where in the drumming repertoire these groupings were embedded. One example, however, appears in a drumming treatise from 1966, authored by the hereditary performer J.E. Sedaraman.[25] Sedaraman cites the opening of the well-known drumming piece "Maňgul Bera,"[26] and asserts that, as with poetry for blessing, "Maňgul Bera" gains its ritual efficacy from the first three clusters of three (non-lexical) drum-strokes, which have auspicious poetic connotations when analyzed as long and short drum syllables (1966, 4).[27] As Sedaraman concludes, the first three tri-syllabic clusters all invoke auspiciousness, respectively materializing the clusters known as *dēva gana* [. . .] (linked to the divine), *jala gana* [. _ _] (linked to water), and *mahī gana* [_ _ _] (linked to earth), as shown in Figure 5 (boxed) and Figure 6 (bracketed under the transcription):

[24] In the four auspicious tri-syllabic groupings, the second and third syllables are always the same length; I have not come across any evidence of this being culturally significant.

[25] Jayadeva Ilangage (J.E.) Sedaraman was a hereditary ritualist who, in the 1940s–60s, authored several books about ritual dance and drumming. Unusually well-educated and well-traveled for someone of his social background (Rajapakse 2012, 44–51), Sedaraman played a key role in the twentieth century re-invention of up-country ritual arts as national culture. He also made available to the public many ritual texts that had previously been the guarded esoteric knowledge of ritualist communities (Sedaraman 2008 [1964], iii). According to Sedaraman, the principles of auspicious syllable-clusters that he details are reproduced from the manuscripts *Nertamālaya* and *Vādankusaya* (1966, 120).

[26] "Maňgul Bera" is an anonymously composed piece of ceremonial drum music that is still played today at the beginning of important events. This opening section of "Maňgul Bera" is known as "Maňgul Bera Pirīmē Padaya."

[27] In Sinhala poetic scansion, a syllable that includes a short vowel followed by a consonant is considered a long syllable (De Silva 1959, 51).

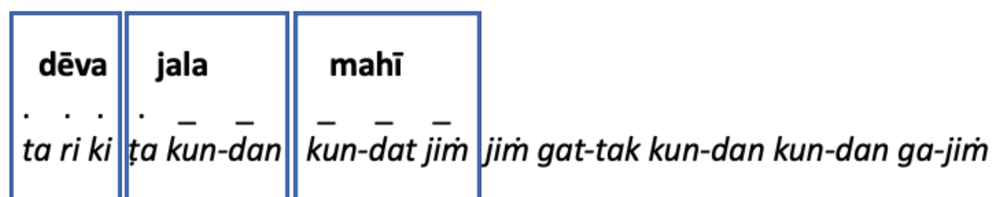

Figure 5. The opening drum syllables of "Maňgul Bera," grouped in threes.

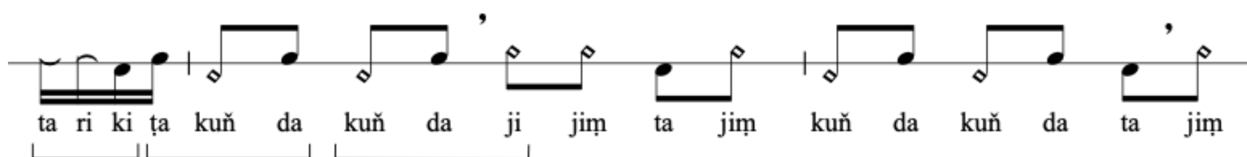

Figure 6. Transcription of the opening drum syllables of "Maňgul Bera," with the first three tri-syllabic clusters bracketed.

However, although Sedaraman groups the opening drum-syllables of "Maňgul Bera" in threes to demonstrate the presence of auspicious syllable clusters, enculturated listeners are more likely to hear them grouped differently, in keeping with the stock motifs typically used in the drumming vocabulary (boxed in Figure 7 and bracketed in the first line of Figure 8). A recording of the opening of "Maňgul Bera" ("Maňgul Bera Pirīmē Padaya") can be viewed here.[28]

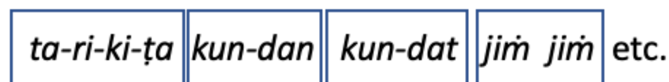

Figure 7. The opening drum syllables of "Maňgul Bera," grouped according to stock motifs.

[28] This video is from a *Bera Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual held in Mavanella, Sri Lanka, on 10th April 2017. The performance here is led by the ritualist Muddanave Sunil.

♩ = c. 56

1

ta ri ki ṭa kuň da kuň da ji jiṃ ta jiṃ kuň da kuň da ta jiṃ ta ri ki ṭa

kuň da kuň da ji jiṃ ta jiṃ kuň da kuň da ta jiṃ ta ri ki ṭa

kuň da kuň da ji jiṃ ta jiṃ kuň da kuň da ta jiṃ ta ri ki ṭa

kuň da kuň da ta jiṃ ta ri ki ṭa

kuň da kuň da ta jiṃ ta ri ki ṭa

kun da kun da ga ji ji ga ta

7

kuṃ ta kuṃ dat jiṃ

8

ta kuṃ ta kuṃ jiṃ jiṃ gat ku jiṃ

Figure 8. The opening section of "Maňgul Bera," with the first few stock motifs bracketed.[29]

In other words, performance practice doesn't draw attention to tri-syllabic clusters of drum strokes, suggesting that the placement of auspicious rhythmic patterns in the composition may not have been as deliberate as Sedaraman would have us believe. That said however, the power of drumming to transform reality is and has been very real for those invested in ritual worldviews, and part of that power is attributed to the idea that the drumming language is embedded with mystically significant tri-syllabic clusters. That the

[29] In this excerpt, Lines 7 and 8 decelerate and are played with more rhythmic freedom; I represent this in the transcription by spatially approximating the typical interonset durations.

precise nature of this embedding is obscure (and not necessarily evident to listeners) only seems to add to the sacred aura surrounding the art form; it also makes it all the more imperative for ritualists that certain drumming compositions are performed exactly as handed down by tradition. In fact, as ritualist I.K. Samaraweera told me, dancers of the previous generation would stop dancing mid-piece if their drummers didn't play the exact drum patterns as prescribed (pers. comm., 30th March 2017).

In the above examples, drumming and speech are both conceived of within the same framework: as sound patterns that invoke supernatural influence. However, I caution that we should not overgeneralize from these examples; it would be too simplistic to infer that all instrumental rhythmic patterns in Sri Lankan up-country traditions directly mimic syllable structures drawn from poetic conventions, especially given the multiple historical sources that have impacted up-country performance contexts.

The next piece-type I discuss does not involve drummed patterns per se, but rather sung sequences of abstract mnemonic-syllables or vocables. Instead of mimicking the characteristics of existing poetry, these vocable sequences likely functioned historically as prescriptive models for composing new verses.

VOCABLE MODELS

As theorized by Richard K. Wolf, certain kinds of musical beginnings have implications for subsequent musical material, for example functioning as (or indexing) models or theories (2009, 239). Such modeling of subsequent patterns can be seen in the use of introductory vocables in Sinhala *vannama* poems, which are today a repertoire of codified texts that form the basis of up-country dance pieces. As argued by C. de S. Kulatillake, the introductory sequence of non-lexical vocables in many Sinhala *vannama*s serves to prescribe the "phonetical arrangement" of the lexical words in subsequent stanzas (1991, 63).[30] In other words, this fixed pattern of sung vocables, known as the *tānama*, functions as a template for the positioning of particular vowel and consonant sounds within the words of a stanza (as well the positioning of long and short syllables).[31] An example of such vocables

[30] For discussions about the functions of vocables in other musical traditions, see McAllester (1992, vocables in Native American music), Turino (2008, vocables in Sub-Saharan Africa), Nettl (2008, vocables in Native American music), and Hughes (2000, indexing of acoustic preferences in vocables).

[31] This method of structuring poetic syllables according to patterns of phoneme-types contrasts with older techniques of Sinhala versification, for example *askshara chandas* (a Sanskrit-influenced type of poetic meter based on quantities of syllables), *gana-chandas* (a Pali-influenced type of poetic meter based on patterns of short and long syllables), *gī*, and *siwupada* (types of poetic meters based on the number of morae).

appears at the start of the "Säwulā Vannama:" *tamtamdana tānām danatamdana tānām tamtamdana tānatteyi tamdanā tamdanānā*; this can be heard in the following rendition of the piece sung by Chadrakanthi Shilpadhipathi on the album "18 Vannam" (1992): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRsMCU63Apo.[32]

To support his argument that *tānama* vocables in *vannama*s constitute a "phono-metric" model for subsequent stanzas, Kulatillake offers the following evidence. The lyrics of the piece named "Säwulā Vannama" are different in every documented historical source, and only the current standard text (e.g., as documented in Sedaraman 2008 [1964], 104, and heard in the above-linked recording by Shilpadhipathi) refer to the animal in the title—*säwulā* (rooster). However, all the versions share with the introductory vocable sequence (and with each other) a similar placement of nasal consonants (*m*, *n*, or *ṃ*) in the first three lines of poetry (Kulatillake 2013 [1982], 30–31).[33] In Table 2, I have transliterated one stanza each from the four available sources, bolding in green the corresponding nasal consonants. Their similar placement is evident in Line 1 and Line 2, where all four examples feature syllables closed with a nasal consonant, at the mid-way point and at the end of the lines. This suggests that the title itself may have referred not to a particular text but rather to a contour of phonemes. For example, the title "Säwulā Vannama" may have indexed the particular pattern of vocables of a specific *tānama*, based upon which different poetic texts could be composed or improvised.[34] Extending this argument, Kulatillake suggests that, historically, Sinhala *vannama*s were defined not by particular subject matter, but rather by their syllabic structures and vowel/consonant contours (ibid.); in other words, the Sinhala term *vannama* itself used to refer to an abstract model of syllabic sounds that was intended to aid in the creation of new lexical verses. This contrasts with present-day practice, where the texts of *vannama* stanzas are fixed and the *tānama* vocables are simply a part of the inherited repertoire.

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[32] These vocables are similar to those used for improvising in the onomatopoetically named *tānam* section of the piece-type "Rāgam Tānam Pallavi" found in Karnatak music. In contrast with the improvisatory nature of "Rāgam Tānam Pallavi," the *tānama* in Sinhala *vannama* poetry is pre-composed, and each *vannama* has its own characteristic pattern of vocables.

[33] In the most recent of these sources, Sedaraman (2008 [1964], 104), the lyrics of *Säwulā Vannama* relate the mythic tale of how the rooster was born as the result of a battle between *Kaňda Kumaru* (prince *Kaňda*) and the *asura* demons.

[34] A similar phenomenon has been noted by Hassan Jouad in his study of Berber poetry of Morocco (1995, 22–38). As Philip Yampolsky describes, "Jouad discovered that a seemingly meaningless sequence of vocables, sung as a choral refrain after each of a soloist's lines of poetry, in fact served as a template for the poetry, abstractly representing the metrical and phonological properties of the poetic line" (2022, 106).

Source:	***Tānama*** **-** introductory vocables	Bandar (1908)	Nanawimala (1939)	Delgoda (1959)	Sedaraman (1964)
Line 1	*tam tam dena tā nam*	*mannan pera siṭan*	*san sun lesa utum*	*tän tän vala gosin*	*emavan paluwakin*
Line 2	*dena tam dena tā nam*	*dun dun basa kanin*	*pun pun siri radun*	*sun bun biňda kamin*	*ewupan sänayakin*
Line 3	*tam tam dena tā nat teyi*	*sun bun kara vänum*	*nan nan siya dahas*	*mandän siha radun*	*säwulā nama eyin*
Line 4	*tam da tā nam da nā nā*	*misa un lanne mekala*	*pirivara siṭa ekalā*	*lesa karamäyi däyi rī*	*lova pala kala upatin*

Table 2. Similar Placement of Nasal Consonants in Different Versions of "Säwulā Vannama."

To further bolster his theory that *tānama* vocables in Sinhala *vannama*s historically functioned as a model for the positioning of particular vowel and consonant sounds in a stanza, Kulatillake notes the existence of similar techniques in medieval Tamil poems that are based on syllabic models known as *cantam*.[35] Tamil poetry from South India is a very plausible source for the use of syllabic templates in Sinhala *vannama*s in Sri Lanka. Sinhala *vannama* poetry is said to have originated in the royal court of the kingdom of Kandy in central Sri Lanka during the seventeenth century (Kulatillake 1976), at a time when there was an influx of influential South Indian immigrants to the kingdom of Kandy and to the royal court (Obeyesekere 2017).[36] To understand Kulatillake's comparison of poetry techniques, a brief explanation of Tamil *cantam* will be helpful:

[35] The idea that Kandyan *tānama*s have been influenced by traditions in South India is also suggested in the popular (but unlikely) legend that all the Kandyan *vannama*s were created by a musician from Kerala named Ganitālaṃkāra (Bandar 1908, 133; Sedaraman 2008 [1964], 97; Wijewardane 1994, 30; Wijewardane 2003, 12).
[36] In a forthcoming article, I argue that the principles of *vannama* versification were adapted by Sinhala-speaking poet-singers affiliated with the royal palace of Kandy during the Kandyan era (1597–1815), inspired by techniques of Tamil poetry composition with roots in South India. I suggest that this style of verse-singing was subsequently incorporated into non-ritual dances by village-based ritualists in the nineteenth century, and that new Sinhala *vannama* verses were codified in the twentieth century and popularized as dance compositions that showcased Sri Lankan national cultural heritage.

From the eighth century onwards, much Tamil poetry in South India was composed based on "a rigidly set pattern of rhythm based on syllabic quantity" known as *cantam* (Zvelebil 1974, 109); *cantam* is cognate with the Sanskrit term *chandas*, referring to poetic meter (Wolf 2009, 298). These *cantam* patterns were based on an older Tamil system of long and short syllable-combinations (known as *cir*) which were placed within lines of poetry governed by their quantities of syllabic-instants (based on Sanskrit models of versification) and were transmitted using mnemonics such as "*tana tanā*" (Zvelebil 1974, 161). In the sixteenth century, these *cantam* syllabic models (when used in the devotional singing of Saiva and Vaisnava *bhakti* hymns) began to be associated with fixed melody-types known as *paṇ* (ibid., 109). *Cantam* models were also employed in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in the composition of eight-stanza Tamil poems called *vannam*, in which alternate stanzas featured assonance (*etukai*) and alliteration (*mōnai*) (ibid., 217).[37] According to the Tamil Encyclopedia *Kalaikalanjiyam* (1963, Vol. 9. 5.1.1) these *cantam* included mnemonic vocables such as *tā-tat*, *tā-tan*, *tat,ta-tā*, *tan,ta-tantā*, *tan,na-tanna*, *taiyyā-taiyā*, *tatai,ta-tatai*, and *ta-tanai-ta*, which prescribed the "tonal color" (*isaiyin niram*) as well as the quantities of syllables.[38]

The concept of *cantam* is also associated with several genres of South Indian Tamil folk song, in which it refers to aspects of a song's metrical structure and melody (Wolf 2009, 250). In this context, the *cantam* is embodied in strings of vocables that act as musical models; these vocables often come to be named after, or identified with, the *cantam* itself (Wolf 2009,

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[37] In my argument, I assume that the terms *cantam* and *vannam* have been historically intertwined. However, the term *vannam* has a much older history (than *cantam*) in South India. The oldest reference comes from the first-century Tamil treatise *Tolkāppiyam,* in which it refers to twenty different styles of versification based on "variation in rhythm" (Rajam 1992, 207). These different *vannam* are distinguished by the placement (within poetic meters) of particular poetic feet (*cir*), hard and soft consonants (*vallicai* and *mellicai*), alliteration (*etukai*), and long and short syllables (Rajam 1992, 207–214). In Arivanār's tenth-century Tamil treatise *Panchamarapu*, *vannam* refers to a type of Tamil song based in sixteen poetic feet (Ramanathan 1979, 57). In Amitacākarar's fourteenth-century Tamil treatise *Yāppu-Arunkāla-Kārakai*, *vannam* refers to "rhythmical features" in poetic meters, characterized by opaque terms such as "eminent variation" (*ēnticai*), "flowing variation" (*tūnkicai*), "dancing variation" (*akavalicai*) etc. (Niklas 1993, 444). These characteristics combine with different kinds of consonants to produce one hundred *vannam* types; Amitacākarar categorizes these hundred *vannam* by five groups associated with a) the gait of an old female elephant, a chameleon, or a heron; b) the movement of an intoxicated elephant, a snake, or a bird; c) the sound of a cartwheel, a heron, a duck, or an animal's bell; d) the gallop of a horse (Niklas 1993, 407–413); and e) the croaking of a frog (Pillai 1985 [1929], 209).

[38] The Tamil encyclopedia provides an English translation of *isaiyin niram* as "tonal colour;" I understand this to refer to the use of specific classes of vowels and consonants which share properties of phonation. As Pillai says (somewhat opaquely), "Vannam, peculiar to Tamil, results from the surgence of letters, and it differs from Sanskrit chandam [poetic meter] which arises from the measure or quantity of letters" (1985 [1929], 210). It is possible that the term *vannam* is cognate with the Sanskrit (and Sinhala) term *varna*, which could refer to color.

250). These vocables (such as *tān*, *nān*, *nē* etc.) and their associated melodies "encapsulate the melodic and rhythmic feel of the song and can be remembered independently from any particular lyrics" (ibid, 255). As shown by Wolf, the syllable patterns outlined by the vocables are not always adhered to strictly in texted verses; rather the vocables serve more like conduits for rhythmic ideas, whereby "the rhythmic choices boil down to how many syllables will be allotted to each beat and where the gap, if any, should be placed" (ibid.). As an example, in the Tamil *temmānku* folk song "*ātta kurukka*" the seven-syllable vocable string "*tantānti nāttu nānnēn*" is replaced with the seven-syllable text "*ātta kurukkataccēn*" in the first verse and with the eight-syllable text "*kulavālai nāttu nāṭṭēn*" in a different verse; however, all three phrases occupy the same duration when sung, and there are similarities in the placement of particular vowels or consonants and particular short or long syllables. Wolf also gives an example from the Tamil folksong genre *oyilāṭṭakkummi* in which some of the metered text is composed extemporaneously. In this situation, having the vocable refrain sung between verses by another singer "allows the [main] singer to mentally try out a new line while listening to someone else maintain the *cantam*" (2009, 255).[39]

Many of the above-mentioned characteristics of Tamil *cantam*-based poetry (and Tamil *vannam* poetry in particular) can be observed in Sinhala *vannama*s as well. For example, in the different versions of *Säwulā Vannama* reproduced in Table 2, in addition to the similar positioning of nasal consonants, the verses approximately mimic the placement of long and short syllables in the *tānama* vocable sequence, and alliteration is abundant. These correspondences can be heard in Shilpadhipathi's recording by comparing the syllables of the sung verses with the pattern of phonemes modeled in the opening vocable sequence: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRsMCU63Apo.

Today, vocable-sequences in Sinhala *vannama*s are associated with particular melodies, similar to the fixed melody-types associated with Tamil *cantam*.[40] It is likely that vocable

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[39] The singing of a melody using non-lexical syllables before that melody is sung with text is also found in the low-country tradition (Sykes 2013, 499) and in the *tenmoḍi kūttu* style of Tamil folk drama associated with Batticaloa, on the east coast of Sri Lanka. Comparing the singing of non-lexical syllables in Sinhalese and Tamil musical traditions in Sri Lanka (as well as noting other corresponding musical techniques) Sykes suggests that "one possible reason for these similarities is that Batticaloa was an outlying part of the Kandyan Kingdom; another is that the pilgrimage site Kataragama, which attracts Sinhalas, Tamils, and Muslims, lies in between Batticaloa and the southern Sinhala low country" (2013, 500). In the *tenmoḍi kūttu* tradition, the non-lexical syllables are known as *teru* (Sykes 2011, 517). I have not yet been able to examine the relationship between *teru* syllables and the words of the verses in these songs, but I suspect that *teru* syllables may function in a way similar to *cantam* syllabic models.

[40] The *tānama* tunes transcribed in Kapukotuwa (1934) and Nanawimala (1939) are different from the tunes sung today. This could mean that the melodies associated with particular *vannama*s have changed during the

sequences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were similarly linked to melodies; this idea is supported by Mahawalatenne Bandar's translation of the word "Wannam" [*vannama*s] as "tunes" (1908, 136).[41]

CONCLUSION

Through my selected examples of music from the up-country tradition, I have highlighted some of the diverse ways in which musicians in Sri Lanka have historically drawn on conventions of poetry composition when creating musical structures and vocabularies. That many performers and listeners today are not aware of these relationships may be due in part to the fact that performance contexts for these musics have shifted in the twentieth century, from village rituals and aristocratic entertainment to today's staged performances that serve as signifiers of Sri Lankan Sinhalese identity (Reed 2010). For example, in the performance of *vannama*s, introductory vocables no longer serve as syllabic templates for creating new stanzas, since the texts are now codified. The *Pōya Hēvisiya* ritual is rarely performed, and only a fraction of its drumming repertoire—which is related to the syllabic rhythmic patterns of poetry—is known to a few senior ritualists. And while the ceremonial drumming piece "Maňgul Bera" is still played regularly at the beginning of important ritual and secular events, its musical syntax is not readily comprehended by those not trained as drummers.

From the standpoint of musical analysis, understanding non-verbal music in relation to language structures allows for modes of theorizing that do not depend on identifying isochronous streams of pulses, instead shifting the focus from timing patterns to culturally determined durational categories that resonate with the worldviews of cultural insiders. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere (2018), the search for ideal type timing models can have an unforeseen prescriptive effect: since the 1960s, when up-country drumming was first theorized in terms of precise pulse-groupings by the Sinhalese musicologists Vincent Somapala and W.B. Makulloluwa, there have been significant changes in the musical structures that are commonly performed on *gäṭa beraya* drums.

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twentieth century. This could also mean that a particular *tānama* vocable sequence could have had several options for a melody; this possibility is conceptually similar (but unlikely to be historically related) to the use of short meter, long meter, and common meter in English Christian hymnody, in which verses based on particular poetic meters can be sung using any melody associated with that poetic meter.

[41] The idea that poetic meters were liked to particular melodies can also be inferred from John Davy's vague observation of 1821: "All their poetry is sung or recited: they have seven tunes by which they are modulated" (239). It is also telling that the Sinhala words *vurtaya* (poetic meter), *tanuwa* (melody), and *tāla* (rhythmic framework) are often used interchangeably to refer to melody (Kulatillake 1976, 15).

In my arguments about non-ritualistic *vannama* poetry, I expanded on the research of C. de S. Kulatillake, drawing on techniques of South Indian Tamil poetry to posit that the introductory vocable sequences in Sinhala *vannama* poetry likely functioned in the past as a model for the syllable patterns of subsequent verses. The idea that this was a cross-culturally shared musical technique is supported by documented historical relationships between people from South India and Sri Lanka. My analyses of the ritual drumming pieces "Sugata Tālama" and "Maňgul Bera" grew outward from the music and surrounding discourse, leading me to identify compositional techniques that suggest possible shared histories between Sri Lankan up-country ritual traditions and other South Asian cosmological worldviews. Further cross-cultural connections might be found in future studies about vocal models and musical rhythm in South Asia, which could compare the syllabic patterns of Sinhala *vannama* verses with the vocable patterns in the South Indian Tamil treatises *Tolkāppiyam* (first century) and *Yāppu-Arunkāla-Kārakai* (fourteenth century) and in the Sri Lankan Tamil *tenmoḍi kūttu* folk drama repertoire, and look for other musical repertories in the region where the syllabic rhythmic patterns of sung poetry are performed on drums as surrogate speech.

The possibilities of shared histories revealed through such analyses contrast with conventional histories that portray Sri Lankan up-country traditions as uniquely Sinhalese-Buddhist, militate against hegemonic narratives that pit ethnicities against each, and serve as a caution against the ways scholars sometimes unreflexively link the origins of musical genres to bounded geographic regions and fixed communal identities.

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