

THE MUSICAL REPRESENTATION OF SRI LANKAN KAFFIRS

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Abstract

This study presents a very small community within the Sinhalese context of Sri Lanka in light of academic interest: the Kaffirs. Their communal history reaches far back into colonial times, and they did not distinguish clearly from which territories in Africa these Kaffirs, an expression introduced by Portuguese rulers for slaves and servants brought to Sri Lanka from African shores, came and how they identify.

Currently, Kaffirs are seen through the gaze of public writings and common biases. They are believed to have their performance styles and their strong association with the drum, dance, and vocal genres integrated into the canon of Sinhalese traditions.

One specific vocal expression is the singing of manja songs, which are introduced and roughly analysed in this short paper. Manja songs are not so widely known to all people living in Sri Lanka. A specific study of these songs has not yet taken place.

The main methods used are micro-analysis, literature studies, and open interviews with those who are connected to Kaffirs, either as members of the group or as people related to their studies and performing arts. Beyond presenting the exciting text repertoire, it is to connect the musical skills that come with this way of singing with related arts such as dancing and drumming.

The Kaffirs' performance potentials are widely underestimated. Many Kaffirs were integrated, through marriage and social subordination, into the current society. Yet, it is important to focus on the snippets in the history of specific performance skills and their relatedness to another continent in order to help understand global issues and their future.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Kaffirs, Manja songs, African diaspora, Micro-analysis

INTRODUCTION

This study presents a rather small community within the Sinhalese context of Sri Lanka in light of academic interest. The African descendants in Sri Lanka, known as Kaffirs, are a declining minority group whose grandparents were brought to colonized Sri Lanka since 1505 until the British left the country in 1948. Their communal history (Nicolini & Jayasuriya, 2017) did not distinguish clearly from which territories in Africa these Kaffirs, which is an expression introduced by Portuguese rulers for slaves and servants brought to Sri Lanka from African shores, came and how they identified. Shihan De Silva Jayasuriya wrote a number of articles and books and produced a few documentaries about Africans in Asia, and among them, the majority of her academic works speak about Sri Lankan Kaffirs (Jayasuriya, 2005, 2010, 2020). However, the lack of inquiries into the content of Kaffirs'

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music and how Kaffirs have been ethnically identified and labelled by other local ethnicities is a remaining question and has yet to be studied. Previous studies, interviews, and public views encountered in internet sources may serve as the initial material to be explored. This research will be further continued by using methods such as microanalysis, literature studies, and open interviews with those who are connected to the so-called Kaffirs (Dahanayake & Meddegoda, 2023), either as members of the group or as people related to their studies and performing arts. Beyond presenting the exciting text repertoire, it is to connect the musical skills that come with this way of singing with related arts such as dancing and drumming.

KAFFIR COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

RECENT HISTORY

The Africans were brought to Sri Lanka by European colonizers, starting with the Portuguese in 1505 and continuing the practice by the Dutch and British until the British left the country in 1948. In 1817, Kaffirs were brought from Mozambique by the British. It is hard to exactly say what are the ultimate places that Kaffirs were picked from in Mozambique. The majority of soldiers were Kaffirs in the Third Lanka Regime during the period of British rule. Some soldiers worked in the Puttalam area, and they stayed there even after ending the regime that brought them to that area. The Afro-Sri Lankans were employed as mercenaries, musicians, road builders, railway line constructors, watchers in salt pans, bricklayers, palanquin carriers, domestic servants, divers in pearl fisheries, nannies, nurses, village officials, and bodyguards.

Three types of Kaffir lineages are dominant: Portuguese Creole, Tamil mixed, and Sinhala mixed. Birth certificates of Kaffirs indicate that they are Kaffirs and that their religion is Roman Catholic. Kaffirs are capable of writing and speaking Sinhalese and Tamil, depending on the territory of living and spoken languages of their parents. Their grandparents have mostly spoken Indo-Portuguese languages with missing scripts as they were not attending a Portuguese school.

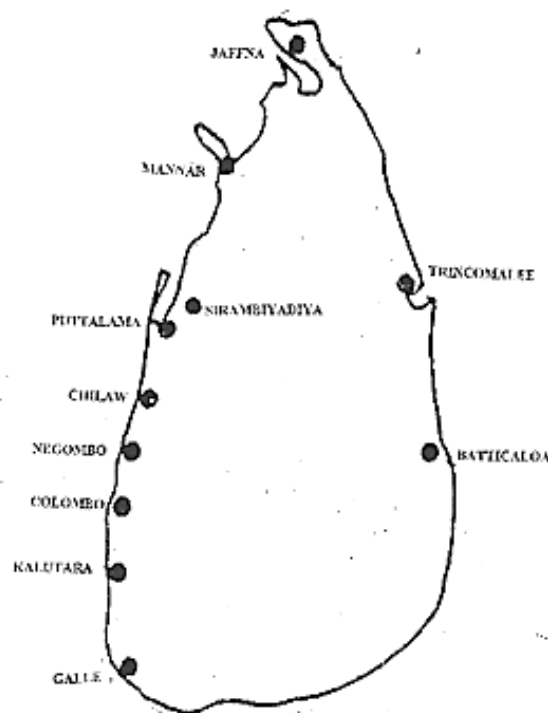


Figure 1: The locations of Kaffirs' residences (illustrated by Jayasuriya, 2005, reprinted with permission).

In an interview, Shihan De Silva Jayasuriya (Jayasuriya and Meddegoda, 2023) said that Kaffirs were brought by colonizers basically for slavery and as soldiers who were loyal and capable. Similar patterns can be found in India (Pescatello, 1977). Usually, she says, Kaffirs do not marry Muslims in Sri Lanka, though they are married to Hindus, Buddhists, and people who follow other religions. I found that the Kaffirs usually hide their identity as Kaffirs in public. The Creole language consists of 90% Portuguese and is the lingua franca of the Kaffirs living in the Eastern province. The self-created language they do use today is not understandable by Portuguese-speaking people. Meaning the added 10% might be crucial to the understanding, which calls for further studies.

Place	Number of people	Year	Source
Senakudiirippuwa	3–4 families	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Sellakkandal Sirambiadiya	2–3 families	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Sellakkandal Sirambiadiya	50 families	2001	Jayasuriya, 2001
Lurdu Mother Church, near Kalaoya	1 family	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Thambowa	Not mentioned	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Puliyankulama	Not mentioned	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Mihinthale	Not mentioned	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Trincomalee	Not mentioned	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Rajagiriya	Not mentioned	1985	Ariyaratna, 1985
Entire Puttalama District	38 families	1952	Ariyaratna, 1985

Figure 2: Table of demography found in literature up to the 21st century (scheme by Chinthaka P. Meddegoda).

Currently, Kaffirs are seen through the gaze of public writings and common biases. Sri Lankans are not much familiar with the word ‘Kaffir’, and instead the words Kaperi or African are used to identify them. Usually, the term Kaffir is used in academic works and newspaper articles. Being Sinhalese myself, I can remember how I was influenced by others in my perception of Kaperi. I was told by my surrounding people some features of African people in general, such as having black skin, curly hair, which is also known as afro-textured hair, wider and fat lips, aboriginal dances with the upper part of the body naked, wearing small tree branches with leaves as skirts, singing particular songs that are well blended with drumming sound, hanging big rings on the ears and nose, and so on. My impression of them was somewhat exotic, and I was rather curious to observe them from a distance. When I was 8 years old, I got an English text book from the school for English learning, and this happened when I was in grade 4 at the school. It is not only me, but all the grade 4 students who study in all Sri Lankan government schools get it for free. The private schools also might have used the same book since mostly all have to adhere to the syllabuses issued by the Ministry of Education. However, my conception of African people changed after I learned the lesson about different races in the world as given in that particular English text book (Figure 2). ‘I am Muru. I am from Nigeria.’ The picture of Muru is largely different from my perception of the look of African people. However, features such as a complexion, wider lips, and afro-textured hair are somewhat visible in the picture. Unfortunately, the education of identifying ethnic differences through the outer appearance of the people might still be a practice in some places in the world.



Figure 3: Two pages of English text book taught in grade 4 in schools of Sri Lanka around the 1980s (reprinted with permission).

Piyal Abeysekara (with Meddegoda, 2023) remembers his mother used to tell him about Kaperi from British times that the Kaperi people were tied and their mouths were locked with padlocks, and they were transported in a well-closed vehicle like a bus in the Kandy area by the British people. He was told that they are human flesh eaters, and therefore the local people did not dare to reach closer to them when Kaperis were around or transported nearby.

I interviewed Ashoka Herath, who is nearly 71 years old, and can remember what she heard from her mother about Kaperi people. As she was asked what you remember, she started singing two lines of a Sri Lankan popular song that contains words from an unknown foreign language.

Aji tapara lahila

Peeji tapara lahila ...

She could not explain why she was reminded of that song. However, its sonic texture is rather African-like to me as well. Herath (with Meddegoda, 2023) described the Kaperis' outer appearance as big and strong people with shiny black skin.

Later, I could reach more Sinhala people who are above 60 years old and can remember what they heard about Kaperis from their grandparents, and I heard similar responses about the first impression of the term Kaperi.

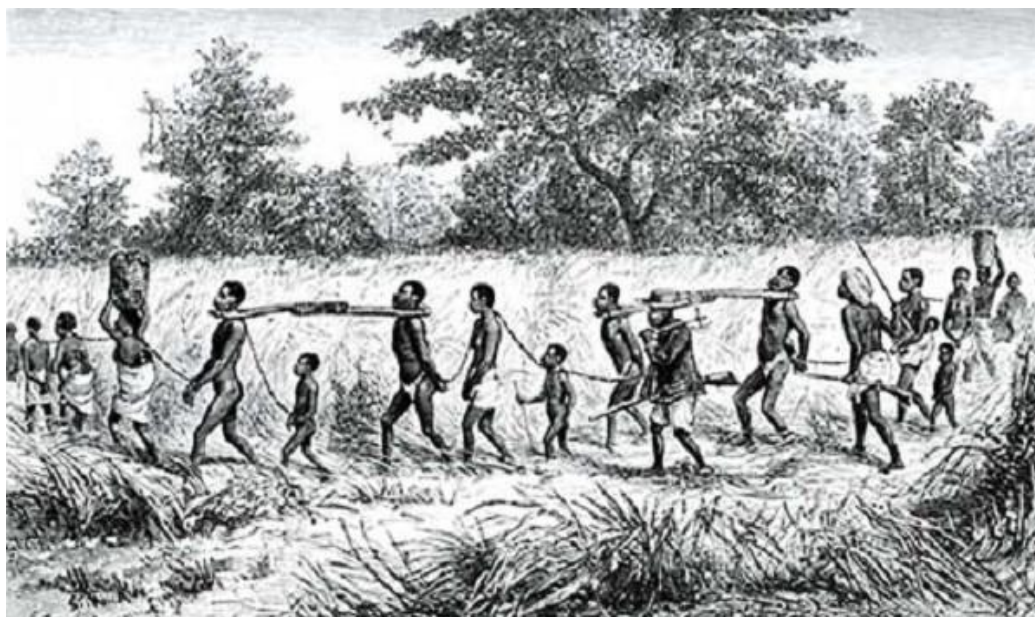


Figure 4: African slaves: http://www.namathumalayagam.com/2018/03/blog-post_50.html (re-printed with permission).

KAPERI MUSIC

There are a few songs and genres associated with Kaperis of Sri Lanka. Among them, Baila Kaffirinya and manja songs are relatively often practiced. Some lines in Baila Kaffirinya songs are in Portuguese language or Creole language. The manja songs are completely in Portuguese or Creole language.

BAILA KAFFIRINYA



Figure 5: Kaffirinya Carnival to tribute the respective early legends by living artistes of Kaffirinya songs. (Advertisement material re-printed with permission).

Dias (2014) confirms that the term ‘Baila’ that is referred to as ‘dance’ denotes a particular vocal genre in today’s Sri Lanka. The terms Baila and Kaffirinya are synonymously used to denote a song style along with an ensemble that has been developed with the involvement of local people, Portuguese, and Mozambiquans. The terms Baila and Kaffirinya denote the same genre (Ariyaratne, 1999). There is a wider repertoire of Kaffirinyas in Portuguese and Creole languages sung by Kaperis and Sinhala singers today. However, the most popular are the versions of Sinhala kaffirinya-styled songs sung by Sinhala singers. The reason could be that the majority of the population, also among the so-called Kaffirs, understands Sinhala language, and therefore the Sinhala version is more attractive.

The kaffirinya ensemble in the 17th century consisted of specific musical instruments, namely the violin, mandolin, rabana, and guitar (Ariyaratne, 1999). Today, the ensemble has been expanded with additions of congas, tambourine, maracas, shaker, accordion, banjo, banjolin, and bass guitar. Jayasuriya (with Meddegoda, 2023, Jayasuriya, 2010: Jayasuriya 2020) believes that Kaffirinya is an amalgamation of cultures from three continents: Africa, Europe, and Asia. The term Baila, or dance associated with Portuguese and Spanish dances, was probably added to Kaffirinya later during the Portuguese power (Dias, 2014). Kaffirinya is another term synonymously used with the term Baila.

MANJA SONGS

Manja songs are not so widely known to all people living in Sri Lanka. A specific study of these songs has not yet taken place. The performances can be widely found uploaded to YouTube by many visitors to the Sirambiyadiya village. Among them are foreign tourists, ethnographers, local visitors, and a few agents of television channels. Kaperis in Sirambiyadiya have entertained the visitors by performing their lyrically limited repertoire of dances and a few songs. They are all somehow dancers and musicians, as they can do at least one of these roles during the singing and within the instrumental ensemble. Seemingly, most of the villagers are economically poor. They receive rewards from the visitors, and, therefore, they are happy to perform.

The ensemble of musical instruments used to accompany manja songs includes dhol, metal coins, spoons, coconut shells, beating or stamping on a wooden plank, and a rabana.

The lyrics of manja songs are in a strange Portuguese language. Many of the main song lyrics are about nature, such as one that describes a child flying a kite in the sky, love, the sea, animals, birds, and devotional songs. The manja songs are completely in Portuguese or in any Creole language, without exception. The Portuguese spoken seems ancient to modern Portuguese speakers though.

The Kaperi’s performance potentials are widely underestimated. Many so-called Kaffirs were integrated through marriage and social subordination into the current society. Yet, it is important to focus on the few snippets in the history of performance skills and their relatedness to another continent in order to help understand global issues and their future.

One manja song should be more detailed. The theme of the song that is most often performed during visits by strangers in the named village is ‘teasing a beloved one’.

The basic line is made of a drum beat interlocked with hand clapping. This rhythm seems to be contagious, and all visitors join the off-beat hand clapping to support the performance. Drummers are seated on plastic chairs, and singers are standing around them. One dancer/singer goes in a circle during the stanza, and then it is repeated on the spot with more musical intensity. Other stanzas may see other performers. So, they switch places. The first singer is female in a flowery midi dress that reaches the lower legs.

Here is a scheme as it may be constructed during the performance of one line in the stanza:

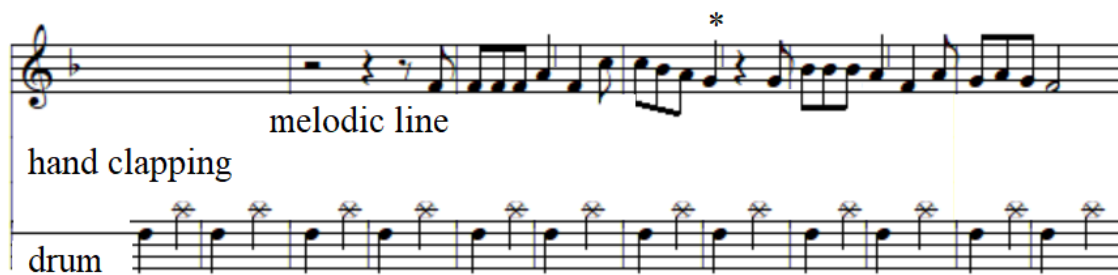


Figure 6: Basic scheme of the manja song's main song line. Writing by the author Chinthaka P. Meddegoda. The time signature was omitted on purpose to show the musical idea instead of a basic reproduction in staff notation.

The melodic pattern, here only roughly drafted in thinking patterns and not in simple transcription, is up-and-down directed and does not exceed the major five-tone scale. The final tones of each line land on a kind of dominant (marked with *), implying the openness of further creation. Only the last line finishes in the basic tone. The text is often repeated, possibly because it is hard to understand or for better emphasis on the plot.

In appropriate representations of this group, for example, in YouTube recordings such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOb84yONUxw>, the melodic line is varied and echoed. But the underlying fast rhythm of drum and hand clapping (one quarter tone is 150–200 speeding up during the performance) can be replaced by a wood block or a pattern given by a keyboard.

AN ANALYSIS OF AVAILABLE AUDIOVISUAL MATERIAL

This particular manja song that has been played in an audiovisual document starts very slowly. Scattering flowers, one woman begins to dance with gentle steps, which may indicate that the village people are welcoming the visitors around them. Everyone pays attention to her, claps, and sings. After singing a few lines of the verse, the musicians and singers increase the speed of the song a little. Where the speed of sound is increased, one sustains the tone loudly as a sign of tempo change.

In this way, the whole song uninterruptedly gets gradually faster and speeds up. In between, more dancers join the performance. The dance is started by one person and continues as a group until the end of the song. The song starts very slow.

The musical structure is that the entire song consists of three or four lines. The first and second lines remain in the same octave. The third line onwards extends to some higher ranges.

The song uses minimal lyrics. At the climax of each stanza, which is mostly at the end, the melody and some redundant syllables or sound effects are used. After a while, the song is repeated. The songs sung in these groups seem to be mostly sung by women, accompanied on drums and other percussive elements by men. Here is a substantial transcription of the four lines in a writing style often used in Sri Lankan teaching of songs (Abeysekara, 2023).

When singing these songs in groups, only one melody is used in various shapes depending on space and time of appearance. These dependencies are not yet well investigated.

The accompaniment of the song is depicted in the transcription (Figure 7). The melody of the song follows a 6/8 rhythm. The accompaniment patterns have a predominantly regular structure, except for the drum named the dholak. The rhythmic structure is characterized by lowercase x and uppercase X. The lowercase x represents the beats produced by the right hand or both hands, while the uppercase X represents the beats created by the left hand.

<u>Song</u>							
S - -	RG -	S- S	PP -	P - D	PM -	G- -	- - -
S - -	RG -	S- S	PP -	P - D	PM -	G-[[Ṣ	SṢ -
NSṢ	ND -	P- G	GG -	GM-	GR -	S - -	- - -]]
NSṢ	ND -	P- G	GG -	GM-	GR -	S - -	- - -]]
[[P - D	PM -	G- G	GG -	GM-	GR -	S - -	- - -]]
<u>Accompaniments</u>							
Coconut shell (slow beat using right hand)							
xx-	xx-	xx-	xx-	xx-	xx-	xx-	xx-
Coconut shell (Fast beat using both hands)							
xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx
Spoon							
x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -
Dholak							
Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-	Dhinaga Dhita-
Beat indication through words							
xxx	xx-	xxx	xx-	xxx	xx-	xxx	xx-
Rabana (slow beat using right hand)							
x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -	x - -
Rabana (Hand drum slow beat using right hand)							
xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
Glass bottle with metal coins using both hands							
xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx	xXx

Figure 7: One stanza seen in the audiovisual example (transcription by Geethika Abeysekera) in a 6/8 rhythm using a common notation system applied in Sri Lanka.

Kaperi people keep using their accompanying instruments as their grandparents have previously used them (Arunasalam, 2010, Figure 7). Dhol (big drum), a traditional rabana, beating or stamping on a wooden plank, as well as clappers, are used for an accelerating accompaniment. The beating with metal coins on a glass bottle and tapping on another wooden platform seem to indicate the simplicity of life. Kaperi might have been used manja songs for entertainment or leisure time music. This cannot be said through a simple recording without having closer connections to the villagers.

The man playing dhol uses aural sound effects, while women also started to use aural sound. The performance experiences a more lively appearance. But this can be changed over time. A simple melody, which has no complicated pitch-related effects, is used for these songs. However, the melodic outline can be used in different shapes.

CONCLUSION

The so-called Kaffirs seem to be fully integrated into Sinhalese social conditions. They live a poor life, similarly to their Sinhala neighbours. They are peasants and family people in the same way, and they are always ready to culturally go beyond their limitations with changing reasoning in order to survive economically.

It is time to not separate them from the entire society by reducing any people down to their suggested rooted behaviour. Also, it is not appropriate anymore to call their skin or hair structure poor as they are darker in complexion and have curly hair. These signs are also seen as less beautiful among Sinhalese and among a number of people living in Asia. In some places, new laws were enforced that forbid advertising beauty idols with fair skin and brighter, straight hair. It is also time to correct the perception of outer appearances together with habits of clothing or cooking as ethnic marks in ethnography. Ethnographers from all over the world may indulge in buying so-called ethnic clothing without being aware of the economic and social consequences. Staging performances also means forcing people to stay old-fashioned. Girls in jeans and T-shirts are not very welcome. The presented tradition seems to have become a matter for old people. One interesting point was the observation that having played back the available recordings to modern native Portuguese speakers did not result in understanding. The conserved language use in songs and the capability to refer to a group language are yet to be investigated in detail.

A simple manja song can teach humbleness and true decolonizing of expressions that were long time seen as an asset to be sold and not allowed to be imitated by others. Yet, we know that first ships and later social media transported those songs over long distances and the songs and dances are not owned by only one group of people, although performances are held at all times and visitors to some villages are expected. This kind of exploitation may have to stop soon without taking the latest achievements away. For these reasons, archives and researchers have to work harder and with more ethical awareness.

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