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**The Story of a Failed Business Concept:  
Intensifying a Drum Production in Sri Lanka**

**Introduction**

Literature and orally transmitted information make evident that the drumming tradition of Sri Lanka is closely related to the ritual practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, and non-religious belief systems of various social groups in Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>. The type of religious and secular practice as traditional performance (drumming, singing, and dancing) is categorized by the name of the region to which the respective tradition belongs<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, there are a number of craftsmen producing Sri Lankan traditional drums distributed in the main regions that are still historically valued, namely up-country, low-country, and Sabaragamuwa. These craftsmen are trained at home, inheriting the knowledge and social position through elder members of the family, mostly passed down orally from father to son. Drums are made according to the requirements demanded by the buyer. Traditional performers are particularly concerned with the sound quality of the drum rather than its physical appearance. The production of the drum, from cutting the tree to the final stages, is taken quite seriously. However, according to a number of craftsmen, some practices of crafting that previous generations found important are now being ignored, modified, or changed.<sup>3</sup> After “traditional dance” was incorporated as an aesthetic subject in schools and universities, traditional performers found that these drums were often not made up to the standard that they once were. Looking into many drawbacks of drum makers, some funding organizations have attempted to improve crafting techniques according to the worldviews of neoliberal craftsmen. This study tries to document and discuss how innovations and modifications on traditional drums were understood by project consultants and how they are received by traditional craftsmen and performers.

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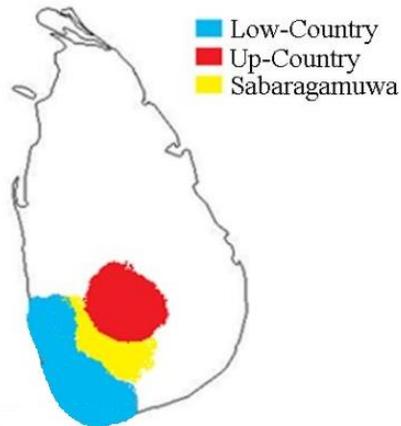
<sup>1</sup> Suraweera, Sumuditha (2009). *Sri Lankan, Low Country, Ritual Drumming: The Raigama Tradition*. PHD Thesis submitted to the University of Canterbury; and Rajapakse, Waidyawathie (2002A) *Dalada Maligawa Saha Turya Vadanaya* [The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and Its Percussion Music]. Colombo: S. Godage and Brothers.

<sup>2</sup> Rajapakse, Waidyawathie (2002b). *Udarata Turyawadana Puranaya* [The Ancient Up-Country Tradition] Colombo: S. Godage and brothers.

<sup>3</sup> Abhayasundara, Praneeth (2004). *Udarata Sangeethaya: Manawa Sangeetha Widhyatmaka Adhyayanayak* [Up-country Music: An Ethnomusicological Study]. Mulleriyawa: Wijesuriya Book Center; and interviews with Richard Nikapitiya (14 10 2017 in Maharagama) and Dhammika Chaminda (27 March 2017 at UVPA), Lasantha Kumara Edirisinghe (27 March 2017 at UVPA).

Traditional drums that are often used for rituals and Buddhist ceremonies are the following:

- getabera ya (associated with Up-country)
- devol beraya (associated with Low-country)
- dawla (associated with Sabaragamuwa region)
- thammattama (used in all regions)



**Figure 1:** The map shows three different regions (Low-country, Sabaragamuwa, and Up-country) in Sri Lanka, each with associated common-practice traditional drumming, singing, and dance styles.<sup>4</sup> Scheme extracted by the author.

I visited drum workshops in two villages in February 2013 and Jan 2017. Performers, craftsmen, and project members were interviewed. In 2013, I visited a craftsman, Kalaugalapathane Ranathunga, whose workshop was in Manikhinna, Kandy. To get an introduction to his knowledge, I recorded him making a getabera<sup>5</sup> in his traditional way. There are few substantial writings on Sri Lankan drum traditions related to specific people and places.<sup>6</sup> However, this paper provides firsthand information that might shed new light on previous findings on similar topics. In particular, this study highlights the variety in Sri Lankan drum making, which was previously documented based on preconceived and homogeneous notions of practices.

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<sup>4</sup> Suraweera, Sumuditha (2009). *Sri Lankan, Low Country, Ritual Drumming: The Raigama Tradition*. PHD Thesis submitted to the University of Canterbury, 2.

<sup>5</sup> The word bera stands for barrel shaped drums in general.

<sup>6</sup> Larsen, Hege Myrlund (2009). *Buddhism in Popular Culture - The Case of Sri Lankan "Tovil Dance"*. Dissertation. Department of Social Anthropology Faculty of Social Sciences. University of Bergen, Norway; Simpson, Bob (1997). Possession, Dispossession and the Social Distribution of Knowledge among Sri Lankan Ritual Specialists. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 3 (1), 43-59; Jones, Robin (2008). British Interventions in the Traditional Crafts of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), c. 1850–1930. *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 1 (3), 383–404.



**Figure 2: Kalaugalapathane Ranathunga is producing a Kandyan drum in his workshop in Manikhinna, Kandy. Photo by Gisa Jähnichen.**

### **Price, Time, and Efforts**

Ranathunga inherited the tradition of drum making from his father and dates back to his grandfather's time. He and his relatives produce few varieties of bera to earn money to cover daily expenses of his family. Ranathunga revealed that he started drum making when he was nine years old, and despite him claiming to be 53, he is said to have been active in the profession for forty years. To take up the family business, he gave up school at a young age. Despite being a maker, he never learned to play traditional drums. He willingly introduced me to two family members who demonstrated the drums for me in his residence. While I visited Ranathunga, his son helped in the work by moving the iron wheel tool for a couple of hours for his father. After working for a few hours on one getabera, Ranathunga said: "It takes at least three days to complete a drum. There are good techniques using machines, but we don't get enough profit to buy and maintain machines. I sell a general bera for seven thousand and a good bera for fifteen thousand. It takes nearly one day to hollow out the wood. If it is the part of the core of the tree, then it takes at least two days. Such wood is used for expensive drums. We cannot see such expensive drums in instrument shops. Performers personally come to us and

request us to produce such drums in a good quality, then only we start making them.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Ranathunga, he is an expert in making the traditional drums of all three regions. He describes the standard dimensions of gera bera should be between 34 to 36 inches long, with the diameter of the drum heads ranging from 7 to 7.25 inches. He notes that the diameter of the drum heads should be slightly different, at least by a quarter inch (ARCPA<sup>8</sup> 02119). In addition to Sri Lankan traditional drums, Ranatunga also produces congas, tambourine, bongos, and other varieties of which he is rather careless with dimensions or notions of an authentic sound quality. These drums are often sold to people who occasionally practice popular music in casual entertainment settings.

His brother in law demonstrated drum patterns and techniques for the getabera , explaining which occasions and purposes they are played. He highlighted the spiritual and royal importance of getabera ya<sup>9</sup> which is played when the flag is raised on Independence Day, when it needs to invite gods to auspicious occasions, when the sacred tooth is moved in the temple in Kandy, and in the practices of kavi, bana, and bali thovil.<sup>10</sup>

In January 2017, I returned to further explore traditional drum production in Sri Lanka and to compare traces of this production on the internet. I found a few funding organizations who ran projects looking to work with craftsmen modernize crafting through the use of machines and new techniques to not only save time, but to also make products more attractive with modifications. I contacted the leading people of one organization who has conducted workshops and seminars the use of such efficient crafting techniques. This project was run by the government through a group called the "National Design Center of Sri Lanka." The main objective of the project was “developing local drums, consisted with modernized appearance and turn them into highly marketable products in the modern music instrument market” (mentioned in the website of the project). I spoke often with the project’s resource consultant, Richard Nikapitya. His proposed designs include attractive drums (appendix) that are standardized so that if some part of the drums wears out, the user can replace parts instead of the entire drum. Mr. Nikapitya’s project also equips craftsmen with tools and machines, at no cost, so that they can both

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<sup>7</sup> ARCPA 02106 & 02122.

<sup>8</sup> ARCPA is an abbreviation for “Audiovisual Research Collection of Performing Arts”. This Audio Visual Archive exists in the Music Department, Putra University, Malaysia. The given code is unique to a deposited audiovisual recording which is accessible to the public.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as magul beraya.

<sup>10</sup> ARCPA 02131, 02132, 02133 & 02134.

standardize their practice but also apply traditional knowledge through time spent in workshops.



**Figure 3: One of the drum workshops in Kuragala village, Kandy, before starting the project. Photo by Richard Nikapitiya, July, 2013.**

Among all the staff who conducted the project, Nikapitiya seems the most familiar with music. In general, music is his hobby and passion and he explores music by himself and through socializing with experts in performing arts and musicology. He is quite interested in sound acoustics and music management in addition to his main expertise on 3-D animation audio technology, computer science, and product design. After teaching efficient crafting techniques and marketing strategies to the craftsmen recurrently for one year at Kuragala, he recently learned that his efforts on improving the craftsmanship were not appreciated. He says “then later, nearly after two years, I visited them and found that they returned back to the previous working styles and techniques. I came to know that the person who has pawned the equipment was the best skilled in the group. He did it to buy alcohol. Most of the people do not have the equipment anymore and the improved set of skills are not continued.” That was his first expression on the project outcomes when I initiated the conversation with him.



**Figure 4: The picture taken on 16 July, 2013, gives a rough idea about the space, people, and multimedia facilities in seminars conducted by Nikapitiya (left) and Vijitha (right). Photo courtesy of Richard Nikapitiya and the author.**

According to the information provided by Nikapitiya and Vijitha, there were previous projects funded by a few other institutions such as the National Craft Council and Central Province Department of Industrial Development & Enterprise Promotion, which have not been successful as expected.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2017, we, myself with Nikapitiya and Vijitha, visited the trained craftsmen at Kuragala village to observe the outcomes. We had many interesting discussions with the craftsmen and people of the village. Also, we found out what they have absorbed from the entire course of the project. One of the craftsmen described the improvement in crafting and what they had to let go. However, after visiting the village along with Nikapitiya, we saw that the progress was not so bad as described prior to the visit.

As we arrived in the village, we met Silva<sup>11</sup> who was noticeably more talkative than the others we later met in the village. Not having enough space to work in his own house, he works at friends' homes in the village. According to Nikapitiya, Silva has actively attended the seminars and workshops of the project and learned new crafting techniques and realized to some extent which attitudes of traditional craftsmen have to be changed. Silva's opinion is that even as attitudes are changed, the instruments cannot be produced accordingly for some reasons which will further be revealed in this article.

Silva seems rather disappointed that he is unable to proceed with his intended modifications in productions and promotions. He says, "We try to do many new things, some are successful and some are left out because what we expect to do is quite expensive and hard work. First, we have to fulfil our daily expenses by continuing usual productions because only a few are here economically fit." He further elaborated that he would like to reside in a constructed village where he would have less conservative neighbors of

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<sup>11</sup> He was not willing to spell the full name.

younger generations. He wishes, if the government would arrange new housing possibilities, at least for ten young families at an isolated location and keep the work running just to avoid influences of those conservative people, he would be glad. He prefers young craftsmen, who have gained individual skills, which may collectively contribute for a better production. He believes that the project of the National Design Center has improved skills of craftsmen to make the productions more up to the desired standard. They previously made drums aiming at immediate money, means the drums were not attractive as they were not even polished well. Silva is very thankful to the National Design Center for arranging workshops and giving opportunities to learn efficient methods enhancing the quality of the drums. He also says he and his colleagues have even known before how to make it attractive, but they did not think that this is necessary, they did not try. Nowadays, the majority of customers have gotten used to demand drums with a well finished look. What he means by well finished is that not only the outer appearance but also the neatness inside the drum is well done. He admitted that they had never thought of a neatly finished inside.



**Figure 5: Thammattama in an exhibition. Photo by Richard Nikapitiya.**

Silva was proud to tell about some incidences where some regular customers who wanted to get their drums repaired have said that “the inside of the drum is done so well and we are so fortunate to meet an honest and skillful

craftsman like you.” Seemingly, these craftsmen are currently rather encouraged as they are invited by the Education Department for providing and repairing drums for schools. Meaning, they could overcome the negative reputation of the “Kuragala craftsmen.”

### **Some Crafting Tools, Material and Techniques**

In 2013, at the drum workshop in Manikhina, found that Mr. Kalugalapathane Ranathunga did not use electric tools and some material in comparison to what the Kuragala craftsmen use today. The consultant Vijitha asked Silva what tools have been newly introduced by the project and he asked him to tell me more about them in detail. Silva continued “A lot of tools were provided by the project. We actually have known to use the compressor to polish the wood even before. After 2013, we learnt to use electric machines for cutting and engraving the drums irrespective using human power any longer. The water-based method is quite costly, therefore we use it for the purpose of displaying drums in exhibitions and on requests. Unfortunately, we could not follow many new things taught during the workshop, for example using NC (thinner) which no one could learn here yet. During the workshop, we could make best quality drums applying new techniques and material because we were guided. We sold these productions in the exhibition for big money, for example we could sell a thammattama (kettle drum) for 15000 LKR, which is a very high price we never even could imagine.” Silva proudly said that he sold a few best quality drums at high prices for the Sri Lankan customers living in America and France.



**Figure 6: Some examples for modified drums (getabera and dawla) made by Kuragala craftsmen are displayed in the exhibition. Photo by Richard Nikapitiya.**

### **Problems with Some Modifications: Aesthetic Issues**

The design consultant of the project, Mr. Nikapitiya introduced the craftsmen to an artificial hide that can be used for the drum head as an initial step to

make all the getabera sound similar in performances. The conflicting opinions and suggestions of the craftsmen, project consultants, and performers can help to find out what really could be changed in the getabera. Before visiting the craftsmen in Kuragala, I managed to meet Nikapitiya and to discuss a newly introduced hide for the drum heads and its efficiency. I delivered my question to him "There must be traditional shapes of drums and techniques of crafting which was learned from the craftsmen's forefathers. So, have you ever had an impression they were a bit reluctant to modifications thinking to the look and the sound of the drums?" His answer shows his many ideas about drum traditions. He said "You know that a bera is a very noisy musical instrument. That is a tribal musical instrument. If you play 50 drums you will hear fifty different sounds. If you record it, then again, the sounds are changed. If you hear recorded sound from different speakers, then again, the sound is different. If you look at wave forms you will see the difference. That is even common for many other instruments for example you can identify your guitar sound from others. I have observed the natural hide of these drums. I looked at them more than 100 times using a microscope and I have witnessed how bacteria destroy the drum hide step by step."

I met professional drum player Lasantha Kumara Edirisinghe who also works as an accompanist with traditional drums at the University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. He appreciates that the sound of each getabera can be different and finds the different sounds of drums useful in group performances. He says "On the one hand I don't think authentic sounds can be produced with an artificial hide which will be a limit in tuning as well too much perfect which is not suitable. I like the changing sound in my instrument. If you use animal hide then the sound will be changed according to the weather, night, morning, and so on. If you play ten traditional drums you can hear ten different sounds which is fantastic. Even we use an artificial hide, we cannot make all the sound being the same, because each musician has his own weight in their strokes." He further explained that the morning dew makes the getabera sound more pleasant as the drum skins can change according to the time of the day.

Another professional performer is Mr. Dhammika Chaminda. He is also an instructor at the University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. He insisted "you cannot produce the same sound on artificial hide." He also prefers the sound to be different on each drum in a group drum performance. He says "the stroke should not be changed for example when all performers play the sound 'jing,' then there should be different sound qualities within this jing sound yet it should not sound like other strokes. You know, each drum is made according to the physical dimensions of each musician. My drum length is three wiyath, three angul. A wiyath is a length from thumb to the little finger, as the fingers are spread, and angul is the length from the first joint

above the palm to the end of the index finger.” He said that tuning units that are proposed to fix on getabera is not applicable as the performers cannot adjust the tuning while performance carried on. The tuning is not meant to be fixed throughout the performance and drum players like the tonal changes in drums and tuning them while performances going on, are cultured as indispensable parts of performance.

Silva’s experience reveals some problems in using the artificial hide. He believes that the sound of artificial hides is not much different from the natural ones. However, he prefers not use artificial for traditional drums. In his point of view, he finds the use of artificial hides as kind of dangerous for traditional drums like getabera and dawla. He uses artificial hide for non-Sri Lankan drums like congas and dholak. While he could not express clearly why he chooses not use artificial hides for traditional drums, he did mention the use of hydrogen peroxide to make them more stretchable. This procedure leaves the hides much whiter than the natural ones making them more contrasting with an unusual look. He is also not really keen to fix nuts & bolts that were introduced as a tool on the traditional drums to make the tuning more efficient. He said “for that we have to spend a bit more money but we sell it for a big money. We do that on request only,” which he says is exceptional and professional traditional drum players do not prefer such modifications.

After talking to Silva, I met Wimalasiri who is rather conventional. He inherited drum craftsmanship from his father. He is firmly against modification which he thinks are harmful to the authenticity of traditional drums. He informed me that his father was the first person who came to his village and started making tabla. Then later the other people started traditional bera and so on. He inherited the secret of preparing the paste patch for the tabla. As he is the only person who can make it, he says he will not let anyone else in the village know the secret. However, he claims he makes all types of drums which are used in Sri Lanka. His straightforward answer on using artificial hide was “not possible! We have already compromised with goat hide as it is difficult to find monkey hide.” He confirmed his opinion by saying that the technology is developed in India more than in Sri Lanka, but India still could not replace the natural hide used for the tabla heads with any other material.

However, he had never experimented with artificial hides as he finds it as inauthentic even it may make the sound uniform. He says “I don’t think the artists will use it because, according to the tradition, we use only cow, monkey, and goat hides. Without such hides, there will not be a value in the drum. It will not be good to replace skin straps with nylon ropes as warapati<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> The straps that connect the two drumheads along the drum.

we can cheat a child with this but not the traditional artists. Traditional artists want it original.”

As a matter of fact, the traditional drummers in Sri Lanka are mostly Buddhists. Traditional rituals where the traditional drums are involved are directly or somehow connected to Buddhist, Hindu, and indigenous beliefs. The performers who are involved in these practices are mostly able to justify obligatory undertakings for the tradition that are considered taboo in the respective belief systems. For example, slaughtering a chicken for a deity as an exchange to cure the illness of the sufferer. Using animal hide for traditional drums is a usual practice which is not taboo in rituals and other religious ceremonies. Wimalasiri is not at all used to modifications like artificial drum heads, he was rather against the advice given through the project. He says “for the getabera we use cow skin for the drum head on left and also for the patiya (belt) and kanwara (the woven loop that attaches the waist strap to the drum). For the right side (louder side), there must be goat skin. It will be much better if you can get a <sup>13</sup>monkey skin to the right. But who will kill a monkey for that purpose? Of course there are people who kill monkeys to eat the meat. Some farmers kill monkeys to protect the crops. We cannot get a skin unless someone kills because, we are Buddhists.” In order to use the monkey hide, the monkey has to be killed without damaging the important part of the skin. He described “the sound of monkey skin is not replaceable with any other skin. Always the skin should be cut at the back but not through the belly. Backside skin is as hard as cow skin but the belly skin is soft. We do not search for monkey skin, but if anyone wants monkey skin to his bera, then he has to find it himself, we only do the craftsman’s part.”

Lasantha Kumara Edirisinghe says “I don’t want someone to kill an animal to get a hide to make my drum. If the animal was killed for eating by somebody else, then the hide can be used without me feeling guilty. I like to use animal hide instead of artificial stuff.”

Mr. Dhammika Chaminda is not only an expert in drum playing he has also gained knowledge in drum making through self-conducted experiments. He firmly admits that the monkey hide is the finest for the right-side drum head without any compromise. He says, “I have already experimented by doing it. You cannot stick the artificial hide on the Gatiya (the woven ring around the edge of the drumhead). Furthermore, I tried to make the body of the drum with fiber material, and it became too light and easy to carry while playing, but it is not practical as we hit fast and the drum tends to shake so easily making it very uncomfortable for us. Therefore, using wood is the best.” Some craftsmen try to use the color of the actual tree by using artificial colors, to cheat us and that is not good. We can identify good wood. Some make straps (warapati) out

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<sup>13</sup> Grey Langur monkeys that exist in Sri Lanka.

of the deer hide to attract us. But this is not as strong as cow hide for straps. Monkey hide is the best for the right drum head. Goat hide is a bit harsh, rough. Some craftsmen use rilawa (rhesus monkey) hide but it is too oily and not nice." He informed me that the dimensions of the drum are decided according to the performer's hands who plays it. The dimensions of the longer drums (i.e., yak beraya and gaṭa beraya) were traditionally measured at three wiyath<sup>14</sup> and three angul in length, and one wiyath at the diameter of the drumhead.

### **Tradition versus Modernity**

The people I met during the field studies of this research have conflicting and similar opinions on the industrialization process of traditional drums. However, four different groups can be identified according to their opinions, problems, aesthetic preferences, and commitments that they bear. They are performers, craftsmen, spectators, and design consultants with project objectives. The latter are committed to improving a drum production in Sri Lanka by convincing the craftsmen of adapting new methods and material so that the drums can be standardized<sup>15</sup>. The objectives set by the project authorities demand these products to be bought by foreign visitors and these products to be exported to the world market which may bring economical wealth to the country.

Drum performers expressed that traditional musicians prefer the look and sound of their non-modified drums. Silva said, "there are some conventional musicians who still like crooked, roughly finished drums and also who will buy them for hundred thousand rupees if the drum sounds good." Silva is quite critical about the traditional way of life as he sees in Sri Lankan drummers in general. He finds the young generation of drummers just follow their fathers by imitating the appearance and the behavior for example the young drummers wear sarong<sup>16</sup> and chew betel as their fathers did, therefore he finds their attitudes are not up to date. He says "They learn from fathers by just following without questioning, they believe their feet should touch the earth and then only they are connected to gods. When they get into a public bus, people maintain sort of distance from them because they are not attractive as they eat betel and wearing in indecent way and the way they carry the drum is messy as the drum is rapped with a red cloth." Silva is rather disappointed that some modifications are not accepted by the drummers. He suggested that the drum should be gracefully polished and kept in an elegant casing like

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<sup>14</sup> A Wiyath is the length from the thumb to the little finger as the fingers are spread.

<sup>15</sup> Attracted by appearance and long lasting material.

<sup>16</sup> Sinhala traditional dress wore around the waist by men. It is made in tube shape.

western music instruments' casings, and then the traditional drummer has to give up betel chewing and wearing traditional dress for casual occasions, they have to get used to decent clothing which may bring traditional drummer into higher status in the society<sup>17</sup>. overcoming the societal disregard. Silva was dared to reveal some tricks that they do to satisfy the traditional drummer who are particular about keeping to the rules in shaping the drum. For example, using kurahan<sup>18</sup> gala<sup>19</sup> which has been an essential tool in shaping the drum edges (See figure ?). The musicians expect that craftsmen indeed use kurahan gala which makes the drum appropriate with the tradition. Silva says he does not need kurahan gala for that anymore as they have new tools which is much better for that purpose. He had to pretend that he uses it and therefore he was clever to keep a kurahan gala at working place pretending as if he uses it.



**Figure 6: The kurahan gala is displayed at one of the drum workshops in Kuragala village. Photo by Chinthaka P. Meddegoda.**

The influence of the project objectives are quite visible in the views of some craftsmen like Silva. Nevertheless, some adaptations are visible in all the craftsmen's workshops. All the craftsmen in the village have replaced the manual wheel to the electric motor. Some craftsmen say after they use the electric motor, for example, the time they spent for 20 beras is now spent to

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<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the picture of Indian caste painted by Dumontian scholars, in which the emphasis is on purity and pollution, the Sinhalese caste system is rooted in a feudal system of service tenures to the king (Rajakariya). Historically, therefore, the status of being low-caste (adu kulaya) in Sinhalese society is primarily connected to the idea of service and land tenure, with notions of impurity forming a secondary theme. Simpson, Bob (1997). Possession, Dispossession and the Social Distribution of Knowledge among Sri Lankan Ritual Specialists. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 3 (1), 44.

<sup>18</sup> The word stands for Finger Millet grains and the word gala stands for stone. Kurahan gala is the mill which is used for grinding finger millet.

<sup>19</sup> Kurahan gala is a manual mill made of stone. It is used in Sri Lanka for grinding grains.

produce 50 beras. The craftsmen are not happy with the mediators who find customers to sell the drums<sup>20</sup>. The surface of the wooden body of the drums were cut and polished much better than before as craftsmen were trained and introduced efficient working tools and material by the design consultants of the project.

As Nikapitiya informed me, the project funding was ended by 2014, and therefore they could not follow up the craftsmen for further years caring whether the craftsmen continue what they learned and accordingly to support by providing new knowledge and funds. Nikapitiya's opinion on development of traditional drums represent the industrial point of view while he is very much aware what he means and his thoughts are utterly straightforward. According to him craftsmen must have a goal to become successful entrepreneur by selling improved productions in masses for higher price without concerning the social and cultural connections that are attached with the conventional drums, performers, and spectators. According to the information provided by craftsmen, they have indeed learned new crafting techniques and material that can make the conventional drum more attractive to the world. The summary of the conversations with craftsmen reveal that all though they are willing to change, the conventional performer will not accept the change. If the craftsmen do not facilitate the objectives of industrial projects, they will not receive the financial support and new knowledge. Seemingly, the craftsmen have been able to manage the needs of the both parties by accepting some modifications which do not affect the sound of the drum and its conventional look.

If the drums have to be produced in mass, there will be difficulties like finding the right wood demanded according to the oral tradition. The professional performers who are coming from traditional schools are particular about choosing right wood which are processed with rituals as described in static anthropological literature as Suraweera has pointed out<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> A few craftsmen informed "there is a summit here who does the mediator role. They buy a bera from us for 6500 LKR and they sell it for 8000 LKR. We are losing 1500 unnecessarily".

<sup>21</sup> "... a tree suitable for drum making, namely that trees grown near temples, waterfalls or trees brought down by natural causes such as lightening were preferred. Trees near cemeteries were considered particularly unsuitable. Once a suitable tree was chosen, the earth under the tree was cleaned, and offerings were made to the Gods to seek their permission. Verses and prayers were recited for up to seven days prior to the felling of the tree and carried out at a particular auspicious time according to astrology. During the construction of the instrument and after the body of the instrument was carved out, it was kept under flowing water for around seven days. It was then taken out to be dried in the shade. A paste of heated resin was coated on the inside of the drum, with the belief that this would protect the instrument from undesired, external, malevolent influences usually reserved for humans" Suraweera, Sumuditha (2009). *Sri*

## **Suggestions on 'Improving Traditional Drum Production' in Sri Lanka**

Silva seems to be rather matured in age though he suggests that he would like to work with young craftsmen who are not following conventional patterns of opinions and crafting methods. His suggestion for developing drums is that the government has to arrange for him an isolated location surrounded young craftsmen with special crafting skills with innovative mind set. The other craftsman who represent "the traditional drum maker" is not willing to accept contrasting modifications such as replacing animal hide with artificial leather and fixing new units on the drum for tuning purposes. He predicts that the traditional drummers will not accept modifications. However, it seems to be like these craftsmen are not confident to face the consequences such as losing customers by changing the condition of traditional drums.

Nikapitiya's opinion contrasts with the conventional craftsman though Silva could be convinced for the suggested changes. Nikapitiya says "The first thing is, they do not have a target. They do crafting just to live. A country can be developed by doing industries but not by doing a job to cover up daily expenses, just like going to office every day and getting a monthly salary. Their ultimate goal was to become an owner of a pattala<sup>22</sup>. These craftsmen can test the right sound using many types of leathers thousands of times, they will not lose the drum unlike someone tries different intonations through the throat doing small surgeries. There will be many people criticizing if you try new things. You have to ignore them, just go on, if you consider what they say, you will never reach the target."

Vijitha, the manager of the project, says "these people tell big stories about making drums, they have not yet done such work and presented. We say you have to do something, then only we can improve through the mistakes. They will get more support from many other sources after they get attention by doing something impressive."

## **Conclusion**

Improved technology has not only to meet willingness to adapt to improved production skills, but also social needs within the communities. It can be observed that some activities where the traditional drums are involved have been changed or modified according to the factors like economy, modernity, politics, and globalization. Some activities are not frequently functioning

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*Lankan, Low Country, Ritual Drumming: The Raigama Tradition*. PHD Thesis submitted to the University of Canterbury.

<sup>22</sup> This is a manual set up with a big iron wheel which is used to shape the drum.

anymore as they were in the past<sup>23</sup>. The traditional drums were utilized for some popular music and video productions though they were not originated or made for them. However, it is important in looking at why these drums were not asked for modifications or improvements even though the functions are changed in some instances. That is because, the appearance and the sound of the traditional drum is valued or ridiculed or used as just a sound in modern popular events to showcase the traditional performing arts as a part of the concepts no matter it is fusion or any other form of popular performing item. This research can also confirm the assertion of Margaret Kartomi that “musical instruments are fixed, static objects that cannot grow or adapt in themselves”.<sup>24</sup> In fact, all the major undertakings regarding Sri Lankan traditional drums being observed in different places of Sri Lanka cause changes, from cutting a tree for making a drum to a performing event. While performing, the musician has to take chances in applying or doing modifications on the traditional drums if they encounter the necessity. This is much different from the case of the harmonium or the tabla in the Malay world where the performers have not got any opportunity for changes in the structure of the instruments though their playing techniques and functions are rather different from the functions in the originating cultures of those instruments.<sup>25</sup> The playing techniques, performance sequences and the condition of the instrument are strongly bound and depending on each other. Therefore it can be asserted that the performer has to encounter the need for modification in their instrument rather than the craftsmen or other observers like funding organizations who do not experience the actual condition nor the musical necessity.

Nevertheless, the process of drum production is rather changed as some examples show clearly the gap between static ethnography provided in some literature<sup>26</sup> and the dynamics of current cultural and social life in Sri Lankan communities for example visible in the process of choosing the wood and

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<sup>23</sup> Suraweera mentions that “In the periods of this study, I have noted a number of occasions where my informant had to omit the performance aspects of the ritual. Secondly, even though the performance element are still present in the public rituals, these rituals are being adapted to contemporary society with a focus on entertainment”. Suraweera, Sumuditha (2009). *Sri Lankan, Low Country, Ritual Drumming: The Raigama Tradition*. PHD Thesis submitted to the University of Canterbury, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Kartomi, Margaret (2001). *The Classification of Musical Instruments: Changing Trends in Research from the Late Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to the 1990s*. *Ethnomusicology*, 45 (2),305.

<sup>25</sup> Meddegoda, Chinthaka P. and Gisa Jähnichen (2016). *Hindustani Traces in Malay Ghazal – A Song so Old and Yet Still Famous*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.

<sup>26</sup> Kariyawasam, Thissa (1998). *Shantikarma Saha Sinhala Samajaya* [Rituals and Sinhala Society]. Wellampitiya: Chathura Publishers; Rajapakse, Waidyawathie (2002a) *Dalada Maligawa Saha Turya Vadanaya* [The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and Its Percussion Music]. Colombo: S. Godage and Brothers.

making the drum edges using kurahan gala.<sup>27</sup> The growing demand of the traditional drums from schools, universities and private performing arts institutions has increased the number of production of drums and therefore it has become impossible to choose wood and execute other undertakings according to the recommendations set by the tradition. These alterations are disregarded to some extent by the traditional performer as they are not primarily influencing the appearance and the authenticity of sound of the drum though there may be some scientific facts which can really matter.<sup>28</sup>

Refusing technological changes by the craftsmen and performers may not just indicate unwillingness but may have well considered reasons that cannot always be expressed. However, some expressions as illustrated in this paper can detect and predict some reasons for unwillingness for change. Therefore, parallel to the implementation of technological and industrial approach on traditional music instruments, cultural anthropology should have gone along to understand the possibilities and the limitations. Therefore, there is a strong need for specialists in the humanities that can analyze complex cultural patterns. However, an approach as suggested by Barth and Hannerz<sup>29</sup> and analyzed by Eriksen for the understanding of knowledge distribution and application has yet to be found for a culturally flexibly embedded knowledge reception and critical appropriation as a counteraction to adopting global values for the sake of local sustainability.

A further discussion of more examples and an intense discourse with social anthropology can improve the way how social needs and musical creativity can be academically supported thus contributing to different local life qualities.

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<sup>27</sup> Figure 6.

<sup>28</sup> Larsen, Hege Myrlund (2009). *Buddhism in Popular Culture - The Case of Sri Lankan "Tovil dance"*. Dissertation. Department of Social Anthropology Faculty of Social Sciences. University of Bergen, Norway.

<sup>29</sup> Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2007). Complexity in social and cultural integration: Some analytical dimensions. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30 (6), 1055-1069; Hannerz, Ulf (1992). *Cultural Complexity*. New York: Columbia University Press; Barth, Fredrik (2002). An Anthropology of Knowledge. *Current Anthropology* 43 (1), 1-18.

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## Interviews

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- Richard Nikapitiya (14 October 2016). Interview about drum production in Kuragala. Maharagama.

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Dhammika Chaminda (27 March 2017). Interview about playing techniques and drum production. University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo.

Silva, E. U. P. (29 January 2017). Interview about getabera playing techniques and drum production. Kuragala Village.

Wimalasiri (29 January 2017). Interview about traditional drum production. Kuragala Village.

Vijitha (29 January 2017). Interview about drum production in Kuragala. Kuragala Village.

Lasantha Kumara Edirisinghe (27 March 2017). Interview on Getabera playing techniques and artiste's preferences in drumming acoustics. University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo.

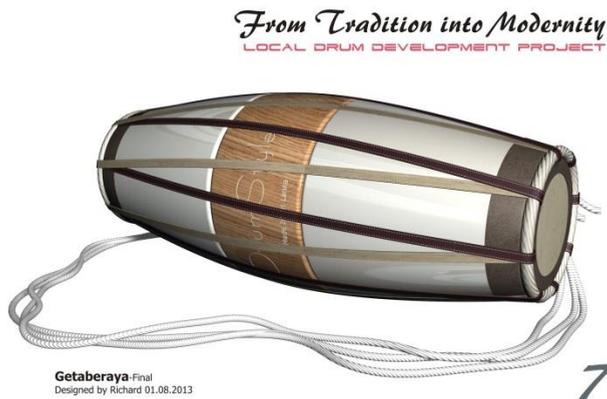
### Audiovisual Material

Ranathunga Kalaugalapathane (02 October 2013). Interviewed by Chinthaka P Meddegoda on drum production in Manikhinna village. ARCPA 02119, Manikhinna, Kandy.

All other cited audiovisual material is publicly accessible on site at the Audiovisual Research Collection for the Performing Arts at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Music Department (ARCPA).

### Appendix

Photos provided by Richard Nikapitiya (numbered according to exhibits).



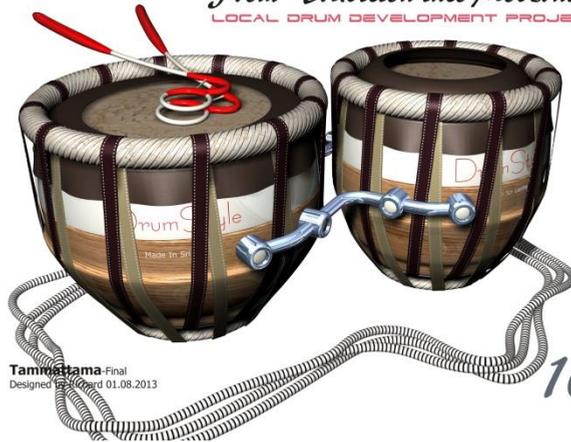
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**Tammattama-Final**  
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