

This volume comprises fifteen selected papers in five chapters from the 27th ICTM Colloquium on Drums and Drum Ensembles along the Great Silk Road. It testifies to how human cultures are never created in seclusion. The richness of drums and drum ensembles, including their repertoires, are also connected to long-term exchanges in military affairs, trades, and religions of various peoples.

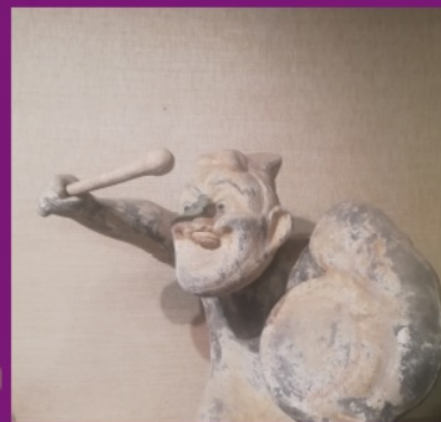
Despite the obvious prevalence of drums among all peoples around the world, their understanding and their repertoires vary due to different contexts. The studies of music originating on the Silk Road presented in this volume pay particular attention to the multiple flows of knowledge between numerous distinctive regions in the narrower geographical and temporal scope.

The editors of this volume, Prof. Dr. Xiao Mei and Prof. Dr. Gisa Jähnichen, are working at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and both partook in the program committee for the event.

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## DRUMS AND DRUM ENSEMBLES ALONG THE GREAT SILK ROAD

EDITED BY  
XIAO MEI & GISA JÄHNICHEN  
2021

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# CONTENTS

## Contents i

### Preface iii

Xiao Mei [萧梅]

## Chapter 1: Features of Africa and the Middle East

### Drum Playing in Yemen 1

Jürgen Elsner

### Speaking and Talking Drums: Marfa` and Tāsah as Means of Nonverbal Communication in the Highlands of Yemen 29

Ulrike Stohrer

### The Nägarit Kettledrum in Past and Present Day Ethiopia 39

Timkehet Teffera [ትምክህት ተፈረሩ]

### Drums and Drum Ensembles in Performances of the Middle East and North Africa in Available Video Resources 57

Neil van der Linden

## Chapter 2: Frame Drums and Shamanism

### Is the Rebgong Flat Drum a Shaman Drum? 59

Bernhard Kleikamp

### From ‘Guoruo’ to the ‘Guairu Festival’: The ‘Making of Intangible Cultural Heritage’ of the Percussion Instruments and the Instrumentation System from the Shibi of the Aba Qiang People 67

Liu Guiteng [刘桂腾]

## Chapter 3: Southeast Asian Histories

### The Praise Drum in the Context of the North Vietnamese Ca Trù 85

Gisa Jähnichen

### Research on Movable Membrane Drums in Guangxi Province and Their Functional Characteristics 95

Lu Song [鲁松]

### Frame Drum Ensembles in Muslim Balinese Culture 113

Mashino Ako [増野亜子]

### Study on Ceramic Hourglass Drums of Guangxi Ceramics on the Silk Road 127

Wu Ninghua and Zheng Lijun [吴宁华、郑丽君]

## **Chapter 4: South Asian Aspects**

**Hierarchies in Local Drumming Practices of Sri Lanka and the Art of Sustaining Traditions** 141

Chinthaka P. Meddegoda [චින්තක ප්‍රථීන් මද්දෙගොඩ]

**Creating a Transcription System for Konnakol and its Virtual Transmission** 159

Carlos Yoder

## **Chapter 5: Western Chinese Practices**

**Wind and Percussion Music during Weddings in Turpan Lukeqin** 165

Cui Bin [崔斌]

**An Exploratory Research on the Rhythmic Characteristics of Xinjiang Uyghur Dap** 173

Peng Yu [彭瑜]

**Study of Drum Making in Late-Tang Dunhuang** 191

Zhu Xiaofeng [朱晓峰]

# HIERARCHIES IN LOCAL DRUMMING PRACTICES OF SRI LANKA AND THE ART OF SUSTAINING TRADITIONS

Chinthaka Prageeth Meddegoda [චින්තක ප්‍රථීන් මැද්දෙගොඩ]<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Sri Lanka is an island with prevalently drumming traditions. Each region has its own classified drums, drumming repertoires, and performance practices kept alive over many centuries. Although, there were significant changes in the social structure of these regions, drumming performances always played a major role in the cultural life of the people. It is, therefore, not surprising that in drumming ensembles prevail specific hierarchies among the drummers, as well as between regional drumming traditions and that these hierarchies reflect traditional social structures.

This paper is to show these different hierarchies, to set them into the context of social and cultural changes, to define and explain widespread common views about drumming practices, and to let drummers articulate themselves through their performances. Personal observation and fieldwork over a longer period of time allow for some first results. One of the results is the remarkable conclusion that these hierarchies may contribute to the sustainability of drumming traditions. At the same time, these hierarchies also reveal the contradictions of sustaining traditions and recent drum performances. Another result is the clear evidence that drumming traditions with their inherent hierarchies may connect to issues of religious belief systems, ritual practice, royal celebration standards, and practiced shamanism that still resonates in these performances. The paper will provide a number of actual examples of the Kandyan, the Low Country, and the Sabaragamuwa drumming traditions, which can be further differentiated. Some works of the scholars, who had an outsider view on these cultures, are reviewed and presented in this research.

## Keywords

Sri Lankan drum traditions, Kandyan, Low Country, Sabaragamuwa, Hierarchies among musicians

## Introduction

The drumming in Sri Lanka has been recognized by the Sinhala people and supported by substantial studies (Kulathilaka, 2000; Evers, 1972) through three distinct cultures they may identify with in a larger picture of the island (Jones, 2008;

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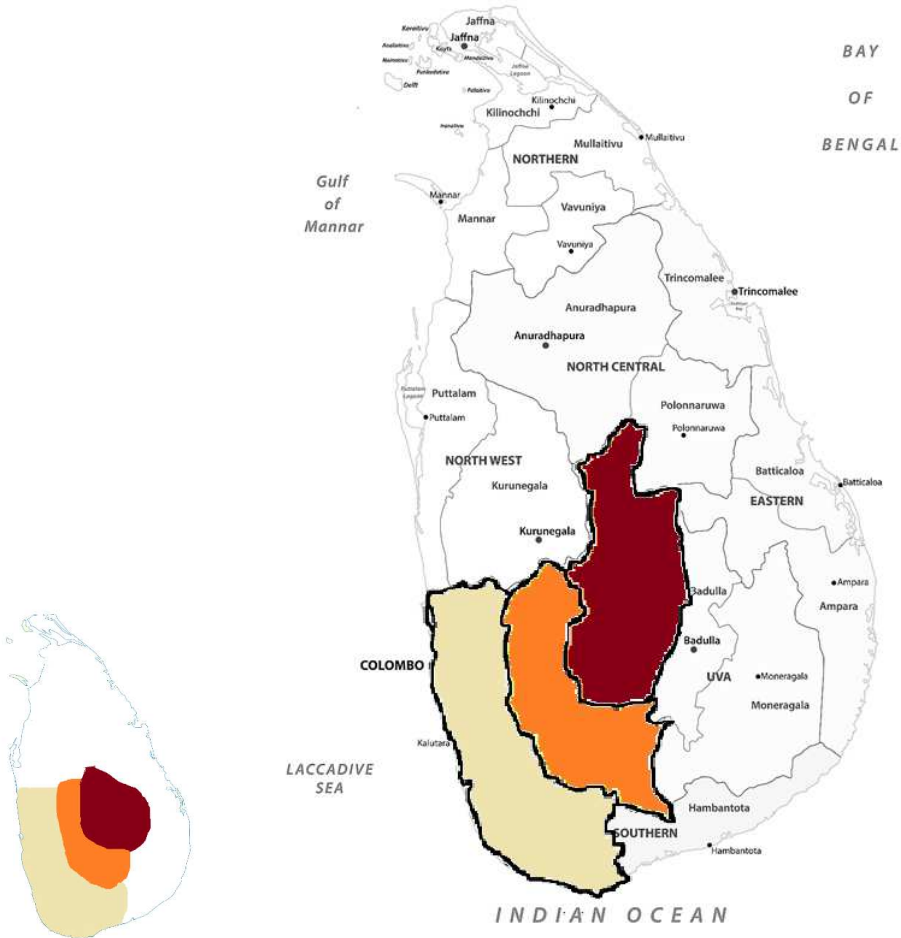
<sup>1</sup> Dr. phil. Chinthaka Prageeth Meddegoda [චින්තක ප්‍රථීන් මැද්දෙගොඩ] teaches and researches at the University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. He is an active member of the ICTM, being the Secretary of the ICTM Study Group on Musical Instruments.

Sivasundaram, 2010). These three traditions are associated regions where certain functions, instruments, and playing styles are remarkably different.

Dark: Pahatharata (also named ‘Low Country’)

Middle: Udarata (also named ‘Up Country’)

Bright: Sabaragamuwa



**Figure 1a and b: Comparison of a widespread scheme (a = left) and the administrative units (b = right) given through a more detailed map of the three cultural regions mentioned in this study, scheme and processing open source, refined by the author (Meddegoda, 2017).**

The performers of Sri Lankan drums are scattered in present Sri Lanka and not necessarily practice only one tradition. Mostly, they are specialized on a particular drum, whereas they occasionally perform other drums. The formal teaching of

drumming, especially of specific local traditions, contributed to the commodification of drumming skills and led to some modelism<sup>2</sup> in this regard.



**Figure 2: Traditional Drummer hanging his Pahatharata beraya (Low-country traditional drum) in Minuwangoda during a Gammadu Event on 28 and 29 February 2020, photo by courtesy of Dinindu Nishan.**

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<sup>2</sup> Modelism means in this context that drums are adhering to specific norms and sound qualities, drumming patterns are narrowly codified and little attention is given to individual diversity.

## Gunawardhana (Pahatarata Tradition)

A skillful drummer known by the village as Master has expressed his views on tradition and the hierarchies of drumming in an interview. His father has been a popular drummer and a very good dance teacher in Minuwangoda, Negombo. Gunarathna was called Master for his talent in playing many music instruments and traditional knowledge on performing Arts. He is rather disappointed about the current generation of drummers for the pure income-orientation regarding their service to the society.



**Figure 3: Demonstrating singing and gestures used in a traditional event, photo by courtesy of Gayesha Dharmasri.**

He expressed that *gurumushti*<sup>3</sup> is something that comes as a barrier in knowledge transmission. “*Gurumushti* is the worthiest knowledge which is not transmitted that easily. I find it is good. The student should be observed for some time until he could be understood. It is important to know whether he is dedicated and respects the Guru and the tradition. Once, it is confirmed that he will not misuse the worthy knowledge,

<sup>3</sup> *Gurumshti* is a specific, often secretly taught, knowledge of drumming practices. Only mature students are chosen to learn this and practice this through their later years, also as teachers.

I would slowly start to teach the secret knowledge that should not be taught to everybody. If the student goes into a wrong direction, then the worthiest knowledge should not be transmitted. We have very good Jathaka<sup>4</sup> stories teaching us the usefulness of keeping the worthy knowledge with the Guru. Consequently, some precious knowledge has been buried with the guru musician. That is the bad side of Gurumushti.” (Meddegoda and Gunarathna, 2020).



**Figure 4: Meeting with the Master in Minuwangoda on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2020. The master is showing poems and prescribed methods of Shanti Karma mentioned in inherited texts from his guru, photo by courtesy of Gayesha Dharmasri.**

Asked for elaboration on the part of knowing the maturity of a student and the idea of dedication towards drumming as an art, the Master adds:

“The person who is very dedicated to the tradition is considered the leading person during the performance. The seniority in the tradition is not the first criteria to become the leading person. Sometimes, senior drummers who are grey haired and bearded bow me after the event, because I am the person who is most respected for my dedication to the tradition.”

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<sup>4</sup> Jathaka stories are legends and tales told in order to teach people, especially the younger of them.



## **Sumanaweera Thiththapajjala (Udarata Tradition)**

Sumanaweera Thiththapajjala is son of Suramba Thiththapajjala who has been a renowned drummer in Sri Lanka. He had two sons who continue traditional schools of drumming at their residence where their father lived before. I met Samaraweera, one of his sons, who had a better idea on drumming and its relation to the society. The two sons still continue the Sri Lanka Deshiya Kalayathanaya (Sri Lanka National Art Institute).

Samaraweera, confronted with some ideas of the hierarchy effects (Simpson, 1997; Meddegoda & Jähnichen, 2016), explains in detail: “It is seemingly difficult to isolate drumming from dance. Both arts are always together. Of course, there are instances that drums were played without dance such as the atya bera performance in Kohomba Kankariya and magul bera performances at the beginnings of auspicious events. The drumming and dancing are mutually benefitting, they belong, and nurture each other. The traditional art of drumming is sustained until today because of the maintained ethics. If a musician learned in a Gurukul (traditional school), he will definitely maintain the school’s specific ethics. I am not sure about others, such as those who learn drumming in various other institutions. In the past, it was considered some necessary attitudes and other special features of aspirants that have to be confirmed, before recruiting them in a traditional school. The aspirants were not taught for months, which was like a probationary period. Actually, the main purpose of ritual drumming and dance is to cure and to bless the people. If someone among the group tries to highlight himself through virtuosic performances, then the main purpose of the ritual is diverted. I believe the performers should understand that. The beauty in the dance or drumming should not be the most important, but the purpose. The purpose of Sri Lankan drumming is not to entertain the people, but it has another purpose. If you look at the history, the Udarata drumming and dance started with the incidence of Divi Doshaya of the Panduwasdev King<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This incident is found in tales and stories that describe the curing of a bewitched king through performances.



**Figure 5: Picture of a renowned music guru of the Udarata (up country) tradition, Suramba Thiththapajjala. The photo was displayed at Sumanaweera Thiththapajjala's home, photo by courtesy of Pandula Ekanayake, taken on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.**

The event is known as Kohomba Kankariya, which was brought from India to cure the king. Since then, it was further, developed until today and we can still witness how it is. Kohomba Kankariya was brought to Sri Lanka not only to cure the king but also to establish Buddhism. However, we cannot say which tradition is most superior. We should take a decision considering the origin, purpose or aesthetic value. The Kohomba Kankariya has national and religious importance. It is the national ritual. Pahatharata performers may have another explanation. The Sabaragamuwa tradition is said to be the oldest tradition. ... Sabara people are the longest time inhabitants of Sri Lanka. The history says they were living here even before the King Vijaya came. The Sabaragamuwa traditional repertoire is not valuable than the other two. However, that tradition possesses the most beautiful

singing tunes among all the others.” (Meddegoda & Thiththapajjala, 2020). He continued praising advantages and disadvantages in the known traditions, yet only came late to specific points of hierarchical thinking among the musicians. It was not easy to extract the national feature in his discussion.



**Figure 6a and 6b: Meeting with Sumanaweera Thiththapajjala in Kandy on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2020, photos by courtesy of Pandula Ekanayake.**

He then explains: “The bera sound is not considered as music and these drums are not called music instruments. The people who listen to it may enjoy the rhythm but it is meant to be enjoyed like music.

The women will not be able to play bera as required. It needs stamina and strong hands. Playing bera does not need loveliness, or smooth gestures. So, ladies are not involved in bera playing. Ladies are not included in Kohomba Kankariya at all. The women should not wear the set of ves<sup>6</sup> dress. All these are traditional things and we try our best to maintain and keep to the tradition.” (ibid.).

Giving it a good guess, 98<sup>7</sup> percent of the gurukuls are having a similar problem of the son that does not follow the father’s profession because of him creating a financial deficit in the family budget. Sumanaweera adds: “The originality, or purity of the purpose of drumming and dancing is serving the society free of charge. The society took the responsibility by offering the musicians and dancers various rewards thus valuing the service. That is how it worked. Nowadays, money comes first. The artistes used to be respected in the past. These traditional artistes were rich of private

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<sup>6</sup> A vest dress consists of a transparent shirt for the upper body, white leg clothes and richly ornamented head and hand jewellery with ribbons and bangles. It is made for the dancers and drummers in specific ceremonies.

<sup>7</sup> This is a guess and not supported by statistics. However, it is a very widespread phenomenon that can be observed in all areas of the arts.

properties. They had enough to survive, so they did not need rewards from the society, they expected only respect, appreciation and a good name. Most gurukuls do not anymore exist due to reasons like lacking finance and loss of dedication. My father was a special artiste in Sri Lanka. I did science as my main subject. My father has been a good example for us. He maintained integrity in the artistry. Therefore, I chose this artistry. I am the fourth generation of our tradition. My father is Thiththapajjala Suramba, his father is Thiththapajjala Sewranga Ganithasara, his father is Thiththapajjala Tikiripanikiya, His father is again Thiththapajjala Suramba who served the King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha, with magul bera playing and he has been the leader of the calling drummers (War drummers). There is a stone-carved document in the Gangaramaya temple about him. The traditional norms in our artistry implies that we should respect elders despite considering who is the most talented. It is the duty of an elder to let the talented youngsters to come up through performances. Still, we are practicing that but today it is being changed. This tradition is preserved until today because we love this knowledge and therefore, we protect it. Most lineages of drumming and dancing are going lost because the fathers have not been good characters. The children are disappointed with the life of their fathers. Therefore, the new generation does not want to inherit and continue as their fathers did.” (ibid.).

Dinidu, a co-researcher, witnessed a Gammadu Shanthikarma taken place in Miniuwangoda. He says that the traditional artistes are better than the Indian music performers in Sri Lanka in the matter of respecting each other. They respect the elders and seniors in a kind way.

A Gammadu Shanthikarma is lasting from late evening to the dawn and finishes around 7am. In a long ritual, all the members got enough time to rest and perform, and therefore there is no competition. Sometimes, I could observe that there is an ongoing competition. Such as in the Pattini<sup>8</sup> episode, a special event, in solo items, mostly the seniors are highlighted. They are afraid of sins. The members know what they can do better and respect each other in terms of their talent. The drummers are well experienced and therefore not verbally appreciating while playing. Some dialogues in the play are meant to have an important role. They respect Buddhism in the first place but deal with gods (Ratnapala, 1901). The talented person comes out through performance. Seniority is the first place, then only exist other hierarchies.

Sumanaraaja is one of the main performers among 30 performers in the event. The event went until 7am in the morning. While it started at 9pm the evening before. The most important sections in the event must include the seniors. Seniors appear for special steps in the event while the juniors are more often active. It is a teamwork.

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<sup>8</sup> The Pattini episode is dedicated to a princess (Obeyesekere, 1984).

These people are chewing beetle leaves uninterruptedly. They are not eating food during the event, but have tea and coffee only. The knowledge comes through doing performances. Some newcomers are encouraged through this doing, and the newcomers are youngsters. They might have come to the point that they automatically forget their personal pride during these performances.



**Figure 7: Some musicians are resting while their peers continue the Gammadu event in Minuwangoda held from 28<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020. The low country drums known as Pahatarata bera are displayed, photo by courtesy of Dinindu Nishan.**

## Saman Kumarathunga (Sabaragamu Tradition)

Saman Kumarathunga is a senior lecturer in the University of Visual and Performing Arts where he teaches dance and drumming of the Sabaragamuwa tradition. He has shown the covers of books about the Sabaragamuwa tradition authored by him.



Figure 8: The front pages of hardcovers of the two books authored by Saman Kumarathunga. The Dawla (Sabaragamuwa drum) and dance postures are displayed, photos open source.

During a talk, he agrees to the following: “Social functions and respect are the most important thing to sustain the drumming tradition. Even the general public in the past could notice if the drummer does mistakes. In my childhood, I remember, when a drumming artiste did a mistake then he felt ashamed. After such instances, the drummer does rehearse and does it correctly to prove his true ability in the next event. Because of the social need of drumming events, the traditional drummer kept to the practice and tried to maintain the originality. When people began to decrease their need of traditional drumming and parallel to this increased other economical necessities, traditional musicians tended to switch to other professions. Many of them changed their surnames, because they indicated the drumming caste.” (Meddegoda & Kumarathunga, 2020).

The drummers who have learned in universities are now much more valued and respected by the society than traditional drummers who didn't study at universities. Currently, Sri Lankan administrators look for qualifications through certificates. The traditional musicians hide good knowledge transmitted through lineages. Sometimes, this knowledge goes in the grave with them and no one knows even there was such a thing as knowledge or skills. For example, there are some indigenous medicinal treatments, which shows good results on the spot. This is amazing. But these medicine compositions are not taught to outsiders of the lineage.



**Figure 9: Saman Kumarathunga confirms some statements referring to the book authored by him at his workplace in UVPA on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, photo by the author.**

It was surely a big mistake that the content of traditional dance has not been documented by monks and educated personalities in the past. Only Ayurveda medicine and Buddhism have been documented. Their documentation started in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The people who continued traditional dance belonged

to the low caste, more likely the Berava<sup>9</sup> caste. Around the year 1925, it started the higher caste people to learn and practice traditional dance. In India, even kings learned music and dance, because the performing arts were sponsored and developed with royal patronage. In Sri Lanka it is different. The government used the dance and therefore traditional artistes were sponsored. The government did not sponsor for documentation or any development to the subject itself.

## **Oshan**

I met Oshan in a wedding event of my relative. He was the leader of the dance troupe who accompanied some sequences of the wedding. He was not keen to reveal his full name but introduced himself as Oshan.

He said about himself: “I learned Katthak dance in Delhi. I could complete the degree. During my studies in Delhi, I realized that I am possibly born for Udarata dance. After I came back to Sri Lanka, I did not continue Katthak anymore but I returned to practice Udarata dance and now I have many students and gigs. I am sometimes very angry with some people where I used to perform for asking my name and father’s name. They want to confirm whether I am a low caste member. I have told them that I am not from any low caste, but I am passionate and do this due to my respect for this tradition and, therefore, indulge in it.

He continues: “I do Udarata dance because I like it. This is the dress of King Malaya dating back to the fifth century BC. This dance is beautiful. The entire world knows Kandyan (Udarata) dance. The sound of the drum is good. We cannot play Pahatharata drum for indoor events such as weddings. It is too loud, and the dress is also not as attractive as the Udarata dress.”

The people who are big professionals who earn a lot of money using dance destroy the traditional practice. I remember once, that the ves dress<sup>10</sup> was created completely in red color. Dancers, who performed it in public events, wore it. It was looking like roosters are dancing. Actually, I do not let even a lady to touch this dress. This should be respected based on the tradition. The traditional musicians and dancers are afraid of doing wrong things to the tradition. The people who are marketing this tradition for earning money destroy the tradition.”

Oshan also confirms what others before him said: “Gurumushthi is the main reason for not sustaining this tradition. The valuable things are vanishing from humanity

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<sup>9</sup> The Berava caste as being mainly for drummers and their families means one of the lowest castes in society, comparable to the Tamil Paraiyar.

<sup>10</sup> A ves dress is an up-country-dancer’s outfit.



because of Gurumushti. I have documented nearly 30,000 poems, which are not hidden in my almira<sup>11</sup>. My students are allowed to read and memorize them.”

The issues surrounding caste behavior and respect towards arts professions is an important field that is not yet sufficiently explored (Sedaraman, 2007; Suraweera, 2009) yet it will be necessary to understand this part of history in order to solve future social tensions among all people working in or through the arts.



**Figure 10: Traditional drummers accompanying a wedding event in Turya Hotel, Waskaduwa on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The Udarata beraya (up country drum) and conch shell is displayed, photo by the author.**

## **Final Observations and Remarks**

The following table shows how the interviewees answered specific questions. This can only be a point of departure for further studies in this field. The number of respondents is low, as further investigations among the students in traditional or formal settings did not lead to more variations.

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<sup>11</sup> Here almira means a cabinet or closet.

|   | Sumanaweera Thiththapajjala (Udarata Tradition) | Master (Pahatharata Tradition)                         | Saman Kumarathunga (Sabaragamu Tradition)                      | Oshan (Udarata Tradition)                          |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Gurumushti protects the tradition                 | Yes   | Yes  | No   | No   |
| Gurumushti is a threaten to the tradition         | Yes   | Yes  | Yes  | Yes  |
| Elders should be leading the event                | Yes   | Not necessarily  | The person who is accepted by the society as the most suitable | Yes  |
| Most talented should be leading the event         | The senior most steps voluntarily back          | The person who is naturally dedicated to the tradition | Yes, in the institutional sector                               | If there are no other respected and worthy persons |
| The traditional member is respected               | Yes   | Yes  | Not today  | Yes  |
| A degree holder of the artistry is respected      | No  | Sometimes, depends on the talent                       | Yes  | Depends on the case                                |
| Udarata tradition is the highest in the hierarchy | Yes   | No   | Not necessarily. Each tradition has their specialty            | Yes  |

Figure 11: Table showing the different answers to the questions put in the explored interviews.

Regarding their educational status, institutionally educated musicians and dancers to some extent marginalize the traditional musicians and dancers. Most traditional musicians and dancers are unable to qualify and to be selected for university education as they are engaged in arts practice from their childhood.

The Udarata tradition of drumming and dancing is highlighted on social, namely on commercial, platforms where the national importance using the arts heritage is promoted. This is because the Udarata tradition was used in Royal occasions and high-status Buddhist rituals taking place during the Kandyan period from 1597-1815 (Abhayasundara, 2004; Kariyawasam, 1998; Rajapakse 2002a and 2002b).

In the industrial context, there are some artistes, who are better in networking and side businesses. So, they are, therefore, skilful to deal with the social demand (Eriksen 2007) while keeping to their traditional work ethics. Interestingly, such artistes usually become the contact persons for gigs, which makes them the leader in other performances as well. Their income, on the other side, again enables them to intensify their musical ambitions.

All dance traditions are bound to Buddhist philosophy (Evers, 1972; Gombrich, 1995; Hannerz, 1992, Larsen, 2009) and the first place is always given to the Buddha, although the majority of rituals is obviously connected with Hindu Gods, ritual sequences, Hindu texts, and mainly Hindu legends.

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