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Ethakota don't say palayang:

language use and 'identity' in baila lyrics [1]

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I discuss the value of baila music lyrics as a means through which Sri Lankan culture and society may be understood. Baila was introduced to Sri Lanka during the Portuguese period (1505-1605). Baila's racially mixed ancestry has given rise to it being widely considered a thuppahi or 'corrupt' form of music, and this view has been reinforced by its use of a mixed idiom widely held to be 'impure' or 'corrupt' language. In keeping with its preferred character for satire, ridicule and mischief, the baila is woven around themes which range from the most ridiculing to the ridiculous. Baila provides ordinary people with the impulse for a locally enacted symbolic creativity – in this case, for conveying a unique sense of Sri Lankan identity. Four themes are examined: the portrayal of Sri Lanka's multiracial population, language use, westernisation and questions of identity, and finally, the love of dancing and making merry.

Key words: popular music, Singlish, bilingual language Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Popular music lyrics can convey images of the people and spirit of a particular region, place or country. Very much can be conveyed with very little through pop music: melodies, instrumentation, rhythm and voice can all be used to give added meaning and create moods that are themselves part of the mood that is produced. With its lyrics, melodies and instrumentation, pop music as a whole has the power to influence and convey messages. Through its lyrics, music can give people a sense of place and identity (Kong, 1996).

Popular music is also a medium through which social meanings can be transmitted and consumed (Kong, 1996); social relations between various groups in a society can be reflected through popular music. Patriotic songs which are found in many countries demonstrate how dominant groups use popular music in very visible ways to express relations in society. In Sri Lanka, baila music is often used to arouse nationalistic sentiments such as “we have not masked ourselves to cheat the world” from the song, *Lying faces* and other lyrics as “Tigers come to dance, die like wolves” from the song, *In the bunkers*. Music is also a means by which certain groups in society define their identity.

Parakrama (1995) writes that music can be viewed as a medium through which marginalised groups in society express their resistance to hegemonic rule by an elite class. For example, Parakrama’s (1995) work is an analysis of the complex ways in which subversion and resistance take the form of imitation and parody in public culture. Similarly, Frith's (1983) work (cf. Kong 1996) is a classic analysis of youth culture and rebellion in 1950s and 1960s Britain when there was explicit opposition to both peer-group and adult middle class norms expressed through rock and roll music and associated expressions (such as Beatles haircuts, surfing styles, facial hair and so forth). In similar vein, Tanner (1978) analyses how punk music is representative of the attitudes of subcultures such as Skinheads towards ruling elites.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the value of baila lyrics as a means through which Sri Lankan culture and society may be understood. I will focus specifically on how music with English language lyrics, which is written, produced and performed by Sri Lankans, conveys a sense of mischief and reflects a distinctively Sri Lankan spirit and identity.

Baila music

Baila is originally an Afro-Portuguese musical genre. Sheeran (1990:94) mentions that there is a popular story, for example, in which baila is said to have arrived, but that people vary about whether the arrival was into the hands of the Sinhalese from the Portuguese Burghers, or into the hands of the middle class as a result of working class musicians. With the 1985 publication of what is probably the most thoroughly researched investigation into *baila* and *kaffringna*, Ariyaratne (1985) more or less defends the baila's place as a legitimate focus of scholarship and intelligent discussion. The baila, he says, is 'sensually bound to the everyday lives of the people of Sri Lanka'. Today, baila has become a part of popular culture by entering everyday communication and connecting with patterns of everyday life.

Baila traditions

Baila traditions include the use of a fiddle and rabana 'a small, hand held frame drum', along with the guitar or the banjo, and since the late 19th century, spoons or triangles. There is a stock set of 18 melodies, but in truth, as long as it is a European melody, and so long as it involves a verse and a chorus, or refrain, it qualifies as baila music (Sheeran 1990:94). This tradition is evident in the most commercially successful kind of baila, colloquially known as *disco baila*. The Portugueseness of the genre, however, is thought to reside less in the melodies than in the instrumentation. In the historical reconstruction given below, Brohier (1984) creates a picture of what the baila must have been like in the 1500s when the Portuguese colonised Sri Lanka by highlighting images of sounds and dance:

> Valiant and hard as the Portuguese in their era of renown were known to be … they were wont to abandon themselves to merriment and conviviality. Thus as transcendental shadows of a forgotten past they fade out, dancing the Fandango to the clash of castanets, the tinkle of guitar and rousing and hand-clapping – a dance which in its degeneracy is today called the baila (Brohier 1984).

Sheeran (1990:87) says that the way in which baila operationalises a sense of connectedness or affinity between people is probably best evidenced in a convention associated with it: at any venue where dancing is involved – be it a wedding, a party or a nightclub – the evening falls flat without a final round of singing and dancing known as the baila session. By three or four o'clock in the morning the dancing may have thinned out, but the first familiar chords of a baila bring nearly everyone back on to the dance floor. The chords are highly recognisable, and they act as an instantly re-energising force. The mood then turns not only upbeat, but joyful and ecstatic.

Although English speakers generally do not like to associate themselves with baila, as Sheeran (1990:113) notes, talking about baila songs to almost any middle or upper class person before independence, immediately gets them to relive glorious moments of drinking and revelry as friends would compete with one another to add roguish innuendos to songs such as *It's a long road to Tipperary* and *She'll be coming round the mountain* as warm ups to baila singing. Ariyaratne (1985) says that *kalu suddas* (black whites) really used baila and that baila filtered downward to the level of ordinary people. With the liberalisation of the economy in 1977, and the subsequent blossoming of the music cassette industry, baila has become more and more popular among the majority of people in Sri Lanka.

The widespread popularity of baila has given rise to the expression *baila gahanna epaa (*don't tell baila*).* This expression, often heard in conversation captures the sense of

provocation and mischief denoted by baila songs. What is most interesting about this admonition is that it is usually used with affection, as if to extend someone an indulgence. For example you would only use *don't tell baila* when the interlocutors know very well that the tallest of tales is being spun, that someone is making mischief, a mischief that is basically enjoyable by all interlocutors involved in the conversation (Sheeran 1990:91). It means that a certain warmth and informality exists between the interlocutors involved in the conversation. Tall tales further constitute the basis of baila's status as a more or less regular vehicle for satirical political commentary.

This satirical bent in baila is captured by its use of language which is focused towards a mischievous mixed idiom. Baila singers have also progressively developed their own speech act patterns as well as a number of major song topics. Baila topics include popular topics such as songs about the civil war, about terrorism and acts of violence as well as those critical of changing values, political doublespeak and the liberalised economy, though as Parakrama (1995:141) has illustrated, all these are exceptions to the major themes of romantic love and paeans to drinking, dancing and being merry. In this sense baila deals with events or topics whose effects have been and are widely felt. As Sheeran (1990:95) notes, one may think of baila as a sort of social antennae, sensitive to the moods and experiences of the listeners and adept at addressing them.

Unlike other expressions of popular music like reggae or rap, there are many things one is unlikely to find in baila lyrics, such as explicit references to drugs and dope, sex, violence, etc. Although romantic love is one of the major themes of baila lyrics, romantic feelings between a man and a woman often tend to be fodder for satire and ironic commentary and sentimentality is a noticeable absence in baila lyrics. The preferred dispositions in baila lyrics then are those of satire, ridicule and mischief. For example in the following lyrics (Song 20) the juxtaposition of *fancy* with the Sinhala word *aadare* (love) desentimentalises the

emotional baggage associated with love (Parakrama 1995:140). This lyric in instructive since it points to the ability of baila music to be self-critical and satiric (Parakrama 1995:140). The reference to Uganda according to Parakrama (1995:141) contains a shorthand for the class and context of the singer whose knowledge of English and social status is located succinctly.

No one on the veranda *1*
Can I kiss you Marinda?
Oya mage lozingere
You my lozenge
'You're my lozenge'
When I was in Uganda
Got your snap from Matilda *5*
Can't you see my fancy aadare
love
'Can't you see my fancy love'

Thematically then, baila lyrics serve as a platform to articulate the social realities, which are relevant to Sri Lanka. Linguistically, the use of language is the base for evoking a sense of fun and mischief and conveying the spirit and identity of being Sri Lankan.

Sri Lankan culture and society in baila music

In this paper I will analyse some themes which reveal Sri Lanka to be a distinctive and unique place with vibrant and spirited people. The themes I will examine will include the multiracial character of Sri Lanka; language use; problems of westernisation and identity; and the love of drinking and merriment.

Multiracial Sri Lanka

The vibrance of Sri Lanka's multiracial population is revealed in a variety of ways. First, the musical styles of the various races in Sri Lanka are infused in English language songs which predominantly use particular melodies and the way a particular group speaks. The following song, titled "De Silvala" represents the spoken language of the Portuguese Burgher community in Sri Lanka. *Almara top got and have* is an expression that has common

currency among the Portuguese Burgher community, and here it is used as a way of representing one of the many ethnic groups in the country. Similarly, the songs employ mixed language as a way of depicting the speech of Sinhala people.

Almara top got and have
Match box and key
Mother-in-law coming dalo
Go and make the tea
Mama telling no need darling
Don't go in the rain
Motor car horn blowing
Falling in the rain

Second, while predominantly using the English language, the inclusion of another language also depicts the multilingual character of Sri Lankan society. This is revealed in the use of words from Sinhala in the following lyrics:

1. ***I am your one and only one***
I am your ever-loving one
I am your one and only kandy *lamissi*
young woman
I am your vate murunga
fence vegetable
"I am your vegetable on a fence"
I am your lassana kella
beautiful girl
I am your one and only kandy lamissi
Ethakota don't say palayang
Then get out (rude)
I got ten acres goyang
paddy
I am your one and only kandy lamissi

Although predominantly in English, the above song contains many Sinhala words and phrases, such as *lassana kella* (beautiful girl), *lamissi* (young woman), *sudu boonikka* (white doll), etc. and conveys the image that Sri Lanka's multilingualism draws from the variety of local languages as well as the inclusion of foreign languages, reflecting the broader cosmopolitan and global influences on Sri Lankan culture. Parakrama (1995:137) however, notes that there are some utterances in which it is not clear which language is being borrowed from, as in line 7, *ethakota don't say palayang* where either English or Sinhala could be the matrix language as it is a combination of both languages juxtaposed together. This example, as Parakrama (1995:137) notes, belongs to 'a category of utterances which have currency in contemporary Sri Lanka'.

As Parakrama (1995:137) notes, this song (Song 15), which seems to be 'a traditional rendering of woman's subservience to her lover, undercuts its conventional gender stereotyping through the mixed idiom which carries the entire convention'. He notes that the clichés by which a woman's undying love must be conveyed (for example, *I am your one and only one, I am your ever-loving one,* etc.), are juxtaposed with the ridiculous similes from Sinhala which compare her to a *vate murunga,* a vegetable on a fence! It also criticises the dowry system by warning the man that he should not chase her away since she owns ten acres of paddy land as her dower, thus implying that all the man really wants is her property anyway.

Singlish

Another distinctive trait that characterises Sri Lanka, which is accurately reflected in some local songs is the use of *Singlish.* C. Fernando (1977:355) tells us that the influence of English on Sinhala is much more dramatic and striking than the influence of Sinhala on English. The tendency to introduce English words into Sinhala is much more marked than the reverse. The bilingual who chooses to talk English rather than *Singlish* or Sinhala will only introduce

those Sinhala words (names of local fauna, flora, etc.) that have become an accepted part of the Sri Lankan English lexis. But anyone who talks Sinhala will use a higher proportion of English words or words of English origin. C. Fernando (1977:355) says that lexical transfers are unidirectional from English to Sinhala or *Singlish* which is, as a linguistic system, more Sinhala than English based, i.e. *Singlish* would show a higher proportion of Sinhala phrases and sentences than English ones. In other words *Singlish* is a sub-variety of Sinhala, not a sub variety of English.

Parakrama (1995:103) notes that while the argument to locate *Singlish* within Sinhala is entirely understandable in certain specific contexts, he has yet to come across any reference to *Singlish* in everyday conversation, which does not refer to the 'dilution' of English with Sinhala words and phrases. According to Parakrama, the absence of an analogous term for Tamilised English in Sri Lanka means that these utterances also get grouped together with examples of *Singlish*, which is of course, no accident and reflects the hegemony of Sinhala in Sri Lanka, since even non-Sinhala speakers use *Singlish.* A similar phenomenon exists in Singapore. But, as Gupta (1999:61) notes the *Sing-* of *Singlish* in Singapore stands for Singapore not a language as in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, *Singlish* is most often used to refer to the code mixed variety although it is sometimes also used to make reference to spoken Sri Lankan English. Whereas in Singapore English dominates the lexis of *Singlish* (Gupta 1999:61), in Sri Lanka, it is dominated by Sinhala. Nevertheless, in both countries the term *Singlish* is used predominantly to mean a sort of 'impure language' as opposed to the standard or 'pure' language. The low status of *Singlish* in Sri Lanka has led some Sri Lankan English speakers to refuse to use it in certain contexts, so as to prove that they are able to speak 'proper English'.

As Sri Lanka is a place where different cultures and languages mix, it is not surprising that a unique brand of spoken English should emerge as a result. This unique brand of English,

Singlish, is spoken with words from Sinhala and Tamil thrown in. This use of *Singlish* in popular music, as well as in other local cultural forms is revealing of how much *Singlish* has become a distinctive part of Sri Lanka's linguistic heritage. In the following song the writer liberally mixes English and Sinhala depicting the spoken language of Sri Lankans.

Heenen ***I see you night and day***
Dreams
"I see you night day in my dreams"
Api penala yamuda ***lovely*** *mage pane*
We elope shall my life
"Shall we elope my lovely life"
crazy crazy girl you're my lovely pearl
Oya mage ***hope in all the world***
You my
"You're my hope in all the world"
kollupitiya ***junction you all had a function*** *5*
place name
I saw you kissing *aayage kolla*
Servant's boy
"I saw you kissing the servant's son"

In relation to Sri Lankan English, C. Fernando (1977:354) says that lexical transfers are an important feature of *Singlish*. Such lexical transfers would include not only loan words, loan translations, etc., that have been absorbed into Sinhala but also regular transfers peculiar to Sinhala even where there are common equivalents in Sinhala. Some of these transfers are single lexical items like *husband, wife, man,* etc. This leads us to ask a perfectly legitimate question, which would be: Why Sinhala speakers use English words when there are equivalent Sinhala words? C. Fernando suggests that it could be because Sinhala words may be strongly associated with monolingual use. In her view, the introduction of English words maintain the informal, colloquial dimension whereas the equivalent Sinhala words can sometimes sound artificial and formal. Another possibility that suggests itself is that the

equivalent Sinhala words may not be adequate to convey the meaning intended by the speakers.

Apart from the musical styles and instrumentation, the contents of the lyrics also reveal the multiracial nature of Sri Lankan society. In a comic vein, the following verse reveals the multiracial character of Sri Lankan society through the ethnic groups and the variety of food and drink that may be found in Sri Lanka, including *rice* (Sinhala), *thosai* (Tamil) food.

Thambi ***Boutique*** *Mudalali****, he is a brick to cheat,***
Muslim shop proprieter
Putting *gadol* ***in the chilli powder, very bad to eat,***
brick
Sometimes we are *thosai* ***bringing, but is not so good,***
Tamil food
That also scared to eat - for having poonac in the food.

Vegetables very dear, even in the *Keera*[2] ***cart,***
When I'm going to buy beef, butcher putting heart,
Aney what to do child, standing and bargaining,
In queue in blazing sun..... leg is also paining.

Haven't milk, haven't rice, haven't even bread,
So drinking plain tea without sugar, and going to the bed,
When telling husband 'go Down Under' he is telling, what you know,
Leaving Country where you born, why you want to go.

So that is what I'm telling aney, life is very sad,
Everything is hard to get, and coming colour bad,
If husband drink and come today, I'm going to give him bombing,
But what for even talking aney..... laughing also coming.
Yours for the asking..... what for the telling.

[2] A place to buy leaves and vegetables at the market

Other lyrical evidences of the cosmopolitan mix that constitutes the population and culture of Sri Lanka are explicit. The following song contains references to casinos and gambling, western food and drink (roast chicken pie, wine), English terms of endearment (honey, darling), Sri Lankan cultural practices (giving dowry), etc.

Hurry up darling open the door
Lollipop I went for a show
I brought you roast chicken pie
Oh you devil you're so funny
Gambling with my dowry money
Sleep tonight on the veranda
Don't be cruel we got married last December
Before the wedding what did you promise
Can you remember
Shut up honey
Only now I know your number
In every town casino joint you're a member
When my darling your husband is the king of wine
Shouting like a devil woman how to live your life
You can see my real colours if I had a knife
I will cut your nose like an Arabian wife

Westernisation and identity

Apart from the mischievous revelations of Sri Lanka's multiracial character baila lyrics also explores the question of identity when individuals are confronted with western values and culture. This is revealed in the baila lyrics given below in which the writer explores how westernisation may make people feel conflicted with regards to their identity.

Don't be silly *aiyo* ***mummy*** *1*

monawa kalath ***I'm your sunny***
whatever do
"whatever said and done"

How to marry ***nandage dooni***
aunty's daughter

That girl is really funny

eyage heti danno danithi *5*
her nature those who know know
"those who know her know what she's like"

karata nagee ***without a*** *gooni*
neck climb sack
"She'll climb on to your neck without a sack"

Sunday morning saw her running round the cabana

Some yankee Johnny chasing with a baila rabana

According to Parakrama (1995:139) here the merging of traditional and anglicised values is shown in the son's refusal to marry his first cousin, who according to custom is his *evassa* or necessary cousin, necessary that is for marriage! The mother, who is clearly westernised appears as *mummy*_and whose son is equally so, hence *sunny*, expects him to accept an arranged marriage. The *girl*, however, is of similar stripe, according to the song and has been seen with an American tourist in tow. This song is a lamentation on a particular kind of modernisation, that which is associated with mini skirts, commercialisation, a faster life and Yankees. Bailas are critical of not just Western culture, but specifically of the United States.

On a functional level, this song is an instance of social commentary: the singer makes fun of the changing values of Sri Lankan society, and their orientation towards westernisation, for instance, the use of English kinship terms and English terms of endearment to identify and describe family relationships such as *mummy* and *daddy, granny* and *grandpapa, mama, dalo, honey* as opposed to the Sinhala and Tamil equivalents not only show instances of 'cultural' borrowing, but also denote the satirical objectives of baila performance. These kinship terms are referentiall*y* important, as they are used self-consciously to indicate a person's social and linguistic aspirations, as in the following baila lyrics:

Mummy*ta kenthi gihin aayata dan yanna kiyanawa*
Daddy *militariyata bendi* *5*

Daddy *nethuwa mummyta hari* ***worry***
Release *wela ennako* ***dear***
Ape ***mummy*** *nithara nithara liyum liyanawa*

Parakrama (1995:139) notes that those who call their parents *mummy* and *daddy* are, almost always near monolingual users of English and that the use of these terms in baila music points in interesting ways in which English is used to parody elite users of the language. Baila music thus acts as an important social antennae of the cultural experiences and struggles that confront Sri Lankan people. The dilemma faced by Sri Lankans with regard to questions of identity can be seen as an ongoing problem.

Drinking and making merry

Another important theme that is predominant in all baila songs is the necessity to enjoy life through drinking and merry making. As a consequence, the speech situations and events portrayed in most baila songs are of a class associated with colloquial language; verbal challenges, violence, drunkenness, etc. The following song, for instance, not only makes reference to dancing but also makes reference to a special local brew, 'devilled coconut brandy'.

That *nondi* ***fellow Johnson who stole your mother's pension***
bandy
Had a rocking time *natamin baila*
dancing
Cheers darling want a devilled coconut brandy
katakapala wakkarapan mokatada shandy

The thematic content of the baila lyrics discussed so far contributes to an overall effect of informality. Most of the song lyrics discussed above depict the cosmopolitan Sri Lankan culture with its variety of ethnic groups, foods and social habits and satirises relationships, westernisation, drinking and making merry. For instance, the following song, which satirises the relationship between husband and wife, reverses the gender stereotypes by portraying the

man as weak and cowardly and the woman as dominant and powerful; she not only calls the man a 'donkey' but also threatens to hit him with a coconut scraper: In this example, the Sinhala word *hiramanaya* has cultural significance. The *hiramanaya* is a utensil that is used in all Sri Lankan homes and its use as a weapon to thrash the husband clearly brings out the sense of mischief intended by the lyrics.

shut up donkey I will hit you *hiramanen*
coconut scraper INS
"shut up donkey I will hit you with the coconut scraper"

(line 14, song 21)

Song 1, which is a parody of Song 21, is a comic attempt by the man to stand up to his wife. His response is to inform her that he is going to take judo lessons to secure his future happiness:

mage ***self defence*** *ekata*
my one DAT
"for my self-defence" (line 4, song 1)

Judo class *heta* *mama* *yanawa*
tomorrow I going
"I'm going to a judo class tomorrow" (line 5,song 21)

There are also baila songs which critically uphold bourgeois visions of Sinhala womanhood and domesticity. In one baila that Ariyaratne (1985:97) mentions, the wife spends the money that her husband has earned as a soldier and in the meantime, 'all the young men in the village have become related to her".

CONCLUSION

What I have illustrated in this paper is how baila music captures and conveys a unique sense of Sri Lankan culture; of what westernisation means, as experienced by Sri Lankans; and the way in which English has interspersed itself into Sri Lankan life. I have tried to show how an analysis of baila lyrics demonstrates an understanding of the social and linguistic structures and discourses. At the same time, it is important to emphasise the point that through the ability of

baila music to be self critical and satirical, it is able articulate issues that are important to Sri Lankan society. A similar idea is expressed by Kong (1996) with regard to popular music in Singapore.

Indeed, many issues which otherwise would not have been voiced have become articulated through what is commonly deemed a “thuppahi” or “low" cultural form. Ariyaratne (1985:98) mentions one baila, for example, that expressed concerns over the ‘massacre’ of (Sinhala Buddhist) culture. In this particular song, the ‘massacre’ happens because people use English instead of Sinhala and because Sinhala women not only wear lipstick, they also prefer to marry foreigners. Similarly, there are many baila songs which are critical not only of Westernisation but the United States. In one baila, titled “The Yankee Pest,” satirises young people whose egos have been overblown by their embrace of American culture and ways of speaking. “A bump called Yankee, is raised in the head” that is so big, he sings, “it defeats even the mount Himalaya.”

In terms of its lyrics, melodies and instrumentation, baila also gives us an understanding of how singers shift between global and local forces. In this context, I have illustrated that baila music produced by Sri Lankans reflect influences from outside. The baila itself comes from African-Portuguese music and utilises a number of devices specific to African and Portuguese cultures through the incorporation of mixed styles of music, rhythms, idiom and ethnic instrumentation. Baila songs constantly make references to banjo, rabana and triangle playing.

As previously mentioned, baila music is influenced by outside forces and reflects a true picture of socio-cultural identities by ‘bringing under scrutiny stereotypic identities and values of people in Sri Lanka’ (Herat, 2001). At the same time, baila music can be seen as being appropriated to depict not only local concerns but also the wider international concerns.

In this paper I also want to draw attention to issues not addressed previously. Since this paper focuses only on baila songs with mainly English and Sinhala lyrics, it would be

useful to analyse the ways in which Sri Lankan songs in other languages (such as Tamil and Malay) convey this sense of identity. Given the ethnic composition in Sri Lanka, in particular, an analysis of English and Tamil songs certainly deserves attention.

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