

Songs Associated with Sri Lanka's Paddy Cultivation – Aspects of Music and Gender

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Abstract

The article documents a unique song repertoire created in Sri Lanka in association with the paddy cultivation. As a result of technological and economic changes in the processes of rural agriculture in recent decades, both the patterns of music performed on these special occasions and the role of women in agriculture have changed noticeably. Therefore it is necessary to collect this song repertoire before it is completely forgotten. Some of these songs are presented in transcription and analysed in their macro- (socio-cultural) structure. The article also focuses on the roles of women in the paddy cultivation process.

Introduction

Paddy cultivation is the primary way of life of the Sinhalese, who comprise 74% of the population of Sri Lanka and are therefore the largest ethnic group¹ in the country. Agricultural activity in Sri Lanka dates back to the Neolithic period and has undergone numerous changes and developments during its long history. Particularly in the last few decades, such changes have accelerated through the introduction of irrigation facilities, gradual mechanization of farm operations, and so on. The role of women has changed considerably in this process:

The gradual commercialisation of agriculture involving a new range of agricultural practices has reduced the traditional role of women. Thus, because of the emergence of seed companies, the role of women in seed selection and seed storage and planning the strategy for crop combinations has become marginal. The male members have taken over the responsibility of deciding the crop combination say of paddy and banana and also marketing the produce. Since, large amount of money has come into the hand of the family, a major part of it is deposited in the bank. The bank account, it was invariably in the name of the husband. The wife role has been relegated to home, activities related of homegarden and occasional manual help on the farm. In case the family has a boutique, this is run by the female members. The money earned is spent on the purchase of a mobike, electric fan, furniture, electronic items, crockery and other household items".²

In the worst cases, these changes have resulted in drastic poverty, with particular hardships for women. As mentioned by R.M. Gunathileke in an online article,³ these changes have even led to dire circumstances including suicide, particularly in remote areas.

At the same time, the occasions in which people sing and perform songs associated with cultivation have changed or disappeared completely, and the song repertoire is in danger of being forgotten. The following description presents paddy cultivation songs as a part of the Sri Lankan cultural heritage, and includes an outline of the steps of the cultivation process.



Figure 1. Transplanting Rice Seedlings (photograph by Shrilal Gomes).

“Once the field is plowed and prepared for rice seedlings the ladies of the village take over. It is their job to do the back-breaking job of planting the individual seedlings, about seven inches apart, in nice neat rows. Although sowing rice in the prepared field, instead of planting seedlings like this is easier and faster, it is believed that this process provides a better crop.

And of course this calls for some entertainment, and the ladies provide it themselves, sometimes in the form of singing contests between groups of women working in adjoining fields. Just like the poems and songs associated with the bullock cart (driving) there are songs and poems (*nelun kavi*) associated with planting rice seedlings. Traditionally, these song tell stories from the life of Buddha...”⁴.

1. Preparing, Transplanting, and Sowing

Farming involves tremendous effort, from the time that the paddy field is prepared to the time of the harvest. Whenever rice is to be sown, leveling must be done, and in the transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and trampling procedures, participants engage themselves in singing various poetic songs in order to experience relaxation or relief from fatigue, and also for purposes of pleasure and entertainment.

The farmer sows paddy seeds with the intention of preparing his paddy field. For this purpose he employs the services of a type of buffalo bull known as *mee gon*. The farmer addresses this animal as “Ambaruva,” while in both the paddy field and also the *chena*-fields in which other products (e.g. sweet potatoes) are cultivated in the off-season. During preparation of their paddy fields, the farmer handles the buffalos and give out a cry called *andahera panava*.



Figure 2. A traditional plowing, by a pair of bullocks, near Bible⁵

The chief farmer leads the first pair of buffalos and begins to perform this cry. Other farmers, who follow with their pair of buffalos from behind him, chant “o ... ho!”, which is called a *heeya*. The pair of buffalos yoked together is known as a *bana*. The yell is heard not only during sowing, but also during the trampling procedure.

By cutting at the bottom of the tree, it can be observed how much has been cut,
By the sounds uttered, it can be known how much of an area has been plowed.

This proverb shows the unbroken attachment that exists between the *andahera panava* and the *heeya*, according to folk poets. The *andahera* is known in some regions by the names *ose edima* and *gehekima* (Kahandagamage 1997: 56). There, the farmer addresses the animal with the words “Amme” (mother), “Appe” (father), “Putha” (son) or “Valu daruva” (diminutive form): terms which express a certain sentimental connection. Following is example of an *andahera panava*:

Let's go my *appa*, may the blessings of the Triple Gem⁶ be with you, o ... ho ... ho ... ho.
May God Sama protect my *meemo*, and may you receive merit, o ... ho ... ho ... ho.
Go from the corner, my *wahu daruwe*; you will be looked after by God, o ... ho ... ho ... ho.
A little bit more, *daruwe*, there's no sin on you, *maye appa* o ... ho ... ho ... ho
(Kahandagamage 1997: 56).

Once the paddy fields are prepared, transplantation is carried out. In some areas, instead of transplanting, simple sowing of paddy is undertaken. But the more popular procedure is evidently transplanting. A few days after this is completed, transplanting and plucking are both attended to, particularly by women. During this process they sing *nelum gee*: songs associated with transplanting.

Among the songs associated with paddy cultivation, the *nelum* song style has a prominent place. The performance of *nelum* songs is most popular in the upcountry region of Sri Lanka, which has an altitude of 1000-1500 feet. Though paddy cultivation is common in other provinces of the island as well, it is rather rare to hear the *nelum* performance there.

It is not fully clear what may have shaped the musical features of the *nelum* style. Some researchers see an affinity to Buddhist chanting. Others believe that this singing style is more akin to the local musical useage or practice. This is a difficult question to answer due to the facts that this is an oral tradition, and that there is therefore a lack of written sources on it.

The lyrics often consist of poems with four-line stanzas. They are *sivpada* compositions: forms in which all four lines of the verses are of equal length, when measured in terms of syllable count, and in which all four lines end in a shared consonantal assonance (Fernando n.d.: 8). Kulatillake refers to a thirteenth-century treatise to define *sivpada* as verses “with four lines or *padas* of equal length...The four lines should maintain symmetry in word groupings and also pausing, and above all should have a consonantal assonance *eli vāta* at the end of the *padas*” (Kulatillake 1974/5: 39).⁷

Some of these verses have been extracted from a folk poem called Yasodharawatha. This poem concerns Prince Siddharta's (i.e., the man who became

the Buddha) wife Yasodhara, and clarifies the good qualities of this woman. A majority of people who sing *nelum gee* learn these songs through their elders (Fernando n.d.: 9).

Performance begins with *ose*, an opening section which is sung in a slow-tempo melodic style. To this style belong the melodies “Pirith Ose,” “Kinduru Ose,” “Namaskara Ose,” and “Horane Ose.” In addition, there is also a type of melody-style called *sindu*, which is sung in a more rapid fashion. These melodies are sung at dusk, when the *nelum* recital ends.

Figure 3. “Horana Ose,” an example of *ose* (from Makuloluwa 1996: 185):

Horane Ose



De - wa - - - ta - - - - - du - - - va - - k ä - vi - din
 Kee - ya - - n ne - - - - - a - a - a - - - a - - - a
 Ja - thee - - ye - - ä - - - o - ba - ta - - ki - ri - mau
 Bo - la - - n ne - - - - - a - a - a - - - a - a - a
 Da n dee - - - e - - - - - sa - - - tha - - - ha - ta - kal
 Ban - di - - n ne - - a - - - a - a - a - - - a - - - a
 Nu va na - - k ma - - ma - - - ki ya mi - - - - da - ru - vani
 A - sa - - n ne - - - - - a - a - a - - - a - - - - -

English translation:

A deity in female form comes and tells the nursing mother to give alms to the people. Listen, I am telling you, children, a piece of advice.

The following transcription shows an example of *nelum sindu*.

Figure 4.

Nelum sindu



Bo - ga m ba ra a pi - - - ne lu ma ta ya na ko ta - - -
 Ttee - - s de - - n ne - - - - - k ne la -
 The - - yi tha - - - la - - - - - - - - m

English translation:

When we were on our way to Bogambara,
 thirty women were harvesting paddy;

though thirty women were harvesting,
 it would have been better to see sisters working;
 sister, your golden bangles give out a melodious sound;
 sisters, you, who are involved in the activity
 are protected by the gods.

2. Harvesting

As is commonly the case in agricultural activities, in paddy cultivation it is the customary practice of the farmer to harvest before the new year begins. An auspicious day and time are selected for this purpose, and certain customary procedures are undertaken. The farmer takes a bath, adorns himself in fresh clothing, partakes of a meal of milk rice, and sets foot on his field at an auspicious hour. He initially cuts three pods of paddy in a lump and reserves it for God. Subsequently, the other helpers also sit in a row and begin to harvest. The farmer to whom the paddy-field belongs then cuts the three pods of paddy and keeps them aside on behalf of God. At a later date, all members get together and reap the paddy. In the process, they indulge in singing various poems known as *goyam kavi*.⁸ The lyrics of these poems include characterizations of the Sun God, Moon God, the Earth (personified as a woman) and the Guardian Deities of the four corners, and during performance one intentionally focuses the mind on these deities. In the past there was a drum in use called *bum mediya* that accompanied the *goyam kavi*. The *bum mediya* has effectively disappeared.

Figures 5 and 6 show two examples of *goyam kavi*.

Goyam Kavi I



U da ya ta pa - - - - ya na
 Hi ru de vi ya - - - - n ta i
 Sa wa sa ta pa - - - - ya na
 San da de vee ya - - - - n ta i
 Sat tha ra va ra - - - - m de vee
 Sat tha ra de na - - - - ta i

Vān da la - - - - gu - ru - - va ra

Ā va sa ra ga - - - - n ta i

To the Sun God, who shines in the morning;
 To the Moon God, who shines in the evening;
 To the Four Guardian Deities of the four corners;
 To get permission from the Teacher by worshipping

Figure 6.

Goyam Kavi II



Va ram va ram sak ra ma ha bam ba a thin va ram - - -
 Va ram va ram ee ra san da de vi a thin va ram - - -
 Va ram va ram mi ni ka at de vi a thin va ram - - -
 Va ram va ram kä pu ma ta de vi a thin va ram - - -

Sakra Maha Bamba extends his hands to guard;
 The Sun God and Moon God extend their hands to guard;
 The Earth personified as a woman extends her hand to guard;
 The God extends his hand to guard when the paddy is reaped

Among *goyam kavi* are short poems called *kota thala*, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7.



ko ta ta - le - kee - m son da ta
 pe ra ka - le - hä ta me he ma ta
 si tha ko - le - va ce i me ma ta
 a pi ra - le - ka pa mu no si ta

Sing in short
 Not so in days gone by
 I feel shy
 Let's reap without waiting

Once reaping paddy is over, the trampling procedure begins. The place where this is done is known as the *kamatha*.



Figure 8. Women working at the *kamatha*.⁹

An older term used to identify the *kamatha* is *kalavita* (Siripala 1994: 23). It is also called *godella* or *kuttiya* (24). During the entire process of preparing the *kamatha* up to the point when the harvest is gathered, a ritual called Poojakarmaya takes place. All ritual activities are conducted according to auspicious procedures found during an auspicious day. Auspicious periods for this purpose were indicated in astrological works such as the *Purana Paladavaliya* and *Muhurtha Chintamanikya* (38).

After the *kamatha* has been well cleaned, a post which is approximately eighteen feet in height is erected and an arecanut inflorescence is tied to the top of it. This is known as the *kap kanuva*. Subsequently a special type of ash made of burned citrus firewood is prepared and sprinkled around the post.

When dusk sets in, *kola gon gesima* or *kola medima* commences. At the outset, the farmers, who break the *golam kolaya*, then keep a *goyam pida* on each other's head, circumambulate the venerated center-post three times, and finally rest it at the foot of the post. In some parts of the country this act is performed only by the chief farmer, but in other places six farmers participate in this practice. While the paddy is kept on the head and they go round the center-post, they engage in reciting the *kamath piritha*, which is also called the *kalaviti piritha*. In different localities, differences in the performances can be observed. The following text is an excerpt from the *kalaviti piritha* (Siripala 1994: 100):

First let the Buddha be worshipped;
Secondly let God be worshipped;
Thirdly let the teacher be worshipped;
Recite the *kalaviti piritha*!

A piece of wood is taken from a *jak* tree
and a piece of wood taken from a *kitul* tree is fixed to the center as the yoke;
Four holes are cut on either side of the piece of wood from the *jak* tree,
And its center is tied with a rope made of coconut leaves.

On a Wednesday
Two big bulls are tied on either side of the plow at an auspicious time
And one full round is plowed beginning from the western end.

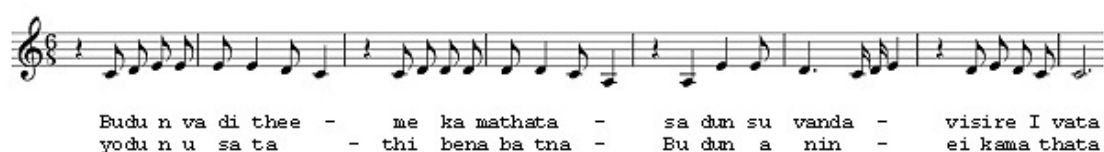
By performing the *kalaviti piritha*, farmers expect the deity to whom the prayers are made to bring a greater harvest and protection from the dangers from herds. Subsequently the entire *golam kolaya* is laid around the center-post. What is inferred here by the term *goyam kolaya* is the paddy that is heaped up on a side of the *kamatha*. Bulls are then used to trample the paddy over the *golam kolaya* that is laid to the side. There is a type of music sung during the trampling procedure, known as *kamatha kavi* or *kamath ose*. During performance, the farmers yell out to scare away birds and other beings which would hinder the cultivation process. *Kamath kavi* lyrics are influenced by Buddhist verses, as is evident in the following examples:

Figure 9.



The power of support from the Buddha,
 The power of support from the Dhamma,
 The power of support from the Sangha,
 The power of support from this Triple [Gem]

Figure 10.



The Buddha visits this *kamatha*,
 The scent of sandalwood spreads around;
 About three miles in height
 It comes to the *kamatha* with the Buddha's command



Figure 11. A traditional paddy storage bin (*wee bissae*), kept in the courtyard of a farming family, near Anamaduwa, a dry-zone area.¹⁰

Concluding Observations

As a result of the contemporary technological developments machinery is now used in certain provinces to sow paddy, and also in the trampling process. There are nevertheless some regions where the traditional practices still take place, and where the associated rituals, performances, and songs are still of enormous importance. But inasmuch as the process of modernization disburdens the farmers and their male and female helpers, it also destroys the contexts in which the ritual and musical practices take place. They are now becoming a part of a cultural past, or heritage, and perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that they may be conserved in an academic or educational context. As is evident in the accounts, pictures, and song lyrics of this article, women have played an important role in each step of the cultivation process.

And recently the rapid changes have dramatically affected the roles of women: instead of being active participants, they are instead relegated to the domain of the household and the home garden. The song repertoire, which in the past was directly involved in every step of cultivation, will lose its meaning and become folklore of the past: a musical home garden in which sentimental memories of past times are cultivated.

Notes

¹ The population of Sri Lanka (as of 1996) is approximately 18.3 million, of which 9.3 million are male and 9 million female. The average population density is 250 per square kilometer, with 50 to 3000 as the lowest and highest densities respectively. The annual growth rate of the population is 1.4 per cent (1980-1990), and the population is expected to reach 25 million by the middle of the twenty-first century. The life expectancy is 73 years, and infant mortality rates are low: 24 per 1000. The quality of life has improved gradually from 1960 to 1980, as reflected in a decrease in death and mortality rates, improved health, high literacy rates (92% for men, and 87.9% for women) and increased life expectancy (69 years for men, and 73 years for women). The Human Development index is 701, demonstrating a high quality of life for the people (Department of Census & Statistics, Sri Lanka, 1991).

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic society, consisting of Sinhalese (74.0%), Tamils (18.2%), Muslims (7.1%) and others (the remaining 0.7% are Chinese, Moors and burghers of Dutch and Portuguese descendents). There are a very small number (approximately 2000) of indigenous people, called Veddas, who live primarily in the dry zone area of the northeastern and southeastern provinces. The majority of Sinhalese (69.3%) are followers of Buddhism, followed by Hinduism (15.5%), Islam (7.6%) and Christianity (7.5%) (Baldwin 1991). A majority of the population lives in rural areas. The urban population comprises approximately 22%, which has remained more or less unchanged since the 1980s. However, growing industrialization may give rise to additional urban growth (<http://www.mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-ch1.html>).

² (<http://www.mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-ch3-e.html>)

The following table is at the same website:

Figure 12. The gender roles in rice cultivation (<http://www.mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-ch3-table18.html>)

Community	Chena	Rice Paddies	Home Gardens
Community	Land selection; slashing; crop protection; hunting of wild animals for meat; fishing from tanks (men).	Decisions regarding the crop variety related to expectation of good, normal, or below normal monsoon season; determining auspicious time for land preparation; sowing and harvesting of crop.	NIL
Men	Burning; land preparation; sowing; fencing of plot; maintenance of fence; crop protection from wild animals; harvesting of vegetable and miscellaneous crops.	Land preparation; seed sowing; use of weedicides; application of fertilizers and pesticides; threshing; winnowing by machines; carrying harvest home; marketing.	Plucking fruits from coconut trees; tapping sap from <i>kitul</i> ; harvesting fruits, spices, coffee; picking tea leaves; transporting home garden products to the market.

Women	Weeding crops; Harvesting of coarse grains; threshing; winnowing; cleaning; storage for home use; storage of seeds for next year's crop.	Puddling; transplanting; weeding (unless weedicides have been used); carrying meals and tea to field for laborers and men of the family; arranging for female labor on payment or exchange basis.	Cleaning fallen leaves; making compost; watering plants; sowing vegetables; cleaning and drying fruits and seeds; storing for home use; storing seeds for next year's crop; <i>kitul</i> ; making of jaggery, cakes and treacle.
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³ In a remote village of southeastern Sri Lanka, D.M. Karunawathie, a 36-year-old mother of six, last month drank a lethal concoction of pesticides in a cornfield near her house. She was rushed to the nearest rural hospital at Uraniya and then transferred to the main district hospital at Badulla. But the poison had already damaged her vital organs and the medical staff was unable to save her life. She died four days later. (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/dec2001/sri-d28.shtml>)

⁴ <http://www.ourlanka.com/photo/village.shtml>

⁵ <http://mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-plate2b.html>

⁶ The Triple Gem refers to the three Buddhist Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

⁷ This information concerns the Sinhala text and cannot be applied to an English translation.

⁸ The term *kavi* means “song” and is similar to the term *gee*.

⁸ <http://mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-gender.html#top>

⁹ <http://www.mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-plate1c.html>

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