

REVIEW OF “JIM SYKES (2018). THE MUSICAL GIFT: SONIC GENEROSITY IN POSTWAR SRI LANKA.” NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Abstract

The author’s efforts to draw a cartography of music practices in Sri Lanka and proposing terms such as musical gift, musical giving, and sonic generosity using the views and practices of Sri Lankan drumming, ritual singing, and dancing is impressive and should be widely appreciated. In her review, Gamburd (2019) provides an impressive summary about the entire book together with some remarks on the author’s political bias and missing content in his fieldwork experience, particularly with informants and his teacher. However, I do not fully agree on Gamburd as Sykes has shared some remarkable fieldwork experiences. He really tried to highlight these experiences as a necessity in order to gain insights into his topic.

A large amount of scientific literature, newspaper articles, and other sound and audiovisual sources are referred to describe various elements of the music practices, their ethnic, religious, political, economic and social conditions and relations starting from the Era of Ravana up to the year 2018.

Keywords

Book review essay, Postwar situation, Sri Lanka, Research methods, Descriptive styles.

The book is structured in four parts and six chapters plus four “checkpoints” between the original chapters of his writings. Each part is dedicated to a specific process. Part One (I) is about “Finding Musical Gifts.” It comprises a general introduction and a first chapter about Sonic Generosity that factually describes the author's understanding of terms. The terms *musical giving* and/or *musical gift* have not been widely discussed previously, but the concept of it has been negotiated in similar studies (recently Hauptmann-Fischer, 2016; Villegas Vélez, 2017).

It is an interesting take to discuss the validity of these terms and to combine them in this framework of music research. However, the use of terms already well-known in official languages of Sri Lanka must be considered critically. The term *berava*, for example, names the caste that most of the traditional drum players of Sinhala religious and ritual practices belong to. The author's translation in brackets denotes “drummer” although the author tells us it is a caste. He often mentions *berava* drumming, *berava* drums, *berava* ritual and refers to *berava* as Sinhala ritual drummers in general. In this sense, Sykes' usage of the term is not common. Furthermore, it is grammatically questionable, so it may cause confusion. In Sri Lanka, *berava* is understood as a culturally sensitive term. It is deemed to be ethically not appropriate to use it among artists and in the general public. The way the author mentions and uses the term all throughout the book makes it a keyword of the study.

This book is not meant to explore the musical content too thoroughly, although, some headings suggest such an intention. For example, in the second chapter, the author has not explored the repertoire of drumming whereas he outlines the chapter as though it tackled “Sinhala Buddhist music-making, focusing on the domain of drumming in religious ritual” (p. 68). In Chapter 4, some paragraphs include mentions of music scores used for percussions and playing techniques, but still

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very little exploration is done in order to reveal the predominantly musical substance. However, some similarities among different drumming genres are explained to illustrate interrelated musical features between different cultural zones.

Some Sinhala terms that are explained in brackets in English and vice-versa are not fully precise. Others contain spelling errors. The usage of brackets is rather confusing. Is it translation, extended elaboration, or what the author actually means by the word following in brackets? Some stereotyping can be noticed such as “Hēvisi drummers are usually poorer, less educated, and looked down upon by other ritualists” [p. 70], which from my point of view is not the case in current times. Generalizing statements can also be found, such as, “They also alternate with a gāta beraya drummer at the Temple of the Tooth (Dalada Maligawa) in Kandy, Sri Lanka’s most famous Buddhist temple” [p. 70]. An etymological shortcut comes down rather as an unsubstantiated guess: “The Sinhala version is called horanāva; the Tamil version is the sornāli (clearly, one of these words is derived from the other)” [p. 146].

Chapters 3 and 4, both of them found in the second part, deal with “Sri Lankan Tamil Music Givings” and the “Cartography of Cultural Zones.” The term *cartography* was initially coined by a few scholars who were connected to Collaer's (1958) and Nettl's (1960) musicological studies. In recent times, an entire school of ethnomusicologists in China exist, who are working on “Ethnomusicological Geography” (Xiao Mei, 2013).

Syke's clear description of cultural divisions of dance and drumming in Sri Lanka is very useful, more so as it helps to understand main differences as well as intracultural differences of their overlapping artistry. The author’s learning experience stems from residing with his guru in Benthara where the Pahatharata tradition is popular. Descriptions of the hard work of learning and playing the yak beraya indicate that the author is passionate with his learning experience. This tradition and the ritual drumming itself are broadly described. These elaborations deserve to be studied deeply, more so as they may even serve as a model for further studies in this regard.

The author assumes cultural migration or exchange among Tamils, Sinhalas, and other Southeast Asians to have fostered the dissemination and adaptation of Sinhala drums. Of course, there are many other possibilities of exchange to think of, like from Middle East, north India, or through the European colonizers (Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British including some of their slaves brought from places in the South of Africa). Seemingly, the author rather believes in geographical closeness than in culturally motivated interaction as a source of exchange patterns.

Part three (III) of the book is titled “The Discursive Erasure of Musical Giving,” which comprises Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 discusses a rather narrative approach to facts. The author gives voice to reports of musicians that recall the situation of war and the tsunami that hit Sri Lanka in 2004. This approach is meant to go “Beyond the Musicology of Disaster.” A musical document is presented. It is a page of a score composed by Eshanta Peiris about the tsunami (Figure 5.1). The document serves to prove the existence of a musical tsunami response among Sri Lankan musicians. Other reports read a bit like newspaper articles on various interrelated events. However, they do not really give evidence of something that can be called “beyond” unless the deliberate way the author gets on the path of political discourses is counted into this process.

He may not clearly investigate music practices as an ethnographic chapter. The author is rather describing it in an agitating tone. It also remains unclear whether this is on purpose or not. However, there could have been given space to a broader spectrum of different voices instead.

Many of the activities the author has taken up, such as hip-hop, the national anthem, posttsunami mixtapes for charity, well-publicized peace concerts, or a Sinhala-led charity bringing European classical music to a symbolical Tamil school, are treated with little consistency towards a musicological approach. Moreover, as music is understood as interchangeable, they do not significantly relate to the initial concept of musical gifts.

There, readers can see a clear shift as music became merely items that happen to have been produced musically and that transform away from musical gifts in the definition of the author toward being simply products that are not gifted. This shift appears not very well substantiated through detailed musical investigations. Chapter 6 then discusses the history of Sri Lanka and the role that music might have played in the past two centuries. Taking the Caribbean as a comparison in order to explore special features of islands, the author follows other research examples in this regard. Nevertheless, the fact of being an island cannot really justify the way of comparison between Sri Lanka and any other geographical island in the world. Whereas many historical events are freshly approached by the author and made digestible for a wider audience, that way, the level of investigating musical expressions is either unstable or not of a very high degree.

Chapter 6 tries to attack the complexity of Sinhala people's activities by approaching cultural causations that have been seen from many different perspectives even within the country. Alongside the author's discussion, I feel the evidence a bit distorted, as he just picks things that fit his arguments without consulting the wider horizon of diverse scholars working within Sri Lanka (Manoj Alawathukotuwa, 2018; Meddegoda, 2017). However, this provoking approach is a key feature of the book that makes it discursive. It surely initiates a wider frame of thinking the entire discipline of ethnomusicology.

The fourth part (IV) titled "Rediscovering Musical Giving" consists of an elaborated conclusion. Here, the author tries hard to return to his initial concept of musical gifts, mainly taking music videos into consideration. He discusses partly the different opinions about these videos as if they were definitely representative. This comes down as an impulsive assumption that an arbitrary collection of YouTube-links with none of these examples presented or described any further in their productive context, let alone analyzed, served a postwar reconciliation. The author's acceptance of website authors and bloggers is admirable as it has some very good points. However, these sources do not get bundled in a proper way to support his arguments. Sykes maintains that he aimed at showing "liberal aesthetics are ipso facto not correct" [p. 239] and that liberal aesthetics and the security mindset in Sri Lanka, for example, are reinforcing each other mutually. That should be worth a wider discussion.

However, liberal aesthetics are served in large parts throughout the book, which makes it a good and a widely attractive read. However, the remaining impression is that the author set out to break up ethnomusicological practices and conventions. As such, his book is an interesting attempt to overcome learned academic behavior and to look forward into future possibilities of ethnomusicology.

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