

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON AGRARIAN LIFE AND PERFORMING ARTS IN TODAY'S SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The main objective of the article is to present some observations on the singing styles that have been used in relation to Agrarian Life in Sri Lanka. They were sung until the late 1990s by people who were employed in agriculture or who were peasants themselves. Today's commercial entertainment singers, in the 21st century, are performing these poems with great enthusiasm using audio-visual media. It is questionable whether they are well aware of the environment related to those songs. The agricultural society that promoted these songs has been widely transformed through changed working processes and demographic shifts. Therefore, the modern society is in a position where stage performers cannot have a real experience of these past times. This study is to observe and investigate the specific musical features of those songs that have been transmitted over the centuries. These observations may help to increase a conscious dealing with musical traditions in the context of Sri Lankan agrarian life and their future representation.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Rural traditions, Songs, Contemporary understanding, Music analysis, Poems

SOME BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka's legendary harvests once brought her fame as the Granary of the East. Historical records tell that paddy was cultivated in Anuradhapura in 161 BC and flourished there until 1017 AD. Today, paddy is cultivated across the Island. As society evolved, activities and people close to the heart of paddy cultivation rose to prominence. In tropical Sri Lanka, paddy cultivation took deep root, transforming into the lifeblood of the islanders and setting the pace for a national culture embellished with elaborate rituals centered around the preparation of the fields and the harvesting of the grain. The cultivation cycle was a highlight of their social life. Everyone pitched in. Coomaraswamy (1995: 189) describes "Great Chiefs were not ashamed to hold the plough in their hands. The majority of village folk were brought into close touch with the soil and with each other by working together in the fields; even the craftsmen... used to lay aside their tools to do a share of the field work when need was, as at sowing or harvest time."

Songs were circulated among the Sinhala villagers based on this process (Weerasundara, 2914: 12). Many poems related to agriculture have been circulated. They were designed to be associated with a variety of tasks. Sri Lanka's agriculture can be roughly divided into two groups: Chena farming and Paddy cultivation.

CHENA FARMING

Chena cultivation is the cultivation of dry lands which is not mixed with water. Paddy cultivation is the cultivation in muddy soil. Chena cultivation in Sri Lanka farming is mentioned in the inscriptions of King Nissankamalla (1187-1196) who ruled in Sri Lanka during the Polonnaruwa period. (Siriveera, 1993: 120). The historical basis of this is clear from the mention of Chena in special literature on Buddhist philosophy such as Butsarana,

Saddaramaratnavaliya, Jojvaliya and Jathaka Katha Potha. The word used in Sinhala for the word Chena is Hena. The names of the villages in Ceylon which are based on the word hena indicate that chena cultivation was prevalent in the past. An example of this is the following rural names: Henegama, Veherahena, Henepola, Hendeniya, Kotahena, Nugahena, Vihaarahena, Maahena, Ginigathhena, Henebadda, Henpitagedara, Thalahena, Kudagalahena, Medahena, Galgodahena (Kahadagamage, 1999). Two types of singing associated with Chena cultivation can be identified as: Pal kavi and Kurakkan kavi.

PADDY CULTIVATION

Paddy cultivation is a very important sector of the Sri Lankan economy. Even though its contribution to the gross domestic product declined substantially during the past 3 decades of the 20th century (from 30 percent in 1970 to 21 percent in 2000 according to Siriveera, 1993), it is the most important source of employment for the majority of the Sri Lankan workforce. Still, a high percentage of the total labor force was engaged in agriculture in 1999. In the subsistence sector, rice is the main crop and farming rice is the most important economic activity for the majority of the people living in rural areas. Several ways of singing associated with the above activities can be found. Those vocal genres are Andaheera, Nelum kavi, Goyam kavi, and Kamath kavi (ibid.).

Poems used in this context are given priority in various Sri Lankan television reality shows that are currently in use. Active participants are formally divided into two groups: teenagers between 12 and 16 years and young people between the ages of 16 and 30. Singing these poems using social media such as FaceBook, WhatsApp, or YouTube, in addition to TV shows has become a major feature today. This study is also to highlight this rapidly growing practice, mainly during the time of the recent pandemic that reached Sri Lanka. In comparison of earlier singing practices with media presentations, this article can explore some interesting characteristics of the aforementioned ways of singing.

DISCUSSION

Pal Kavi

A hut is built on a branch of a large tree. It is to escape from wild animals, mainly to escape from wild elephants. These songs were sung at night while watching the fields. The danger of the unknown darkness has an impact on this singing.

Among the poems of pel kavi used in Sri Lankan popular commercial music, several features unique to it can be identified. Those features are not found when using other poems.

A common feature of musical shape as sung by some villagers in the second half of the 20th century is the uniform pause. Singing the first line is interrupted by a pause in the middle of the second line and a pause at the end of the second line (Wedikkaragedara and Panapitiya, 2007). It can be shown as follows:

Yasa lesatama Alakuth Vatakara Seduna
Eka lesatama Velakuth E Meda Seduna

Breaking these verses while singing a kind of Yati (Srividhya Balaji, 2020), an embellishment of the melodic line as found in some Carnatic music, can be identified as the main feature here. The division of verses in singing can be, for example, arranged as follows:

Yasa lesatama Alakuth Vatakara	Seduna
Eka lesatama..... Velakuth E Meda	Seduna

This seems to be a main feature of all 48 poems that were used for this investigation. This way of singing can be clearly seen as the main attribute to these poems. Another interesting feature is that the singing continues in one breath until the first pause in the second line. Some recent recordings indicate that these features are not anymore respected or applied to tunes deriving from this way of singing and the related poems, which are called Pal kavi, yet miss out these main features. The use of sustaining tones and embellishments was systematically analyzed using measurements based on the Cent system (Benson, 2007:166) to get a roughly comparable impression. For this analysis, it was used a Pal kavi poem sung on 19 March 1975 by Wedikkaragedara Piloris in Mathalapitiya. The text was:

Male Male nobanin ape ammaata
Thopen apen den de netha ammata
Vena de nethath dethane kiri bivvata
*Budun vadina lesa vedapan ammata*¹

(Translation: Brother, brother, do not blame our mother! /We have nothing to give mother. /Nothing else but milk from mother. / Worship your mother the way you worship Buddha).

The way of singing can also be seen in an example of a Sri Lankan Pal kavi (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows some frequency values used in singing this Pal kavi.



Figure 1: Example of a Pal kavi in 5-staff-notation (by the author).

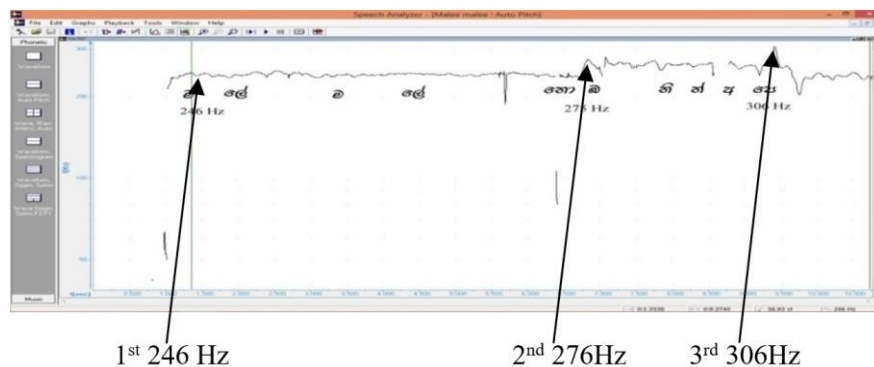


Figure 2: Table with frequencies used (by the author).

It is very difficult to see in this Pal kavi the recognized tone positions that were used. Through rough measuring according to the cent system, a frequency distance between the first and second tone resulted in 199 cents. Another measuring between the second and third tone resulted in 178 cents. Here is another example of a Pal kavi poem:

¹ This recording was processed by the Conservation Unit of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation. CD 1. Audio item 15, Recording date: 19 March 1975.

*Mage appa pela thenuve dehipothe
 Negagannatayi me inimaga bedagaththe
 Ringachchama pela vetha bayakuth neththe
 Appachchi kiwwa val aliyage thathve.*

(Translation: My father made hut at the top of the tree. / This ladder was made to climb for the hut./ I do not feel scared once I enter the hut./ Because Dad told me about wild elephants.)

The first line of the Pal kavi looks as following when analyzed:

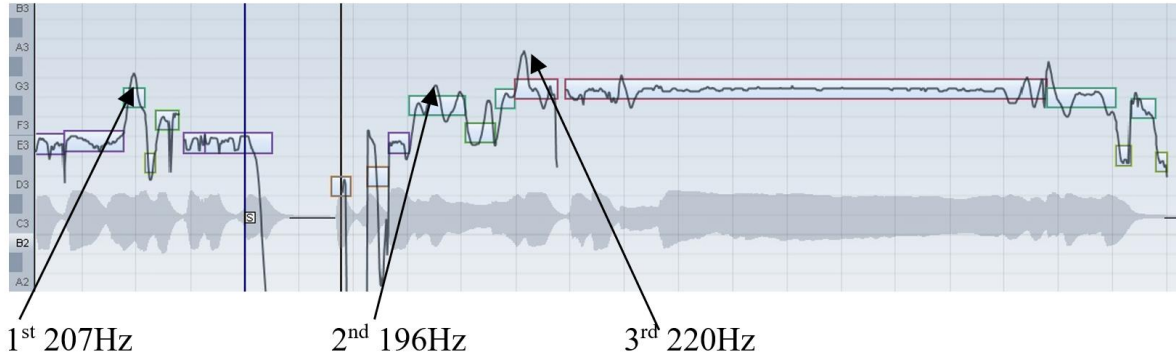


Figure 3: Table with frequencies (by the author).

Kurakkan Kavi

Finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) is an important crop in Sri Lanka. It can be cultivated under adverse soil and climatic conditions mostly as a rain fed crop. Kurakkan grains are highly nutritious and have an excellent seed storage quality. Kurakkan is the main crop of chena cultivation. Although various crops were cultivated, poetry was created in association with Kurakkan. Kurakkan kavi as a way of singing has a strong place in Sri Lanka among the musical activities associated with agriculture. Kurakkan poems are only sung by women, possibly because of the fact that Kurakkan cutting was done only by women, at least in the previous century (Kahadagamage, 1999: 81). At present, men are also involved in it. There are three ways of singing Kurakkan kavi, Dig Osa, Ketu Osa, and Kota kavi.

The following is an example of Kurakkan Dig Osa singing, called *Avasara genime kavi* (Permission kavi) provided by Welegedara Pinchamma, Ihalagedara Ukkuamma, Widanagedara Ranmenika, and Ihalagedara Kiriamma (54), at Dabulla, Kongahavela, sung on 22 December 1970.

Hiru deviyo denavada apta avasara
 Sada deviyo denavada apata avasara
 Gana deviyo denavada apata avasara
 Me siti sabaya denavada apata avasara²

(Translation: Does the sun god allow us?/ Does the moon god allow us?/ Does the Gana god allow us?/ Does this audience allow us?)

Here is an example of a Sri Lankan Kurakkan kavi:

² This recording was processed by the Conservation Unit of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation. CD 4. Audio item 8, Recording date: 22 December 1970.

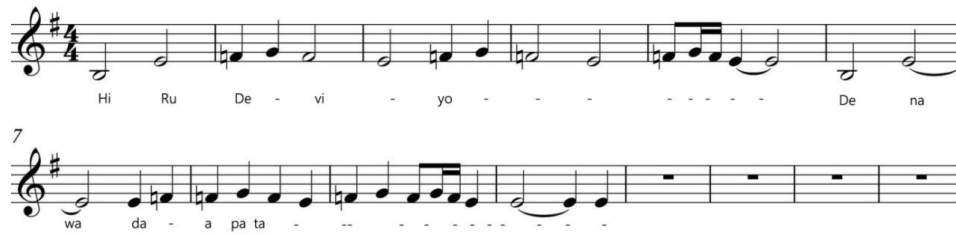


Figure 4: Example of a Kurakkan kavi in 5-staff-notation (open access teaching material).

It takes a long time to sing a line of a poem when singing a Dig osa. The time it takes for the words to be sung is repeated in the same way. It uses the vowels a and o. The chart below shows a diagram of the time it takes to sing a line in the above Kurakkan kavi.

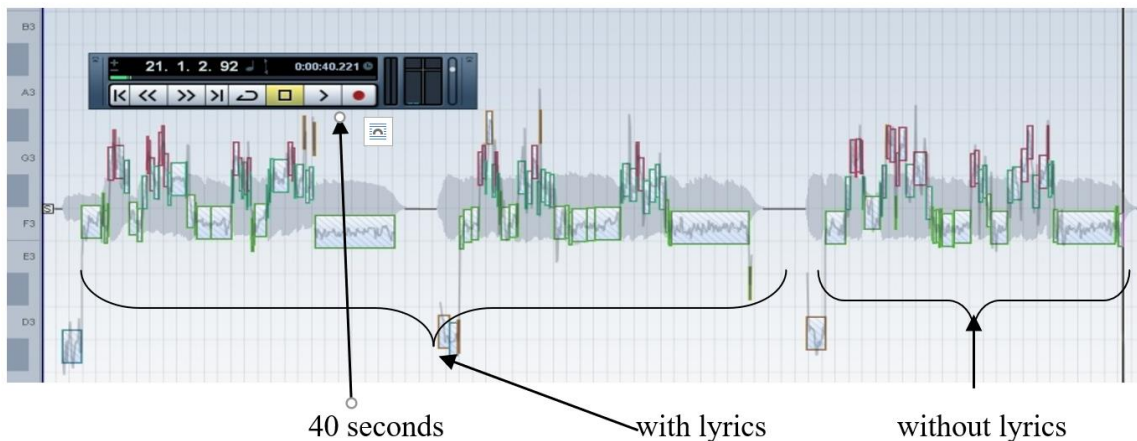


Figure 5: Table showing the time taken for a line in a kurakkan kavi (by the author).

The total time taken to sing one line of this poem is forty seconds. The other feature of this Kurakkan kavi is that the positions of the outgoing tones are all different in frequency.

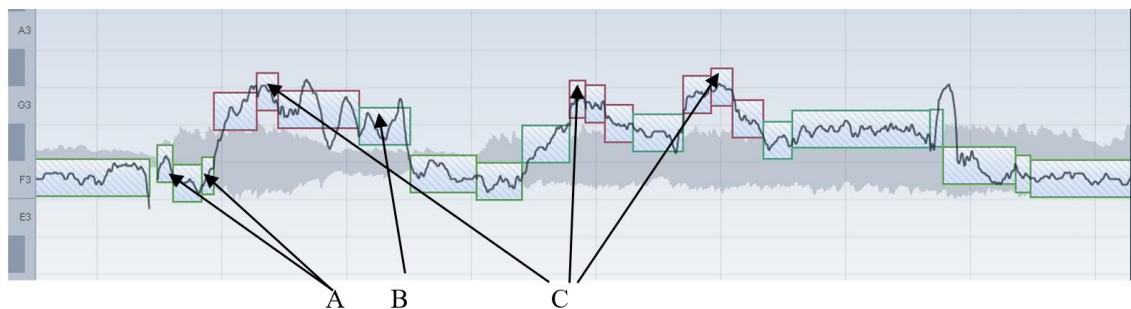


Figure 6: Table showing the difference in the frequencies (A, B, C) of the outgoing tones in a Kurakkan kavi (by the author).

Poems of this kind are often presented on stage and through various media. It could be observed that the use of frequencies to break out of the usual melodic line adopts to diatonic principles of common pop music. This can be shown in a parallel analysis of the Teekava stage Concert 2017, where the Matara Folk Music Group presented a Kuruttan poem as follows:

*Deelee aru deken yannee denamuthuva
 Medata kapanne api savoma kelloo
 Avven avsarak netha nupalata ayyoo
 Dapalla lensu hisa paley deyyoo.*

(Translation: Those who have knowledge are the ones who travel on both sides./ Walking in the middle are young girls./ There is no excuse for you in the sun,/ so put the handkerchiefs on your head.)

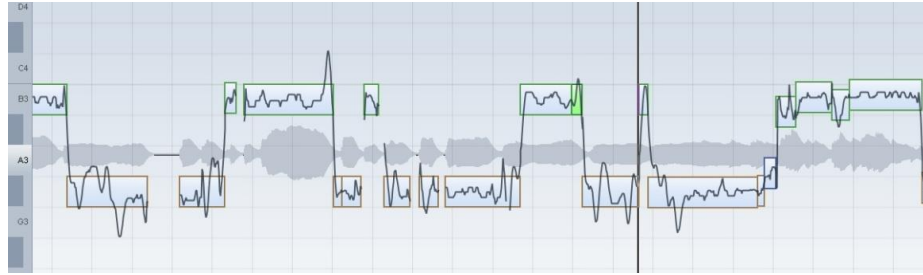


Figure 7: Sound wave chart of a Kurakkan kavi (by the author).

The above chart contains only the first line of the Kurakkan kavi. The overdrawn frequencies are very clear. This shows the impact of the increased consumption of pop music on standardized musical instruments and a widely propagated music theory being taught over years.

Paddy Cultivation

Rice is the staple food of Sri Lanka and as such, paddy cultivation is given utmost importance in agriculture. Paddy has been grown as the main crop in Sri Lanka. This is important because the singing traditions that have developed in this context continue to this day despite shifting demographics. They can be divided into four main ways of singing such as Andahera (Cow call), Nelum kavi (Planting), Goyam kavi (Harvesting), and Kamath kavi (Threshing floor) (Lanarol, 1980: 67).

Andahera

Cattle is used in muddy fields. Different names are used for that activity. The terms Seesáma, Hánava, Heeya, (Plowing) are examples of this. The poems sung during this activity are called Andahera. There is a delightful saying in the Sinhala vernacular for this (Senarathna, 2006: 75):

“ *Gasaka ketuma gasamula pēyumen denē*
Miniha nominiha yana kadisaren denē
Amuthu bath dima ath allumen denē
Hānaa Heeya Pānaa Andaheren denē ”

(Translation: Clearing the root of a tree reveals that it is about to be cut down./ Can be identified who he is by the way he walks. /It can be understood by grabbing the elbow to invite to a meal./ Nature and extent of the plowing are evident in the Andahera singing.)

These verses are sung only by men. Andahera can be divided into three shapes according to the nature of the singing: Singing in the form of a poem consisting of 4 lines, singing two lines of poetry with prose parts, and using only prose parts and a different variety of sounds (Kulathilaka, 1995: 29).

It is a difficult and complex singing variety. Andahera singing requires good training and stamina. This is because of the subtle vocalizations used in the singing. The main feature here is the use of different tones and the voice stops at the same time in singing. The following is an illustration of an Andahera song sung using two pitch sets at a time.



Figure 8. Sound wave chart of an Andahera sung by Mathalapitya, Millagagedara Bodiya³ (by the author).

Nelum Kavi

There are several types of singing that have very subtle variations. The Sri Lankan planting song can be also called Nelum osa and can be divided into three shapes Dig osa, Keti osa, and Kota kavi/Hamara kavi.

The difference between Dig osa and Keti osa is the time it takes to line up a poem during the singing. Below are a table and figure that clearly shows the difference between Dig osa and Keti osa singing.

Dig osa	Keti osa
The interval between the vowels is large	The interval between the tones is small
The melody range used in singing is abundant	The melody range of the singing is limited
The time it takes for a Dig osa to make a line is long	The time it takes for a Keti osa to make a line is short

Figure 9: Table showing the main differences between Dig osa and Keti osa (by the author).

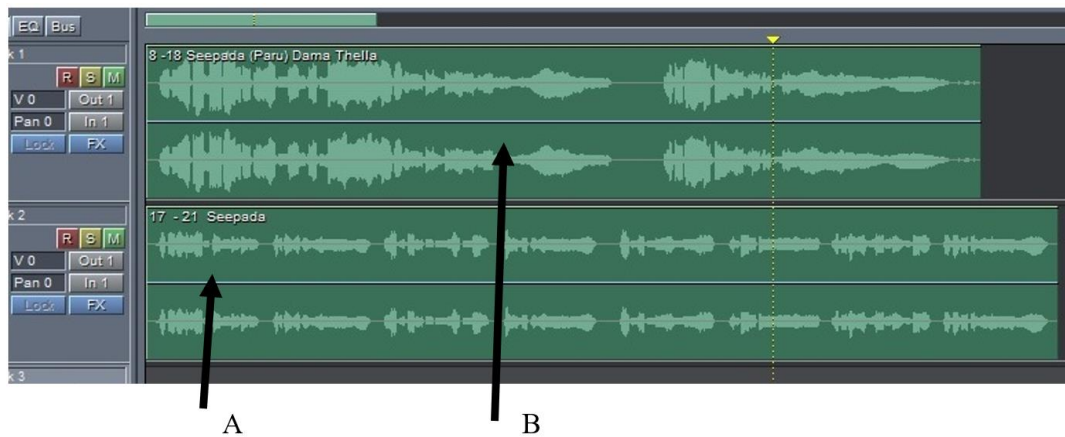


Figure 10: Screenshot of a comparison between Keti osa and Dig osa using an Adobe mixer (by the author).

A = after singing all four lines of a song in a Keti osa
 B = Only the first line of a Dig osa

³ This recording was processed by the Conservation Unit of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation. CD 1. Audio item 13, Recording date: 9 March 1975.

Goyam Kavi

A goyam kavi is a harvest song. The *Dēkeththa* (Sickle)⁴ is used to cut the grain part. The percussion instrument used for this is the Bummediya (Gunasena, 1980: 56).⁵ Harvesting is done according to the rhythm given by the bummediya. If the bummediya is played with two beats, the crop is harvested twice. If three beats are played, the crop is harvested three times. The frequency of harvesting is determined by the drumming as follows:

The bummedi pada that is played	The number of times the crop is harvested
Dhith Thakkita Dhith Tharikita Tha.	One
Dhith Thakkita Dhith Tharikita Dhith Tharikita tha.	Two
Dhith Thakkita Dhith Tharikita Dhith Tharikita Dhith Tharikita tha	Three
Dhith Thakkita Dhith Tharikita, Dhith Tharikita, Dhith Tharikita, Dhith Tharikitadirikita Tha	Four

Figure 11: Table showing the frequency of harvesting according to drumming patterns played (by the author).

Kamath Kavi

The threshing floor songs are considered to be the last way of singing in paddy cultivation. The main singing element here is the singing of Kamath osa that slightly resembles the Andahera since it is associated with cattle. The separation of paddy seeds from their grain stems is done using cattle. The cows walk on the harvested crop and separate the paddy seeds. Singing effects and vocals productions used in Andahera singing are performed in Kamath kavi. These songs take place at night. The purpose of these songs is to guide the cattle and to alleviate the loneliness and fatigue of the night. The hidden meaning of these poems is propagating Buddhist ideas. It can be explained in the following poem.

*Buddan saraneda balee - Damman saraneeda balee
Sangan saraneeda balee – mee thun saranedda balee*

(Translation: By the power of the Buddha's, Damma's, Sanga's blessings)

*Budun vadithi me kamathata
Daham suvada vihideyi vata
Yodun usata thibena betha
Budun anin en kamathata*

(Translation: The Buddha comes to this threshing floor./ Then the scent of Dhamma spreads./ At the word of the Buddha the harvest/ comes to the threshing floor.)

⁴ This is a tool designed to cut grain spikes. It is a real metal sickle, complete with black handle and curved edge. Sickle blades found during the 20th century were made of flint, straight and rather used in of a sawing motion than with through a more modern curved design.

⁵ This is a drum known by various names such as kele beraya, kala beraya, ekath beraya, this drum is hung on the shoulder and is played by both hands. The bera or bummedi pada (beating patterns) that are played are called Ahuru pada. Gunasena (1980: 56) describes them.

FINAL REMARKS

The basic features of the songs examined above are not found in the singing of presentation on commercially driven stages and in social media productions. The places where these poems were sung such as paddy fields, threshing floor, or a temporary hut of the paddy field cannot be imagined either. In today's social reality, songs are presented in colorful costumes and aim at an audience that does not know the background either. Producers try to use different musical instruments to add color and intensity to the singing thus eliminating principal features. They try to present those songs in an attractive way. It is also their strongest effort to compose and sing traditional poems creatively using modern technology and extending their outreach in order to find more audience. That is why we can distinguish between these two directions of singing. The contemporary representation does not mind to remove functional features and to lure people into an attractive and romantic musical feeling. Yet, it is necessary to study carefully all the details in order to provide resources of learning about past practices.

Currently, the most emphasis is given to: Voice training in singing, understanding of pitch and notes, the use of voice resonators and voice control, singing in a way that suits the stage performing and the sound system, and the presentation of singing in accordance with musical instruments and rhythm. These priorities, resulting from postcolonial dealings in formal music education and a market-oriented music production, will not contribute on their own to a better understanding of local histories. It needs the efforts of further studies.

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