

Verbal Communication through Folk Songs – A Study Based on Sri Lankan Folk Music

Saumya Batuwatta, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka
Anoma Satharasinghe, Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Folk songs reflect the identity of a culture. Genre of Sri Lankan folk songs is significant in passing down culture to generations through oral tradition. The composer was uninhibited and frank. The spontaneous verses were standalone works bearing structural variations and were instructional. These songs varied from work to recreation while adding rhythm to manual tasks. The objective of the study was to identify how these songs have been used for communication purposes based on wording and melody and what aspects the songs convey in different contexts preserving the tradition. A sample of thirty songs were categorized based on profession, beliefs and recreation. Data were gathered through audio recordings, literature and resource personnel. Sri Lanka being an agriculture-based country, folk songs were mostly associated with paddy and *chena* cultivation. Agricultural work was a collective endeavour of both men and women. These impromptu songs were not mere monotony breakers, but a method to perform certain tasks with consistency and evenness while communicating with fellow partners. The other professions like boating, mining, cart riding and collecting honey are equally notable. Similarly, songs based on chanting at *thovil rites* (curing by mental remedies) where the black magician communicates with demons and spirits play a crucial role. Under leisure and recreation, communication embedded in folk songs had articulated youthful love, lullabies, and teens singing at play to build up companionship. The study concludes that folk songs were used as a creative and effective medium of communication at a time sophisticated technology was unimagined.

Keywords: Folk songs, Verbal communication, Culture, Spontaneous, Identity

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Introduction

“Every Sri Lankan is a poet -Robert Nocks”

Folk songs or *janakaviin* Sinhala have been performing a crucial role in the Sri Lankan folk lives over centuries. These songs have passed down through mouth to mouth over generations, bearing its' unique features until the formal education system was introduced in 1950s after the independence. “In the history of human existence, the first to emerge was the verbal communication, later on these statements were recorded in written scripts” (Wickremarathna A,1999, P:7). In that society, fathers have verbally instructed their sons about agriculture based activities while mothers have taught the daughters about the art of cooking, sewing and household maintaining. Therefore, keeping written records were not in practice at that time.

Sri Lankan folk songs can be basically categorized into two as *gami gee* which were created by the ordinary village folk and *se gee which* were written by elites in the society following the poetic techniques based on different situations and purposes.

Sri Lankan folk songs are unique for its' distinctive nature of composition. For example, creativity is a key character of these songs while the quality of unpretentiousness and the degree of sensuality is remarkable. The composers were uninhibited, frank and spontaneous and their interactive, standalone works bear structural variations. Within the creative mind of the composer, was a penchant for using simple language; as people working in paddy fields, chenas, mines or transporting merchandise in boats and bullock carts, intended everyone around to hear and feel the recitations. Further, the spontaneous verses were expressed in spoken language. Since Sri Lanka is an agriculture-based country, most of the related tasks were collective efforts. Therefore, folk songs were a combination of an individual chanting within a group, combined singing by members of a group or interactive discourses. Agricultural work was a collaborative endeavour, with free contributions of family and neighbouring labour in a system known *Aththam*, where people take turns to help in each other's fields. During the task performance, *Nelum Kavi*, *Goyam Kavi* and *Kamath Kavi*, the songs sung in the fields were not mere monotony breakers, but a method to perform certain tasks with consistency and evenness.

There are also Sinhala folk songs which contained humour and sarcasm while some folk songs demonstrated regard for kindred, the love of parents for children and vice versa. The expression of love combined with sensuality in folk songs articulated youthful love, affection of a man for his female kindred or cousin, or feelings of lovers at dusk.

At a time when medicine was not sophisticated enough to cure the illnesses caused due to mental and spiritual reasons, *Shaanthikarma*, the mental remedies or black magic performances were the unique techniques which brought solace to the bygone local society. Typical nature of a performance was based on the region and the reason. Those performances were noted for their uniqueness.

Se gee, the songs written by elites of the society; mostly the monks or the ministers in the king's court were also distinctive in the history Sri Lankan folk music. But these compositions are differed from *gamigee* in every aspect. These compositions were

written following the poetic techniques such as rhyming patterns, metaphors, similes, complicated language and melodies with two or more rhythms etc. The educated people wrote these songs in order to fulfil various requirements in the society such as ceremonial events, praise the kings, to send poetic messages and to write compositions on religious and academic contexts.

Objective

The variety of folk songs is almost endless. They vary from lullabies, damsels riding on swings to recreational songs while they reflect our lives from birth to death. In other words, they are part and parcel of the lives of village folk. Sri Lanka's folk songs also play an important part of its musical heritage. The most notable aspect of these songs was that, though they are spontaneously compositions by the ordinary village folk, there is always a deep meaning that reflects various aspects in the society and human life.

The objective of this paper is to examine how those songs fulfil the requirement of communication which surpasses other aspects such as entertainment, social interaction, profession, recreation etc. In order to fulfil the task of a successful communication, three components need to be completed. Firstly, there should be a communicator, secondly, a message to be conveyed and finally the presence of a receiver (Wickremarathna A, 1999, P:8). Considering those points, it is clear that, all those folk songs have been able to fulfil these three components. Further, this study aimed to find out the ways and means that were used to create the need for communication and how they have used it in practice. Further, the study was aimed at identifying in what ways the endeavor was successful.

Methodology

A sample of thirty songs were selected under various themes and primarily they were divided into two sections as *gami gee* (ordinary folk songs) and *se gee* (written by elites). Then the songs under *gami gee* were further categorized firstly, as songs based on professions: agriculture (paddy and chena – growing crops in a farm setting), transporting goods using bullock carts on rough roads and transporting goods and people along rivers, gem and coal mining, bee collecting. Secondly, according to the religion and beliefs. Thirdly, as social, recreational and entertainment. On the other hand, *se gee* are prominent for the songs of sending messages on poetic verses which is known as “*dhooth services*” (messenger services).

The existing knowledge of native scholars and literature were equally important in conducting this research. As mentioned before, most of these folk songs were composed by the village folks who were totally ignorant in writing letters. Therefore, this tradition was passed down verbally over generations. As a result, more than referring to written documents, the information gathered from the resource personals were very much important, original and unique. Three such persons were interviewed and a considerable number of folk songs were collected. It was identified that even the folk songs which belong to the same category had used different dialects and wordings. Those folk songs must have changed in certain ways over the years as they have been transferred verbally over generation.

Among the written documents on Sri Lankan folk music, "*Hela Gee Maga*" (1962) written by veteran folk musician and researcher Mr.W.B.Makuloluwa, is considered to be the ideal hand book of Sri Lankan folk music. This book was the first formal book written with an adequate amount of information based on this topic. Apart from that, in modern times several other researchers have taken a great interest towards finding out the history and nature of the local folk music tradition." The *Mahawamsa* states that there had been a unique music tradition in Sri Lanka. But enough evidence could not be found about the nature of that genre of music" (Makuloluwa,1996, p117). "Further, records can be found in *Thupawamsa* about certain musical instruments that had been used in the ancient Sri Lanka namely: *rideedaara, shudra veena, ransack, dhaarasak*" (Makuloluwa W.B,1996, p118).

Old voice recordings from Sri Lanka Broadcasting Cooperation (SLBC) were used to identify the forms and features of the folk songs and to categorize them according to the requirement of the research study.

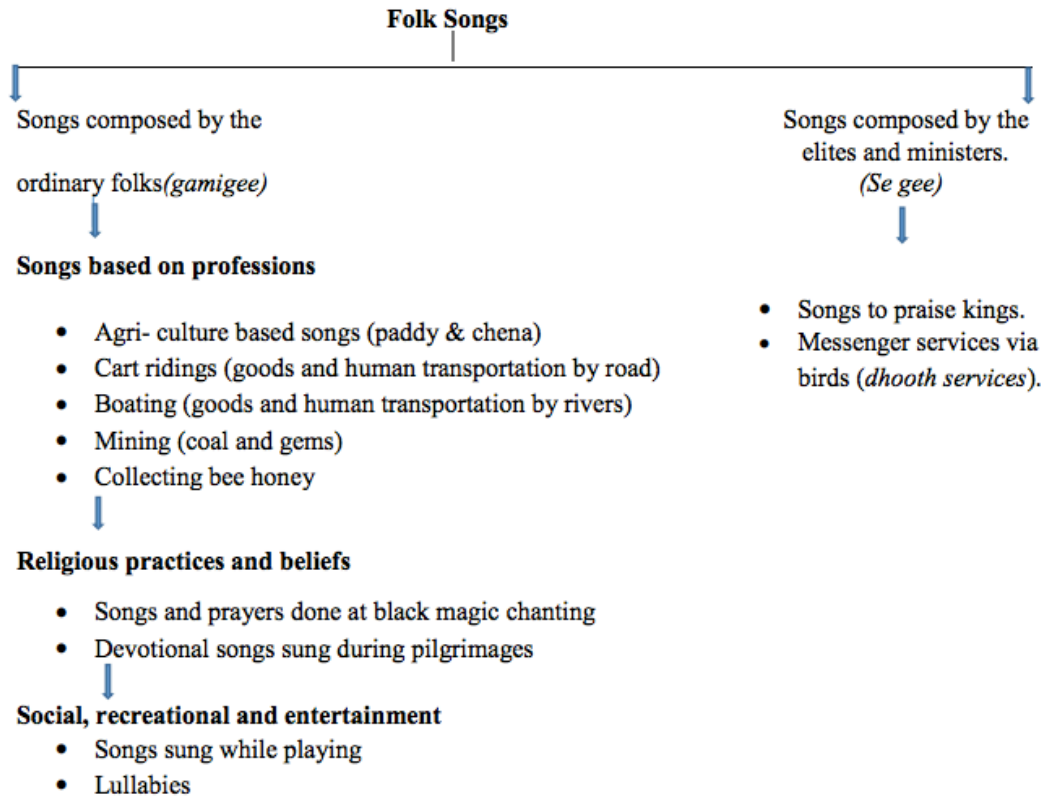
Data Analysis

In studying the selected folk songs, it was understood that several common features were shared by those folk songs. Firstly, the nature of simplicity is a unique feature of almost all the folk songs. Since they were composed spontaneously by ordinary folks, educated or complicated language usage cannot be seen. The language used was also unique and simple. Secondly, almost all the folk songs were composed into four stanzas combined with a simple tune and a rhythm. Thirdly, the composers are anonymous, and the folk songs are limited to verbal records. Fourthly, the melody of each song itself reflects the nature of the task at hand and they were sung by both men and women in the forms of solos, duets and sometimes as a chanting. Fifthly, all the songs were sung in a very high voice to fulfil the communication requirement effectively.

"It is also understood that these songs are formed in three different aspects as: isolate—the songs sung to his/herself, interpersonal – songs sung between two persons as a conversation/ argument/competition etc, group chanting – a whole set of people sang together as a choir or chanting" (Wickremarathna A,1999, P:8).

Finally, the rhythm can be basically divided as songs with a tempo (*aghathathaathmaka*) and without a tempo (*anaghathathaathmaka*) (Wanigasekara L,2008, p: 133-134).

Basically, the selected folk songs can be categorized as follows:



Identifying how communication purpose was fulfilled through songs belonging to each category;

Agriculture based songs (paddy & chena):

Sri Lanka being an agri-culture based country with a great history related to farming, folk songs have been composed on every activity based on agriculture; specially the activities in the paddy fields. In other words, songs have been sung from the initial stage of entering the paddy field to the final stage of receiving the harvest and offering the fresh portion to Lord Buddha and deities (these are customary activities of Sri Lanka). Participation of both men and women can be seen here. The rhythm of each of these songs vary according to the task at hand.

Considering the communication purpose of those songs; mainly they have been sung to avoid boredom while at work and to minimize the pain and hardness of the outdoor activities. Communication during these activities plays a prominent role. By studying the content of the songs related to the paddy field activities, it is understood that the communication had taken place effectively among men and women at work. They had exchanged the ideas about the condition of the harvest, thanks giving to the deities for prosperous harvest, hardships and difficulties at work, ill treatment by the land owners and also they have exchanged ideas about the weather and the beauty of the environment.

Vegetable farming is also a similar activity that had taken place in the Sri Lankan agri- cultural context. Activities in a farm yard are different from those in a paddy

field. The farmer had a huge responsibility to protect the harvest from animals specially at night. Therefore, he had to stay in a tree house burning mid night oil to guard his crops. The dangers that lurk in the dark usually bring uncertainty and fear within the mind while silence is piercing and unbearable. He breaks into a song hoping for a relief from the monotony of keeping watch. The melancholy melody of a lonely man echoes through the air on a frozen night and the wind carries his voice to another isolated guardsman, who responds in a song to the delight of the other. This is the tale of two solitary sentries passing time on a weary night, finding harmony through songs

Likewise, it was a mode of communication to the beloved ones at home as an indication that the farmer is secure and no harm from any dangerous animal at night. On the other hand, this was a mode of indicating to the animals that the farm yard is not isolated. The content of the songs sung while staying at a pale (tree house) were varied. Mostly, two neighbouring farmers of the tree houses made conversation about the hardships of life, sometimes about their future or about their lovers as well.

The melodies of those songs are totally different from the songs sung in paddy fields. For example, the continuation of the tune or the melody can be seen in the paddy field songs while the “pal songs” are sung with pauses in between due to disturbances caused by mosquito bites or falling asleep. All these songs do not bear a tempo as they were sung in isolation with a sense of loneliness.

<p><i>“Mandaaramataudaigilenawahileenie- gonugekare</i> <i>Bandaaweni bara goneie...</i> <i>Wela langa ambalama kaatath parawenie</i> <i>Mata thaninathe – numbanaadanulalenie...</i> <i>ulalenie! (annonymous)</i></p>	<p>“It’s a very odd, monotonous and a lonely time of night that I am staying alone in this little tree house ”Do not worry dear I can look after myself as this is my destiny....”.</p>
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Gal gee/ Karaththa kavi (songs sung while cart riding):

It was a time the public transport system was not sophisticated and easy as today. The prime mode of transport was bullock carts. “Gal gee” or “Karaththa Kavi” were sung by men while transporting goods on business matters and for daily requirements or by people specially on pilgrimages along rough roads..The ordinary village folks who had a thorough awareness of the Buddhist teachings empathised with the plight of the bull as well. At the same time, even the ordinary village folk had an understanding towards the merits and demerits as explained in Buddhist teachings. Therefore, they explain how people have to suffer in this birth for the sins committed in their previous lives. The villager very effectively creates a comparison between the life circle and the wheel of the cart. Travelling along the rough roads was difficult very tiring and time consuming. In order to overcome all these difficulties, the rider and the travellers sang those songs. Sometimes the riders too sang alone to themselves to overcome loneliness while some had sung in groups within the travelling group. If the journey is a pilgrimage or a journey for pleasure, the songs were composed based on the beauty of nature, life, songs on folk stories and so on.

Another reason for singing these songs was to avoid danger at night travels. As the roads were not properly lighted there was the risk of colliding with other carts in the

thick darkness. Further, those songs were sung to avoid encounters with wild animals at night. The melody and the structure of those songs also bear the features of folk songs and they also did not have a tempo in the compositions.

Considering the songs studied, *Paaru (canoes)*, *Pathal (mines)* and *Bambara gee (wasp)* are highlighted for their nature of the use of effective means of communication through folk songs.

Paaru gee (songs sung while canoeing):

Paaru Kavi, associated with men transporting supplies and people along rivers, were sung to ensure that every boat stayed on the course, when avenues for communication were few and there was a constant threat of the vessel tipping over or being waylaid by thieves. In the middle of the river away from the river bank obviously brings unsteadiness within the mind of the sailors. Further, in the morning mist and the thick darkness at night, the possibility of colliding with other canoes was unavoidable. When the boat is on one side of the river, for the sailors who were expecting a canoe on the other on side need an indication that the boat is at work on that day. So, in order to deliver this message to the passengers the rider sang songs. As the communication modes were not effective those days, singing was the only medium to signal that the sailor was safe in the middle of the river. The speciality of those songs was that only solos could be found and duets or group singing was unheard. The nature of the song was flowing and continuous like the river. Similar to other songs, those songs were also sung at a high voice in order to be heard by the people on the land.

As same as the other songs, the content of those songs was also about the risks involved in the profession and hardships of life. But on the other hand, the songs were also composed describing the moon's rays on the spire of the "Mahiyangana stupa", which illuminated the river path for the boatmen to navigate through and also appreciation of nature.

Pathal kavi (sung during mining):

These are popular folk songs that expressed the despondency of the miner, separated from family and home, lamenting the pitiable status of his vocation and urging to see his parents and beloveds. Many such folk songs came into being as the traditional village economy evolved into a more manipulative, profit-based economy, marked by clear division of labour and the worker felt exploited by the employer, and expressed his displeasure in song.

"*Pathalkavi*" are very much highlighted in communication for its nature of form and usage. Among the professions existed in those days, mining was the most dangerous and risky profession. At a time where the technology was not efficient, when the massive ditches are sinking into the earth, the workers had to go along manually clearing the earth till they reach the treasure. At such situations, there are certain spots where the air is filled with poisonous air or the risk is very high of falling the loosen earth. In order to communicate with fellow people outside the mine, the only solace was evoking the voice.

The tunes itself reflect the nature of work at hand. Not like the other songs, these songs have pauses in between the words as an indication that the singer is busy either filling the basket will soil or setting it to be sent out. All most all these songs depict the hardships and the risk of the profession itself and the fatigue life the workers experience apart from working hours.

Bambara kavi (sang while collecting bee hives)

Apart from mining, collecting bee hives is the most difficult profession where communication through songs was highly required. It was a task performed based on its own customs and practices. As a tradition, only the brother in- laws went together to this task. While one person climbs down the steep rock with a help of a rope, the other one must hold it tightly being on the other end. There are possibilities that the person gets fainted looking down from the summit of the high rocks or being attacked by the bees. In other words, the person's life is at a high risk of a single small mistake. Therefore, in order to indicate the safety, the two people have sung with each other to maintain the communication. It is also identified that; these people have sung these songs to take away the fear of seeing the hillock. The songs have been composed on different themes; some expresses the fear, the beauty of nature around, conversation with each other and so on. It is important to note that, even the village ordinary people at that time had a clear understanding about the Buddhist teaching; mainly about karma. They knew that this is a very sinful act that the innocent bees collect nectar drop by drop and form the hive. But human beings take them without any concern and earn their living. Though the collectors repent on this sinful act, they simply do it to make living.

The speciality of the tune of these songs were that, there is a segment to be sung in a quick rhythm that suggest the singer is getting closer to the bee hive and hold the fire to chase away the bees and he quickly moves back to protect himself. This movement of the task nicely depicts through the melody.

Religious practices and beliefs.

At a time where the western or ayurvedic medicinal practices were not popular, especially for mental treatments and superficial believes, the only solution was the black magics (*thovil and shaanthikarma*). It was a unique method of indicating the mentally sick person that the performer communicates with evil spirits and bring the cure to the sick person. In order to emphasis the environment, it is further fills with face masks, coconut decors, fire and so on. The *kavisang* in this setting were duets between the preacher and the drummer. These songs carry the nature of very strong and hardness as they deal with spirits and supernatural powers. Only the men have sung these songs that the participation of females were absolutely not.

Another situation where these folk songs were sung was during the pilgrims; specially when climbing the *Sri Paada* mountains. It is believed that no inauspicious words should utter during this time of climbing. So, the devotees sang the devotional songs called "*thunsarenekavi*" only focusing on Triple Gem of Buddhism Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Further, to minimize the tiredness of climbing the devotees chanted these songs spontaneously sometimes in groups or as duets. This communication has taken place mostly between strangers who pass up and down while climbing the mountain

but the feelings of friendliness, kindness and affection are unmistakable of these poetic verses.

Social, recreational and entertainment:

Among the songs come under social, recreational and entertainment; lullaby songs take a prominent place as it was the initial stage of communicating between mother and the child. These songs are crucial in developing the personality, mentality and the language skills of the children. The other speciality of these songs that, these are fully composed and sung by the women folk of the society. Even at the time of “*veddas*”(the original native tribe of people in Sri Lanka), the lullaby songs have existed. These songs were the best opportunity to depict creativity and female representation. Further, it is believed that this is the initial stage of the communication process of a human being.

Secondly, entertainment also took a prominent place in the village society from teens to adults; the games existed at that time were linked with songs. Different features in these contexts were communicated as challenges, arguments, duets, conversations and so on.

Songs composed by the elites (*Se gee*)

These folk songs have taken a form different from the ordinary village songs. Those have been composed by the educated people such as priests, kings, ministers and scholars at that time. They had followed poetic techniques to compose those songs and the main speciality was that they could read and write; as such they had documented those songs.

The prominent category of those folk songs were the messenger services which were carried out with the help of birds. Those messages were written in poetic verses based on political matters, religious information, social messages and love messages as well. This popular method which was known as *dhooth service* was a poetic method of communicating with the educated class in the society. The most popular “*panchasanteshaya*” a document written based on five messenger services considered to be one of the greatest master pieces ever written in Sinhala literature.

Findings

Considering these facts, it was obvious that almost all these songs have been mainly used to fulfil the communication purposes of day to day life. Though these songs are simple and spontaneous at surface level, at a deeper level all of them carry great philosophies about life.. Also, it was noticeable that, even the ordinary village folk had an understanding of the virtues of life. Further, these songs reveal different facets of village life style and their thoughts and beliefs. Analysis of the folk songs had indicated how the rural life in the bygone era had benefited immensely through this aesthetic and creative mode of communication.

Recommendations

Folk songs reflect the identity of ones' culture. Even a single category has many aspects to be expressed. Further, different facets of the bygone society are reflected through these songs as well they reflect many information of the domestic lives, life styles, beliefs, traditions , the unity within the people and gender representations etc. It is a popular trend worldwide to make new melodies and music compositions based on the melodies and the lyrics of the folk songs. So, it is also recommended to do researches on new compositions vs. the original folk songs and to what extent have they become successful and what aspects of the original versions were influenced with the modern ones. Further, creative modes of communication like folk songs is a great stress reliever. In addition, they had contributed immensely to keep the social bonds alive and contribute towards harmonious co-existence. Those attributes could be taken forward from the bygone era to present and future generations

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is understood that Sri Lankan folk songs have taken a prominent place in the society. Further, it was not a mere entertainment but have been used as an effective method of communication at a time where the new sophisticated communication modes were unheard. Folk songs were a part of the identity of one's own culture; therefore, not only in Sri Lanka but also in other countries folk songs are considered as an important part of the culture and heritage.

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Contact email: saumyabatuwatta@gmail.com