

Baila: A Sri Lankan Artform

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### Baila: A Sri Lankan Artform

Baila is a form of music unique to Sri Lanka that has been popular since the 1940's, but traces its roots back through the era of Western colonization and globalization over 500 years old. Baila is the culmination of the diverse cultural influences within Sri Lanka, providing an incredibly rich, nuanced viewport into Sri Lankan history and culture, with more than 40 Sri Lankan radio stations dedicated to this culturally unique music.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, its popularity in Sri Lanka and being the cornerstone in Sri Lankan musical culture, to the untrained ear Baila sounds distinctly un-Asian, often mistaken for



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<sup>1</sup> Even outside of the country, Baila is one of the most well-known Sri Lankan music genres, dominating searches for Sri Lankan music on Youtube, Spotify, and other global music consumption platforms.

Afro-Hispanic music.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the instruments in Baila come from many different cultures, ranging from India to Africa to Brazil, this diverse musicality provides a unique representation of Sri Lanka's history as a colonized nation. If one wants to understand Sri Lanka they should study Baila because within it can be found the history of the country interwoven into the instruments, rhythms and lyrics. In order to better understand Baila, this paper examines the instruments, rhythms and lyrics of Baila music and its origins in Portuguese colonization of Sri Lanka. Baila's lyrics indeed offer a deep insight into the historical struggles of Sri Lanka, playing an important role in the communication of political and philosophical beliefs, as well as functioning as a source of joy and hope in times of trial.

What is Baila and how did this musical form come about? Baila as a genre of music has travelled quite a distance to get where it is, taking components from the huge array of cultures that were part of the Portuguese maritime empire. Baila



Initially the Portuguese were greeted as visitors

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnomusicologists note that Baila is a prime example of the globalization of Afro-Hispanic music influences. This prominence and the nuanced relationship between cultural exchange and the commercialization of primarily West-oriented Afro-Hispanic music is still in its early stages of research, having gained interest in the recent 1990s.

began as a sort of pidgin entertainment music<sup>3</sup> and developed over time into a widespread folk music that was celebrated and passed down through generations. Its rhythmic, upbeat style encourages dancing and participation, even today continuing to be a staple of party and nightclub scenes.<sup>4</sup> Throughout its history it has often taken on politically charged lyrics as Sri Lanka struggled against the rule of the Portuguese<sup>5</sup>, dating back to 1505, when a Portuguese fleet led by Commander Lourenço de Almeida was brought in by a storm to Colombo, a prominent port on the west coast of Sri Lanka. King Vira Parakrama Bahu welcomed the Portuguese, who quickly realized the economic and strategic advantages of Sri Lanka, bringing an influx of foreign workers from India and Africa. The distinct musical style of Baila eventually evolved from these diverse traditions, culminating in a distinctive style in 6/8 beat, performed using maracas, banjo guitar, viola, violin, Spanish guitar, and rabana (flat drum). Despite Baila's huge significance in Sri Lankan culture, it is discussed in only a modest amount of research literature. Within Baila, a careful listener and music lover can easily find a comprehensive and rich tapestry of the nation's heritage and history

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<sup>3</sup> In a culturally diverse and Portuguese-dominated Sri Lanka, it became a tradition that lower class Portuguese-Sri Lankans known as burghers would entertain at upper class burghers' households during holidays. While dressed in African garb, they would perform Kaffringha, a music style created by Kaffir Afro-Sri Lankans.

<sup>4</sup> While it *is* widespread, there is also a continual (and arguably growing) resistance of Baila from Sri Lankan Buddhist traditionalists who condemn Baila as something of a cultural displacer, it having stemmed directly from colonialism's cultural impact.

<sup>5</sup> A modern day concern regarding the globalization and commercialization of music is that Baila is taking on increasingly mundane, "nonsensical" lyrics to better appeal to global consumers.

interwoven in the eclectic instruments, rhythms, and lyrics that characterize the diverse spirit of Sri Lanka.

The instruments in Baila come from many cultures which helps us understand Sri Lanka's varied cultural history due to colonization. The primary instruments of melody are the

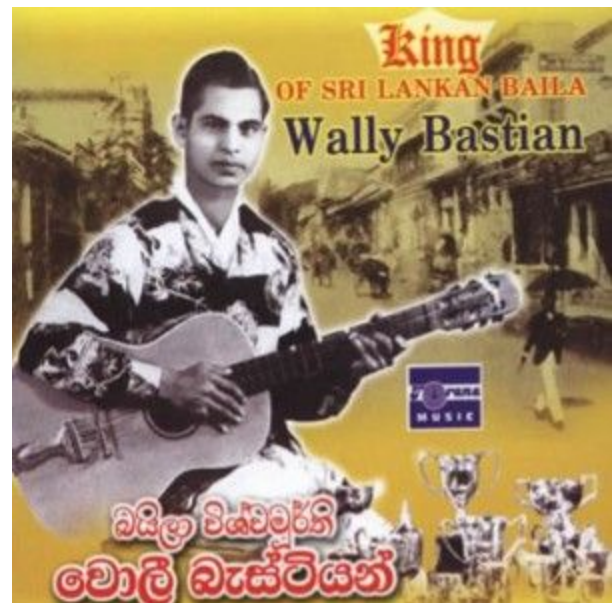
instruments of Sri Lanka's could be conquerors. The song *Lassana Rosa Malak* by M. S. Fernando recorded in 1970s helps illustrate this. Driving the melody of this song, in which the singer declares "*how pretty things are not pretty*

*as you*", are violins, ukuleles, violas, guitars, mandolins and piano in the form of electric keyboard, all instruments brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese. The influence of these Portuguese instruments on Baila's melodies is quickly apparent when one listens the melodies of traditional Portuguese music such as the "*Baile de San Antonio*" which directly translates into "*San Antonio Dance*." However it is not only in the translations of the melodies and instruments from Portugal and Europe that we can draw insight into their influence on Sri Lankas music and culture but from the words themselves. Sri Lankan Baila music is a festive music of joy, celebration and dancing. Baila in portuguese literally translates to the word dance. But the impact of the Portuguese does not stop there, the singer

**The Sri Lankan Baila song  
"රමනී බරතෝලමියුස්"  
has almost entirely  
Portuguese lyrics.**

himself, like many Sri Lankan's has a last name of Portuguese origin, Fernando. The Sri Lankan language itself Sinhala contains over 1000 words of Portuguese origin. Some of these make their way directly into the songs of Baila, such as the song *Aajithapara Lalila* recorded by Ramani Bartholomeusz which has almost entirely Portuguese lyrics.

The rhythms of Baila also come from many cultures which helps us understand the importation of Sri Lanka's workforce by its would be conquerors. Baila's rhythms are the rhythms of its subjugated. A great example of these rhythms can be found in the song *Irene Josephine* recorded in the 1940's by Ogustus Martheneus Bastiansz who performed under the stage name Wally Bastiansz. Wally Bastiansz was a traffic policeman who was active in the police band, his talents were recognized and he was invited to play for the third Prime Minister of Sri Lanka John Kotelawala.



Wally Bastiansz

His impact on Sri Lankan Baila was so great that he is often referred to as "Father of Modern Baila." This song is one of the first "modern" Baila songs and contains rhythms from Africa including a unique "6/8" time signature that has become central to Biala and is often referred to as kaffirhina style. His most popular

songs that are still popular and played today include Hai Hooi Babi Archchi, Nurse Nona, Le Kiri Karala and Ratak Watinawa. As with everything else Baila the very time signature of the music is a window into the culture of the island. The term kaffirhina is derived from kaf (Kaffirs) and rinha which means 'local lady'. In 1505 the Portuguese brought Africans to Sri Lanka as slave labor, these migrants were referred to as Kaffirs. Kaffir was actually an ethnic slur used by Arab traders who the Portuguese encountered along the western coast of Africa. After the Portuguese, the Dutch ruled over the island from 1658 to 1796 where the Sri Lankan Kaffirs were used to build the Dutch Fort in Colombo. The Kaffirs in the late 1700's protested their captivity and became violent, leading to eventual emancipation. Later during the British rule of Sri Lanka from 1796 to late 1940's, the British brought in an additional nine thousand Africans to Sri Lanka as laborers. Over time the Sri Lanka Kaffir population began to mix with the native Sri Lankan's often marrying the local women. This blending of cultures brought the integration of the Sri Lankan African descendants and the term kaffirhina was coined, with it the rhythms of Sri Lankan music.

During its history Sri Lanka has known many political struggles and Baila has played an important role in the communication of political and philosophical beliefs as well as providing relief from challenging times by providing joyful music. All of Baila is joyful in tone, tackling sad and challenging topics with joyful humour as well as general happy topics with celebration. In the song

*Kiyanne Gothala* by Sunil Perera and his band Gypsies, which was originally recorded in 2001, Sunil sings:

*samahara wita obathuma kiyana wal  
wada.*

*balu wadda okkoma karana minissu  
thama*

*obathumata baninne*

Sometimes you talk about horrendous  
things you do.

People who do awful bitchy things that's  
you.

You are scolding.

The song talks about Sri Lanka's corrupt government and how the island is ruled over by racist politicians who ruined a prosperous Island, how it would be better if the British remained in power. Before the island was mismanaged, Sri Lanka was once politically stable, with a growing economy and a rising educational system where University degrees were recognized in all British territories. During the 1930's Minister of Lands and Land Settlements, politician D.S. Senanayake produced a grand plan to claim land that were the "traditional homes" of the Tamil and Muslims in Polonnaruwa and throughout the East of the island. The Sinhalese politicians wanted Sri Lanka to become a Singala Buddhist country. Due to this, there was tension between the local Tamils and the Sinhalese people who at one point respected each other's personal religions and cultures. Sri Lanka wanted to completely forget about the minorities and its conquerors who brought in and make a new destiny on its own, however the



minorities refused to be treated like second class citizens. This was the end of a peaceful and hospitable country that offered onlookers a free cup of tea. Once an hospitable country, faced with a new revolutionary war among its own people. While Sri Lanka struggled finding its identity, its politicians withheld strict buddhist rules where people were excluded if they were not fitting with the social norms.

In the song Surrangini Kaamal Karegi originally recorded by A.E. Manoharan in the 1960's we hear a joyful of pure fun and celebration. The song generally referred to Surrangini has been recorded and performed by many artists and is a staple at any Sri Lankan event. In the song the singer sings:

|  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| <i>surangini anthini anthini hey where are you</i> | surangini anthini anthini hey where   |
| <i>i am here my dear i am come here</i>            | are you                               |
| <i>surangini surangini surangini kamal karegi</i>  | i am here my dear i am come here      |
| <i>surangini surangini wo darling tumhari</i>      | Aren't you ashamed to be crying on    |
| <i>banegi</i>                                      | the road                              |
| <i>hey solhva ye sal ye mast mast chal</i>         | They are watching you from all        |
| <i>koi dekhna dhamal karegi</i>                    | around                                |
| <i>surangini surangini surangini kamal karegi</i>  | You are crying; your eyes are turning |
| <i>surangini surangini wo darling tumhari</i>      | red                                   |
| <i>banegi</i>                                      | Im also crying just watching you      |

*hey solhva ye sal ye mast mast chal*  
*koi dekhna dhamal karegi*

Surangini Surangini Surangini  
 I brought some fish for Surangani  
 Fish, fish, fish;  
 Fish that was brought just now  
 I brought Surangini fish.

This song is traditionally sung at festivals, parties, dances, like most of Baila, however it is a great example of some of the pure silliness that fills much of the music. Surangani is a girl on the side of the road who the singer passes and



finds crying, the singer to cheer her up offers her some fresh fish. That the singer would seek to meet the sorrow of Surangani with fish and the sing of his offer with such joy

**Don't cry I brought fish!**

presents a level of joy that is a release

for the audience itself, calling to them *forget all of your worries! I have Fish! Fish!*

The performance of the song is always met by laughter, dancing and often comes during the more intoxicated portions of the evening.

The music of Sri Lankan Baila is complex, blending rhythms, melodies, languages, instruments from its native soil with those brought to it by its would be conquerors and fellow subjugated to create something unique in the world.

Its lyrics reflect a sensibility exclusive to Sri Lanka, blending humor in the face of tragedy along with nonsensical celebration focused fun, allowing them to face the tragedy of colonization, civil war and corruption with mirth. Its melodies and instruments and rhythms providing them with the opportunity make the sounds of the world their very own.

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